
the situated thinker

The movement of thought in my philosophizing should be discernible in the history of my mind, its moral concepts, and in the understanding of my situation.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Denkbewegungen*

Some while ago a friend at Cambridge took me to the ancient graveyard of St Giles where Ludwig Wittgenstein lies buried. The place was deserted except for some birds in the untended bushes. After a little searching we found the grave in the wild grass. A plain slab in the ground records Wittgenstein's name and the years of his birth and death (1889–1951) – nothing else. A nearby tree had shed leaves on the stone. Someone had scattered flowers on it, a couple of coins, and, surprisingly, the stub of a pencil. It all struck me as right. All the complexities of Wittgenstein's life and thought, so it appeared to me at the time, had been folded here into complete simplicity.

What reason is there now to drag the philosopher from the anonymous peace he has sought in that Cambridge graveyard? After all, he “purposely lived in obscurity, discouraging all attempts to make him into a celebrity or public figure,”¹ so why should we now dwell on Wittgenstein's life, if our concern is really to bring his thought to bear on our own pressing problems? It is true that the man himself and the circumstances of his life have provoked the curiosity of biographers, cultural historians, and literary authors. But what do we have to know about the man and his life in order to understand his thought? Every thought is, admittedly, someone's thought. But every utterance also stands apart from its author and may have uses and meanings that the author never intended. A written text, in particular, is capable of leading a fertile life apart from its author, and to tie it too closely to its author may diminish its vitality and importance. Still, some biographical facts prove useful when we try to decipher Wittgenstein's writings.

wittgenstein, First Edition. Hans Sluga.

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A Man at the Crossroads

Perhaps the most important thing to know about Wittgenstein is that he lived his life at a number of crossroads – some personal, some cultural and historical in character. It is this, above all, which makes his work crucial to us since his crossroads are also very much ours.

One of these crossroads is that of secular and religious culture. Wittgenstein's family had thrown off its Jewish past and become Christianized at some time in the mid-nineteenth century.² His great-grandfather had taken the first step by changing the family name from the Jewish-sounding "Mayer" to the German (and aristocratic) "Wittgenstein." His grandfather, who moved the family from Saxony to Vienna, had become a Protestant and reputedly also an anti-Semite. The philosopher was, in turn, baptized a Catholic but grew up in a largely secular household. During World War I he became inspired, however, by a non-dogmatic version of Christianity which he discovered with the help of Tolstoy, and this outlook was to mold his ethical thinking from now on to the end of his life. "I am not a religious man," he would say later on to his friend Drury, "but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."³ Much of this view was focused on the Christian and, specifically, the Catholic tradition. To Drury he said accordingly also: "The symbolisms of Catholicism are wonderful beyond words." But then he said, characteristically, that "any attempt to make it into a philosophical system is offensive."⁴ By contrast he looked at his Jewish background with deep ambivalence. "Judaism is most problematic [*hochproblematisch*]," he wrote in his diary in 1930,⁵ and "even the greatest of Jewish thinkers is no more than talented."⁶ When he said to a friend in 1949, "My thoughts are one hundred percent Hebraic,"⁷ he meant, in any case, to include the Christian in the Hebraic as maintaining, in contrast to the "Greek" view of things, that good and evil cannot in the end be reconciled. If we are to classify him at all, we would certainly have to call Wittgenstein a religious thinker within the Christian tradition. But that characterization is not easy to reconcile with the content of Wittgenstein's actual philosophical work, where religious issues are never directly apparent. That aspect of Wittgenstein's thought has therefore been understandably ignored by most interpreters. Still, we cannot doubt that Wittgenstein considered questions of ethics and religion with utter seriousness and that this attitude expressed an abiding distrust of modern secular culture. While this may not affect Wittgenstein's particular views on language or the mind, it will certainly bear on the question of what his work can mean for political thinking.

A second crossroad for Wittgenstein, related to the first, was that of scientific/technological and philosophical culture. His father, Karl Wittgenstein, had made himself a rich man in the Austrian steel industry and he expected his sons to follow him in this career. Ludwig, the youngest, who showed some mechanical aptitude, was sent to the technical high school in Linz. After completing his high school education, Wittgenstein enrolled in the Technical

University of Berlin and later on in the University of Manchester to study engineering. But in Manchester he developed an unexpected fascination with the foundations of mathematics, which made him turn to philosophy in 1911 (just as his father lay dying). The move was not altogether surprising given Wittgenstein's early immersion in the culture of *fin de siècle* Vienna.⁸ We are told that he had, in fact, early on read Arthur Schopenhauer, who was widely admired in late nineteenth-century Vienna. Traces of Schopenhauer's thought can certainly be found throughout Wittgenstein's philosophical work. His earliest writings also reveal, moreover, familiarity with such figures as the physicist Rudolf Boltzmann, the philosopher of science Ernst Mach, his student, the philosopher of language Fritz Mauthner, the philosopher of sexuality Otto Weininger, the cultural critic and satirist Karl Kraus, and the modernist architect Adolf Loos.

Robert Musil and Hermann Broch – two of Wittgenstein's contemporaries with a similar outlook and development – depict Vienna in their writings as a world steeped in the pessimism of Schopenhauer that curiously combined deep nostalgia for the old with a curiosity for the new and modern.⁹ The same duality is manifest in Wittgenstein's work, which combines an interest in the study of language, mathematics, and the mind characteristic of the new currents in Viennese thinking with an exceedingly somber view of life. His doubts about secular culture and about the promises of our scientific and technological civilization combine ultimately into a devastating assessment of where we are today. To his friend Drury he could summarize his – and our – situation by saying in 1936, "The dark ages are coming again."¹⁰

From Vienna to Cambridge

It is not enough, however, to think of Wittgenstein in terms of his Viennese background. He is just as intimately linked to England and the Cambridge of the first half of the twentieth century, and we can speak here therefore of yet another crossroad in Wittgenstein's life.

When he was at Manchester as a student in engineering, Wittgenstein's attention had been drawn to Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* of 1903, a book that had sought to deduce the entire body of mathematics from an enlarged logic. Wittgenstein found himself particularly intrigued by Russell's account of the post-Aristotelian logic of the German mathematician, logician, and philosopher Gottlob Frege. On the strength of this he decided to visit Frege in Jena, who advised him, in turn, to go to Cambridge and work with Russell.¹¹

Russell was at the height of his philosophical career at the time. He had just finished his monumental treatment of logic in *Principia Mathematica* (written in collaboration with A.N. Whitehead) and was keen to apply himself to new things. He wanted to use his logic, in particular, to deal with some of the fundamental problems of metaphysics and epistemology. Once settled in Cambridge, Wittgenstein quickly became Russell's student, collaborator, and

critic in pursuing this project. Accordingly, Russell could write to his mistress; “Wittgenstein has been a great event in my life . . . He is *the* young man one hopes for.”¹² Russell’s influence is evident in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, where its author pays homage to both “Frege’s magnificent work and . . . the writings of my friend Mr. Bertrand Russell” (TLP, p. 3). But even in that work, written only a few years after his encounter with Russell, Wittgenstein was already moving decisively beyond the ideas of his mentor. In later life his admiration for Russell turned cold, when he called Russell’s thought in a somewhat vengeful mood “immeasurably shallow and trivial” (Z, 456). Russell, in turn, became convinced that the later Wittgenstein had abandoned serious thinking in philosophy.¹³

In retrospect we can see that the philosophical movement we now know by the name of “Analytic Philosophy” began its life in the interactions between Frege, Russell, and the young Wittgenstein. United in the project of building a new logic that could solve (or resolve) important philosophical problems, each of them contributed a distinctive set of ideas to this evolving philosophical movement. Frege introduced essentially Kantian assumptions about different kinds of truth and the foundational organization of human knowledge into the analytic debate; Russell added ontological concerns with the nature and structure of reality to it; Wittgenstein, finally, contributed a positivistic conception of science and philosophy, a preoccupation with language, a wariness toward theoretical constructions, and a yearning for a simple, unmediated existence to this mixture – ideas that all derived from his Viennese background. “Analytic philosophy” was thus constructed from a *mélange* of ideas drawn from various strands of the European tradition.

Historically, the rise of analytic tradition marks, however, first and foremost a point of transition away from the cultural dominance of German and Continental European philosophy to Anglo-American thought. The common distinction between “Continental” and “Analytic” philosophy reflects the upheavals of the twentieth century in which Anglo-American civilization became increasingly more powerful. The distinction is, however, not as sharp as it is often made out to be. In his life and work Wittgenstein sought to bridge that divide again and again, and it is in this sense also that we can call him a man at the crossroads.

The Two Sides of the *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein’s collaboration with Russell in the period between 1911 and 1914 was intimate, stormy, and immensely productive. World War I, however, was to bring this period to an unanticipated close since Wittgenstein, as an enemy alien, was now forced to return to Austria. There he considered it his duty to enroll as a soldier. But he remained, at the same time, determined to continue with his philosophical work. Two days after he had been assigned to his regiment, therefore, he began to keep a philosophical diary that he continued

throughout the war. It opens with the anxious question, “Will I be able to work now?” (GT, p. 13),¹⁴ but it turned out that he could do so even under the most daunting conditions. In December 1914 he noted, for instance, the “heaviest thunder of canons from all sides – gun fire, conflagrations, etc.,” adding laconically: “Worked much and with success.” (GT, pp. 48–49)

Quite naturally, the diary begins where his discussions with Russell had left off. But as the war dragged on, new themes appear in it that are far removed from this initial agenda. Where concerns with logic had preoccupied Wittgenstein in the first period of the war, we find him suddenly writing in June 1916: “What do I know about God and the purpose of life?” (NB, p. 72). And soon after: “The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious” (p. 80). Deeply traumatized by the war and increasingly pessimistic about its outcome, Wittgenstein addressed himself now to questions of ethics and aesthetics, to the distinction between the good and the bad conscience, the nature of happiness and the problem of suicide and sin. To his friend Paul Engelmann he wrote at the time: “My relationship with my fellow men has strangely changed. What was all right when we met is now all wrong, and I am in complete despair.”¹⁵

The book Wittgenstein extracted from his wartime notebooks, the famed *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, reflects the entire course of his thinking from his initial reflections on logic to his later ethical and mystical musings. In large part it can be read as an attempt to reconcile Russell’s metaphysical atomism with Frege’s epistemological apriorism. When the work was published, Russell could thus rightly praise it as an important contribution to the theory of logic.¹⁶ But the book is equally moved by moral and metaphysical considerations – which Russell largely ignored, to Wittgenstein’s irritation. Angrily, he wrote to his former teacher: “Now I’m afraid you haven’t really got hold of my main contention . . . The main point is the theory of what can be said in propositions – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what cannot be said in propositions, but only shown [*gezeigt*]; which, I believe is the cardinal problem of philosophy.”¹⁷ In the same letter Wittgenstein complained that Frege had also failed to understand his book. Mournfully, he conceded: “It is very hard not to be understood by a single soul.”

The *Tractatus* has, indeed, proved to be a baffling piece of work. Composed in an exceedingly severe and compressed style, and organized by means of an elaborate numbering system borrowed from *Principia Mathematica*, the book meant to show that traditional philosophy rests on a radical misunderstanding of “the logic of our language.” Much of the work is concerned with spelling out Wittgenstein’s conception of the logical structure of language and the world and these sections of the book have understandably drawn most of the attention of philosophers within the analytic tradition. But for Wittgenstein himself the decisive part of the book lay in his conclusions concerning the limits of language, which are reached only in the last pages of the work. He argues there that all sentences which are not pictures of concatenations of objects or logical composites of such pictures are, strictly speaking, senseless. Among these are all the propositions of ethics and aesthetics, all propositions

dealing with the meaning of life, as well as all the propositions of logic, indeed all philosophical propositions, and finally all the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself. While these sentences are strictly senseless, Wittgenstein sought to show that they nevertheless aim at saying something important. But what they try to express in words can really only be shown. This claim has led to some confusion. Did he mean to say that there are truths that defy verbal expression? Or that these sentences are quite literally nonsensical? Wittgenstein concluded, in any case, that anyone who understood the *Tractatus* would finally have to discard these propositions, that he would have to throw away the ladder after he had climbed up on it. Someone who has reached that state would then have no more temptation to say something philosophical. He would see the world rightly and so would recognize that the only strictly meaningful propositions are those of natural science. Natural science could, of course, never touch upon what is really important in human life, the ethical and the mystical. But those matters would have to be faced in silence. For “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” as the last proposition of the *Tractatus* declared.

These philosophical views were to find their most surprising expression eventually in a house that Wittgenstein built in Vienna in the late 1920s together with his friend Paul Engelmann.¹⁸ Engelmann, who had studied with Adolf Loos, had met Wittgenstein during World War I and he had subsequently undertaken various architectural projects for the Wittgenstein family. Thus, when Ludwig’s eldest sister Margarete decided to build a new mansion for herself in Vienna, she commissioned Engelmann for the job. Wittgenstein, who was at a loose end at the time, got quickly drawn into the project and the building ended up as much his work as Engelmann’s. Conceived in the spirit of Loos, the house shuns all decoration and all reminders of the architectural styles of the past. Aesthetic values are, instead, to be realized in pure architectonic forms. In pursuit of this ideal, Wittgenstein dedicated himself to the design of the smallest details: the exact height of the ceilings, the metal and glass doors, the glass-enclosed elevator showing the inner mechanics, the door handles, the vents of the under-floor heating system, the radiators, even the feet on which those radiators stood. Austerely minimalistic (there were bare light bulbs hanging from the ceilings instead of the traditional chandeliers), the house is indubitably a specimen of cultural modernism.¹⁹ It is also, however, a direct expression of the ideas of the *Tractatus*. One of Ludwig’s younger sisters, indeed, called it, appositely, “logic turned into a house, not a human habitation.”

The Return to Vienna

Given the conclusions of the *Tractatus*, it was obvious for Wittgenstein that he should not seek to pursue an academic career in philosophy. After his release from an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, he considered briefly joining a

monastery but quickly decided that he lacked the necessary faith. Finally, he chose to undergo training as a schoolteacher, and in 1920 began to teach primary school in the mountains of lower Austria.²⁰

Wittgenstein's six-year experience as a schoolteacher was to prove not an altogether happy one. His own unsettled state of mind, his demanding intellect, and his impatience made him less than an ideal instructor of the village children. The experience was, nevertheless, to prove an essential source of philosophical insight for him in later life. While the *Tractatus* had looked at language exclusively as a medium of representation, as a means of formulating scientific theories, and as something to be analyzed in purely logical terms, the later Wittgenstein was to interest himself above all in the informal language of everyday life whose multiple, communicative functions could not be accounted for in terms of strict, logical rules. Where the *Tractatus* had taken language as a fixed and given structure, the later Wittgenstein spoke of it rather as a dynamic and pluralistic system; and he focused specifically on the various ways in which language is learned and on the whole process of enculturation of which the acquisition of language is a part.

This shift of perspective took Wittgenstein eventually back to the work of Fritz Mauthner, whose *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* he had known since the time of the *Tractatus*. Then he had sided with Russell against Mauthner's anti-formalist and skeptical views. The later Wittgenstein would, however, agree with Mauthner's assertion that language cannot be understood on the model of the logical calculus; that it must be considered, instead, as a tool designed for the satisfaction of a multiplicity of human needs. He would also sympathize with Mauthner's wariness toward scientific theorizing, his skepticism toward empirical psychology, his anti-Cartesian view of the human self, and, perhaps most of all, with his deep-seated skepticism.²¹ While being trained for the teaching profession, Wittgenstein had also read the work of the educational psychologist Karl Bühler. Though he dismissed Bühler later on as a charlatan, he is likely to have been alerted by him to the issues of Gestalt psychology, a topic that surfaces repeatedly in Wittgenstein's later work. We also know of Wittgenstein's continuing fascination with Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* in those years. It is unclear, however, what he drew from Weininger's peculiar mixture of transcendental philosophy and gender-theoretical, anti-feminist, and self-laceratingly anti-Semitic speculations. To his friend Drury, Wittgenstein was to speak later of Weininger as a "remarkable genius" who had recognized the importance of Freud's ideas before anyone else had taken much notice.²² Freud himself also became a subject of interest to Wittgenstein when his sister Margarete decided to be psychoanalyzed. Though he remained skeptical of Freud's theoretical claims, he was sufficiently intrigued by the analytic practice to speak of his own work later on as therapeutic in character. At times he even called himself "a disciple" and "a follower of Freud" (LC, p. 41).

Among the books Wittgenstein read in this period (mostly at the suggestion of his sister Margarete) was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* of

1918. This brilliant, speculative, and exasperating book was not meant to provide merely an analysis of the military, economic, and political disasters of the just-finished war – as its title may suggest – but intended to set out “a sketch of a morphology of world history,” as the subtitle said. It asked: is there a systematic structure to historical processes? Is there a historical logic? Can we specify the structure of cultures? Opposed to the idea of history as a linear and cumulative process, Spengler claimed that individual cultures are differentiated from each other by specific unifying ideas. These characterize everything that goes on in the culture, from its music and its religious practice to its science and mathematics. The forms of different cultures are, moreover, incommensurable. One culture cannot be understood in terms of another. We can grasp the unifying idea of a culture not by theorizing about it but only through the attempt to achieve *Übersicht*, a perspicuous representation of it. Spengler sought to interpret the current state of European culture in these terms. Each culture with its unifying idea possesses, according to him, a life of its own that leads from simple beginnings through an age of maturity to a terminal phase which Spengler called “civilization.” In Spengler’s words: “Every culture has its own civilization . . . Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of a culture.”²³ He was certain, moreover, that Western culture had now entered this terminal phase.

These readings were to bear fruit in the philosophical work that Wittgenstein was going to do in the 1930s and 1940s. They helped him, in particular, to overcome his old, narrowly logic-oriented conception of language and meaning. Where he had previously thought of psychology as a waste of time, his later work would focus extensively on issues in the philosophy of psychology. Where he had previously thought of the world in terms of a single, unified logical structure, he would end by reflecting on the ways the world presents itself to us in our different and, indeed, incommensurable world-views. Above all, those readings would lead him to a new conception of his work as a philosopher.

The Vienna Circle

While Wittgenstein was busy on his sister’s house, a group of philosophers and scientists had been meeting regularly at the University of Vienna to map out a new “scientific world-view.” They were eventually to call themselves “The Vienna Circle,” and in the manifesto they published in 1929 they were to name Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein (among others) as forerunners of their movement. When the members of the Circle discovered that the author of the *Tractatus* was actually living in Vienna, they naturally invited him to their meetings. Wittgenstein, however, declined to join them and instead agreed only to meet a delegation of two or three of them to discuss questions about the *Tractatus*.

He later downplayed the significance of his contact with the Vienna Circle, but the association was to have at least three significant consequences for him. It drew his attention, first of all, back to the *Tractatus* and to philosophy. While he was by no means ready to abandon the views expressed in that work, his discussions with Moritz Schlick, Friedrich Waismann, and (at times) Rudolf Carnap alerted him to its obscurities and shortcomings. This realization was eventually to bring Wittgenstein back to an active engagement with philosophy and it would lead, in due course, to the total destruction of the system of the *Tractatus* and the emergence of an entirely new set of philosophical ideas. The second effect that Wittgenstein's contacts with the Vienna Circle had on him was to expose him to naturalistic and empiricist views in philosophy and this drew him away from the concern with pure, formal logic that was so characteristic of the *Tractatus*. The notes that Waismann kept of their conversations reveal that Wittgenstein may actually have invented one of the Circle's crucial doctrines: the principle that the meaning of a sentence is fixed by the method of its verification. Later on, he would, however, transform this principle into the more comprehensive claim that the meaning of a sentence is its use.

Wittgenstein's contact with the Vienna Circle was significant, thirdly, because it reignited his early interest in the philosophy of mathematics, which had taken a secondary place in the *Tractatus*. In late 1928 some members of the Circle took him to a talk by the Dutch mathematician L.E.J. Brouwer from which he emerged galvanized, according to all reports.²⁴ In that lecture Brouwer had laid out a program for a constructivist conception of mathematics. There is no reason to think that Wittgenstein ever subscribed to Brouwer's "neo-intuitionism" for, unlike Brouwer, he never rejected the use of the principle of the excluded middle in mathematics. But Brouwer must nevertheless have struck a responsive chord in him – possibly because of his attack on formalism and the assumption of the reliability of logic and language, and because he insisted that mathematics was a human construction. Wittgenstein may also have been intrigued by Brouwer's appeal to Schopenhauer's philosophy. Brouwer's talk contributed, in any case, to Wittgenstein's decision to return to philosophy. It may also have renewed his interest in the philosophy of mathematics, for in the decade and a half that followed, Wittgenstein addressed himself intensively to that topic.

Back to Cambridge

Meanwhile, Wittgenstein's former associates at Cambridge had been trying to bring him back to England. With the help of John Maynard Keynes they finally secured a grant that would make this possible. When Wittgenstein returned in 1929, he did so with the firm goal of trying to tie up the loose ends of the *Tractatus* that he thought he had now identified. But things turned out

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differently from what he had expected. Once he had begun to rethink some of the assumptions of the *Tractatus*, he found himself forced to dismantle more and more of its structure. Within a few months the whole, elaborate edifice of the *Tractatus* had collapsed. The realization of this proved liberating and opened a floodgate of new ideas. In no other period in Wittgenstein's life did ideas flow so easily and in no other period did he write with such abandon. His most decisive step in this period was to give up the belief that meaningful sentences must have a precise (though hidden) logical structure, and the accompanying belief that this structure corresponds to the logical structure of the depicted facts. He concluded now that these assumptions were based on a piece of unwarranted metaphysics of exactly the kind he had set out to combat. Where he had once, before the *Tractatus*, considered it possible to ground metaphysics on logic, he was now certain that metaphysics can only lead the philosopher into complete darkness.

In Cambridge, Wittgenstein found himself all of a sudden back in an academic community. Having obtained a belated PhD for the *Tractatus*, he could now take up a regular teaching position. When G.E. Moore attended Wittgenstein's lectures in the period between 1930 and 1933, he was impressed by "the intensity of conviction with which he said everything which he did say, . . . [and] the extreme interest which he excited in his hearers."²⁵ His classes attracted a small but regular following of gifted students, among them Norman Malcolm, Rush Rhees, and Elizabeth Anscombe, and the mathematicians Alan Turing and Georg Kreisel. Their lecture notes and later reminiscences give us a vivid picture of Wittgenstein's presence and work in this period.²⁶ O.K. Bouwsma, who came into contact with Wittgenstein in the 1940s, wrote later on:

Wittgenstein is the nearest to a prophet I have ever known. He is a man who is like a tower, who stands high and unattached, leaning on no one. He has his own feet. He fears no man . . . But other men fear him . . . They fear his judgment. And so I feared Wittgenstein, felt responsible to him . . . His words I cherished like jewels . . . It is an awful thing to work under the gaze and questioning of such piercing eyes, and such discernment, knowing rubbish and gold!²⁷

Of the greatest significance for understanding the direction of Wittgenstein's thinking after the *Tractatus* are two texts which he dictated to his students from 1933 to 1935. They have come to be known as the *Blue* and the *Brown Book*, respectively. The two works delineate a body of thought that foreshadows the best-known and most finished piece of writing of Wittgenstein's later years, the *Philosophical Investigations*, composed between 1936 and 1947. In a number of important respects they represent, nonetheless, a distinctive phase in Wittgenstein's philosophical development. Because Wittgenstein scholars have become increasingly aware of this, it is common now to distinguish three phases in Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking:

the early, Tractarian Wittgenstein (roughly 1914 to 1930);
the middle Wittgenstein (1930–1936);
the late Wittgenstein (1936–1951).

These divisions are somewhat arbitrary, however, and do not reflect the continuities in Wittgenstein’s thinking and its overall dynamic character. One can equally make a case for there being only one Wittgenstein or, alternatively, for distinguishing more phases in his thought. It is quite plausible, for instance, to argue that the ideas of the *Tractatus* differ from those that Wittgenstein pursued earlier on in conjunction with Russell. The so-called middle period may, in turn, be divided into two separate phases: that of the disintegration of the *Tractatus* system and the tentative exploration of various new ideas (1930–1933) and that of *The Blue and Brown Books* (1933–1935). One can also make a case for arguing that Wittgenstein’s work after 1948 goes in an importantly new direction beyond the ideas of the *Philosophical Investigations*. So, according to taste, we may also speak of six periods in his work. Alternatively, we may want to emphasize the dynamic and fluid character of Wittgenstein’s thinking, as his friend Waismann did when he wrote in 1934: “He has the wonderful gift of always seeing things as if for the first time . . . He always follows the inspiration of the moment and tears down what he has previously sketched out.”²⁸

Sketches of Landscapes

Wittgenstein’s thinking was not always as much in flux as when Waismann wrote these words. By 1936 much of the turbulence produced by the disintegration of the *Tractatus* had run its course and Wittgenstein’s thought could settle into a steadier flow. But much had changed in the meantime. Where he had previously sought to resolve philosophical problems with the help of the logic devised by Frege and Russell (and modified by himself), he was now setting out to examine philosophical matters by looking at the working of everyday language. Unwittingly, he became in this way the initiator of a new style of philosophizing, the “ordinary language philosophy” that flourished in the English-speaking world in the 1950s and particularly so at Oxford. By 1936 Wittgenstein had also arrived at a new way of writing. Gone was the tightly numerical arrangement of the propositions of the *Tractatus*. Instead, he was now composing his text as a series of loosely organized, successively numbered remarks. These were sifted from notebooks in which he meticulously worked over his ideas in ever-new formulations and variations. In contrast to the dogmatism of the *Tractatus* he pursued a much more reflective form of writing that sought to do justice to the complexity he saw now in the philosophical problems. The premature confidence of the earlier work that he had resolved those problems once and for all was gone. Where the *Tractatus* had celebrated the art of short, apodictic assertion, the later writings are full of questions,

interjections, suggestions, observations, illustrative stories, and imaginative metaphors. Most notably, Wittgenstein wrote now in a conversational tone, developing his ideas in dialogical interchanges between imagined speakers. The linear exposition of the *Tractatus* had given way to “sketches of landscapes” made in the course of “long and involved journeyings” (PI, p. v). Those, he wrote in the preface of the *Philosophical Investigations*, had forced him to “travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction . . . The same points or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made” (ibid.).

The major outcome of this new work was the *Philosophical Investigations* on which Wittgenstein labored persistently between 1936 and 1947. Over time Wittgenstein entertained various conceptions of the nature and content of the work. The earliest part of it consisted of sections 1 to 188. They contained an account of his new view of language, a critique of the *Tractatus*, a statement on how he saw philosophy, and a discussion of rules and rule-following. At some point he meant to continue the work with reflections on the notions of truth and proof in mathematics but then replaced those with thoughts about consciousness and the mind and the concepts of feeling and thinking. What has been called Part II of the *Investigations* represents material added after 1945. Though Wittgenstein felt almost ready to publish this material, it never quite reached its final shape in his hands, and so the work appeared only after his death.

The Last Years

When World War II began, Wittgenstein felt once again called to service. He was now too old for the military, but he volunteered to work as a hospital porter and later on as a technical assistant in a medical laboratory. The new disruption signaled in effect the end of his academic career in which he had never felt quite at home. In 1947 he gave his last lectures at Cambridge and then resigned his professorship.

Those last years were not merely a period of consolidation. Perception and knowledge became now new topics of interest to him. In the *Philosophical Investigations* he had repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that language must be learned. This learning, he had said, is fundamentally a process of inculcation and drill. In learning a language the child is being initiated in a form of life. In the last stage of his thinking Wittgenstein took up the notion of a form of life as identifying the entire complex of natural and cultural conditions that make language – and, indeed, any understanding of the world – possible. In notes written between 1949 and 1951 (now published under the title *On Certainty*) he insisted that particular beliefs must always be seen as part of a system of beliefs which together constitute a world-view. All confirmation and disconfirmation of a belief is internal to that system. Far from advocating a careless relativism, his view represented rather a form of natural-

ism which assumes that forms of life, world-views, and language games are ultimately constrained by the nature of the world. The world teaches us that certain games cannot be played.

Wittgenstein's final notes give vivid evidence of his continued philosophical creativity; they also illustrate the continuity of his fundamental philosophical concerns throughout all the changes his thinking. They reveal once more how skeptical he was about any kind of philosophical theorizing and how he understood his own work as an attempt to undermine the need for such theorizing. The considerations of *On Certainty* were, in fact, directed against both philosophical skepticism and philosophical refutations of skepticism. Against the philosophical skeptics Wittgenstein insisted that there is real knowledge. But this knowledge is always dispersed and not necessarily reliable; it consists of things we have heard and read, of what has been drilled into us, and of our own contributions to this inheritance. We have in general no reason to reject this inherited body of knowledge; we do not generally doubt it, and we are, in fact, never in a position to doubt everything at once. But the certainty we have of the truth of our convictions is only a function of our inability to doubt everything. The fact that we consider some our beliefs to be certain, Wittgenstein argued, indicates only that those beliefs play an indispensable and normative role in our language game; they are the riverbed through which the thought of our language game flows. But this does not mean that they express absolute philosophical truths. All philosophical argumentation must come to an end, but its end is not self-evident truth, it is rather the certainty of our natural human practices.

The Alienated Thinker

Wittgenstein's thinking is characterized throughout by an ambivalent and even paradoxical attitude toward philosophy. For he entertained, on the one hand, a profound skepticism with regard to philosophy – hence his quick and often harsh dismissals of the claims of traditional philosophy – but he tempered that attitude with a genuine appreciation of the depth of the philosophical problems. In the *Tractatus* he had maintained, for instance, that the whole of philosophy is full of fundamental confusions, and that “most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical” (TLP, 3.324 and 4.003). But this critique had eventually been modified by his appreciation of the truth contained in these confusions and mistakes. “In a certain sense one cannot take too much care in handling philosophical mistakes,” he wrote later, “they contain so much truth” (Z, 460). In consequence, he was critical not only of traditional philosophy, but also of those who in his opinion failed to appreciate the depth of the philosophical problems. This dual belief resulted in a peculiarly ambivalent attitude toward philosophy – an ambivalence that is, perhaps, best captured in the following statement: “How does it come about that philosophy is so complicated a

structure? It surely ought to be completely simple, if it is the ultimate thing, independent of all experience, that you make it out to be. – Philosophy unties knots in our thinking; hence its result must be simple, but philosophizing has to be as complicated as the knots it unties” (Z, 452).

Though Wittgenstein dismissed traditional philosophy, he did so always for philosophical reasons. He was certain, in any case, that something important could be rescued from the traditional enterprise of philosophy. In the *Blue Book* he spoke of his own work accordingly as an heir, “one of the heirs of the subject that used to be called philosophy” (BB, p. 28). The characterization suggests that traditional philosophy is now dead, but at the same time also that it has left an inheritance to be disposed of; it suggests, furthermore, that there are a number of heirs to the philosophical heritage and that Wittgenstein’s work should be thought of as one (but only one) of them.

Wittgenstein’s wary attitude toward philosophy may remind us of Schopenhauer’s (in)famous denunciation of “University philosophy.” According to Schopenhauer, genuine philosophy is bound in the end to transcend all metaphysical theorizing and its true endpoint is found in mystical surrender and silence. What Wittgenstein rejected in traditional philosophy was, above all, its theory-constructing impulse, which lies behind all the great systems of philosophy. Of his critique of philosophical doctrines he writes: “Where does our investigation get its importance from, since 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.)” And to this challenge he answered: “What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand” (PI, 118). As an alternative to the traditional aim of philosophy to construct a great theoretical system, he proposed the idea of philosophy as critical inquiry. Already in the *Tractatus* he had insisted that “philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity” (TLP, 4.112). To this he added in the *Philosophical Investigations* that “it was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones . . . And we may not advance any kind of theory” (PI, 109).

Wittgenstein was convinced that the theory-constructing impulse in philosophy was deeply anchored in our civilization. In 1930 he wrote: “Our civilization is characterized by the word ‘progress’ . . . Typically it constructs. It is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure and even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as an end in itself. For me on the contrary clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves” (CV, p. 7). And he insisted that, by contrast, the spirit of the great stream of European and American civilization was “alien and uncongenial” to him, that he had no sympathy for it and did not even fully understand its goals, “if it has any” (CV, p. 6). These protestations have made some of Wittgenstein’s critics uncomfortable. For one thing, Wittgenstein appears to assume in them a sharp division between philosophy and science. Thus he rejects any conception of philosophy that would make it into a quasi-scientific enterprise. He writes, accordingly, in the *Blue Book*: “Philosophers constantly see the method of

science before their eye, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics and leads the philosopher into complete darkness" (BB, p. 18). It is also clear that he feels generally antipathetic to science or, at least, that he feels distanced from it. "I am not aiming at the same target as the scientists," he writes, "and my way of thinking is different from theirs" (CV, p. 7). And: "We cannot speak in science of a *great*, essential problem" (CV, p. 10). And finally: "I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me" (CV, p. 79). To those who are steeped in the values of science such remarks will naturally sound offensive, if not obscurantist.

If Wittgenstein's goal is not the formulation of any philosophical theory, then what does he see as the outcome of his undertakings? This he describes variously as showing what cannot be manifestly expressed in language or as describing the evident features of our practices. In either case he holds that "the work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (PI, 128). That purpose is at times described as therapeutic in character and the therapies are understood by him, in turn, as multiple and diverse. "There is no such thing as *one* philosophical method, but there are methods, like different therapies" (PI, 133). The ultimate goal of these therapies is to bring about the disappearance of the problem of life. "We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problem of life remains completely untouched . . . The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem" (TLP, 6.521–6.522). Elsewhere, he describes philosophy as "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language," and declares "the real discovery" to be "the one that gives philosophy peace" (PI, 109, 133).

Wittgenstein's Standing

Despite Wittgenstein's indubitable influence on twentieth-century thought, his standing within academic philosophy has been and will always remain uncertain. His resistance to systematic philosophical theorizing, the unique style of his writing both in the *Tractatus* and in his later works, his frequently expressed anti-philosophical sentiments, his profound cultural pessimism, and the highly personal tone of his thought all make it difficult to fit him into the framework of academic philosophy. That judgments about Wittgenstein should differ so much is surely not surprising in a thinker whose views are always unique and sometimes radically idiosyncratic. We might compare him in this respect to Nietzsche in that both thinkers have been acclaimed as new starting points in philosophy and both have been dismissed as not really being philosophers at all. Besides those who speak of Wittgenstein as "a philosopher of genius" or say that in his writings one enters "a new world"²⁹ we can thus easily find others who maintain with equal seriousness that his importance for philosophy has been highly overrated.

Even as a strictly philosophical thinker Wittgenstein is not easily classified. We can read the *Tractatus* simply as a contribution to logical theory in the way Russell and generations of analytic philosophers have done. But we can do so only at the price of ignoring Wittgenstein's insistence on the broader ethical purpose of his work. We can similarly read the *Philosophical Investigations* straightforwardly as a contribution to the theoretical study of language but only at the price of ignoring Wittgenstein's characterization of the work as therapeutic in intent. There is much to be said for concluding that Wittgenstein was most deeply motivated by ethical and religious considerations. But an exclusive focus on this side of Wittgenstein's thought has its problems. It makes it look as if large parts of the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* were somehow inessential to his thought. A third line of reading emphasizes his wariness toward philosophy. Was Wittgenstein, perhaps, after all just a skeptic? That account also runs into difficulties. Why does he explore questions of truth and meaning, of logic and language at such length, if he only means in the end to reject such explorations as senseless?

Yet a fourth group of interpreters has argued that it is best to ignore Wittgenstein's programmatic remarks about philosophy (whether ethical, therapeutic, or skeptical in nature) and to concentrate, instead, on his treatment of concrete philosophical problems. Some of these interpreters have even maintained that it is then possible to discover a coherent and important system of philosophy in his writings. That conclusion can be reached, however, only by doing substantial violence to Wittgenstein's texts. What remains true is that Wittgenstein covers an exceptionally wide range of philosophical and quasi-philosophical matters and that he manages to speak about them with an unusual freshness, in a precise and stylish language, often with the help of surprising images and metaphors. This has suggested to yet a fifth group of readers that what is of greatest interest in Wittgenstein's work is the manner in which he engages with philosophical questions. On this view, Wittgenstein teaches us above all some valuable methodological lessons.

Wittgenstein's influence on twentieth-century philosophy is due not only to his written work or to the particular claims he seems to be making. Of equal importance has been his practice of philosophy and his teaching of this practice. It produced, in the first instance, a generation of followers and students who preserved, transmitted, and interpreted his work. They have also transmitted to us how he went about doing philosophy. In their memoirs and in their own practice of philosophy they have communicated to us something of the intensity and the moral seriousness with which Wittgenstein pursued philosophy. Unhurried and yet relentless, he teased and harried the problems that concerned him, hunting them down into their most hidden caves and corners. No turn of the question was too small for him, no trail too insignificant to pursue. "Where others pass by," he said, "I stand still" (CV, p. 66). Profoundly concerned with the very words into which we cast our philosophical predicaments, he never loses sight of the great issues that lie behind them. In his writings he suggests, asks, admonishes, calls for experiments in thought, action, and

imagination. He demands from his readers a constant active engagement in thinking. It is, perhaps, in these characteristics that he reveals to us his true significance as a thinker. We need not agree with the conclusions that he is led to, we need not be preoccupied with the particular questions that concern him, but he can still serve as a model of what it means to be a philosopher.

Wittgenstein remained philosophically active till the end of his life. True to the course he had chosen for himself (or, rather, on which he found himself), he persisted in his thinking even when he felt that it was not taking him anywhere. In the last month of his life he wrote ironically of himself: "I do philosophy now like an old woman who is always mislaying something and having to look for it again: now her spectacles, now her keys" (OC, 532). But that did not stop him from going on. The last entry in his philosophical notebook is dated only days before his death of prostate cancer on April 29, 1951. Since he had always wanted to live to the end the life of a thinker, he could truthfully tell his friends on his deathbed that, despite all his suffering and unhappiness, he had after all lived "a wonderful life."³⁰

notes

- 1 Norman Malcolm's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London: Oxford University Press 1958), p. 59. Paradoxically, Malcolm's *Memoir* has done much to pull Wittgenstein out of obscurity.
- 2 Wittgenstein's family background is described in Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life, vol. 1, Young Ludwig 1889–1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). There exist now a number of biographical studies. The most detailed biography is Ray Monk's highly readable *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: The Free Press, 1990).
- 3 M. O'C. Drury, "Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein," in Rush Rhees, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield 1981), p. 94.
- 4 Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein," p. 117.
- 5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Denkbewegungen, Tagebücher 1930–1932/1936–1937*, edited by Ilse Somavila (Innsbruck: Haymon 1997), part 1, p. 68.
- 6 Wittgenstein, CV, p. 18.
- 7 Wittgenstein, CV, p. 175.
- 8 The best characterization of that milieu is to be found in Carl E. Schorske's *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980). Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's widely read book, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), is more anecdotal, less reliable, and more superficial in its analyses.
- 9 Of particular interest in this connection are Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, translated by Sophie Wilkins (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), and Broch's *Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit* (Munich: Piper, 1964).
- 10 Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein," p. 152.
- 11 Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), chapters 7 and 8, gives us a vivid description of their encounter.

- 12 Quoted from Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, p. 41.
- 13 Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), pp. 216–217.
- 14 It is useful to read Wittgenstein's *Geheime Tagebücher* together with his *Notebooks, 1914–1916*.
- 15 Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 25.
- 16 Even some recent interpreters have characterized the book without further qualification as “a work in philosophical logic.” See H.O. Mounce, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 1.
- 17 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letters to Russell, Keynes, and Moore*, edited by G.H. v. Wright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 71.
- 18 Paul Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Architect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
- 19 Peter Galison has discussed the confluence of the philosophical ideas of Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle and the stylistic conceptions of the Bauhaus in his essay “Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism,” in *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), pp. 709–752.
- 20 The significance of this episode of Wittgenstein's life for his subsequent philosophizing has as yet been insufficiently explored. An important start is made in Konrad Wünsche, *Der Volksschullehrer Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1985).
- 21 For a discussion of Mauthner's significance for Wittgenstein see Hans Sluga, “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism,” in *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- 22 Drury, *Conversations with Wittgenstein*,” p. 106.
- 23 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, translated by C.F. Atkinson (New York, 1926), p. 31.
- 24 L.E.J. Brouwer, “Mathematik, Wissenschaft und Sprache,” *Monatshefte für Mathematik*, 36 (1929), pp. 153–164.
- 25 G.E. Moore, “Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930–33,” in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, edited by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 50–51.
- 26 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1932*, edited by Desmond Lee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); *Lectures, Cambridge 1932–1935*, edited by Alice Ambrose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, edited by Cora Diamond (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976).
- 27 O.K. Bouwsma, *Wittgenstein. Conversations 1949–1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), pp. xv–xvi.
- 28 Cited from *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, recorded by Friedrich Waismann, edited by Brian McGuinness, translated by Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979,) editor's preface, p. 26.
- 29 Peter Strawson, “Review of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations,” in G. Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 22; David Pears, *The False Prison* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 3.
- 30 N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 81.

further reading

Malcolm, Norman. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. New York: The Free Press, 1990.