

Between Wittgenstein and Freud: How Far Can Language-Games Go?

Review of Józef Bremer's book Wittgenstein on Freud
Reexamined: Psychoanalytic Treatments as Language-Games.

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Jan Hertrich-Woleński

If A and B are giants of thought (be it philosophical or other), it is very tempting to compare ideas proposed by both of them (even in cases where they do not have very much in common). Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein are examples of A and B satisfying the antecedent of the preceding conditional. Yet one can express doubts about whether there is a sufficient amount of proximities in their views to justify the comparison in question. Clearly, Wittgenstein and Freud knew about each other. Margaret, the sister of the former, was a patient of the latter for a long time, and it is unlikely that she did not inform her brother about the psychoanalytical treatments of Freud. On the other hand, we know nothing about Freud having been influenced by Wittgenstein or having commented on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In fact, this work was very far from the scientific and philosophical views of the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud would have known that Wittgenstein was associated with the Vienna Circle—a group of philosophers who considered psychoanalysis too metaphysical. In particular, Karl Popper (who regarded himself as not a member of the Circle, though this would not have been known in the 1930s) pointed to psychoanalysis as consisting of a collection of sentences that are unfalsifiable (and so metaphysical, in Popper's understanding). Nevertheless, Freud would not have been aware that Wittgenstein radically departed from his earlier admiration for formal logic and logical atomism, going as the latter did in the direction articulated in his *Philosophical Investigations*, published in 1953. Freud died in London in 1939, when Wittgenstein's new philosophical orientation was

known only to a very small number of philosophers—ones who themselves were rather young and not yet influential in academic circles.

In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, we find two fragments which might be interpreted as "Freudian." (The use of inverted commas here just serves to indicate that we are dealing with something that is a matter of interpretation). The first passage says that "philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language" (§109), and the second that "there is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were" (§133). The phrases "a battle against bewitchment" and "different therapies" can be taken as signposts of a possible connection between psychoanalysis and philosophy in Wittgenstein's second stage of philosophical development. Since philosophy is understood as a battle against bewitchment by language, why not consider this struggle a form of therapy? This way of looking at Wittgenstein's thinking may be strengthened by noting that he made some remarks on Freud's approaches to the psyche and its treatment. Although Wittgenstein was highly critical of psychoanalysis as such, he knew about this approach to mental health. Indeed, the topic we are discussing receives a very nice wording in the title of Jacques Bouveresse's book, *Wittgenstein Reads Freud: The Myth of the Unconscious* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1995). (The latter is a translation of the French original, published in 1991; Bouveresse published several books and papers on the relation between Freud and Wittgenstein). The second part of the quoted title refers to Wittgenstein's view—as Bouveresse understands it—that the unconscious does not exist.

Józef Bremer agrees with Bouveresse (and with the authors of many other works—see the bibliography in the book under review here) that a comparison of Freud and Wittgenstein is not only possible, but even required, if we are to arrive at a better understanding of what is going on in contemporary philosophy. Yet Bremer is perfectly aware that the relation of Wittgenstein to Freud was highly ambiguous and must be reconstructed very carefully. In his "Introduction" to *Wittgenstein on Freud Reexamined*, we read (p. 1):

Wittgenstein stated that he read Freud just as he concluded that psychology borders with nonsense. Afterwards, he characterized himself as a disciple or a kindred spirit of the latter, declaring him "one of the authors he thought worth reading" (cf. Bouveresse 1995, 3). At the same time, it seems that he was severely critical on of psychoanalysis, calling it "fanciful pseudo-explanation" (Jacobs 2008, 79 ["Freud is Everywhere." In *Freud at 150: 21st-Century Essays on a Man of Genius*, ed. by J.P. Merlino, M.S. Jacobs, J.A. Kaplan, K.L. Moritz, Landham, MD: Jason Aronson 2008, 79–81]). He warned one of his friends,

who had been studying Freud's theories, that "psychoanalysis is a dangerous and foul practice, and it's done no end of harm and comparatively very little good" (... cf. Harcourt 2017 [E. Harcourt, "Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis." In *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. by H.-J. Glock and J. Hyman, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2017, 651–66]) . . . Viewed from a . . . critical perspective of reading Wittgenstein's works, Freudian psychoanalysis, for him, seems to exhibit the character of pseudo-religion, pseudoscience, or even mythology. Yet, looking from the point of view proposed by our reexamination of Wittgenstein, we obtain another picture of Wittgenstein's approaches to psychoanalysis.

Bremer points out two facts in the quoted fragment. The first is that Wittgenstein was astonished by the highly effective results of psychoanalytic approaches to therapy, where this success inspired him to adjust his own attempts at enhancing the therapeutic value of philosophizing. The second is that, as Bremer himself aims to show, Wittgenstein's crucial ideas of ordinary-language and language-games, frequently considered to be a bridge between his philosophy and psychoanalysis, have a "much weaker significance" in the context under discussion than that which most authors seek to emphasize. Put another way, the affinities between Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and psychoanalysis show up as accidental and superficial in many respects. Bremer's main task is to offer a better key for understanding the place of psychoanalysis in Wittgenstein's philosophy (see below). The title *Wittgenstein on Freud Reexamined: Psychoanalytic Treatments as Language-Games* indicates that two factors are at work in Bremer's analysis: firstly he claims that the thoughts of Wittgenstein concerning Freud should be reexamined (which implies that prior examinations of the issue have been unsatisfactory), and secondly he holds that this project should be realized through an attempt to view psychoanalytic therapies as language-games.

The book presently under review consists of the following parts (together with a Bibliography and an Index with entries for both persons and topics): the Introduction contains a general characterization of the entire book; Chapter 1 ("Two Biographies: Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein") describes the careers of both thinkers, as well as informing us about English translations of their works; Chapter 2 ("Ordinary Language-Games") is mostly devoted to the philosophy of language of the later Wittgenstein, but with many excursions into applications to psychoanalysis of the ideas outlined in the *Philosophical Investigations*; Chapter 3 ("Philosophical and Psychoanalytical Treatment") considers hypnosis as treated by Wittgenstein and by Freud. More particularly, Section 3 of this chapter analyses

Wittgenstein's philosophy as therapy, while Section 4 explores the language games of psychoanalytic approaches to therapy and the problem of free association as being "the cornerstone of psychoanalytic method." Chapter 4 ("The Complexity of Psychoanalytic Treatment") investigates various components of psychoanalysis as embodying a view about how the human psyche functions. Here, Bremer mentions transference, resistance, repression, fixation, reverie, talking and acting, and also analyses these concepts in the light of the views of Wittgenstein and Freud. Chapter 5 ("Dream Interpretation") is devoted to dreaming as described by Freud and Wittgenstein. A Conclusion (numbered as Chapter 6) completes the main text. The book also has an Appendix, which speaks about psychoanalysis as a scientific psychological theory, and here various approaches to psychoanalysis (in particular, the views of Popper, Adolf Grünbaum and Jürgen Habermas), which are mostly critical, are discussed.

Bremer concludes that "[...] we have offered a new understanding of psychoanalytic treatment from based on Wittgenstein's notion of language-games, and at the same time we have significantly extended the use of this notion" (p. 204). Consequently, the concept of language-games is, basically, crucial to the author's approach to psychoanalysis. This notion is analysed in Chapter 2. The author points out that the word "language-game" has several meanings. Many commentators dealing with Wittgenstein's second philosophical phase have stressed that we can distinguish descriptive and evaluative functions where language-games are concerned. Whereas the former is in play when seeking to give an account of such linguistic phenomena as family resemblance, openness, etc. (Wittgenstein has serious doubts about whether the word "explaining" could be used in this context), the latter qualifies ordinary language-games as being normal, proper, correct, etc. In particular, the principal aim of philosophy insofar as it is "a battle against bewitchment our intelligence by means of our language" consists in showing that departing from ordinary language-games has a privatory impact on our thinking and calls for various therapeutic responses. However, another understanding of the role of language-games in philosophy is also possible: one can say that philosophy itself shows up as a departure from ordinary language-games. (This interpretation is related to the view that regards the Philosophical Investigations as a continuation of the *Tractatus*.)

It is important to note that the adjective "ordinary" has at least two meanings in the context of talk of "ordinary-language" and, *a fortiori*, "ordinary language-games." This was observed by Gilbert Ryle in his essay "Ordinary Language" (*The Philosophical Review* 62, No. 2, 167-186; Bremer does not quote this work). He distinguishes the ordinary use of expressions and

the use of ordinary language. The latter should be replaced by “the usage of ordinary language”—it refers to customs, styles, etc. Now, the ordinary use of expressions is philosophically highly relevant, because it refers to what is standard as contrasted with what is non-standard. In particular, specialized terminologies such as mathematical, physical and logical ones also generate ordinary uses of expressions. So-called “ordinary language philosophy” (the Oxford school that included Ryle, John L. Austin and Peter Strawson) recommended appealing to the ordinary uses of expressions as a basis for assessing the correctness of philosophy. Unfortunately, this recommendation was (and still is) unclear, confusing as it does descriptive and evaluative aspects of being ordinary in language-games. Wittgenstein’s second philosophy can be seen as a kind of ordinary philosophy, and the Oxford school as an interpretation of what was proposed in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Yet this historical contextualization of Wittgenstein does not eliminate problems of interpretation with respect to what “ordinary” means in his philosophy. Does it refer to use or usage in Ryle’s sense? This is a question which cannot be overlooked.

Clearly, Freudian (or any other psychoanalytic) practice is impossible without making use of the linguistically conveyed reports of patients. If that is so, then saying that psychoanalysts employ the language-games of the persons they are studying (and, perhaps, ones that they themselves use, too) will be quite natural. The next step in this interpretation consists in viewing such data through a Wittgensteinian lens—eventually by extending the scope of the concept of language-games. And, indeed, Bremer offers such a perspective. However, I must raise an objection that stems from my preceding analysis. Freud’s interpretation of mental illness was deeply rooted in his general theory of the psyche. (The situation in another versions of psychoanalysis is similar.) Consequently, the treatment of some language-games as standard, and others as non-standard, results from certain definite presuppositions: for instance, that sexuality is the key to the proper diagnosis of the patient. Hence, while viewing the psychoanalytic approach as Bremer does furnishes an interesting philosophical perspective, it seems that psychoanalysis offers much more than “treatment as a language-game.” Anyhow, Bremer’s book is important because it brings philosophy and psychology closer to one another—something that is always significant for both domains. Let me add the following remark: I am a philosopher, not a psychologist. Hence, I do not feel competent to comment on Bremer’s statements about psychoanalysis as such. My remarks about the book reviewed here are mostly limited to what I can say as an analytic philosopher.