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Ludwig Wittgenstein Confesses

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Along with Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein is generally considered to be one of the two greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. But as with the field of twentieth-century philosophy itself, Wittgenstein has never seemed to be a very accessible thinker to the nonspecialist. Those, it seems, whose education has left them innocent of the arcane technicalities of mathematical logic and linguistic philosophy need not apply.

The recent biography of Wittgenstein by the philosopher of mathematics Ray Monk, however, goes far to meeting this difficulty (*Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, 1990). Not only is it a riveting portrait of a philosopher who himself exercised an absolutely mesmerizing influence on his disciples (a personal influence that may have been matched in the history of philosophy only by Socrates), but more to the point, Monk's biography handles the technical issues of Wittgenstein's writings with great ease, subtlety, and clarity. Indeed, its greatest success is its impressive ability to set forth the inner development of Wittgenstein's thought from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* in a way that allows the general reader to see the full range of Wittgenstein's mind at work.

And how that mind did *work*! When non-philosophers encounter the writings of philosophy, they are often nonplussed at or downright scornful of the abstruse effort expended in describing what to common sense already seems manifestly clear. But common sense contains within itself enigmas that it often goes to great pains to disguise; and once these dilemmas come to light, thought is provoked. And this beckoning of thought demands tremendous labor, a labor that Wittgenstein never shirked.

> *Denken ist schwer* [thinking is hard]. What does this really mean? Why is it difficult? It is almost like saying, "Looking is difficult." Because looking intently is difficult. And it's possible to look intently without seeing anything, or to keep thinking you see something without being able to see clearly. Looking can tire you even when you don't see anything.

Like Socrates, Wittgenstein focused all of the efforts and struggles of this chosen work on the enigmas of language. But unlike Socrates, he was not after some single, overarching meaning before which all other attempts to define the meaning of a word would have to prostrate themselves. One of his favorite slogans was, "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use."

Wittgenstein arrived at this principle, however, only after long struggles down another path, where meaning was to be fixed to the ideal of an exact representation of the "picture" of reality. In his early work, fact-stating discourse is the only ideal language, one to which all others must be subordinated. But in the later work, it turns out that fact-stating discourse is just one way of speaking among many, one type of "language game" alongside innumerable others.

Monk is superbly skilled at describing for the reader innocent of the history of philosophy the various mental highways and byways that brought Wittgenstein to the "language game" theory of his later years. But his book is in no sense some warmed-over dissertation concerned only with Wittgenstein's intellectual development. It is a genuine biography, a full account of his *life*, and one which succeeds brilliantly (in no small part because Wittgenstein's literary executors gave the author full access to his subject's coded diaries and unpublished notebooks).

In reading Monk, one is particularly struck by three features of his subject's life that are not immediately obvious in the *Tractatus* or the *Investigations* (and are certainly not stressed in most philosophy departments): (1) Wittgenstein's deep religiosity; (2) the influence of his Jewishness-fully assimilated though he was-on his life; and (3) his disdain for the sentimentalities of pacifists and his deep respect for the reality of force and power as constituents of the world.

To those who knew him by the (rather parsimonious) writings published during his lifetime, few philosophers would seem to be less qualified for the Kierkegaardian mantle of a deeply religious philosopher than Ludwig Wittgenstein. And even when his *Philosophical Investigations* finally came out a few years after his death, there seemed to be little indication of any deeply religious feelings on his part. But in 1977 G. H. von Wright published some of Wittgenstein's notebook jottings (under the title of *Culture and Value*), and scholars were astonished not only at the frequency with which religious topics came up in his musings but at the intense seriousness of his remarks on the subject. Although in their aphoristic power these show a deep affinity to Nietzsche's remarks, they startled scholars for a different reason-their fundamental sympathy for religion in general and Christianity in particular:

> Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. Here you have a narrative, don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it. There is nothing paradoxical about that!

These of course could be merely the observations of a particular perspicacious and sympathetic outsider (as to an extent they are). But what Monk makes clear is that Wittgenstein was himself deeply religious, so much so that some incidents in his life often read like an echo from the lives of the saints:

> If I am unhappy and know that my unhappiness reflects a gross discrepancy between myself and life as it is, I solve nothing; I shall be on the wrong track and I shall never find a way out of the chaos of my emotions and thoughts so long as I have not achieved the supreme and crucial insight that that discrepancy is not the fault of life as it is, but of myself as I am. . . . The person who has achieved this insight and holds on to it, and who will try again and again to live up to it, is religious.

And how religious Wittgenstein really was, by his own definition, comes through in a letter he wrote to a friend when his friend mentioned that he had recently been worried about his motives for his own work, whether they were decent and honest motives. Wittgenstein wrote back:

> I did something about which I can tell you, because you know me well enough not to regard it as a piece of stupidity. That is, I took down a kind of "confession," in which I tried to recall the series of events in my life, in as much detail as is possible in the space of an hour. With each event I tried to make clear to myself how I should have behaved. By means of such a general overview the confused picture was much simplified. The next day, on the basis of this newly gained insight, I revised my plans and intentions for the future.

Wittgenstein took these efforts at "confession"-as he took philosophy itself-with extraordinary diligence and tenacity. Indeed, for him the two efforts went together, because what gets in the way of genuine understanding for Wittgenstein is often not lack of intelligence, but pride. Thus his aphorism: "The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that is terribly hard work." And pride has to be dismantled not just for the sake of character or in order to be a decent person but because otherwise one could not write decent philosophy either:

> Lying to oneself about oneself, deceiving yourself about the pretense in your own state of will, must have a harmful influence on [one's] style; for the result will be that you cannot tell what is genuine in the style and what is false.

The most remarkable instance of this relentless insistence on ferreting out all of his faults occurred after a quixotic-and disastrous-bout of teaching elementary school in a farming village in Austria named Otterthal after World War I. So ill-suited was he to the almost monkish torment he had set for himself teaching pupils utterly unsuited to the rapier intellect of the scion of one of the wealthiest families in Vienna, and so isolated was he from all friends, that one day legal proceedings were brought against him by the parents of a girl whom he had pulled by the ears and the hair so violently that her ears had bled and her hair had been torn out.

This happened in the spring of 1926. Ten years later, Wittgenstein returned to Otterthal, astonishing the villagers by appearing at their doorsteps to apologize personally to the children whom he had physically hurt. He visited at least four of these children, begging their pardon for his ill-conduct toward them-with some responding generously and others, the girl especially, still bitter about his brutality. What is significant about this episode might easily elude an interpreter who is not aware of Wittgenstein's deep sense of the connection between authentic philosophy and confession:

> One can imagine how humiliating this must have been for Wittgenstein. And it might almost seem that the point of humbling himself in this way

was precisely that: to punish himself. But this, I think, would be to misunderstand the purpose of his confessions and apologies. The point was not to hurt his pride, as a form of punishment; it was to dismantle it-to remove a barrier, as it were, that stood in the way of an honest and decent thought. If he felt he had wronged the children of Otterthal, then he ought to apologize to them. The thought might have occurred to anyone, but most people would entertain the idea and then dismiss it for various reasons. . . . But to find these reasons compelling, as I think most of us would, is in the end to submit to cowardice. And this above all else is what Wittgenstein was steadfastly determined not to do. He did not, that is, go to Otterthal to seek pain and humiliation but rather with the determination to go through with his apology despite it.

This apology took place long after he had obtained a position at Cambridge under the auspices of several professors there (primarily Bertrand Russell). Perhaps even more indicative of this connection between the dismantling of pride and efforts to develop an authentic philosophy is the series of "general confessions" he insisted on inflicting upon some of his closest friends at Cambridge right before his return visit to Austria. Most found the experience embarrassing or exasperating, either because he would drag someone along to a cafea while reciting his sins in a loud and clear voice or because he would call up a friend (in this case, Fania Pascal) at an inconvenient moment and insist it was urgent that he see her.

"If ever a thing could wait," she thought, facing him across the table, "it is a confession of this kind and made in this manner." The stiff and remote way in which he delivered his confession made it impossible for her to react with sympathy. At one point she cried out: "What is it? You want to be perfect?" "Of course I want to be perfect!" he thundered.

This particular confession to Fania Pascal is important, however, far beyond the somewhat comic relentlessness with which Wittgenstein went about his shrivings. For it is to her we owe word of yet another confession: his failure fully to admit his Jewishness. Somewhere the impression had arisen (which he had until then done nothing to correct) that he was three-quarters Aryan and one-quarter Jewish, whereas in fact the reverse was the case: of Wittgenstein's grandparents, three were of Jewish descent. And so in accordance with the recently passed Nuremberg Laws, this made Wittgenstein himself a Jew. But what he did not tell Fania Pascal and which she only subsequently discovered was that two of those Jewish grandparents were baptized as Protestants and the third was a Roman Catholic. "Some Jew," she remarked.

This half-confession, it turns out, is more than a little revealing, for in regard to the Jews Wittgenstein was given to some of the most sweeping (and in light of later history, most damaging) generalizations that have ever been visited upon one group, the mildest of which goes as follows:

> Among Jews "genius" is found only in the holy man. Even the greatest of Jewish thinkers is no more than talented. (Myself for instance.) I think there is some truth in my idea that I really only think reproductively. I don't believe I have ever invented a line of thinking. I have always taken one over from someone else.

Clearly, Wittgenstein was using his Jewishness as a symbol or foil to hold in check all those faults that would seem to undermine the authenticity of his philosophy and the purity of his style. By reminding himself of his Jewishness, it seems, he was "going to confession," striking his breast and reminding himself of the virtue of humility. Only this can explain the functional role such sweeping generalizations play in his notebook.

> The Jew must see to it that, in a literal sense, "all things are as nothing to him." But this is particularly hard for him, since in a sense he has nothing that is particularly his. It is much harder to accept poverty willingly when you have to be poor than when you might also be rich. It might be said (rightly or wrongly) that the Jewish mind does not have the power to produce even the tiniest flower or blade of grass that has grown in the soil of another's mind and to put it into a comprehensive picture. We aren't pointing to a fault when we say this and everything is all right as long as what is being done is quite clear. It is only when the nature of a Jewish work is confused with that of a non-Jewish work that there is any danger, especially when the author of the Jewish work falls into the confusion himself, as he so easily may. (Doesn't he look as proud as though he had produced the milk himself?) It should be mentioned that these remarks were set down in 1931 and that even before Hitler took power Wittgenstein had ceased using the language of anti-Semitism (often at its most clichead, as if in unconscious imitation of what he was saying) as a tool for digging out his pride or expressing doubts about the originality or courage of his thought. Nonetheless, some of these remarks are more than merely peculiar forms of self-abasement, for they adopt at times some very dangerous metaphors:

> Within the history of the peoples of Europe, the

> history of the Jews is not treated as their intervention in European affairs would actually merit, because within this history they are experienced as a sort of disease, and anomaly, and no one wants to put a disease on the same level as normal life (and no one wants to speak of a disease as if it had the same rights as healthy bodily processes, even painful ones). We may say: people can only regard this tumor as a natural part of their body if their whole feeling for the body changes (if the whole national feeling for the body changes). Otherwise, the best they can do is put up with it. You can expect an individual man to display this sort of tolerance, or else to disregard such things; but you cannot expect this of a nation, because it is precisely not disregarding such things that makes a nation. That is, there is a contradiction in expecting someone both to retain his former aesthetic feeling for the body and also to make the tumor welcome.

Evaluating such "confessions" in the life of Wittgenstein is a difficult business. The vigor and the unpleasant echoes of the biological version of anti-Semitism make one wonder what precisely are the dynamics at work behind such enigmatic jottings. Steven Beller, the author of *Vienna and the Jews: 1867-1938*, takes a rather benign view, saying that Wittgenstein's remarks are "not necessarily negative but may instead constitute a recognition that Jews-including in this context, himself-are different." The reader who comes to these remarks for the first time may question such a mild interpretation, for such biological invocations must surely involve more than the (rather tautologous) statement that Jews are "different."

In any case, after 1931 Wittgenstein stopped making sweeping statements of any kind about the Jews. And we also have his intriguing confession to Fania Pascal that he had not been forthright enough about his Jewishness. What does that mean? That is, does his confession to her represent the last vestige of these characterizations or is it finally the open expression of his desire to proclaim a more open solidarity with his people? In other words, is he once more pointing out how unworthy of attention he is because he is even *more* Jewish than people thought, or is he now openly admitting what he should have acknowledged long ago and what only the Nuremberg Laws have forced out of him?

It seems to me that we must exclude the first option completely (and in this sense Beller's benign interpretation is right): not only does Wittgenstein entirely cease from indulging in any remarks about the deficiencies of Jews as a whole or their parasitic relationship to European culture (however mildly that might be put), but his efforts to secure the freedom of his family trapped in post-*Anschluss* Austria and his remarks on the Nazi regime generally indicate that he had entirely abandoned the pop anti-Semitism of the assimilated Vienna of his youth.

But it is noteworthy also that Wittgenstein did not then go on to express a more open solidarity with his people beyond the acknowledgment of his true family background. In this, as in so many other details, he reminds one of Simone Weil, who herself came from an assimilated and highly cultured Jewish family of gifted mathematicians in France (her brother Andrea became a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton). Weil too was intensely interested in Christianity without ever subscribing to a Credo or submitting to baptism. Yet her writings on Christianity, as an outsider, show an unusual perspicacity and penetration, so much so that her books have now become a staple of spiritual literature. And finally, Weil too was given to some quite breathtaking sweeping generalizations about the Jews, but this time confined primarily to the Old Testament (which she detested) and mitigated to some extent by her willingness to be just as scathing toward the ancient Romans.

Weil died in London during the war of complications of a fast undertaken in solidarity with her occupied brethren in France, and Wittgenstein died of cancer in 1951. Both, that is, died before Western culture had really begun to face the full impact of the Holocaust; and so we shall never really know what impact the destruction of European Jewry would have had on how either one of them would have later "confessed" their Judaism.

But what we do have to go on in both thinkers is a healthy respect for *power* and a keen realism about what it means to be a defenseless people. Weil, for example, in an essay famous in the world of classicists, "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force," says of this work:

> The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad, is force. Force as man's instrument, force as man's master, force before which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul, in this poem, is shown always in its relation to force: swept away, blinded by the force it thinks it can direct, bent under the pressure of the force to which it is subjected. Those who had dreamed that force, thanks to progress, now belonged to the past, have seen the poem as a historic document; those who can see that force, today as in the past, is at the center of all human history, find in the Iliad its most beautiful, its purest mirror.

Similarly, Wittgenstein had little patience with the vapid hopes of those who denied hope in God and saw "History" or "Progress" as their ultimate savior, with hypothesized "Committed Action" as the mediator of the Eschaton. The contrast between Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell is instructive here: while Wittgenstein was fighting for Austria-Hungary in a Hapsburg uniform during World War

I, Russell was imprisoned for his pacifist activities in Britain. But rooted in these two stances was a more personal and temperamental difference: between trying to improve the world, and seeking only to improve oneself.

> The war had made [Russell] a socialist, and had convinced him of the urgent need to change the way the world was governed; questions of personal morality were subordinated by him to the overriding public concern to make the world a safer place. When in the 20's Russell wanted to establish, or join, a "World Organization for Peace and Freedom" or something similar, Wittgenstein rebuked him so severely that Russell said to him: "Well, I suppose you would rather establish a World Organization for War and Slavery," to which Wittgenstein passionately asserted, "Yes, rather that, rather that!"

In opposing the too-easy moralism of someone like Russell, it seems that Wittgenstein was occasionally driven to extreme methods. His own approach to life could not have been more different. In the midst of the battles of the war on the Eastern front, he wrote down this credo, really the only set of bald, positive assertions we have from his pen about what he actually believed:

I know that this world exists.
That I am placed in it like my eye in its visual field.
That something about it is problematic, which we call its meaning.
That this meaning does not lie in it but outside it.
This life is the world.
That my will penetrates the world.
That my will is good or evil.
Therefore that good and evil are somehow connected with the meaning of the world.
The meaning of life, that is, the meaning of the world, we can call God.
And connect with this the comparison of God to a father.
To pray is to think about the meaning of life.
I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.
I can only make myself independent of the world-and so in a certain sense master of it-by renouncing any influence on happenings.

This perspective led him to such amazingly penetrating probings of his own psychology as this:

> Yesterday I was shot at. I was scared! I was afraid of death. I now have such a desire to live. And it is difficult to give up life when one enjoys it. This is precisely what "sin" is, the reasoning life, a false view of life. From time to time I become an animal. Then I can think of nothing but eating, drinking, and sleeping. Terrible! And then suffer like an animal too, without the possibility of internal salvation. I am then at the mercy of my appetites and aversions. Then an authentic life is impossible.

Here we see perhaps Wittgenstein's most Jewish side, or at least the side that shows how thoroughly and completely religious he was and would always remain. For here we see in its most pristine form, expressed in the crucible of war, the search-never to be abandoned-for the authentic life. It is what has given such extraordinary density to all that he has to say about religion, and why Christians especially would do well to hear from this intensely prophetic voice what their religion should really mean to them:

> Christianity is not a doctrine, not I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For "consciousness of sin" is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan, for instance) are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it. . . . Within Christianity it's as though God says to men: Don't act out a tragedy. That is to say: don't enact heaven and hell on earth. Heaven and Hell are my affair.

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