

---

# Book Review

## *Wittgenstein Reads Weininger*

David Stern and Béla Szabados, editors  
Cambridge University Press, 2004.  
206 pp. \$75.00. ISBN 0521825539

*Review by Baris Bagci, Texas Woman's University*

This book is a collection of six essays on how Wittgenstein was influenced by Otto Weininger. It opens up with a very informative, easy-to-read introduction by the editors. It is well documented that Wittgenstein himself conceded that he was influenced by Weininger and is known to have recommended Weininger's *Sex and Character* fervently, for example to G. E. Moore. Indeed, the question that this book attempts to answer is not whether Wittgenstein was influenced by Weininger, but rather the nature and scope of this influence. The case seems even more interesting owing to the role Weininger played as a leading anti-Semite and antifeminist in the fin-de-siècle Vienna. One cannot help but wonder why Wittgenstein would have anything to do with Weininger in the first place. One can, for example, trace the influence of Schopenhauer, another writer which was held dear by Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus* on the subject of will. Or, the influence of Karl Kraus is easy to assess since he and Wittgenstein regard language in high esteem. But, when it comes to Weininger's influence, the question is not easy to resolve. It is essential to remember Wittgenstein's advice on how to read Weininger. In a letter addressed to Moore, Wittgenstein says: "It is true that he is fantastic but he is *great* and fantastic. It isn't necessary or rather not possible to agree with him but the greatness lies in that with which we disagree. It is his enormous mistake which is great. I.e., roughly speaking if you just add a "~" to the whole book it says an important truth." Of course, when one is talking about a body of complicated and intertwined pieces of thought, one must be cautious in understanding how that negation must be applied. The tilde here then must not be understood as the negation in the ordinary propositional logic but rather used as an emphasis on critical reading of the Weiningerian ideas.

Good ideas may spring from reading a text, which we do not fully agree of. Note that Wittgenstein's use of the term "roughly" explains a lot, taken in this context. This point is made aptly by one of the contributors, namely Joachim Schulte, and it would have helped to emphasize it in the introduction.

The first essay, written by Béla Szabados, deals with the question of to what extent Wittgenstein was influenced by Weininger or in which particular ways the later Wittgenstein was influenced. The first point raised by Szabados is that of reading Weininger with a negation sign. In Szabados' view, Wittgenstein considered Weininger's enormous mistake to be methodological i.e., his essentialist views on nature of things. Weininger was fond of thinking in terms of Platonic Ideals since this was necessary, in his view, to understand the essence of any object around us, be it language, man or woman. This essentialist view is criticized by later Wittgenstein who did not think highly of Weininger's characterology because of Platonic Ideas. Of course, given that Wittgenstein does not agree with Weininger's methodology it does not follow that Wittgenstein did not get anything useful out of Weininger. In fact, quite the opposite. Only through this negation, can important truth emerge. According to Szabados though, there are many "truths" in Wittgenstein's writings which can be traced back to Weininger. One is Wittgenstein's insistence on clarification. According to Weininger, the whole history of thought is a continuous 'clarification' (S&C, p. 97). Similarly, Wittgenstein considers his task to be the one of clarification (CV, p.16). According to Szabados, Wittgenstein's reverence for language is borrowed from Weininger since the latter mentions reverence as a moral virtue throughout his writings. I do not agree with Szabados since Wittgenstein's reverence towards language cannot be explained away merely by noting his *reverence* to anything around him. What is important to understand is not that Wittgenstein, in my opinion, is reverent to everything surrounding him in the first place, but rather the comprehension of the fact that he has *chosen* to be reverent towards *language*, in his philosophical thinking. I find Szabados' arguments very weak in this respect. Among other parallels drawn by Szabados between Wittgenstein and Weininger are their common emphasis on the importance of particulars, their use of metaphors, and scrutinization of differences in thinking. For Wittgenstein, language-games must

be seen as objects of comparison which shed light on similarities as well as dissimilarities (PI, p. 130) while for Weininger the use of ideals are essential in order to detect differences (S&C, p. 55). One ironic remark made by Szabados worth mentioning is on the idea of influence itself. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein writes: "It is a good thing I don't let myself be influenced." However, as Szabados rightly remarks, this attitude itself might be influenced by Weininger who considers this the feature of a great man (S&C, p. 174).

The author of the second essay is Allan Janik (known for *Wittgenstein's Vienna*). Janik draws attention to the close connection between Wittgenstein's personal and philosophical views. Especially for an analytic philosopher, this is not common. Wittgenstein's personal life was really so intertwined with his studies in logic or philosophy of language that thinking about his personal sins or logic was one and the same thing. Janik emphasizes the importance of Weininger's thought on Wittgenstein's existential problems although Weininger only enabled him to restate his problem, which made it possible for Wittgenstein to come up with a solution. In this sense, the negation mentioned above can now be understood better since it is not Weininger's thoughts that Wittgenstein borrows but a general methodology to tackle problems dear to himself. The answer to the question of how Weininger influenced Wittgenstein in this sense is to be found. Weininger has insisted that all existential problems are practical in nature. In this sense, just as Hertz's ideas convinced Wittgenstein of the importance of "showing" (hence Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning) so Weininger's ideas have taught him the necessity of facing these dilemmas in life as one lives. As soon as Wittgenstein understood this, ethics and logic were to be set on equal footing since both were now conditions of the world. How must one live then? Janik believes that Wittgenstein believed in Weiningerian scheme in which one can be happy only if one is respectful to the limits surrounding one. This limit was his own self according to Wittgenstein who took a solipsist turn in questions regarding ethics. He needed to solve his existential problems in the world and he was his own world (*Notebooks*, 12. X. 16). We can thus see why Wittgenstein's personal and philosophical views were so related to one another. For Weininger as well as Wittgenstein, philosophy is not only an intellectual enterprise. It is in this context, Janik states, that

Wittgenstein must be understood when he says 'Difficulty of philosophy, not the intellectual difficulty of science but the difficulty of a conversion. Resistance of the will has to be overcome.' (*Nachlass*). It must be noted that this attitude on part of Wittgenstein marks his whole philosophical enterprise.

The third essay, *Sex and Solipsism*, is by Steven Burns. Since Burns is also the translator of the Weininger's posthumously published book, *On Last Things*, it is not surprising that the main topics in his essay have been selected from it. The first ten pages of Burns' essay is interesting in its analysis of Weininger's *On Last Things* but it is not quite clear to me how this is important in understanding Wittgenstein. If the title of the book would not be chosen to be *Wittgenstein Reads Weininger*, one would not hesitate to consider these pages a sort of the positive feedback but since the expectation of the reader is to gain some insight into Wittgenstein and the influence of Weininger on him, I find these pages to be redundant at least for the content of this book. Moreover, although one would expect some overlapping ideas among the contributors, it is done at the expense of considering only Weininger in the case of Burns' essay. After a lengthy reading of Weininger's analysis of Ibsen's play "Peer Gynt", Burns, in the last four pages of his essay, tries to argue about Wittgenstein's solipsism. Solipsism is indeed important in understanding Wittgenstein since as the author correctly states, it forms a link which connects first and later Wittgenstein. However, I do not think these pages were well spent on this topic, nor was it possible to do justice to it here. One would really like to read about the relation of solipsism and realism in Wittgensteinian in detail and in connexion to Weininger.

The fourth essay in *Wittgenstein Reads Weininger* is entitled "Wittgenstein and Weininger: Time, Life, World" and is written by Joachim Schulte. Schulte connects Wittgenstein and Weininger with the cultural atmosphere of fin-de-siècle Vienna. In this light, some ideas of both Weininger and Wittgenstein can be seen to be the products of this common cultural atmosphere. According to Schulte, some ideas shared by two were already *in the air* (italics are mine) of the Vienna of those times (p. 127). In other words, instead of thinking in terms of influences of Weiningerian ideas, one must think, to a certain extent at least, of the influence of *Zeitgeist* on these two philosophers.

The fifth essay in *Wittgenstein Reads Weininger* is entitled “Uncanny Differences” and it is written by Daniel Steuer. Steuer agrees with some of the other contributors in agreeing that Weininger was above all a psychological element in Wittgenstein’s life. Weininger was the other for Wittgenstein with whom he was setting the score even throughout his entire career. In short, Weininger was Wittgenstein’s Doppelgänger. The importance of writing an autobiography is important for both Weininger and Wittgenstein. Both consider this to be a central theme in their lives since only through autobiography one can see what one did in totality. This also blurs the demarcation between theoretical philosophizing and practical sphere of life. Then, how must one understand the aforementioned *enormous mistake* (italics are mine) of Weininger seen by Wittgenstein? For Wittgenstein, the task of writing a complete and utterly honest autobiography was impossible. In the case of Weininger though, this was possible and moreover a must. Even though Wittgenstein did not agree with Weininger on this particular issue, both believed in personal involvement with the truth. What is more, according to Steuer, Weininger’s tension and unacceptance of human condition led him to commit suicide whereas Wittgenstein saved himself from suicide by embracing a different approach to the same problem. Instead of Ideals set forth and forced by Weininger on him, Wittgenstein became interested more and more in particular workings of things. This in turn serves Wittgenstein to value the context in which any principle is laid. Even basic principles are of no importance independent of a specific system. Therefore, it was Weininger’s contribution to introduce this problematic and the black and white attitude to Wittgenstein. But, it was Wittgenstein’s contribution to set this problematic in context and to try to see it under whole spectrum of light, not only in black and white perspective.

The last essay in *Wittgenstein Reads Weininger* is titled “Weininger and Wittgenstein on “Animal Psychology” ” by David G. Stern. Stern first informs us of Georg Henrik von Wright’s report that Wittgenstein took *On Last Things* by Weininger very seriously. Von Wright also acknowledged that Wittgenstein spoke especially highly about the section entitled “Animal Psychology”. Weininger’s theme in this section concerns specific characters associated with animals. He maintains that “each species of animal has a *single* character common to

all its members, but which among humans is possessed only by a certain few." (p. 170). Von Wright's information allows us to understand the examples using animals in Wittgenstein's writings. We even learn that Wittgenstein was fond of classifying his friends in Cambridge according to Weininger's animal types. Stern then draws our attention to what symbolism means to Weininger. More aptly put, why does he think that it is important to think about animal psychology in general? Weininger's main conviction is that he believes in the idea of human being as a microcosm. Since all our interpretations are just our own projections, talking about animal psychology is nothing but talking about our own self. Weininger states that "Because the human being stands in relation to all the things in the world, so all these things must surely exist in him . . . According to it (i.e. the idea of microcosm), the system of the world is identical with the system of humankind. Every form of existence in nature corresponds to a characteristic in human beings; every possibility in humans corresponds to something in nature." (p. 174). For example, dog represents the slavish personality, inability for apperception, and living a life without making any kind of choices whatsoever. The dog is the symbol of the criminal, according to Weininger. The question remains as to why Wittgenstein was interested in this section in particular. Did he really believe that dog is the symbol of evil? Wittgenstein indeed borrowed the same problem from Weininger and asks what it means for a dog to be good or bad in the first place. His answer in his *Philosophical Investigations* consists of two main objections against this kind of reasoning. First, by associating these humane attributes with a dog's behavior, we fail to see the differences between ourselves and dogs. The main difference, according to Wittgenstein, is the fact that the dogs, or any other animal for that matter, cannot speak. And attributing certain attitudes to the animals presupposes the use of language. In short, Wittgenstein's view is summarized as "no language, no thought". On the other hand, Stern says, Wittgenstein's second objection was directed against our failure in assessing the similarities between the dogs and ourselves. Wittgenstein believes that friendliness can be seen on a dog's face as we can see it on our friend's face. Therefore, Wittgenstein can be said to hold the view that friendliness is objective as far as it can be seen on the face of the creature but it is also subjective since it requires a subject experienced enough to be able to see what he or she can see.

*Wittgenstein Reads Weininger* is an important contribution to secondary literature on Wittgenstein and is valuable in understanding some essential features of Wittgenstein's background. On the other hand, one must be very cautious in assessing what is original in his works since Wittgenstein's reading of Weininger's books is very subtle. This book also serves to the purpose of understanding how one of the most important philosophers of our times has developed his ideas throughout his career.

### References

- Otto Weininger (2003), *Sex and Character* (S&C), NY: Howard Fertig.
- Otto Weininger (2001), *On Last Things*, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980), *Culture and Value* (CV), Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1984), *Notebooks*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein (2000), *Nachlass*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.