Distant reading in the history of philosophy: Wittgenstein and academic success

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This contribution is part of the larger project DR2 (Distant Reading and Data-Driven Research in the History of Philosophy, www.filosofia.unito.it/dr2 – University of Turin), which aims at getting together and coordinating a series of research activities, in which Franco Moretti's distant reading methods are applied to the history of philosophy and, more in general, to the history of ideas. This contribution provides a sample of how such methods may usefully interact with more traditional methods in the history of philosophy, resulting in a more or less deep revision of the received views.

As suggested in the title, the topic of our contribution is the place of Wittgenstein in contemporary analytic philosophy; or, perhaps more precisely, the relationship between two philosophical traditions, the analytic and the Wittgensteinian. The main aim of the present contribution is to check whether the application of a distant reading approach can add some interesting details and insights to the historical-philosophical understanding of the "decline" of the Wittgensteinian tradition in contemporary analytic philosophy (a topic that has already been studied using traditional methods of the history of philosophy, see for example Hacker 1996 and Tripodi 2009). We consider a the period 1980-2010 in the US, by analysing the corpus of more than 20,000 PhD theses in philosophy provided by Proquest (www.proquest.com). This corpus contains the metadata (such as author, title, year of publication, name of the supervisor, university, department, abstract, keywords, and so forth) of the PhD dissertations. Within this corpus, we select and cut out the metadata of the dissertations in which the name "Wittgenstein" occurs in the abstract. They are almost 450, and half of them are directly concerned with Wittgenstein's philosophy (i.e., they are entirely devoted to Wittgenstein). For each dissertation we find out and register the main subject matter and the names that co-occur with the name "Wittgenstein". Then we try to find out, with the aid of search engines, what kind of academic career (if any) the PhD candidates were able to pursue: for example, how many of them became full professors, associate professors, assistant professors, adjunct professors; how many of them got an academic job in the US, how many went abroad; how many of them worked in the highest ranked departments, in lower ranked ones, in liberal arts colleges or in community colleges (only for undergraduates). By combining such variables together and by assigning a value to each of them, we are able to obtain a sort of "Academic Success Index" (ASI), which roughly but quite reasonably measures the academic success of PhD candidates in philosophy who wrote their dissertation on Wittgenstein (or, at least, mentioned Wittgenstein in the abstract of their dissertation). We do the same operation with other philosophers, that is, with other names occurring in the abstract of the dissertations (for example, Gadamer, Spinoza), as well as with a random sample. A first interesting result is that the index of academic success of those candidates who mention Wittgenstein in the abstract of their dissertation is significantly *lower* than the index of those who mention analytic philosophers such as David Lewis, Saul Kripke, Michael Dummett and Jerry Fodor.

This interesting fact – the fact that in the last 30-35 years a PhD candidate working in the analytic philosophical field, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, has more chances to get a good academic job than one who belongs to the Wittgensteinian field – can be explained or interpreted in many ways, inspired by different disciplines and perspectives: for example, there are sociological explanations that are more or less plausible (some professors of philosophy had and still have more academic power than others; since certain topics are more difficult, they attract better PhD students, and so forth), but there are also historical-philosophical interpretations (philosophical fashion makes it more "profitable" to work on, say, recent mainstream analytic philosophy rather than on Wittgenstein), and many other possible answers. We have a number of good reasons, however, not to accept such

explanations and interpretations as entirely correct, or at least as complete. Once again, we try to find a somewhat novel answer to our question by applying a distant reading approach. We use a visualization software (VOSviewer; www.vosviewer.com) to represent the more frequent words occurring in the almost 450 "Wittgensteinian" dissertations and in the almost 500 "analytic" ones, respectively. The impressive result is that this kind of visualization seems to provide a key to a better understanding of the difference between the indexes of academic success: looking at the "analytic" visualization chart and considering, for example, the 50 words that are more frequently used in the abstracts (but similar results would be obtained by considering the first 10 or the first 100 of the list as well), we find the prevalence of words such as "theory", "argument", "result", "consequence", problem", "solution", "account", and so forth, whereas the Wittgensteinian visualization chart presents a different configuration and a different set of frequently used words. We would like to suggest that the presence (and the absence) of this semantic pattern refers to the presence (and the absence) of a science-oriented philosophical style and metaphilosophy. Since we think that a science-oriented philosophical style should be conceived of as part of a process of academic and scientific legitimation, the main thesis of our contribution is that the index of academic success for PhD candidates in US philosophy departments in the last 40 years is quite strictly connected to the choice of a more or less science-oriented philosophical style and metaphilosophy. Such a contention, suggested by the application of distant reading methods to the history of philosophy, throws new light on the issue of the decline of the Wittgensteinian tradition in contemporary analytic philosophy.

Bibliographic References

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