



FRIEDRICH WAISMANN

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1896–1959

**F**RIEDRICH WAISMANN, through his published work and through his teaching at Oxford, greatly influenced the development of philosophy in Britain in the years following the war.

Waismann was born in Vienna. His father was a Russian, his mother an Austrian. Both were Jews. He did not speak Russian, and his education and style of thought were characteristic of Vienna in the years after the First World War. Because of his Russian ancestry, he was subject to some disabilities during the First World War. He was interned for a short time in the Isle of Man as an alien during the Second World War. He often spoke of himself as stateless and as unattached by loyalty to any nationality. Something that was essentially solitary, both in his thought and in his mode of life, is probably in part traceable to these experiences. His family was not rich, and he had difficulty in supporting himself at the University of Vienna. As a student his interests and his distinction were in mathematics, and also in physics. I recall his descriptions of Hahn's lectures, and of the atmosphere of intellectual excitement in the university as the new advances in physics and in mathematical logic were being assimilated and discussed. But firm dates and definite facts did not emerge from his conversation, and I fear that there is little hope now of reconstructing his biography. Characteristically, his memory presented him with scenes and impressions only, and he was reluctant to commit himself to any narrative of his life. He began teaching as a lecturer and tutor in mathematics. But the decisive influence in his early life was his friendship with Moritz Schlick, who was the natural centre of the group of philosophers, and philosophers of science, known as the Vienna Circle. Waismann conducted a preliminary Seminar from which those who attended Schlick's Seminar were chosen. In a published memoir of Schlick, sympathetic and moving, Waismann showed that his own achievements as a philosopher would not have been possible without Schlick's early encouragement. He read Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with a view to reporting on it to the Circle and was profoundly impressed. Through Schlick he came to know Wittgenstein. With this meeting his intellectual future was determined, and for many years he worked on a systematic

development of Wittgenstein's thought. He later described his conversations with Wittgenstein as having at the time impressed him with the force of a revelation. The boldness and freedom of Wittgenstein's thinking, the dramatic contrasts which his temperament required and which he introduced even into purely abstract discussions, were unlike anything that Waismann had known before; they corresponded with his own innate conception of philosophy. Waismann also wished to write philosophy which should be, not only precise, methodical, and sceptical, as the Vienna Circle required, but also profound and adventurous. He was naturally sensitive to words, and to literary values, and this interest was no less strong, and no less part of his approach to philosophy, than was his interest in mathematics and theoretical physics. In the course of his discussions with Wittgenstein, he found that all his interests were called into play simultaneously, as proper parts of philosophy. From this time onwards he became increasingly dissatisfied with the methods and programme of the Vienna Circle. His intellectual progress was a continual movement away from the clear-cut ambitions of Schlick and of Professor Carnap, who had seen most of the traditional problems of philosophy as finally superseded. Under Wittgenstein's influence, and later in his own researches into language, he came to disbelieve that the design of formalized languages, as abstract models of natural languages, could be of real use to philosophers trying to understand, and to solve, the persisting problems of philosophy.

A general method of finding exact formulations, and final solutions, of philosophical problems had been proposed by logical positivists, as the heirs of the Vienna Circle. No philosophical problems, as distinct from problems of natural science, would present themselves in a logically clear language, that is, in a language governed by explicitly formulated and consistent meaning-rules. The proper work of modern philosophy, free from ancient superstitions, was to construct segments of logically clear languages, and to exhibit within them the formally distinguished and precise equivalents of the confusions of meaning which had generated philosophical problems. This was the revolutionary position from which Waismann had started. It would be an error of complacency, and an error of historical judgement, to represent this programme as evidently bound to fail, and as misconceived from its beginnings. On the contrary, it had a superb plausibility and attracted some of the most acute philosophers in Europe and America in the 20's and 30's.



Even today it has distinguished adherents, and it is the foundation of some of the most interesting and constructive philosophy of this time. But Waismann was gradually convinced that the essence of a real philosophical problem would always escape from any such rational reconstruction and would remain untouched by this method. Many of the problems that are truly philosophical have their origin in the necessary indeterminateness of natural language in the normal conditions of its use. The indeterminateness, the uncertainty in the conditions of applications of concepts, is not an accident, an effect of carelessness, which can be eliminated; it is an essential condition of their application. Therefore the construction of formal systems, with precise meaning-rules, will never in itself bring enlightenment in philosophy. The original difficulty in understanding the conceptual scheme, as it actually exists, will be left untouched.

It follows that we cannot hope for continuing solutions of philosophical problems achieved by a uniform method of analysis: the translation of the original problem into a logically clear notation. Waismann came to doubt, and finally to deny, that the notion of 'solution' was in its proper place in connexion with the problems of philosophy, as opposed to problems of mathematical logic. Problems in mathematical logic, and in foundation theory, must ultimately be susceptible of solution by regular methods, even if these methods are still undiscovered. But it may be the mark of a philosophical question that the schema of problem and solution is inapplicable, because understanding the problem cannot be distinguished, as a separate and prior phase, from finding the solution. When we have fully understood the source and nature of a philosophical problem, we have often gained the insight that we needed, and nothing then remains either to be asserted or to be denied. A philosophical inquiry does not generally end in some addition to positive knowledge, in a solution, but rather in a clearer view of possible alternatives in the connexion of concepts of different types and of different levels.

It is plain that these doctrines, which entered into Waismann's published and unpublished writings from about 1930 onwards, were originally derived from Wittgenstein. Waismann always himself stressed this inspiration. But from the beginning of their association in Vienna, he interpreted and applied his new insight into the nature of philosophy in his own way, which increasingly diverged from Wittgenstein's. Waismann was by

training a mathematician who had turned to philosophy, and his knowledge of mathematics was the original basis of his relationship with Wittgenstein. His only published book, *Einführung in das mathematische Denken* (Vienna, 1936), applied the new philosophy to the foundations of mathematics and to some of the unsolved problems left by Frege and Russell. Wittgenstein had earlier sought from Waismann an account of the significance of Brouwer's work and of intuitionism, and from these beginnings Waismann developed his own philosophy of mathematics and, subsequently, of language. But he never achieved a complete and unitary statement. He arrived in England under the auspices of the Academic Assistance Council, after the National Socialists' invasion of Austria, the author of this subtle and respected book on the philosophy of mathematics, and of a brilliant article on logic published in *Erkenntnis*, the journal of the new movement in philosophy. He brought with him an almost finished version of a book on philosophy and language on which he had been working against time, and against political disaster, throughout a long summer. Only the final chapter had remained to be written when he left Vienna. One copy of the book had been left with his publisher, Springer, in Austria: another was to be sent to the philosopher Neurath in Holland; the third the author hoped would be translated into English in England, with the concluding chapter added. This was never to happen. In Cambridge he found that, in the new circumstances, his previous relations with Wittgenstein were not to be resumed and that there was to be no further contact of any kind between them.

Following upon others, I helped in the translation of the book, ineffectively, after Waismann had moved from Cambridge to 104 Abingdon Road, Oxford, which remained his home until his death. He was made a member of New College, and later became a member of Common Room at Wadham. If the book had been published in 1939, or even in 1945, it would certainly have marked an important step in the development of analytical philosophy. The theme was the different levels of language, and the birth of philosophical doubts and questionings at their points of contact. A range of concepts, clearly interrelated, and a range of idioms, have their uses in well-recognized contexts; another range of concepts, and another range of idioms, are introduced and accepted as adequate to the expression of new natural knowledge. In a makeshift, pragmatical spirit, we may forbear to raise questions about the logical relations between two or

more segregated sections of our language. We may be content to use one set of concepts in an unscientific context, and the other set in the context of scientific inquiry, without asking how this departmentalization of our thinking can ultimately be justified. Philosophical doubt begins when this departmentalization of our thinking is for some reason suspended, and we are no longer content with makeshift. We begin to ask—'Which of the two sets of concepts is *really* adequate to reality? Upon what principles are we to make a choice in contexts where both sets of concepts might conceivably be applied?' Waismann found illustrations of his theme from the history of science and of philosophy, illustrations which were both apt and intrinsically interesting. The form of the argument was in this respect quite unlike that of Wittgenstein's later work, even though its conclusion was in some respects similar. Waismann tried to show, from the history of thought, that many philosophical problems had come into existence as acutely felt problems at a particular juncture in the development of new forms of knowledge, and had subsequently lost their power to perplex us, as the new knowledge was consolidated and an earlier conceptual scheme became obsolete. Of such problems we should say that they were 'dissolved' rather than that they were solved. The purpose of philosophical argument should be to make us conscious of the many levels of language, and of the shifts that we unnoticingly employ in moving from one level to another. We shall not thereafter be inclined to systematize the whole of our language in accordance with logical principles that are peculiar to one segment of it. This is evidently no more than a crude summary of some parts of this various and inventive book.

Waismann never accepted the opinion, rightly or wrongly associated with Wittgenstein, that philosophy was a kind of therapeutic inquiry, and that we should return at the end of a philosophical argument to acquiescence in familiarly known truths. Both in his lectures and in his published essays, he argued, with the aid of examples, that philosophical insight (a favourite word) could still contribute to the advancement of knowledge, as it had so often in the past. He attributed the opposing view to a too naïve dichotomy between the form in which new knowledge is expressed and the new knowledge itself. A bold conceptual revision, of the kind that constitutes a philosopher's paradox, may open new paths to positive knowledge, at this time no less than in the seventeenth century. In 'What is Philosophy?', a contribution to *Contemporary British Philosophy*



(Third Series, 1956), he memorably stated the claims of conceptual analysis to be considered constructive and to lead to discovery. This is probably the most perceptive and critical introduction to contemporary philosophy written in English in the last fifty years. The style and form is characteristic: indefinite and rhetorical and discontinuous, but unmistakably the expression of independent thinking. Waismann aimed, not always successfully in English, at gnomic utterances, which should point at a philosophical conclusion in the form of an aphorism. But the style is here subdued to a restraining purpose: to state justly that which is new, and that which is continuous with the past, in the conceptual analysis that is characteristic of the philosophy of his time. He indicates some of the ways in which analytic philosophy, when it is not a lifeless academic routine, may contribute to a new vision of reality.

Of his other writings published in English from 1938 onwards, perhaps the most notable is a series of articles in the journal *Analysis* on the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. As this distinction was one of the two main supports of logical empiricism, the criticism of it was criticism of the whole philosophy by which he had been formed. He sought to show by well-chosen examples that the distinction could never be made precise outside the context of a formalized language. The conditions of application of language to reality include a necessary indeterminacy in meaning-rules. He had introduced a metaphor for indeterminateness of meaning—'the open texture of language'—which became a familiar phrase in discussion, liable to be quoted, whenever some too sharp reductive analysis of a concept had been proposed. As we progress along the series of heterogeneous examples cited in these articles, we shall have gained an insight into the complexity and variety of our concepts and of the conditions of their employment. We shall also be warned against a too naïve antithesis between 'the facts', neutrally reported, and our chosen pictures of 'the facts', and between independent realities and our conceptual requirements. The articles were original and useful because of their range. They brought together scientific and mathematical examples of indeterminateness of sense together with examples drawn from ordinary speech.

The new analytical philosophy in Britain was always narrowly concentrated on the structure and idioms of common speech, and on the criticism of logic and of metaphysics, wherever they seemed to do violence to the forms of common speech. Moore

had turned the attention of a generation of philosophers towards new standards of accuracy, which were quite independent of innovations in logic and mathematics. For those who were educated as classical scholars, and who had had no concern with the foundations of mathematics, or with theoretical physics, philosophy, in its search for clarity and precision, became for a time almost identified with more accurate linguistic analysis. The great contribution of Waismann, particularly in Oxford and particularly in the years immediately following the war, was that he was sensitive and original in his tracing philosophical problems to neglected differences in linguistic idiom, while never losing sight of the wider scope of philosophy, on the margin of advances in mathematics and in science. For some years after the war he was, and knew that he was, a counterpoise in Oxford to a rather provincial indifference to the philosophy of mathematics and of physics. First, as Reader in the philosophy of mathematics, and, later, as Reader in the philosophy of science, he tried to act as an interpreter between the linguistic analysts and the problems left by Poincaré, Hilbert, and Gödel and by quantum theory. He was not consistently successful and he did not believe that he was. He knew that his own difficulties with the English language, and the lack of any preliminary knowledge in his audience, often defeated him, particularly in his later years. His natural tendency to isolation was reinforced by great personal misfortunes—the death, first, of his wife and, later, of his only son—and he found increasing difficulties in communicating with others. But in the five or six years after the war, his lectures and classes, together with those of J. L. Austin, formed that habit of hesitant, detailed, indecisive analysis of contrasting idioms which became known as characteristic of philosophy in Oxford. Two essays, 'Verifiability' published in the Aristotelian Society's Supplementary Proceedings, and 'Language Strata', published in *Logic and Language*, 2nd series (edited by A. G. N. Flew), give the substance of his teaching at this time. During a short period at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton, he had conversations with Gödel. These conversations recalled to him the intellectual expectations of his youth in Vienna, and the exact atmosphere of that time. They reinforced his sense of exile from a way of life which had been destroyed.

Waismann was almost a recluse, and his life was devoted to solitary thinking. He wrote continuously in notebooks, but he was almost never satisfied with his own writing and he was



unable to bring his work to a conclusion. His thinking issued in an accumulation of fragments, representing many distinct moments of illumination. Some of the fragments were of considerable length, but still remain fragments, because they lacked a finished form and a conclusion. Almost a book on the nature of geometry: almost a book on motives and the will: long essays on perception, on knowledge, and on various aspects of logic: all these existed among his papers, in addition to the already mentioned book which, lacking its last chapter, was never published. The transition from the German to the English language was more difficult and more crippling for him than for anyone else whom I have known in similar circumstances. He was a very self-conscious stylist in words, influenced, as he said that Wittgenstein had also been, by Lichtenberg and by Karl Kraus, and anxious that his own words should make an exact, strong, and surprising impression. He would carefully, and even pathetically, read Virginia Woolf, and study Pearsall Smith's essays on English words, and try to find a clothing for his thoughts, which he knew to be alien and fetched from somewhere distant. He thought in German and then rendered his philosophical arguments in English. It was a painful experience to help him in this deforming of his real intentions. He wrote verse in German, and also a great number of aphorisms, some philosophical, some reflections on experience. They have as their background, and still clinging association, the culture that is described by Musil, whom Waismann greatly admired, and that was formed and represented, at their different levels, by Schnitzler, Zweig, Trakl, and Kraus. A luxuriance in pessimism and passivity, and in the ineffectiveness of reason; a wry sentimentality, a cultivation of mystery, and the sense of belonging to a dying élite, who congratulate themselves on their philosophy, which they know will not save them from being swept away by the violence that is to come. He delighted to read Novalis and Nietzsche, and when introduced to Kafka's writings in Oxford, he immediately felt an affinity. He gave a characteristic, and still remembered, lecture on 'the many levels of meaning' in Kafka to an International Summer School at Oxford.

From his early years he had despised and dreaded German nationalism. His life and work were indeed interrupted and spoiled, and he was not able to achieve more than a small part of that which he still reasonably hoped to achieve. Those who knew him, and particularly graduate and undergraduate pupils,

recognized the extraordinary depth and tenacity of his inner life, and an eccentric privacy, gentleness, and detachment. He seemed to be an utterly unworldly thinker, the figure of a philosopher in romance, and he was in fact exactly what he seemed. His absorbed thoughtfulness, his manner of independent and solitary reflection, had a temper peculiar to himself, and they had their part in forming contemporary philosophy in England and at Oxford.

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