

# WITTGENSTEIN AND THE RELATION BETWEEN LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY

KNUT ERIK  
TRANØY

## I. My relation to Wittgenstein

Two contingent facts are of particular importance in the silent context of my paper. The first fact is that I am a *moral* philosopher. My basic commitment and loyalty as a philosopher is moral philosophy or ethics. The second is that I got acquainted with Wittgenstein as a research student in Cambridge in 1949. I never heard him lecture and we talked very little about philosophy. Nevertheless, he left a very profound impression on me as a moral philosopher. My paper, therefore, will be subjective in a very straightforward sense. It is about me and my reflections on Wittgenstein, his life and his philosophy. And most of all, perhaps, about some general problems of moral philosophy which have surfaced in me in connection with my encounters with Wittgenstein, live and on paper. More occasionally I shall also refer to what others have written about the same topics.

I should add to this that I am not much of a Wittgenstein scholar, partly perhaps because he did not write much about ethics. But how much or how little Wittgenstein wrote about ethics may be a bone of contention. It may depend on how one views and understands the relationship between Wittgenstein's life and his philosophy. And he did have a view of life – *eine Lebensanschauung* – which, as I see it, expressed itself in his non-philosophical life and conduct, if not in his philosophy. Cases in point are how during the two world wars he radically changed his way of life – or way of living. He once said to me that, when the first world war broke out in 1914, he

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either ought to enter a monastery or volunteer for war service. He chose the latter, and emphatically so, as we all know. (He may have known that I was also in some sense a veteran of world war II.)

Underlying the theme I have chosen for my paper is the feeling that it is difficult, or even impossible, to draw a line between his philosophical life – as a writer and teacher of philosophy – and his non-philosophical activities. I think our walks along the river Cam may qualify as instances of his non-philosophical life, or as borderline phenomena. They were in no way speechless walks and almost but not quite philosophy-free. And I wonder whether some such distinction between a philosophical and non-philosophical life holds for all philosophers. It surely does for many other academic professions or vocations, for physicians and lawyers and automobile mechanics, for instance.

## 2. Two questions

Two not very clear questions about the relation between human life and philosophy in a more general sense are basic to my paper. They may be particularly pressing for moral philosophers.

Q1. What does or can philosophy do to or for *the philosopher* whose philosophy we are talking about?

Q2. What can – or cannot – a philosopher’s philosophy do *for others*?

Concerning Q1, when in 1993 professor von Wright published “a fragment of an intellectual autobiography” under the title *Philosophy is my life*,<sup>1</sup> he was in fact making use of a statement Wittgenstein made while he lived in von Wright’s house in Cambridge not long before he died. It seems to me that *that* – to be my life – would be the most any philosophy could do or be for any philosopher. But still it is not quite clear what this amounts to. If I were to say that about me and my life my wife would ask me how many lives I have.

In *The Myth of Progress* as in his recent autobiography *My Life as I Remember It*<sup>2</sup> von Wright tells us that, at the age of 13, it became “clear to me that

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1. In Swedish, in the volume *Myten om framsteget* (“The Myth of Progress”). Albert Bonniers Förlag 1993.

philosophy was my calling” (von Wright 1993, p. 153). Both books are in Swedish; one of the many advantages of being a Norwegian is that you can also read Swedish. I do not know what to make of this; is this the road to philosophy all philosophers travel? Personally I would sooner have to say that at the age of 35, when I had gained my PhD, I discovered that I had become a philosopher and that, at the age of 83, I still am.

Let me turn back to the impact of my encounters with Wittgenstein. Although I was very much a newcomer to philosophy, Wittgenstein – as I said above – made a powerful impression on me although we never talked about philosophy and only occasionally about philosophers. One consequence of that impact was that even after his death I did not trust myself to *read* Wittgenstein. When some ten years later I did read the *Tractatus*, I could not help reading it against the background of my own picture of Wittgenstein. What puzzled me then was the apparent fact that many of those who at that time were reading and writing about the *Tractatus*, apparently did not seem to take seriously what the author said about ethics and other such topics that were neither logic nor philosophy of logic. Or perhaps I should say, what the *Tractatus* says about ethics and the world<sup>3</sup> – but not the world in the sense of “alles, was der Fall ist”. That was, one might perhaps say, my first experience of “Wittgenstein research revisited”. I found it next to impossible to believe that Wittgenstein *did not really mean* what he had said in the book and its Preface. To do that one had to take seriously his statements about seeing the world rightly and about ethics not being *in* the world – which might seem to clash with proposition 1 in the *Tractatus*, that the world is everything that is the case. Wittgenstein had two worlds if not two lives.

The remainder of my paper is made up of reflections and comments on four points taken – subjectively – from the philosophy and life of Wittgen-

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2. In Swedish, *Mitt liv som jag minns det*. Albert Bonniers Förlag 2001.

3. To my knowledge, the first to take Wittgenstein seriously in this sense was Stephen Toulmin with his “Ludwig Wittgenstein” in *Encounter* (January 1969, pp. 58–71). My first publication along such lines is “Ethics as a Condition of the World – a Topic from Wittgenstein” (*Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift*, 1973, pp. 117–132), a somewhat revised version of a paper I read in May 1966 to the philosophy departments of the University of Newcastle and the University of Durham.

stein, presented in their order of appearance in his life. As I see them, all four points have links to the two questions Q1 and Q2 introduced above.

### 3. “To stop doing philosophy”

(1) While working on the *Tractatus* and for some time afterwards, Wittgenstein was of the opinion that it is possible to solve certain – and in a sense *all* – philosophical problems once and for all, and that he had in fact done so. I quote from the preface of the *Tractatus*: “... the *truth* of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved.” (*Tractatus*, Preface.) The absence of modesty in this statement is striking. It does not become less striking if we take these finally solved problems to be restricted to those philosophical problems that were recognized in Vienna and Cambridge (and Uppsala and Berlin) as *genuine* problems and not mere pseudo-problems. For then, in a sense, he had also done away with, and gotten rid of if not solved the philosophical problems of all other philosophers. It might follow from this that there would be no more use for philosophers. Not that his *life* had therefore to come to an end, nor that it ought to come to an end. But his subsequent non-philosophical life therefore ought to change radically, and it did.

(2) We all know that after a while the philosophical problems he thought he had unassailably solved refused to lie down. For good. His new philosophical life was in fact not very long – a good twenty years from 1929 to 1951 with a less good five years of war thrown in. His own Preface to what came to be known as *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations* is dated January 1945, some six months before the end of world war II. And that preface also suggests that now he had come to the end of his philosophical road: “... the time is past in which I could improve it.” But once more, the philosopher was resuscitated; I am thinking of *Über Gewissheit*.

There are passages in the *Philosophical Investigations* which suggest that his concern with philosophy is now painfully compulsive. I am not suggesting that his philosophical concern in the *Tractatus* period was in fact less compulsive. The manuscript survived the first world war along with its carrier. But at that time, he could at least try to follow the ‘logic’ of his own philosophy by ceasing to be a philosopher. In particular, I am struck by some statements in § 133 that seem to me to call for attention: “The real discov-

ery (*Entdeckung*) is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions (*von Fragen gepeitscht wird*) which bring *itself* in question.” (To one whose native tongue is Norwegian, *tormented* does not conjure up the visions that the original German *gepeitscht* does – whipped, beaten, flogged, lashed.)

Is this discovery something that philosophy cannot now give him – in contrast to what his philosophy used to be able to do for him? Did the questions of the *Tractatus* whip or flog him in a way that made him want to stop doing philosophy? Why does he use the word ‘discovery/Entdeckung’ – as if there were something “out there” waiting to be found, an insight, perhaps, that escapes him?<sup>4</sup>

Did he consider to stop doing philosophy? It is – or may be – all right simply to say, “I have changed my mind”. At times, when there are good reasons against one’s view, there is even some kind of moral duty to do so. It is hardly unreasonable to say that Wittgenstein felt he was under some such moral obligation, a “cognitive” or “intellectual” moral obligation to change his mind about certain ideas in the *Tractatus*, especially in the light of Sraffa’s criticism (as he relates in the preface to the *Investigations*). From an ethics point of view this comes close to the heart of the matter of (moral) philosophy, perhaps of any philosophy – and to the heart of the matter of a decent non-philosophical life as well.

Could we say, then, that Wittgenstein would have been *inconsistent* not to abandon some of the central ideas in the *Tractatus*? Or that it was *consistent* of him then to change his mind about not doing philosophy any more? I am sure that in ordinary language we do apply the notion of consistency and especially its negation inconsistency about human acts and behaviour. But I am not sure that in moral contexts, consistency and inconsistency mean the same as in formal logic.

If you stop doing philosophy, then you have to do something else. For most of us, to find something else to do is difficult if not impossible after a certain age, and few would call that sort of practical imperative a calling.

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4. Worth noting at this point, in the Festschrift to Arne Næss on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, one of the interviewers asks Næss: “Gjør det vondt å tenke?” (“Does it hurt to think?”).

These speculations lead me on to a different angle. There are other cases or situations where consistency-in-action is more problematic than Wittgenstein changing both his mind and his conduct and mode of life as, in one sense, a consequence of his philosophy. I am thinking of Heidegger and Nazism. In *Humanity – A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (Cape, 1999), Jonathan Glover discusses the case of Heidegger: “Is it possible to put aside Heidegger the man and to consider only Heidegger the philosopher? What are the links between the two? There is probably no twentieth-century philosopher about whom opinion is more divided.<sup>5</sup> (...) But his admirers include Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Richard Rorty and George Steiner” (p. 372). Glover goes on to ask, “Did Heidegger’s Nazism grow out of the philosophy?” (p. 375). “The moral case against Heidegger the man is obvious. The central moral case against Heidegger the philosopher is easier to get wrong. It is not about a link between his theories and Nazism. *It is about undermining philosophy’s role in developing a climate of critical thought. (...) Karl Jaspers was right in seeing this ‘incommunicative’ mode of thought as linked to being dictatorial*” (p. 375; emphasis mine).

We could also ask, then, whether an acceptable moral philosophy today should favour a political commitment to democracy – in some broad sense of the term – as a required or preferred principle in political philosophy? Or perhaps less demanding, there are certain politico-moral principles which it could never be legitimate for an acceptable moral philosophy to accept and promote, for instance the kind of racism that was both preached and practiced in Hitler’s dictatorship. In general, any politico-moral principle that is incompatible with the most basic human rights. Is this the sort of thing that is presupposed in the political philosophies of Rawls and Habermas and even in their disagreements? A free transnational dialogue does indeed seem to presuppose and implement some such politico-moral principles.

(3) In *Philosophical Investigations* the confident mood which dominates in the *Tractatus* and is so clearly stated in the Preface, seems to me to be replaced by a mood of resignation and pessimism. In the Preface to the *Investigations* he says: “It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this

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5. Norway had a similar controversy over Knut Hamsun and his active wartime support of Hitler and the German occupation of Norway.

work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another – but, of course, it is not likely.” No more talk about solving philosophical problems, and no belief in the possibility that this new philosophy – which had tormented the philosopher – could nevertheless benefit *others*.

Q2 asks what can – or cannot – a philosopher’s philosophy do for others. And this is the point where that kind of question becomes particularly relevant for a moral philosophy that wants to be normative. For a *normative* moral philosophy is one that evaluates and judges human actions and/or offers advice, counsel, guidance to whoever reads or hears it. I don’t know whether this kind of query is relevant – let alone “tormenting” – at all for most philosophers. It is difficult to see how it could be for two disagreeing moral philosophers. I know it is for some, for Jonathan Glover, for instance. In an interview (“Socratic empathy” in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 14 Nov., 1997), he said that he would feel uneasy living the privileged life of an academic if his life as an academic made no difference to others because it could not possibly have that effect. And, of course, not just any difference but a difference for the better.

(4) What can – or cannot – a philosopher’s philosophy do to or for others. There are three possible answers when it comes to making a difference to others. The first outcome is that it makes no difference at all to those who are exposed to it or hear about it. That outcome is usually called indifference. Or, second, it could be in some sense good or useful to those that are exposed to it. And finally, the third possibility is that the philosopher’s philosophy could be harmful to others. In most cases and for most persons it is probably the indifference alternative that is the outcome. Which may be all right if it is acceptable to argue that on the whole, indifference is better than being harmful. “Do no harm” is in fact an important norm in all medical ethics, old and new. To alternative two: it is a very old belief in our culture that philosophy, and not only the history of philosophy, is so important that teaching it ought to be in some sense obligatory. It was in the middle ages and still is now. Teaching and studying philosophy is a perennial transnational project in our cultures and in several other civilizations.

The third possibility is that philosophy could be harmful. The history of our institutions of higher education seems to tell us that we have been reluctant to think so. Philosophy has always been on the curriculum of our uni-

versities. This is not to deny the possibility that one particular philosopher's philosophy has been or still is (or is considered) harmful to some particular individual or group. Could this be true of a philosopher who is widely held to be one of the most, if not *the* most influential philosopher of the twentieth century? After Wittgenstein's death Gilbert Ryle wrote in an obituary that Wittgenstein had been a philosophical genius and a pedagogical disaster. When I knew Wittgenstein in 1950, I asked him why he had resigned from his Cambridge chair, and he answered, "Because there are only two or three of my students about whom I could say I do not know I have done them any harm."<sup>6</sup> When I asked him if von Wright was one of them, he said *yes*. I did not ask for the names of the one or two others.

#### **4. What is it to be a philosopher?**

What is it to be a philosopher? That question probably has no simple answer, in contradistinction to asking what it is to be a physician, a lawyer, or a teacher. The beginnings of an answer might be that to be a philosopher is not to have a profession, like that of medical doctor or barrister. Perhaps it could be to have a calling or vocation. Von Wright uses the expression 'calling' (Swedish *kallelse*) when at age 13 he knew that he was going to be a philosopher.

If Socrates is the model, it certainly seems hard to think of it as a profession. And if it were, it might be more like psychiatry or clinical psychology than any other profession. In Norway at present we have a group of mostly young philosophers who advertise themselves and their services as counselors on a fee-for-service basis. Apparently there is now a demand and a market for philosophers and not only in Norway. I am fairly sure that some philosophers see that as a sign of decay – but should they if they are *moral* philosophers who want to be of use to others?

Nothing I have said in this paper should be read as an attempt to answer questions about the real meaning of Wittgenstein's life and philosophy, of course not. And I have not tried to say anything worth saying about what it is to be a philosopher, and even less about what philosophy is. I have tried to

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6. See also my contribution in *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G.H. von Wright* (Acta Philosophica Fennica, 1976, pp. 11–21).



become clearer in my own mind about certain problems connected with the nature or essence of philosophy in general and moral philosophy in particular. Knowing and reading Wittgenstein have made these problems more urgent to me because they may be of interest and concern to others. While preparing this paper I re-discovered and found support in von Wright's concluding remark in the "Biographical sketch" he wrote for Malcolm's *Memoir*, first published in 1958. "I have sometimes thought that what makes a man's work *classic* is often just this multiplicity, which invites and at the same time resists our craving for clear understanding."