Wittgenstein: a feminist interpretation

Alessandra Tanesini; Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2004, ISBN 0-7456-2074-4, £50.00 (hbk), ISBN 0-7456-2075-2, £15.99 (pbk)

Tanesini begins her book with a clear statement of what it is *not* going to be about. It will neither be about the exposure of Wittgenstein's sexism, nor about the 'underdeveloped feminism' of his philosophy. Instead, the book provides a feminist interpretation of Wittgenstein in two ways. Firstly, it offers an interpretation of Wittgenstein's writings inspired by the strategies for reading put forward by the feminist philosopher, Michelle Le Deouff. Secondly, Tanesini explores how Wittgenstein's analysis of, and response to, modern philosophical problems set up by the Cartesian (and subsequently, Kantian) account of the self, displays elective affinities with feminist critiques of the ways in which the self/subject is conceived within the modern philosophical tradition. At the heart of Tanesini's interpretation is the argument that Wittgenstein's work, including that of the *Tractatus*, should be read existentially rather than epistemologically. For Tanesini, Wittgenstein's fundamental concerns, which underlie his ostensible preoccupations with logic and language, are to do with the nature of the human condition and the problems created by the distinctively modern (and hugely mistaken) conception of the self as autonomous (pp. 5–10).

Tanesini follows Cavell in locating Wittgenstein within 'continental' philosophical traditions, aligning him with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger (p. 3). She also points to important links between his (Wittgenstein's) work and that of Freud (pp. 33–34). The latter link is of particular importance, in that Tanesini asserts a strong analogy between Wittgenstein's understanding of the purpose of his philosophical work and that of psychoanalysis. For Tanesini, rather than seeking to put forward substantive theories in his work, Wittgenstein was engaged in therapy, a process of bringing our understanding of ourselves, and our own limitations, back home from the places of loneliness and estrangement in which modern philosophy has stranded it. Given that this estrangement follows from the absurdity of the abstracted, self-legislating account of the rational, knowing subject embedded in modern philosophy, the parallels with feminist critiques of the philosophical tradition are startlingly obvious.

The book falls into five chapters. In the first chapter Tanesini sets out the broad parameters of her interpretation, and deals with charges of conservatism and misogyny that are commonly made against Wittgenstein. In relation to the former charge, she argues that Wittgenstein is not a political but an ethical thinker, and that for him, therefore, philosophy is a work on oneself as opposed to a prescriptive, legislative exercise (p. 23). Nevertheless, she also argues that there is nothing in Wittgenstein's arguments to suggest the immutability of the *status quo* or the immunity of any aspect of it from critique (p. 26). As far as misogyny

is concerned, the case against Wittgenstein is stronger, since he was explicitly prejudiced against women. However, Tanesini argues that Wittgenstein's attitudes to both gender (women) and race (Jews) do not necessarily reflect judgments of inferiority, but can also be read in terms of respect for difference (pp. 27–30). Interestingly, Tanesini does not include any consideration of Wittgenstein's sexuality in her account of either his preoccupation with the existential dilemmas of modernity or his attitude to women. In the second chapter, Tanesini introduces Le Deouff's feminist techniques for reading canonic philosophical texts, focusing particularly on how images and metaphors provide clues to meaning (p. 45). However, whereas Le Deouff sees the appearance of images and metaphors as pointers to what is repressed or contradictory within the text, Tanesini argues that in Wittgenstein's case, he explicitly invites us to read his work through such images and metaphors, as if philosophy were written as a poem is written, with style as a key to content (p. 42).

In the third and fourth chapters, Tanesini provides sustained readings of the *Tractatus* (Chapter Three) and of the argument against the 'hiddenness' of the inner self developed in Wittgenstein's later work (Chapter Four). The former identifies the *Tractatus* as a demonstration and exploration of human finitude, and an argument against the 'impulse to transcendence' rather than as an attempt to fix the legitimacy of connections between language and that which is the case. The latter shows how Wittgenstein's later arguments demonstrate the finitude of the human condition and the wrong-headedness of either trying to escape it or interpreting this as necessarily a *problem*. In both cases, Tanesini concludes the chapters by showing how Wittgenstein's arguments link to feminist debates on the nature of the self or subject and offer possible ways forward for feminist thinking. In the final chapter, Tanesini turns from the interpretation of Wittgenstein to the application of his ideas in a critique of Chantal Mouffe's conception of political community. She argues that Mouffe's understanding of the 'we' of political community as necessarily exclusive relies on a conception of boundaries that is embedded in the sceptical, Cartesian philosophical tradition of which Wittgenstein and feminists are critical. A Wittgensteinian approach to thinking political community permits 'we' statements to be acts of 'acknowledgement' rather than exclusion, and offers a possible alternative to the agonism inherent in the deconstructive paradox of political community on which the work of radical democratic theorists such as Mouffe is based.

Tanesini makes little concession to the reader who is not already familiar with both Wittgenstein and feminist philosophy. In particular, as it stands there is a rather perfunctory feel to the discussions of feminist debates, which tend to appear at the end of chapters, with a great deal of ground being covered very quickly. Overall, the book is stronger in its account of the critical as opposed to the constructive side of Wittgenstein's work, even taking account of the point that the latter should be interpreted in permissive rather than prescriptive terms.

The final chapter, which does try to map out some positive implications of Wittgenstein's work, although interesting in itself, sits rather oddly with the rest of the book, given its (the chapter's) concern with the collective and the political rather than the individual self and the ethical. Nevertheless, in spite of the above criticisms, reading Tanesini's book, in particular Chapters Three and Four, has made me want to read Wittgenstein again. Moreover, it has convinced me that his early as well as his later work is and should be of interest to feminist philosophers. The book provides both fascinating insights into Wittgenstein's philosophical project and a reminder of the capacity of feminist readings to illuminate new avenues for philosophical inquiry within very familiar canonic texts.

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Recovering subversion: feminist politics beyond the law

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In *Recovering Subversion*, Nivedita Menon examines the relationship between radical feminist politics and the use of law for social change. The text focuses on issues central to the contemporary Indian women's movement and provides detailed analysis of politics, practices and law reform since the 1980s. Menon's comprehensive exploration describes significant limitations for the women's movement engagement with law in order to advance feminist politics. Menon examines the efficacy of utilizing the language of rights for social change and ultimately argues against law as having potential to enact comprehensive transformation for the ethical and emancipatory impulses of feminist politics.

The central focus of the text outlines the problematic of 'the 'paradox of constitutionality'' (p. 2), which Menon analyses through a feminist perspective. Menon suggests that for feminist politics, differing moral visions must be asserted; women's diverse experiences 'as 'real' ... acquires meaning precisely through an interplay of contexts, and may be rendered sterile within the rigid codification required within legal discourse' (p. 107). She argues that this problem becomes apparent in pursuing recognition of these experiences, as legal discourse works by 'fixing meaning, by creating uniform categories out of a multiplicity of possibilities, by suturing open-endedness' (p. 107). Therefore, Menon's analysis contends that legal discourse is not only insufficient for