

Review article

‘If some people looked like elephants and others like cats, or fish ...’

On the difficulties of understanding each other: the case of Wittgenstein and Sraffa

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Brian McGuinness (ed.), *Wittgenstein in Cambridge. Letters and Documents 1911–1951*. Malden (USA), Oxford (UK) and Carlton (Australia): Blackwell, 2008. viii + 498 pp. £75.00. ISBN 978-1-4051-4701-9

Wittgenstein in Cambridge contains correspondence of and documents relating to the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein during his life in Cambridge, UK. It is a follow-up to *Cambridge Letters*, which Brian McGuinness had edited with the late Georg Henrik von Wright (McGuinness and von Wright 1995). Some 200 additional items make it about twice as long as the previous volume. The most important novelty is a fair number of letters from Wittgenstein to Piero Sraffa and some memoranda written for Wittgenstein by the Italian economist. These had been removed (stolen?) from Sraffa’s rooms at Trinity College, Cambridge, and had come onto the market only recently. They shed light on the difficult friendship of the two, the development of their relationship over the years since they first met in 1929 until Wittgenstein’s death in 1951 and the conversations they had, which, as Wittgenstein

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Review article with special emphasis on the relationship between Wittgenstein and Piero Sraffa.

acknowledged, had a deep impact on his thinking in general and his *Philosophical Investigations* in particular.¹

In a fine introduction of just 12 pages, the editor provides a summary account of Wittgenstein's times in Cambridge, his friends there and the Cambridge institutions that played a role in Wittgenstein's 'philosophical, professional, and general intellectual life' (p. 1). Then follows a list of letters and documents, and the letters and documents themselves. They are arranged in a chronological order, or what is taken to be such, and are numbered. Numerous valuable editorial notes put the material in context, contain cross-references, draw the readers' attention to reflections in Wittgenstein's writings of the ideas exchanged, and so forth. A biography informs us about the works mentioned or alluded to in the letters. There is also an index of correspondents and document sources plus a general index.

For obvious reasons, in this review I focus attention on the hitherto unknown material relating to the economist Piero Sraffa.

When Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in January 1929 after 16 years of absence, John Maynard Keynes saw him on the train and wrote to his wife Lydia: 'God has arrived'. A great many Cambridge celebrities (with some notable exceptions) were indeed fascinated by Wittgenstein and his remarkable intellect combined with a strong willpower. For example, on 1 June 1930 the mathematician J. E. Littlewood reported to the Council of Trinity College:

Wittgenstein has explained some of his ideas to me verbally in some 6 or 8 sessions of 1 hour to one hour and a half. This has been inadequate for a full understanding, but enough to give me the impression that his work is of the highest importance. Revolutionary as his ideas are, some of them seem to me clearly destined to become eventually part of logical thought. There are cases of new absolutely first class work when even an amateur can feel confident, and justifiably, in its importance. (p. 187)

It must have been a Greek god Keynes saw returning to Cambridge, possessed of human fallibilities. Wittgenstein was well aware of these, and throughout his life tried to fight them. They were put in sharp relief in his discussions with Sraffa. Much of the material concerns precisely this aspect and, in addition, what in Wittgenstein's view were the shortcomings of his intellectual counterpart. Apparently, while the two minds at first fully met, their discussions soon began to cause both a lot of strain. Time and again we see Wittgenstein complain about Sraffa not understanding or

1 For a discussion of Sraffa's influence on Wittgenstein, see Sen (2003) and several contributions in Kurz *et al.* (2008).

misunderstanding him. The following summary account of the material shows why he thought this to be the case.

Sraffa met Wittgenstein soon after the latter's return to Trinity College.² Regular meetings of the two, usually in the afternoon, began in October 1930 (Michaelmas Term). They also had a number of evening appointments, typically after meetings of societies or clubs or talks given by others. Their conversations concerned all sorts of matters, including political developments in Europe and elsewhere. Since the relationship was essentially conducted face to face, it is safe to assume that the letters and memoranda cover only a very small sample of the questions raised.

A major concern of the two especially in the early 1930s, but also later, was how to detect errors of thinking and identify nonsense, and what the role of language was in all this. In a document taken from Sraffa's unpublished papers kept at Trinity College, which merits to be quoted in full, Sraffa argues:

If the rules of language can be constructed only by observation, there can never be any nonsense said. This identifies the cause and the meaning of a word.

The language of birds, as well as the language of metaphysicians can be interpreted consistently in this way.

It is only a matter of finding the occasion on which they say a thing, just as one finds the occasion on which they sneeze.

And if nonsense is "a mere noise" it certainly must happen, as sneeze, when there is cause: how can this be distinguished from its meaning?

We should give up the generalities and take particular cases, from which we started. Take conditional propositions: when are they nonsense, and when are they not?

"If I were the king" is nonsense. For either I, or the job, would have to be entirely different. I know exactly what the reasons are that make this unthinkable; and I see that the modifications required to make it thinkable would be so great, that I would not recognize myself so transformed, nobody would say that the job, as adapted to my present self, is that of a king.

"If I were a lecturer" has sense. For I was last year, and I don't think I have changed much since, nor has the job.³ The difference is small. Or rather I cannot see it: I don't

² At the time Sraffa was a member of King's College. According to Sraffa's *Cambridge Pocket Diary* 1928–1929, the first meeting with Wittgenstein took place on 17 February 1929 at 4:30 p.m.

³ Sraffa resigned from his lectureship in May 1931. The above remark may therefore be taken as an indication that he had composed the note in 1932.

know exactly in what I have changed since last year. There is nothing repugnant to me in the idea.

But does it not simply depend on my knowledge? (For a difference is big or small, according to whether I see it clearly or not). If I knew enough they would all be nonsense.

Then of course there are the propositions where “if” stands for a class, and the proposition is true (or thinkable, as *supra*) for one member at least of the class. (p. 196)⁴

It may come as a surprise to many readers that already in the early 1930s Wittgenstein expressed sentiments of suffering from the conversations he had with Sraffa.⁵ On 1 January 1934 he wrote to the Italian economist:

Now you know that the conversations which we had in recent times (meaning roughly the last 6 or 9 months) were always a very great strain for me; and I’m sure for you too. This in itself wouldn’t matter but I think it is clear that, for the present at any rate, we have given each other all that we can give. I have learnt an enormous amount from you in the conversations we had during the past 2 or 3 years; but I can’t say that I have learnt much from you in our last conversations. Not that I’ve learnt all you can teach! But I’ve learnt most of what at present can be assimilated by me. That’s why our last conversations haven’t been profitable. Now this, I think, is no ground for never meeting again; but it is the reason why, until I feel more powerful, I avoid having conversations with you. (p. 222)

The two indeed variously interrupted the regularity of their meetings (see, for example, the editorial note on p. 222), but, due to the rise of Nazi Germany, Wittgenstein felt an urgent need to have his friend’s opinion on

4 See Sraffa’s papers D3/12/174: 1–2 (references follow the Trinity College catalogue prepared by Jonathan Smith, archivist. The catalogue is available online: <http://rabbit.trin.cam.ac.uk/~jon/Msscolls/Sraffa.html>). See in this context also a document presumably composed somewhat earlier in which Sraffa contemplated on how the social position of an observer in a given society or state of the world affects his point of view and on the problem of self-sameness in thought experiments that imagine alternative states of the world. When one talks about worlds other than the actual one, one engages in counterfactuals. This, however, is as risky enterprise and puts in question one’s capacity to judge properly. For example, in the context of a discussion of what is a sufficient reason for the existence of profits, Sraffa remarked: ‘Our point of view was wrong. We were looking at it from the point of view of “what can be changed”. . . . But by whom, and how? “If I were dictator of the world”.’ The difficulty of the involved thought experiment is put into sharp relief by Sraffa’s following addendum: ‘But if I were, could I have the same ideas: would I remain [the same] if I had?’ (D3/12/7: 42–3).

5 As Wittgenstein once famously put it, in some of their discussions Sraffa made him feel like a tree stripped off its branches.

whether Nazism could take over Austria as well. There are a few remarkable memoranda reflecting Wittgenstein's political naivety. It must have been beyond Sraffa's comprehension to see Wittgenstein insist that Austrian patriotism was a sufficiently strong protective belt against Hitler and his followers. In their respective discussions, Sraffa appears to have been rather blunt and may even have lost his temper, which prompted Wittgenstein to the following complaint of 31 January 1934:

I think that your fault in a discussion is this: YOU ARE NOT HELPFUL! I am like a man inviting you to tea to my room; but my room is hardly furnished, one has to sit on boxes and the teacups stand on the floor and the cups have no handles, etc etc. I hustle about fetching anything I can think of to make it possible that we should have tea together. *You* stand about with a sulky face; say that you can't [sic] sit down on a box, and can't [sic] hold a cup without a handle, and generally make things difficult. – At least that's how it seems to me. (p. 225)⁶

In a note for Sraffa written three weeks later, Wittgenstein described his role in their respective talks in the following way: 'It's like trying *hard* to fill a barrel which has no bottom' (p. 225). The document is of particular interest, because it begins a discussion of why changes take place in society. The case in terms of which Wittgenstein illustrates his view on the matter is a change in fashion. He argues that the 'fallacy' is this – 'to think every action which people do is *preceded* by a particular state of the mind of which the action is the outcome. ... The fallacy could be described by saying that one presupposes a mental reservoir in which the real causes of our actions are kept.' Such a 'reservoir, I.E. "the mentality of people"' would then allow for some changes, but not for others.' Wittgenstein added: 'The fallacy in this argument is, I suppose, that one then (in a sense unconsciously) presupposes that *a certain Kind of characteristics* (which forms the mentality or its expression) won't change. The fallacy roughly speaking is to think that if the unexpected things happened the people would have no face, NO physiognomy' (p. 226).

Two days later Sraffa answered his Austrian friend. He introduced his argument in terms of an observation on their discussions that expresses clearly what he felt made it so difficult to render them fruitful:

As to the method of our discussions (remarks or arguments) I have this to say. I must have long stories, not short ones; I must try to stick to a point & not saunter from one to the other, apparently disconnected; I am much too slow for that, and cannot find the hidden connection. Also I cannot be content with hints or

⁶ As regards the transliteration of emphases and so forth in Wittgenstein's letters and documents, see the editor's remark (p. 12).

allusions (or things which cannot be laid down black or white), I must have it all thrashed out. (p. 227)

As regards the substance of Wittgenstein's argument, Sraffa objected: 'No, the fallacy is to suppose that phys.[iology] is the reservoir of primary changes. What we want is not a reservoir of unchangeable things, but one of things that change first.' He added, striking an objectivist note:

This is the point. I think that the reservoir must contain definite concrete things, preferably measurable or ascertainable with some certainty, independently of my likes and dislikes. Phys. are certainly not that; they are made up of my prejudices, sympathies etc; & I know by experience that my view of the phys. changes always after – long after – the events I was trying to predict happened. (p. 227)

Wittgenstein's answer to the problem under consideration that 'People dress as they do for lots of different reasons' (p. 225) Sraffa qualifies as 'of no use to anyone' (p. 227). A change of fashion, for example, should be related to 'things the change of which will be visible first . . .; things of the sort of the quantity of coal produced in Germany (if it is relevant), not of the spirit of the German people' (p. 227). Sraffa insisted that:

in the answers you must point to things which are dependable; If you said to the tailor, "look at the spirit of the people, when it changes, dresses will come into harmony with it." Would this rule be of any use to the tailor? Would it be as much use as if you said: the newspapers have been full of Tutankhamen and the fashion will be copies of Egyptian clothes, but not of silk because the crop has failed and is too dear and adapted so that mechanical looms can produce them, and of a darker shade so that they don't get too dirty in London etc. (pp. 227–8)

Wittgenstein composed a letter of some 10 pages in answer, which – alas! – has not yet been retrieved. There is, however, a short note by Sraffa written in early March 1934 that deals with the difference between intuition and science. In it Sraffa maintained: 'The error is to regard intuition as a provisional substitute for science: "when you will produce a satisfactory science, I shall give up intuitions"'. – Now the two things cannot be set against one another they are on entirely different planes. Intuitions are a way of acting, science one of knowing (Physician)'. To this Sraffa added two observations: 'Actions do not require a rational justification – they are *objects* of explanation' and 'You are trying to rationalise intuition[s] – and say they are the *pis aller* for science' (p. 229).⁷

⁷ For echoes of these exchanges in the *Blue and Brown Books*, see the editorial notes (pp. 228–9).

Both scholars were extremely sceptical of received explanations of events. As regards their own attempts at explaining things, they followed rather different routes, with Sraffa opting for a materialist approach. Sraffa related his own method to that of the seventeenth-century British economist William Petty, who had decided to express himself ‘in Terms of *Number, Weight or Measure*; to use only Arguments of Sense, and to consider only such Causes, as have visible Foundations in Nature’ (see Sraffa’s excerpts from Petty’s *Political Arithmetick*, written in 1676, but published only in 1690 in D3/12/4: 3). Such a method would rule out as much as possible the influence of one’s likes and dislikes, prejudices, sympathies, and so forth. In this context it is perhaps useful to draw the reader’s attention to a brief note entitled ‘The distinction between “value-judgements” and “empirical (or objective, scientific, etc) knowledge”’ contained in a folder with material Sraffa characterised broadly as stemming from ‘After 1927’.⁸ The note is first and foremost a comment on a famous distinction usually ascribed to the German economist and sociologist Max Weber that played an important role in the so-called ‘value judgement debate’ (*Werturteilsstreit*), but then also on contemporary economics and its claim to objectivity. Sraffa wrote:

This trite distinction has recently gained popularity amongst German economists (they always think in terms of it), having been newly stated by Max Weber. Unless it is taken in a purely practical, common-sense fashion, it is exceedingly stupid.

Its success is due, not to the “don’ts” [sic] it implies, but to its affirmative part – to the fact that it gives the economists the faculty of saying something which has scientific validity, which must be accepted by laymen as the truth ascertained by science. It is therefore constantly used by economists to smuggle under its cover their “value judgements” labelled as “objective knowledge”.

Thus, according to Weber (see Diehl’s account of his work in QJE XXXVIII, 95)⁹ the “professors” may show the political parties “the facts with which you will have to reckon” – but the facts are infinite, and with what criterion will the selection be made? then they have to be described, – is this possible “objectively”?

8 The note on the construction of the rules of language quoted in the above is contained in the same folder. Since in the note Sraffa refers to a book by Einaudi published in 1929, the note may have been written in late 1929 or shortly later. This gets also some support from the fact that it is contained in a ring book next to excerpts from and comments on Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk’s *Positive Theory of Capital*, published in 1891, on which Sraffa worked at around this time, as is reflected in some of his other papers (see Gehrke and Kurz 2006: 108).

9 The reference is to Diehl (1923).

A typical case is that of Pareto: I only say what the consequences of free trade & protection are & free trade leads to an increase of wealth, protection to a destruction – now I do not say what you must chose, as an economist, etc.

But a much better case is that of the Einaudi–de Viti controversy on the taxation of saving.¹⁰ (D3/12/7: 144)

After this interpolation we now come back to the volume under review. Shortly before Wittgenstein went to Russia in 1935 he wrote a letter to Sraffa (which the latter dated 13 July 1935), asking him to give him ‘the name of the preparation against bugs which you once mentioned to me. I think you said that you had the stuff with you in Russia’ (p. 248).¹¹ The letter reflects also Wittgenstein’s deep discontent with his situation in these stirring times. He actually put forward the following confession: ‘All I can now say is this: that there is *something* fundamentally wrong with me’ (p. 248). To be sure, Sraffa could not help him, ‘as it is my job anyway to do something to put it right’ (p. 248). And a few days later he wrote to Sraffa in a mood of despair ‘that *nothing that I say really interests you.*’ He added: ‘You like to discuss with me because I am persistent and clever (in a sense), but the other thing which is necessary to make a *good* discussion that each should *enjoy* what the other says is lacking (i.e. *you don’t enjoy what I say, not vice versa.*)’ (p. 249).

In August 1936 Wittgenstein, after having terminated his engagement in Cambridge, went to live in his hut in Norway. He sent Sraffa a postcard on which he wrote: ‘I think of you quite often and not with disagreeable feelings. I also sometimes think of our last conversation in the Backs [of the colleges] about Spain and how wrong I was’ (p. 253). The reference is apparently to Franco’s *coup d’état* in Spain in July 1936. Once again Sraffa had shown to be possessed of a solid judgement of upcoming political developments.

On 12 March 1938, the day on which German troops marched into Austria (the ‘Anschluss’ was declared the following day), Wittgenstein wrote from Dublin to Sraffa asking his advice whether he, Wittgenstein, could ‘go to Austria in May or June for one of my usual visits, to stay there a month or so and to return to Cambridge or Dublin.’ What bothered him was ‘whether I shall be let out of Austria if I go there’ and ‘whether I shall be let in to England from Austria’ (p. 267). Sraffa answered on 14 March 1938:¹²

10 See in this context especially the copy of Einaudi (1929) in Sraffa’s library, which Sraffa annotated heavily.

11 Sraffa had visited the Soviet Union in August/September 1930.

12 This is the only letter of Sraffa’s preserved among Wittgenstein’s papers.

Before trying to discuss, probably, in a confused way, I want to give a clear answer to your question. If as you say it is of “vital importance” for you to be able to leave Austria and return to England, there is no doubt – you must not go to Vienna. (p. 269)

The usually well-informed Sraffa then explained in some detail, and in a way that is all but ‘confused’, why he had arrived at this recommendation.¹³ It is apposite to have a closer look at his reasoning. He argued that ‘now you would not be let out: the frontier of Austria is closed to the exit of Austrians. No doubt these restrictions will have been somewhat relaxed in a month’s time. But there will be no certainty for a long time that you will be allowed to go out, and I think a considerable chance of your not being allowed out for some time.’ He expounded: ‘You are aware no doubt that now you are a German citizen. Your Austrian passport will certainly be withdrawn as soon as you enter Austria: and then you will have to apply for a German passport, which may be granted if and when the Gestapo is satisfied that you deserve it.’ Sraffa went on:

As to the possibility of war, I do not know: it may happen any moment, or we may have one or two more years of “peace”. I really have no idea. But I should not gamble on the likelihood of 6 months’ peace.

If however you decided in spite of all to go back to Vienna, I think: a) it would certainly increase your chance of being allowed out of Austria if you were a lecturer in Cambridge; b) there would be no difficulty in your entering England, once you are let out of Austria (of Germany, I should say); c) before leaving Ireland or England you should have your passport changed with a German one, at a German consulate: I suppose they will begin to do so in a very short time; and you are more likely to get the exchange effected here than in Vienna; and, if you go with a German passport, you are more likely (though not at all certain) to be let out again.

You must be careful, I think, about various things: 1) if you go to Austria, you must have made up your mind not to say that you are of Jewish descent, or they are sure to refuse you a passport; 2) you must not say that you have money in England, for when you are there they could compel you to hand it over to the Reichsbank; 3) if you are approached, in Dublin or Cambridge, by the German Consulate, for registration, or change of passport, be careful how you answer, for a rash word might prevent you ever going back to Vienna; 4) take great care how you write home, stick to purely personal affairs, for letters are certainly censored.

If you have made up your mind, you should apply at once for Irish citizenship – perhaps your period of residence in England will be counted for that purpose: do it

¹³ In an editorial note McGuinness comments that ‘Sraffa’s standards were high’ and adds the opening phrase of a letter of Keynes to Sraffa: ‘After three months commercial diplomacy with the Americans, I feel almost equal to correspondence with you’ (p. 270).

before your Austrian passport is taken away from you, it is probably easier as an Austrian than as a German.

In the present circumstances I should not have qualms about British nationality if that is the only one which you can acquire without waiting for another ten years' residence: also you have friends in England who could help you to get it: and certainly a Cambridge job would enable you to get it quickly. (p. 269)

Wittgenstein followed Sraffa's advice and postponed the trip. The requirement to exchange his Austrian passport for that of a 'German jew' horrified him. After some deliberation he followed anew the advice of Sraffa (and Keynes) and applied for British naturalisation. Sraffa also helped Wittgenstein with family problems and even went to Vienna to see his friend's sisters and discuss the possibilities of being exempted from racial persecution.

On the day of the Munich Agreement, 29 September 1938, Wittgenstein asked Sraffa to take him to Czechoslovakia in case he, Sraffa, intended to go there 'to help in some way or other'. He added: 'IN CASE you should have any use for me I should be overjoyed' (p. 284).

The two discussed at some length whether they should accept the invitations in late 1938 to become Fellows of Trinity College. Wittgenstein advised Sraffa to accept, which Sraffa eventually did. (Both became Fellows in 1939.¹⁴) Interestingly, in a letter of 1 December 1938, Wittgenstein mentioned as a point in favour of accepting the election 'that it will be a *change of position* and thereby may help to *uproot* you. I.e., you'll have to get up from your present chair and sit down on another one. It will therefore teach you *new* things, and that's a point in favour of accepting.' He added: 'In a sense, you will loose your job and get another one; *which is at least some motion*' (p. 288). In a letter to Joan Robinson, quoted by the editor, Sraffa wrote on 15 February 1939, the day Wittgenstein was elected to the chair: 'Wittgenstein advises me to accept, but he has a complicated argument that this may be due to his having accepted the professorship and unconsciously wanting to drag me down into a similar ignominy' (p. 288).

14 More precisely: Wittgenstein was admitted to a Senior Research Fellowship on 5 December 1930. He signed the admissions book for fellows together with the mathematician Abram S. Besicovitch (whom Sraffa was later to consult on mathematical problems he encountered when working on his 1960 book). This fellowship had a limit of six years, and after it lapsed in 1936 Wittgenstein left Cambridge to spend some time in Norway. However, when he became Professor of Philosophy, Trinity elected him to a Professorial Fellowship and he signed the admissions book on 10 October 1939, together with Sraffa.

Only a few weeks later, on 15 March 1939, Wittgenstein expressed anew his disenchantment with a meeting they had and which prompted him to think ‘that you’ld [*sic*] almost rather *not* hear from me.’ He accused Sraffa of an ‘attitude of *contempt* for what you don’t understand’ and added: ‘I *believe* I know how excellent and sound your understanding is, as far as it goes; but I believe that it is very narrowly bounded, and I can’t help believing that you have no idea of how narrowly bounded it is’ (p. 301).

Wittgenstein kept Sraffa informed about the talks he had at the Deutsche Reichsbank and with his brother Paul and his sisters concerning the concessions to be made to the Reichsbank in order for the Wittgenstein family to be exempted from racial and other discrimination in the annexed Austria (pp. 305–6).

In a letter written on 8 January 1941, Wittgenstein took a meeting the night before in Sraffa’s room and a remark he had made on this occasion and Sraffa’s reception of it as the starting point of some reflections on their relationship. He wrote: ‘I said that my brain had deteriorated and I added that you, too, didn’t think properly – as though I thought these two things were on the same level. – This however I don’t think.’ He added: ‘The deterioration of my thinking powers seems to me to be something *permanent*, as though it were due to physiological causes; the decline which I seem to observe in your thinking I believe to be a thing about which something can be done and to which, therefore, your attention should be drawn’ (p. 338). The symptom of the decline of Sraffa’s thinking, Wittgenstein maintained, ‘is that you are unable now to stand decently *strong contradiction*, the contradiction of someone, I mean, who mistrusts your reasoning – which reasoning seems to me to be *very* often *muddled* and *superficial*.’ This decline is said to have made ‘a *deep* discussion now impossible.’ The ‘cause of this’, Wittgenstein surmised, is, ‘to put it bluntly, that you have in some way gone *soft*.’ This might in turn ‘perhaps be due to the fact that *many* people admire you now than used to a few years ago.’ As the case of Professor G. H. Hardy, the mathematician, is said to have shown, admiration has ‘bad effects’ on people (p. 338).

Sraffa appears to have responded to this only verbally: ‘I won’t be bullied by you, Wittgenstein!’ (see p. 339).¹⁵

Letters Wittgenstein wrote to Sraffa whilst he was working in a hospital in London in the early 1940s document his ongoing affection for Sraffa (pp. 347 and 351). Yet in a letter written on 19 December 1944 he had

15 Sraffa was widely known as a kind and obliging man. When Michal Kalecki once visited Cambridge he said that there he had encountered only two gentlemen: one was a Communist (Maurice Dobb) and the other an Italian.

another try at identifying the sources of their difficulties to communicate fruitfully:

I should like to make remarks about last night's conversation.

I. About myself.

- 1) I'm vain and it's hard for me to admit that I'm wrong, or that an argument has dislodged me.
- 2) I'm *very* unclear about things, and find it very difficult to make useful remarks.
- 3) I think it must be said in my favour that I *long* for a better and deeper discussion; and when I fall I try, as hard as I know how, to get up and walk again.

II. About yourself.

- 1) You're superior to me by being much less vain.
- 2) You are less clumsy than I am and don't stumble as easily.
- 3) You seem to me less anxious to find out whether you are right or wrong than to stay where you are. And you can do this because it is so easy for you to beat off an attacker. In this way your cleverness is a danger to you and I'm *inclined* to think a grave danger. I believe the only remedy in such a case is this. You must *help* the other man attack you if he doesn't do it properly (provided there is anything in him at all). You must help him up if he stumbles, not try to make him stumble. Not out of kindness towards him, but so as to give yourself a chance to see if perhaps after all there's something wrong with your ideas. (p. 372)

The situation did not improve as the years went by – on the contrary. On 10 October 1947 Wittgenstein wrote to Sraffa:

When I left your room this morning I had a strong and *extremely* queer impression. – As you know some years ago we were what I should have called “friends”. ... Then came a time when I got more and more on your nerves and our conversations became less fruitful. You, very naturally, reacted with a certain violence and rudeness, and in consequence of this, and of outward circumstances, we met less and less frequently. Your final rude outbursts (about 1940 I think) hurt me and angered me a great deal. After a longish time, very gradually my feeling changed. I began to expect a certain unfriendliness from you and my feeling of friendship cooled off, particularly when I seemed to discover that you were no longer wishing to be *helpful* when I came to you for advice, etc. For, gradually, you seemed to me to become a *Trinity Don*: stiff, stand-offish and unfriendly. For a long time I couldn't believe in *that* change. (p. 416)

However, in Wittgenstein's perception there were clear signs that Sraffa's attitude towards him had altered significantly. Wittgenstein concluded:

If you have, for whatever reason, taken a strong dislike to me (which I would understand) then your behaviour, though certainly nasty, is quite understandable and not anything alarming. If, on the other hand, though not particularly liking me, you don't particularly dislike me either, your behaviour seems to me *most* alarming. I should like to say in this case: Please see that you don't become completely inhuman! (p. 416)

And on 23 August 1949 Wittgenstein wrote to Sraffa from Ithaca, N.Y.: 'I have *very slowly* in my life come to the conviction that some people *cannot make themselves understood to each other*, or at least only in a very narrowly circumscribed field. If this happens each is inclined to think that the other doesn't want to understand, and there are ENDLESS misunderstandings.' He added: 'Only by a real tour de force it was possible for us to talk to each other years ago when we were younger. And if I may compare you to a mine in which I worked to get some precious ore, I must say that my labour was *extremely* hard; though also that what I got out of it was well worth the labour.' And in a *post scriptum* appended to the main text we read:

The older I grow the more I realize how terribly difficult it is for people to understand each other, and I think that what misleads one is the fact that they all look so much like each other. If some people looked like elephants and others like cats, or fish, one wouldn't *expect* them to understand each other and things would look much more like what they really are. (p. 450)

Wittgenstein and Sraffa stayed in touch with each other until Wittgenstein passed away on 29 April 1951 in Cambridge. Sraffa noted in his *Cambridge Pocket Diary* in ink, in large capitals, in the section reserved for calendar events for each day on this day 'MORTE DI WITTGENSTEIN'.¹⁶

The volume edited by Brian McGuinness contains important documents informing us about Ludwig Wittgenstein's life and work in Cambridge. It shows a man in search of intellectual and psychic purity and clarity, possessed of many talents and capabilities, often obstinate, highly sensitive and fundamentally insecure. Wittgenstein's letters to Sraffa and Sraffa's memoranda written for Wittgenstein add an important chapter to the story and allow us to get an idea of the difficulties these two towering figures of the twentieth century encountered in an attempt to benefit from each other's intellectual powers. At the same time attracted by and repelled from one another, their meetings from an early time onwards involved a lot of strain for both. As regards the themes discussed on these occasions and the

16 Sraffa used large capitals in his diary only rarely. It can safely be assumed that, despite their 'endless misunderstandings', Wittgenstein's death was a great loss for him.

views exchanged between them, only some of the documents are fertile sources of information. There is no doubt that they mark only the tip of an iceberg, whose by far greater part is still (and will probably forever be) hidden from our eyes. One would have wished to see more of this type of exchange. However, the few documents speak vividly of the style of discussion of the two scholars, their different personalities and attitudes and the clashes of their thoughts. Brian McGuinness is to be thanked for his meticulous and elegant editorial work.

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