Wittgenstein

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‘The World is all that is the case’
Wittgenstein
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Bibliographical Entry:
A Note on the Author

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Introduction

About this Book

This is an introductory text on one of the greatest Twentieth Century thinkers, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). I could not hope to give a full account of the breadth and inventiveness of Wittgenstein’s thought. Although he published only one book in his lifetime, he produced a huge number of notebooks and dictated notes which have subsequently been published. At least two of his books are classics of twentieth century philosophy: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Both books have proved enormously influential in contemporary analytic philosophy. It is these two books that I shall focus on, as they represent the key ideas of both the ‘early’ (*Tractatus*-era) and the ‘later’ (*Philosophical Investigations*-era) Wittgenstein.

I shall primarily be concerned with giving an exposition of some of the key ideas in Wittgenstein’s thought. In choosing what to cover and what to leave out, I opted for those topics that can best be amalgamated into a coherent whole and that best reflect our interests, as analytic philosophers. As a result, the theme of meaning is to the fore, whereas Wittgenstein’s mysticism in the *Tractatus* and much of his thinking on psychology in the *Investigations* is passed over.

Although there is much in Wittgenstein’s thought that is open to debate, my aim has been to give a clear presentation of his ideas rather than an argument for or against them. I have included pointers to the relevant literature for the reader who wishes to investigate the arguments further. Each chapter ends with several discussion points which should be considered; often, these points link Wittgenstein’s thoughts to that of other philosophers and to the contemporary debate. Where appropriate, there are pointers to further reading.

Background to Wittgenstein’s Philosophy

Wittgenstein began his philosophical career at Cambridge in 1912, at a time when British philosophy was still very much under the influence of Hegalian Idealism. Idealism’s advocates in nineteenth century Britain included T. H. Green (1836–1882), 
F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), J. M. E. McTaggart (1866–1925) and H. H. Joachim (1868–1938). Although British Idealism is rarely discussed or taught in academic philosophical circles nowadays, these philosophers nevertheless had an important impact on British philosophy in general: McTaggart’s article ‘The Unreality of Time’ (1908) is essential reading in the Philosophy of Time and Joachim’s The Nature of Truth (1906) is the classic presentation of the coherence theory of truth.

McTaggart taught Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and G. E. Moore (1873–1958) at Cambridge, both of whom would later teach Wittgenstein; and indeed both Russell and Moore began their careers as Idealists. Largely as a result of the changing attitudes of Moore and Russell, British Idealism fell out of favour early in the Twentieth Century, to be replaced by the still dominant analytic school of philosophy (which is not so much a body of doctrine as a way of approaching the subject). The rise of analytic philosophy was also due to the writings of Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) on logic, language and the foundations of mathematics. Frege was a mathematician who wanted to provide secure foundations for mathematics; he developed modern logic in more or less the form we find it in today and gave an analysis of language and its meaning which remains influential. Frege’s influence can be found throughout the Tractatus.

Russell too was a mathematician who helped to develop modern logic (his Principles of Mathematics (1903) and Principia Mathematica with A. N. Whitehead (1910, 1912, 1913) are both classics in the field). This shared interest in logic, mathematics and meaning was to be a key influence in early analytical philosophy and these were the areas on which Wittgenstein began to work.

Russell’s approach to language allowed for a method of logical analysis to reveal the true form of an expression or proposition, known as its logical form. By way of example, the meaning of the expression ‘the present king of France’ is not clear because, at present, France has no king. Russell’s method was to analyse the linguistic form of the proposition (in this example, the definite description ‘the present king of France’) to reveal its true logical form. Once that had been done, the meaning would be clear.1

Wittgenstein took up Russell’s project of logical analysis and combined it with theories of meaning he had learnt from Frege. The results of Wittgenstein’s early thought are both remarkably deep and, in a sense, diametrically opposed to Russell’s aims. Whereas Russell was concerned with placing knowledge on a firm Empiricist footing,

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1 Russell’s famous analysis of descriptions in ‘On Denoting’ (1905) held that the logical form of ‘the present king of France is bald’ is: there is exactly one present king of France, and he's bald. But this is false; so the original proposition is false too. The example is intended to show how the analysis reveals the meaning obscured in the original form of the proposition.
Wittgenstein viewed much of philosophy as mystical; we shall see how he arrives at these conclusions in chapters 1 to 3.

Biographical Notes

Wittgenstein was born in Vienna on 26 April 1889, into one of the wealthiest families in Austria. His father, Karl, was an industrialist and emphasized the need for a scientific education. Wittgenstein studied at the Realschule in Linz, receiving a practical rather than classical education, followed by the Technical Academy in Berlin–Charlottenberg. In 1908, he began studies at the College of Technology in Manchester, eventually working on the design of a propeller. He attended a ‘foundations of mathematics’ discussion group, where he heard about Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics* (1903). In 1911, this interest in the foundations of mathematics led him to Cambridge, to attend Russell’s lectures. Russell remarked that ‘getting to know Wittgenstein was one of the most exciting intellectual adventures of my life’ (Russell, 1951, 298).

He matriculated at Trinity College in February 1912, studying philosophy. He made friends with Russell as well as G. E. Moore and John Maynard Keynes, the economist, and became a regular at the Moral Sciences Club. In the winter, he travelled to Jena to meet the great German logician, Gottlob Frege, who greatly influenced Wittgenstein’s early thought. He then moved to Norway, where he built himself a small hut. After the death of his father Karl in 1913, Wittgenstein donated 100,000 crowns to be distributed to poor Austrian artists, one of the beneficiaries of which was Rainer Maria Rilke.

At the outbreak of war, Wittgenstein enlisted as a private soldier despite having been excused military service on health grounds. During the war, he was awarded several medals for bravery; he also began work on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which he completed whilst in a prison camp in Italy. In 1919, he managed to send copies of the *Tractatus* to both Frege and Russel through the offices of the Red Cross. When he was released from the camp, he returned to Vienna and distributed his fortune between his brothers and sisters.

During the war, he had decided to abandon philosophy and so began training as a teacher. After qualifying in 1920, he spent the summer working as a gardener before taking a teaching post. He visited Norway again in 1922, where he met with Russell but broke off the relationship. The young Frank Ramsey (1903–1930) visited Wittgenstein in Vienna to discuss the *Tractatus*. Ramsey’s famous *Critical Notice* of the *Tractatus* (1923) puts forward important criticisms of Wittgenstein’s thought.
Wittgenstein’s career as a primary school teacher was far from successful and in 1926 legal proceedings were brought against him, charging him with cruelty. He retired from his post and worked again as a gardener and then helped in the construction of a house, the famous Stonborough house in Kundmangasse, Vienna, for his sister Margarethe.

During this time, Frege and Russell had each tried to arrange for the *Tractatus* to be published. One publisher agreed on condition that Russell write an introduction; but Wittgenstein was not happy when he read Russell’s contribution. The *Tractatus* first appeared in 1921, in German, as *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung* in the series *Annalen der Natursphilosophie*, apparently without Wittgenstein’s knowing (he later referred to this edition as ‘pirated’). Russell arranged for an English translation by C. K. Ogden (with Frank Ramsey’s help) to be published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1922. The title ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’ was suggested to Wittgenstein by Moore (it echos Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*).

The *Tractatus* was read closely by the Vienna Circle, a group of philosophers that included Moritz Schlick, Gustav Bergmann, Rudolf Carnap and Friedrich Waismann. In 1927, Schlick contacted Wittgenstein to arrange a meeting; Wittgenstein also met with Waismann during this period, which saw him gradually returning to philosophy. In 1928, Wittgenstein saw the Dutch mathematician Brouwer give a lecture on the foundations of mathematics. Brouwer was the founder of intuitionism, a form of anti-realism in mathematics, which greatly influenced Wittgenstein’s later thoughts on meaning and logical necessity.

He returned to Cambridge in 1929 and received his PhD for the *Tractatus*. He published ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’ in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* but gave the accompanying talk on infinity instead, as his ideas had already moved on. He was made a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge on the strength of the work published posthumously as *Philosophical Remarks* and began lecturing on the problems of language, logic and mathematics. In 1933–4 and 1934–5, he dictated notes that would become the *Blue and Brown Books*. When his fellowship expired in 1936, he travelled and returned to Norway. By this time, he was concerned about his health.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, he felt torn between his family in Austria and the realization that, as a Jew, he could not safely return to Vienna. When Moore retired as Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, Wittgenstein applied for and was awarded the chair; he was soon granted British citizenship also. He immediately travelled to Vienna and Berlin to secure his family and their fortune. During the war, Wittgenstein lectured at Cambridge on his notes for the *Philosophical Investigations* and on aesthetics; later
he worked as a laboratory technician at Guy’s Hospital and then in Newcastle, working on the physiology of shock.

He began teaching again at the end of the war on the Foundations of Mathematics and the Philosophy of Psychology but had begun suffering from kidney problems. He resigned his professorship in 1947 and moved to Ireland and then to Ithica, New York in 1949, where he fell ill. He returned to England and was diagnosed with prostate cancer. He stayed with friends in Cambridge, Oxford and London throughout 1950 before settling with Dr Bevan in Cambridge, who had promised to take care of him. He died in Cambridge on 29 April 1951; his last words were ‘tell them I’ve had a wonderful life’.

Further Reading


A Brief Outline of the Book

Chapters 1 to 3 deal with the *Tractatus*. Chapter 1 presents Wittgenstein’s accounts of reality (which for the time being we can think of as his metaphysics); chapter 2 presents the famous *picture theory* in which Wittgenstein gives an analysis of language and its meaning. Chapter 3 deals with the implications of the picture theory and in particular, discusses what counts as meaningful and what as nonsense. Chapter 4 investigates problems found in the *Tractatus* and with how Wittgenstein himself viewed them at different points in his career. The chapter discusses Wittgenstein’s return to philosophy in 1929 and his rejection of much of his earlier work.

Chapters 5 to 7 cover the period often referred to as the ‘later’ Wittgenstein, concentrating on the *Philosophical Investigations*. I single out three important topics for discussion: in chapter 5, the rejection of his earlier thoughts on language and the idea of meaning as use; in chapter 6, his account of sensations and the famous private language argument; and finally in chapter 7, Wittgenstein’s account of rule following and necessity.
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