Sraffa's Impact on Wittgenstein

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Introduction

Sraffa and Ramsey are the only two persons who's influence Wittgenstein explicitly acknowledged in the preface of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953/1968, p. x). Whereas Ramsey's influence on Sraffa is uncontroversial (see Jacquette 1998 for a detailed discussion), this is much less clear in the case of Sraffa. Most discussions (e.g. Kienzler 1997; Monk 1991; Sen 2003a, 2003b) focus their attention on an anecdote by Malcolm (1958, p. 69): Sraffa convinced Wittgenstein by a Neapolitan gesture that a proposition and what it describes need not have the same logical form. The analyses that were based on this anecdote, however, did not yield satisfying results, as a number of papers in recent years on Wittgenstein and Sraffa show (Davis 2002; Marion 2005; Sen 2003a, 2003b). The present paper critically investigates Sraffa's influence on Wittgenstein. Sraffa's contribution is compared to Ramsey's to find out its relative merit. In addition to the existing literature, the yet unpublished letters from Wittgenstein to Sraffa (Unterhuber 2007) and interviews with Georg Kreisel (Unterhuber 2007) serve as basis of the investigation.

Ramsey's Influence

Ramsey's criticism (1923) of the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1922/1933) is essential for the change from Wittgenstein's earlier to his later philosophy (Jacquette 1998). Ramsey's influence on Wittgenstein is very easily traceable, as Ramsey (1923) published his criticism of the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein modified the approach of the *Tractatus* to account for the criticism and published his response in *Some Remarks on Logical Form* (Wittgenstein, 1929). He, however, eventually noticed that his modified approach did not solve the problem suggested by Ramsey.

The criticism of Ramsey amounts to the fact that Wittgenstein could not explain a statement he accepted: that a "point in the visual field cannot be both red and blue" (Ramsey 1923, p. 473). According to the *Tractatus* "the only necessity is that of tautology, the only impossibility that of contradiction" (p. 473). The present contradiction, however, is attributable rather to properties of space, time and matter and is not accounted for by the general form of proposition which according to the *Tractatus* determines all and only genuine propositions. Wittgenstein eventually gave up the thesis that there is a general form of proposition and resumed a family resemblance approach which does not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the distinction of meaningful and senseless propositions.

The Famous Anecdote

In the case of Sraffa no such direct evidence exists. Wittgenstein mentions Sraffa explicitly in only a handful of passages, which do not admit an unequivocal interpretation. Moreover, Sraffa was economist, and did not write anything about Wittgenstein nor about philosophy (Fann 1969, p. 48). Thus, most investigations start with the more promising aforementioned anecdote. The interpretations of this passage, however, differ strongly. Fann (1969), for example, suggests that the Neapolitan gesture was a "kind of concrete counter-examples which broke the hold on Wittgenstein of the conception that language always functions in one way" (pp. 48-49). Kienzler (1997, p. 54) takes a distinct, but related stance. He argues that in the anecdote Sraffa conveyed to Wittgenstein that the sense and the meaning of linguistic expressions are only determined in the context of their use. The anecdote itself, however, is also in need of explanation. Why does Wittgenstein accept the Neapolitan gesture as a counter-example? Wittgenstein could argue that the gesture is emotive and does not describe a matter of fact. The general form of proposition would, thus, not be applicable (Jacquette 1998, p. 187). Even if the gesture would be a descriptive statement and it appears as though it does not have the same logical form as the matter of fact it describes, a correct analysis according to atomic facts may reveal that it nevertheless is the case.

Very often the anecdote is interpreted in the context of a comment by Wittgenstein to Rush Rhees that "the most important thing he gained from talking to Sraffa was an 'anthropological' way of looking at philosophical problems" (Monk 1991, p. 261). This passage is again open to multiple interpretations. Fann (1969, p. 49) argues that Sraffa used the method of speculative anthropology in *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* (Sraffa 1960). Sraffa (1960) describes simple economic systems first and builds up more complicated systems by increasing their complexity. A similar approach was used extensively by Wittgenstein in his lectures and his later philosophical works (Fann 1969). Sen (2003b) interprets Wittgenstein's comment quite differently. In the talks with Sraffa, Wittgenstein began to recognize the relevance of the culture-dependence of our thoughts and actions for philosophy. Because of the ambiguity of 'anthropological' the comment by Wittgenstein probably is not helpful in clarifying the role of the anecdote with the Neapolitan gesture, nor the influence of Sraffa on Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's Letters to Sraffa and their Discussions

The previous discussion shows that both the anecdote and Wittgenstein's comment to Rush Rhees do not allow an unequivocal interpretation of Sraffa's influence on Wittgenstein. A promising alternative are the rediscovered letters of Wittgenstein to Sraffa. They may reveal topics of their discussions and, thus, help identifying Sraffa's influence on Wittgenstein, because their talks stand at the centre of their intellectual exchange. Wittgenstein, the philosopher, and Sraffa, the economist, had talks for more than a decade, often more than once a week (Marion 2005, pp. 381–382).

From a philosophical point of view the letters, however, are disappointing. Although Wittgenstein often alludes to the topics of seemingly philosophical talks, he does not describe them. The famous disciple of Wittgenstein, Georg Kreisel, was interested in the letters and was interviewed on the basis of the letters. It was hypothesized that Wittgenstein's allusions would allow him to identify philosophically more interesting topics of their talks. Again, the investigation was largely unsuccessful. Nevertheless, a careful examination of the letters in the context of the in-

terviews showed that some rather interesting conclusions regarding Sraffa's influence can be drawn.

A Closer Look at Wittgenstein's Letters

The letters of Wittgenstein to Sraffa mention besides practical and political matters four philosophically relevant topics of their talks: the philosophy of Spengler (Letter 95[1]), vivisection (Letter 88), the drawing of a bad picture (Letter 93) and a political issue (Letter 102).

In Letter 95 Wittgenstein refers to a quotation from Spengler. Unfortunately the quotation was not included nor specified. In Letter 88 Wittgenstein compares his philosophical theory to a portrait which a layman with healthy eyes would judge to be bad. In Wittgenstein's eyes one would in general be ill-adviced to follow the layman's judgment what to change in the portrait. An interpretation which immediately suggests itself is that Sraffa corresponds to the layman and that Sraffa may have a point in arguing that Wittgenstein's theory has a weak spot, but Sraffa might not provide a solution to the problem as he lacks a stronger philosophical background. An essential piece of the puzzle, however, is missing. What is the theory Sraffa criticized? A similar problem involves Letter 93. In this letter Wittgenstein asks Sraffa to talk about vivisection. It would be closely related to the things they were talking about. As he does not mention further details, the context is too vague to single out unequivocal interpretations of the passage.

In Letter 102 Wittgenstein describes the content of a discussion about a political issue. Probably at the time of the Nazi rise in Germany, Sraffa had argued that the Austrians can do what the Germans did. Wittgenstein argues against Sraffa's position by pointing out that it is not specified what is meant by 'can'. Sraffa's advice to look at the events that happened in Italy would not resolve the ambiguity; Wittgenstein compares Austria to a man in rage. One could describe the facial muscles, say a, b, c, that are expected to contract when the man is in rage. The information, however, does not provide a picture of the man's face. Other muscles could interact and prevent the muscles a, b, c from contracting. Even if all muscles are described, the picture might not be unequivocal; there are different ways of describing the man's face. A painter and a physiologist, for example would have different approaches to describe the face, though they have to arrive at equivalent descriptions when they provide a complete description.

From a political point of view Wittgenstein's argument is implausible. The philosophical aspects of the discussion, however, are of some interest and quite justified. In alethic modal logic multiple meanings of 'can' can be specified. Furthermore, the reference to another instance is surely not sufficient to determine in which sense 'can' is used, above all because in Italy and Austria the political situations before the fascists' reign were quite different. Moreover, an explication of 'can' by specifying a condition in which Austria fulfils a list of essential properties would not suffice, because it is not known whether other not yet known properties interact. Finally, descriptions of all relevant properties might not be unequivocal, because there may exist more than one way of describing the matter of fact.

Conclusion

On a surface level, the letters only show that Sraffa agreed to talk on a wide array of topics ranging from practical and political matters to analogies and the philosophy of Spengler. A closer scrutiny, however, suggests that Wittgenstein used these less philosophical talks to draw philosophically relevant inferences from them. Sraffa was able to help Wittgenstein by being a skilful discussant (Sen 2003a) and standing outside the philosophical tradition of Frege and Russell, on which the *Tractatus* was built (Unterhuber 2007, p. 19). This probably stimulated and helped Wittgenstein to see philosophical problems afresh.

The letters and interviews, however, reveal that Sraffa's contribution may not have been genuinely philosophical. Concerning this fact, Sraffa's contribution differs quite strongly from Ramsey's. Ramsey identified an essential drawback in the *Tractatus* which Wittgenstein was unable to solve. His criticism is precise and unequivocal. It needs no application nor interpretation. Sraffa's criticism, as described in the anecdote, definitely is in need of interpretation. The letters support this assumption; the discussions are consequences of differing philosophical positions, but are always applied to concrete contexts. Thus, Sraffa's criticism does not show the same level of philosophical stringency as Ramsey's criticism. This fact also applies to Sraffa's more genuine philosophical considerations, as described in Kurz (2006). Sraffa's philosophical thoughts on objectivity and counterfactual conditionals rather express a reservation against counterfactual conditionals and would need to be worked out in much greater detail to be of genuine philosophical value[2].

Thus, much work and effort on behalf of Wittgenstein was needed to draw philosophical inferences from the discussions with Sraffa, the more as the discussions were open to multiple interpretations. Wittgenstein himself confirms this impression. In Letter 130 he compares Sraffa to an ore mine. He had to work extremely hard to gather some precious ore which, however, was well worth the effort.

[1] All numbers of letters follow Unterhuber (2007).

[2] This is not surprising, as Sraffa wrote of himself that he had never written anything on philosophy (cf. Fann 1969, p. 48).

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