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Jean-Pierre Cometti: A Wittgensteinian Philosopher

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Abstract The purpose of this text is to clarify and explain the sense in which Jean-Pierre Cometti can be defined as a Wittgensteinian philosopher. In particular, it emphasises how Cometti's interest in Wittgenstein's thought was never purely exegetical. On the contrary, Cometti sought in Wittgenstein stimuli for a philosophy that he always understood, following in Wittgenstein's footsteps, as a work of clarification. However, it also emphasises how, thanks above all to the Wittgensteinian spirit that animates it, Cometti's philosophy was, on the one hand, capable of critically engaging, without dogmatism, with the philosophy of his time, from the thought of Heidegger and his followers to Derrida's deconstructionism, and from analytical philosophy to the hermeneutic tradition; on the other hand, to incorporate into his thinking suggestions and attitudes from American pragmatism.

Keywords Wittgenstein. Philosophical methods. Language. Philosophy of psychology. Metaphysics.

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1. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein was Jean-Pierre Cometti's philosopher. He dedicated several books and many essays to Wittgenstein, and he also translated many of his works into French to promote their dissemination in France – a country that had shown some resistance, so to speak, to the reception of Wittgenstein's thought.[1] Of course, Cometti was not only a scholar, interpreter and translator of Wittgenstein. Suffice it to mention his works on Robert Musil (see, for example, Cometti 1997 and Cometti 2001), on aesthetics and the philosophy of art (see, for example, Cometti 2012 and Cometti 2016a), or his very important works on pragmatism and John Dewey's thought (see, among many others, Cometti 2010 and Cometti 2016b). But it was to Wittgenstein that Cometti always returned, and it was with Wittgenstein's philosophy that he consistently identified. From this point of view, it may be interesting to note that one of the most important and comprehensive books Cometti devoted to Wittgenstein (Cometti 1996) is not entitled something like *La Philosophie de Wittgenstein*, but – much more significantly – *Philosopher avec Wittgenstein*, i.e. philosophising with Wittgenstein.

2. In any case, it was as a scholar of Wittgenstein that I first encountered Cometti, and it is his philologically accurate and theoretically engaging works on Wittgenstein that I know best and have drawn inspiration from more than once in my own work. For this reason, I will use the few pages at my disposal to make some general observations on how Cometti has interpreted Wittgenstein and engaged with his thought.

I would begin by observing that Cometti's Wittgenstein is not the Wittgenstein of many analytic philosophers (he is not, for example, Saul Kripke's Wittgenstein), but neither is he the Wittgenstein who was discovered at a certain point and partly appropriated by the hermeneutic-philosophical tradition or by so-called 'post-structuralist' thinkers. By this, I do not simply mean to suggest that, according to Cometti, Wittgenstein cannot be confined to any single philosophical tradition or movement, as if the question of what kind of philosopher Wittgenstein was could only be answered, as many Wittgensteinian gladly do, by saying that Wittgenstein is Wittgenstein. After all, even if, as Cometti seems to concede, there is much in Wittgenstein with which an analytic philosopher can identify and see themselves reflected, this does not mean that, for example, a comparison between Wittgenstein and Derrida – one capable of highlighting similarities and differences between "Wittgensteinian therapy" and "Derridian

1 For an analysis of the difficulty French philosophy has encountered in accepting Wittgenstein's ideas, see, for example, Bouveresse 1998, 119-41. This is a question, moreover, to which Bouveresse returned more than once in his writings.

deconstruction" – is absurd and completely unfeasible, as most analytical philosophers seem to think (see Cometti 1994, 215-27). We could put it that way. However, if we take seriously Wittgenstein's assertion that a philosopher is someone who "is not a citizen of any community of ideas (*Denkgemeinde*)" (Wittgenstein 2007, § 455), as Cometti seems to do, what comes to the fore is not the question of what philosophical assumptions and theses we share with Wittgenstein (or which he shares with us), but whether we can or want to philosophise with Wittgenstein – that is, whether we can or want to engage in that work of clarification which, according to Wittgenstein, is the very purpose of (his) philosophy or, rather, of (his) philosophising (see, for example, Wittgenstein 1974, prop. 4.112 and Wittgenstein 2009, I: § 130).

Of course, one might object that this emphasis on philosophy as a means of clarification is not at all neutral, nor free of presuppositions. I believe, however, that Wittgenstein (and Cometti) would readily have admitted this. It is true that certain statements by Wittgenstein on philosophy, and not only those in the *Tractatus*, sound very peremptory and may lead us to think that, in order to philosophise with Wittgenstein, one must first of all share his theses on philosophy and his metaphilosophy – or, to use Williamson's phrase (Williamson 2023), his philosophy of philosophy. But if we take a closer look at what he tells us in his various *Prefaces*, we may recognise that Wittgenstein's intended interlocutor is someone who is driven to philosophise by the same or similar anxieties that motivate Wittgenstein.

3. Indeed, in many of his works on Wittgenstein, Cometti begins by asking himself, "[i]n what sense was Wittgenstein a philosopher […] [a]nd what did philosophising mean to him?" (Cometti 1996, 24).[2] However, according to Cometti, these questions are not the questions that a scholar seeking to better understand Wittgenstein would ask themselves, but rather questions that must be asked by those who seek "in his work, a reasonable way out of the impasses in which we [contemporary philosophers] find ourselves" (Cometti 1996, 25). This once again shows that Cometti's reading of Wittgenstein is motivated not by historical-philosophical considerations alone, but by broader philosophical concerns. In short, we could say that the questions Cometti asks about Wittgenstein – as we have just seen – are also the questions he asks himself: what kind of philosopher am I? Or rather, what kind of philosopher would I like to be, and could I be? It is also worth noting that Cometti never asks these questions in general or abstract terms, as if he believed that philosophy has an essential (or

2 The passages from Cometti quoted here have been translated from the French by the Author.

timeless), but always frames them in relation to what he considers to be the state or condition of philosophy in his (and our) time. One can only be a philosopher by responding to one's own time – though this does not imply, following a historicist view that Cometti, regarded as alien to Wittgenstein[3] – that philosophy is or must be an expression of its time (whether in the form of celebration or rejection). In any case, Wittgenstein was certain that philosophical problems were neither eternal nor universal. As Cometti writes, "in Wittgenstein's view, philosophical problems were the expression of conditions that were, all things considered, contingent" (Cometti 1996, 29). In short, we can distinguish Wittgenstein's approach to philosophy "in the clearest possible way from conceptions that attribute to philosophical problems and to philosophy itself a meaning that lies at the heart of an original and universal human experience" (Cometti 1996, 28). As Cometti has clearly demonstrated on several occasions, it is precisely this lack of philosophical emphasis that distinguishes Wittgenstein from many other philosophers, such as Heidegger, and explains why many philosophers, both analytic and otherwise, distrust his philosophy or philosophy of philosophy (see Cometti 1996, 28).

4. Of course, as Cometti often points out, Wittgenstein acknowledges that some philosophical problems are, if not eternal, then certainly long-lived. However, this does not signify the universal importance of philosophy, but rather indicates "the persistence of the severity of a malaise that philosophy alone could not resolve", as these are problems that arise from language, but do not "reflect discomforts that are also linked to ways of life" (Cometti 1996, 28-9). Cometti is well aware that many philosophers might react with annoyance and incredulity to this attitude (and indeed, many have). Is not philosophy something much more essential and profound than this? Does it not seek to answer the crucial questions about what exists, who we are, what we can know and how we should live? Wittgenstein's answer, as Cometti understands it, seems to be twofold. On the one hand, he seems to be addressing not philosophers in general, but rather those who, like him, believe that philosophical problems are not scientific problems; they are not the kind of problems that science seeks to answer by formulating hypotheses and developing theories. It is not ignorance or lack of knowledge that motivates these philosophers, but an anxiety that knowledge alone cannot erase. On the other hand, and in a similar spirit, Wittgenstein never claims that his philosophy is the only authentic way of philosophising. Instead, he seems to suggest that his approach is one way of philosophising, connected in various

3 According to Cometti, Wittgenstein's appreciation of Spengler is not sufficient grounds for attributing any historicist inclination to him (see Cometti 1996, 40).

ways – through both similarities and differences – to what has been called 'philosophy' throughout the centuries. Cometti writes:

> Nothing authorises us to think that Wittgenstein meant by philosophy something that could be linked to a common *essence*. Nor does anything oblige us, on the contrary, to subject the use of this word to this condition. What we classify under this designation are related practices and discourses […]. This is why, to a certain extent, even if Wittgenstein believed that his way of philosophising could be linked to what we have called 'philosophy' in our tradition based on family resemblances, he was in no way obliged to regard the nature of philosophical problems, as he conceived them in the light of the type of description he endeavoured to give them, as having an ahistorical or universal meaning, capable of extending to everything we are likely to call 'philosophy', whether in the past or in any imaginable future. (Cometti 1996, 33-4)

At the end of the *Preface* to *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009, 4), Wittgenstein takes pains to remind us that the time in which his work is being published – and in which he addresses its readers – is marked by "poverty" and "darkness". This remark should be taken seriously, not merely as something incidental. In this sense, philosophy belongs to its own time even when, as seems to have been the case with Wittgenstein, that time is perceived as "alien and uncongenial" (Wittgenstein 1998, 8). Obviously, we must ask ourselves what time Wittgenstein is referring to here or, to put it slightly differently, what Wittgenstein's time was. It is sufficient to note here that if we compare the *Preface* to *Philosophical Investigations* dated "January 1945" with the *Sketch for a Foreword* of 1929, we must conclude that this time is the period when what Wittgenstein calls "the progressive civilization of Europe and America" (Wittgenstein 1998, 10) imposed itself in all areas and fields. As Cometti has repeatedly pointed out, this does not mean that Wittgenstein philosophises with his gaze (nostalgically) turned to the past or that he expects, like Heidegger, "an other beginning" (Heidegger 1989, 504). Significantly, after declaring the spirit of his book to be different, alien and uncongenial to that of "the prevailing European and American civilization", he adds that even if its aims are different from those of that civilization, "this civilization is perhaps an environment necessary for this spirit" (Wittgenstein 1998, 8-10).[4]

[4] It may be interesting to recall a long conversation I had with Cometti and Brian McGuinness in Venice in 2013. We discussed whether, in the *Preface* to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein also intended to refer to the historical and political conditions (Nazism, the Second World War, etc.) of the years in which he was writing the book. It should be noted that the *Preface* is dated "January 1945". McGuinness

5. At this point, we could say that one of the things Cometti has no doubts about is that philosophising with Wittgenstein means taking seriously – and striving to fully share – his refusal "to consider philosophy as knowledge" (Cometti 1996, 10). This means not only refusing to regard philosophy as a science in the sense as physics, for example, but also, and above all, refusing to consider it a *super*-science or *meta*-physics. In any case, it must be acknowledged that nothing could be further from Wittgenstein's philosophical spirit than the idea that philosophy is about making "discoveries", such as the discovery that behind language there are language games "that could be used to outline the contours of an *essence* or a *foundation*" (Cometti 1996, 11). As Cometti writes, "Wittgenstein did not believe that it was the task of philosophy to penetrate the shell of things, or of words, in order to access a hidden *truth* or *meaning* that was not immediately available" (Cometti 1996, 3). The concept of the language game, for example, is not part of a (philosophical or scientific) theory of language, but is a tool belonging to the work of philosophical clarification; it arises from a comparison between "the use and rules of language" and "the practice of games such as chess" (Cometti 1996, 10-11) and, in turn, allows new comparisons to be made. In this sense, it can be said that for Wittgenstein, philosophical activity is "an activity that does not claim to establish anything beyond what constitutes it as an *activity* and what it aims, as such, to bring to light". For this reason, it can also be said that there is a sense in which "Wittgensteinian inventions [such as the concept of linguistic game] are not destined to survive beyond the philosophical problems they make it possible to address" (Cometti 1996, 12).

Cometti is well aware – and the French philosophical (and intellectual) environment in which he lived could only have heightened this awareness – that many philosophers are reluctant to give up the idea that the philosopher has a "privileged point of view" and that philosophy possesses "special powers" (Cometti 1996, 35). We are faced with what Cometti calls "philosophical vanity" (Cometti 1996, 39), which he, along with Wittgenstein, considers to be one of philosophers' cardinal sins. There are two sides or aspects of this vanity that particularly interest Cometti. On the one hand, there is the idea that philosophy somehow holds the "secret" (see Cometti 1996, 3) of being – in the form, for example, of a philosophy of history capable of discerning the meaning and laws or principles of historical development. On the other hand, there is the related idea that philosophy determines, either positively or negatively, what the world (and we along with it) is, can be or fails to be. This is what Cometti

categorically ruled out this being Wittgenstein's intention, arguing that his was, a more "epochal" reference, so to speak. Cometti and I were less peremptory on this point.

calls "intellectualist sophism" (Cometti 1996, 40), a tendency not only of classical metaphysics but also of many thinkers (among others, Derrida, Vattimo and Lyotard) who, in various ways, continue to celebrate the death of metaphysics (see Cometti 1996, 39-41). From this point of view, Cometti approvingly quotes a passage in which Hilary Putnam criticises Derrida and the deconstructionists, observing that "deconstructionists are right in claiming that a certain metaphysical tradition is bankrupt; but to identify that metaphysical tradition with our lives and our language is to give metaphysics an altogether exaggerated importance" (Putnam 1992, 124; see Cometti 1996, 40). Reasoning in this way, as Putnam immediately points out, means seeing metaphysics as "the *basis* of our entire culture, the pedestal on which it all rested; if the pedestal has broken, the entire culture must have collapsed – indeed, our whole language must lie in ruins" (Putnam 1992, 125). In the same spirit, Cometti directs many critical, ironic observations at all those philosophers "who pretend to celebrate the death of metaphysics, yet clearly conceive of no alternative but to prolong the celebration or renounce […] what only metaphysics allowed them to establish" (Cometti 1996, 41). In this quote, Cometti effectively employs – with reference to certain 'post-modern' philosophical trends – what Wittgenstein repeatedly sought to make us understand about his philosophy. We might say that, for Wittgenstein, there is nothing that his philosophical work forces us to renounce; on the contrary, Wittgenstein's concern is that we manage to ask ourselves why it seems to us that there is something great and important that we would be forced to renounce if we were to demolish the 'buildings' of metaphysics. This is exactly what is explained to us in § 118 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Where does this investigation get its importance from, given that it seems only to destroy everything interesting: that is, all that is great and important? (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) But what we are destroying are only houses of cards (*Luftgebäude*), and we are cleaning up the ground of language on which they stood. (Wittgenstein 2009, I: § 118)

6. Of course, we must not forget that the philosophical era in which Cometti worked for most of his life is now largely over or in decline. Today, on the one hand, we are witnessing a resurgence – variously motivated and defended – of metaphysics and more or less extreme forms of metaphysical realism; on the other hand, we are seeing the spread in philosophy of a form of naturalism that seems antithetical to Wittgenstein's desire to keep the philosophical work of clarification distinct from the hypotheses, theories, and explanations of science. Cometti has engaged with these trends as they have appeared or

reappeared in philosophy, especially in relation to the philosophy of mind and what has been called the 'cognitive turn' (Cometti 2004, 9).

There is no space here to explore this very important aspect of Cometti's work in depth. However, it is worth mentioning at least one of the convictions that guide his considerations on Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology. Cometti believes that Wittgenstein's philosophical work of clarification can be extended to the philosophy of mind that developed after Wittgenstein, especially following the emergence of cognitive science and then neuroscience – fields that Wittgenstein obviously could not have known. So while it is true that the psychology criticised by Wittgenstein for its confusions (behaviourism, introspectionism, etc.) is largely outdated and no longer in vogue, it is also true that Wittgenstein's philosophical work (his approach to psychological concepts) can (and must) be tested against the new paths and pursuits that have characterised psychology since the early 1960s. For example, Cometti seems to think that psychology and cognitive science could benefit from two aspects of Wittgenstein's work that are often interpreted as criticisms of psychology as such. On the one hand, there is the distinction between causes and reasons, which seems so important to Wittgenstein that some scholars (though not Cometti) have taken it not merely as a heuristic or descriptive distinction, but as a genuine dichotomy (Cometti 2004, 201-8). On the other hand, the reference is to Wittgenstein's constant critique of introspectionism. As Cometti observes, Wittgenstein could teach today's psychology and philosophy of mind that, in order to investigate the mind, "it is advisable to appeal to means clearly dissociated from the models of interiority" that have long prevailed in philosophy and psychology (Cometti 2004, 200). From this point of view, as Cometti suggests, it would be useful to consider the way in which Wittgenstein criticises every attempt to overcome the divide between the Inner and the Outer by simply eliminating one or the other – i.e., the Inner, as classical behaviourism does, or the Outer, as mentalism, or what Cometti calls "introspectionism", does. But, as is clear to Wittgenstein (and Cometti with him), in order to overcome the divide between the Inner and the Outer, it is not enough to delete one of the two terms, since the deleted term continues to shape how the preserved term is understood (see Cometti 2004, 114-16).

As any attentive reader will see, Cometti does not underestimate the limitations and ambiguities of Wittgenstein's remarks on psychology,[5] but nevertheless believes – and, for what it is worth, I

5 For example, Wittgenstein makes statements such as the following, which Cometti (2004, 211) does not hesitate to describe as "totally surprising": "It is thus perfectly possible that certain psychological phenomena *cannot* be investigated physiologically, because physiologically nothing corresponds to them" (Wittgenstein 2007, § 609). This is clearly such a "radical" observation that one may wonder what kind of philosophy

agree with him – that psychology would have much to lose by ignoring Wittgenstein's work on psychological concepts. Similarly, Wittgensteinian philosophers would be mistaken to assume that Wittgenstein's criticism of the conceptual confusions of psychology can be applied directly, without changes or rethinking, to the field psychology and cognitive science as they have developed in the decades since his death.

7. As Cometti often points out, Wittgenstein's philosophy, as set out in both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, is closely linked to the importance he assigns to language. In short, Wittgenstein fully belongs to the so-called 'linguistic turn'. This does not mean that Wittgenstein was or considered himself a philosopher of language, but rather that, for him, philosophy had to do with language because it is precisely from language that those fundamental confusions arise with which all of philosophy is riddled (see Wittgenstein 1974, prop. 3.324). Now, one of the things that Cometti never fails to emphasise is that, for Wittgenstein, at least in the *Investigations* and other texts from the same period, language can never be considered in isolation: to say 'language' is always to say 'uses' (in the sense of common or social practices), and to say 'uses' in this sense is to say 'ways or forms of life'.[6] This means that it is completely illusory to hope to free oneself from philosophical confusion by coming to terms with language once and for all – even if, as Cometti seems to believe, this was the illusion of the *Tractatus* – because there is no language with which to come to terms once and for all. Thinking differently, i.e. thinking like the *Tractatus* if Cometti is right, would mean, despite all statements to the contrary, claiming a privileged perspective and 'object' for philosophy (see Cometti 1996, 33). To make this point clear, Cometti refers to a passage in the *Big Typescript* (Wittgenstein 2013, 305) in which Wittgenstein states that "[a]ll that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not creating a new one" – not even, Cometti adds (1996, 61), what for some has been, or still is, the idol of Language (written with a capital L).[7] We could also say that what Cometti finds particularly interesting in Wittgenstein – and what he sees as a genuine, non-extrinsic connection to the pragmatist tradition – is that "attention […] to the instrumental

could possibly support it. Are we not faced with "an extreme form of linguistic idealism" (Cometti 2004, 211-12)? According to Cometti, this is not the case, and Wittgenstein's observation is less paradoxical and anti-scientific than it might seem. However, there is no doubt that it could be understood as Cometti believes that, on closer inspection, it should not be understood.

6 See Cometti 2013 on the pragmatic value of this line of thinking.

7 Wittgenstein's passage ends with the words: "say in the 'absence of an idol'" (Wittgenstein 2013, 305).

dimension of language", which allows him to escape "the aporias that sometimes tend to favour an 'idealistic' conception of language, and at other times a 'realistic' one, defined in relation to a world or a reality that is considered independent" (Cometti 1996, 61).

This is a very important point that would deserve more space than is available here. As Cometti often recalls, the assertion that "language is not an instrument" or a tool is a sort of leitmotif in the thought of Heidegger and in philosophical hermeneutics throughout the second half of the twentieth century. It also plays a significant role "in structuralism, in Lacan's view of the unconscious and in Derrida's deconstruction" (Cometti 1996, 53). If we associate the linguistic turn with this anti-instrumentalism and the "organic and reified vision of language" (Cometti 1996, 53)[8] that accompanies it, we must also acknowledge that Wittgenstein did not make any linguistic turn; indeed, "[t]his famous 'linguistic turn' in philosophy […] could exemplify the conception that many of Wittgenstein's remarks on language [certainly those in the *Philosophical Investigations*] are directed against" (Cometti 1996, 52). It is in this context that we can situate, for example, the many critical observations that Wittgenstein began making in the first half of the 1930s concerning all those positions that regard meaning as something prior to and independent of use (see Cometti 1996, 54). Here, we are faced with what Wittgenstein considers to be a veritable "mythology of symbolism" (Wittgenstein 1980, 53), which consists in the idea that the rules of a sign (e.g. of the negation sign) derive from something we can call its 'meaning'. Against this 'mythology', Wittgenstein repeatedly asserts that it is the rules that determine, fix or constitute meaning. Thus, continuing with the example of negation, the rule of double negation does not follow from the supposed meaning of negation; rather, it is this rule that determines (fixes or constitutes) the meaning of the negation sign.[9]

But there is also another aspect that Cometti highlights in this context, drawing on Georg H. von Wright's valuable observation that

8 This also explains why Cometti has always looked favourably upon what he regards as Donald Davidson's provocative claim that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" (Davidson 2005, 107).

9 "It looks as if one could *infer* from the meaning of negation that '~ ~ p' means p. As if the rules for the negation sign *follow* from the nature of negation. So that in a certain sense there is first of all negation, and then the rules of grammar" (Wittgenstein 1980, 53). "We would like to say: 'Negation has the property that when it is doubled it yields an affirmation'. But the rule doesn't give a further description of negation, it constitutes negation" (Wittgenstein 1980, 52). Obviously, care must be taken not to escape the mythology of meaning only to fall into the mythology of rules. Coming to terms with the mythology of rules is one of the crucial tasks that Wittgenstein undertakes in the *Philosophical Investigations*. On this, see also Cometti 2011.

"problems of philosophy have their roots in a distortion or malfunctioning of the language-games", which "in its turn signalizes that something is wrong with the ways in which men live" (see von Wright 1982, 207 quoted in Cometti 1996, 29). Now, as Cometti comments, this is a way of recognising the limits of philosophy. After all, it is clear that, for Wittgenstein, "it would be completely absurd […] to attribute [to philosophy] the power to act on ways of life" (Cometti 1996, 29), even if it is precisely through "a change in the way we live" that we might expect philosophical problems, as he understood them, to become "superfluous" (Wittgenstein 1998, 70 quoted in Cometti 1996, 29). Here we are faced with one of Wittgenstein's basic convictions about philosophy. There is no doubt that Wittgenstein was aware of the importance of philosophy as a work of clarification, not only for himself, but also for others who were inspired to philosophise by an impulse similar to his own. At the same time, however, he always sought to avoid what Cometti called "philosophical vanity" (Cometti 1996, 39). In short, Wittgenstein never forgot the remark he made in one of the most philosophically dense passages of *Culture and Value*:

> If there were a 'solution to the problems of […] philosophy […]' we should only to caution ourselves that there was a time when they had not been solved (and then too it must have been possible to live and think). (Wittgenstein 1998, 69)

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