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God and Some Fellows of Trinity: Ludwig Wittgenstein

At a meeting of the Moral Sciences Club in 1912, just a year after Wittgenstein had arrived in Cambridge, a clergyman tried, as Wittgenstein thought, to wriggle out of a difficult question. Wittgenstein declared this clergyman to be 'the most stupid, the most wicked, the most utterly worthless creature that ever lived'. Even Bertrand Russell, whose strident anti-clericalism was never in doubt, thought the reaction somewhat extreme, and encouraged Wittgenstein not to judge too critically those whose thoughts were perhaps not so much dishonest as merely vague.

How was it that Wittgenstein had come to be in Cambridge? Towards the end of a fairly unremarkable school career in Vienna, (the most notable fact about it being that Wittgenstein and Adolf Hitler were a couple of classes apart), Wittgenstein developed an enthusiasm for engineering. His father was one of Austria's wealthiest men, a powerful steel magnate whose dealings with his family seem to have been no less brisk than his approach to business. The death by suicide of two of Wittgenstein's older brothers (a third was to commit suicide later), seems, however, to have softened the father slightly – enough, anyway, for him to allow Ludwig to pursue this interest, in the first instance by his going in 1908 from Vienna to Manchester in 1908. Engineering led to an interest in mathematics, and in turn to problems in the theory of mathematics, and thus to the writings – and then the doorstep - of the greatest authority in the field, Bertrand Russell, a man of nearly 40 years old and at the height of his powers in 1911, in the process of completing the three volumes of Principia Mathematica with Whitehead (another fellow of the College).

The 22 year old Wittgenstein arrived in Cambridge with no formal training in either mathematics or philosophy, and promptly began to explain to Russell where he was going wrong. Russell was generous with his time - but to begin with a little unsure. 'My German engineer, I think, is a fool' he writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell in November 1911. But in early 1912 - he has formed another view: 'I feel he will do the work I should do, and do it better.' From then on, Russell took Wittgenstein under his wing, introducing him to a circle which included Keynes and Moore, and displaying an enormous generosity and warmth, the more remarkable for two reasons. First, as you will already have guessed, Wittgenstein was

no easy friend, but someone whose ‘morbid sensitivities’¹ led to endless problems and friction - and very soon to his seeking isolation in a small wooden hut on a lake in Norway, a long way from the life of the Cambridge set whom he judged, to use Keynes’s word, ‘irreverent’. And second, Russell’s generosity is the more remarkable because Wittgenstein’s fundamental advances in philosophy and logic over the next ten years consisted very specifically in demonstrations of the inadequacies of Russell’s life work to date, ‘reducing [Russell’s] thought to paralysis’.²

That incident with the ‘stupid, worthless, wicked clergyman’ is telling and somewhat ironic. Telling as to the patient and fatherly guidance which Russell provided for this angular outsider. Ironic in that whilst Russell was encouraging Wittgenstein to be more tolerant of a clergy man, it was just over the matter of religion that there would be misunderstandings and tensions between them - though of course it was Wittgenstein who was sympathetic to religion in a way which Russell never was. Indeed, when Russell saw Wittgenstein after the first war (in which Wittgenstein had served with conspicuous bravery - and perhaps recklessness - in the Austrian army) it was a deepening of Wittgenstein’s religious sensibility which Russell immediately noticed and upon which he remarked.

They meet in The Hague in late 1919 - and spent a week discussing the manuscript which Wittgenstein had worked on through the war and which was to be published in 1921 as the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Wittgenstein, newly released from a prisoner of war camp, was as intense and demanding as ever; Russell, newly released from prison where he had served six months for an article in The Tribune, is still warm and generous. Wittgenstein, he writes to Lady Ottoline Morrell, is ‘glorious and wonderful, with a passionate purity I have never seen equaled.’ And yet, in another letter, there is a hint of the incomprehension which would mar their subsequent relationship: ‘I had felt in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard . . . and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk’. Wittgenstein didn’t become a monk (though back in Vienna he took lodgings rather than live in the family palaces, and gave away all of his very substantial fortune), but he and Russell would never again experience the closeness which marked the first ten years of their

¹ Hacker, DNB

² Ibid

cooperation and friendship - for it had become apparent to both, that they looked out on the world through rather different eyes.

The differences, however, were not simply temperamental, but philosophical. In the Tractatus Wittgenstein set out a position which sought to accommodate what he termed the 'mystical', a mode of thought for which Russell had no sympathies - and even when Wittgenstein, in his later work from the 1930s onwards, repudiated the very aspects of that early work associated with his supposed mysticism, the new direction which his thought took was more, not less hospitable, to the tendencies Russell disliked.

Wittgenstein's sympathy, let it be said to begin with, is not for what we might think of as conventional religious belief - the supernatural religion he attributes to 'parsons'. (And he certainly scorned the supernaturalism of those such as his Trinity colleague the philosopher C.D. Broad, who was interested in psychical research, just as he scorned the writings of another Trinity Fellow, Frazer of Golden Bough fame, for construing all religion and magic as primitive science.) The supernaturalists, on Wittgenstein's account, think of God as one more actor in the world - albeit a very grand and powerful one. Thus when one of these parsons asserts that God will judge our souls, the parson and the atheist Russell are agreed on what is in question - it is just that what the one believes, the other denies. One thinks that a certain prediction is true, the other that it is false. For one side religion is, so to speak, a reasonable hypothesis; for the other it is bad science.

According to Wittgenstein, however, taking his stand with his favoured trio of Tolstoi, Dostoyevski and Kierkegaard, this is not how it is with religious belief. To say that God will judge our souls is not to make a prediction, but to place our lives within a certain moral framework - a framework which we might fill out by drawing on such notions as sin, judgment, vocation, blessing, forgiveness, thankfulness, redemption and sacrifice. To construe reality in these terms is not a matter of bad science - or of good science for that matter. To experience a circumstance in one's life as an opportunity for redemption, say, is not a matter of acting on the basis of some hypothesis, but rather of receiving that circumstance in a particular way and thus of being open to an occasion for moral struggle and growth. It was the possibility of receiving the world thus and so which Wittgenstein saw as essential to the religious life and which he sought to protect against the acids of a certain sort of scepticism.

Now the philosophical problem to which Wittgenstein applied himself could be said in the broadest terms to concern the relationship between thought, language, logic and world.

Central to the Tractatus is a distinction between what could be stated or said (essentially the truths of science), and what could not be said but only shown (metaphysics, religion and ethics). The dark, gnomic sayings at the end of the Tractatus express this rather mysterious doctrine - some of which sayings, as Tony Kenny has said, 'have proved easier to set to music or to illustrate in sculpture, than to paraphrase.' The very last words of the work have gained a certain currency: 'that of which one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'

Russell and others who took up the ideas of the Tractatus in the 1920s and 30s, ignored the doctrine of the ineffable. In particular, out of the Vienna Circle came what was known as Logical Positivism - associated in England with A.J. Ayer. Logical positivism converted the Tractatus's notion of the sayable into the doctrine that the meaning of a proposition is its mode of verification, and wielded this doctrine to assert that religion and morals contained only pseudo-propositions, and were strictly nonsense. Wittgenstein's Tractatus was hugely influential in the development of this philosophy - but its exponents chose to expound only half of the book.

Wittgenstein, meanwhile, took his own last words in the Tractatus seriously, and holding that he had solved all the major problems of philosophy, had gone off to work first as a gardener, and then - not entirely happily - as a primary school teacher. I say not entirely happily - and that applies to both him and the pupils. He seems to have beaten the children for being stupid, and then - with that wonderful naiveté which only the truly brilliant possess - to have been somewhat perplexed by the resultant outcry. Into this less than fully successful retreat from philosophy, in which Wittgenstein's tendency to harsh self-criticism and depression deepened, there appeared (in the summers of 1923 and 24) Frank Ramsey, himself a truly brilliant undergraduate of this College who had assisted with the translation of the Tractatus when he was in his teens, and who now persuaded Wittgenstein that, amongst other things, the doctrine of ineffability - that certain things cannot be said, but can be shown - was wrong. Ramsey is credited with the immortal line: 'if it can't be said, it can't be said, and it can't be whistled either.' (Wittgenstein, by the way, was a famous whistler and would often whistle whole movements of his famous symphonies. There doesn't seem to have been much to do after dinner in Cambridge in the 30s; young people here need to be reminded, that there was, in particular, neither television nor internet, hard though it is to conceive of such an existence.)

Wittgenstein finally returned to Cambridge and to philosophy in 1929. He was awarded his Ph. D. for the Tractatus after a viva by Russell and Moore which Wittgenstein

brought to an end by slapping them on the back and saying, 'Don't worry, I know you'll never understand it'. Immediately he started to come to terms with the criticisms not only of Ramsey but also of the Trinity economist, Piero Sraffa, a refugee from Mussolini's Italy.³

Central to the shift in Wittgenstein's thinking was his coming to see that the account of meaning underlying the Tractatus involved, to use his words, 'grave mistakes'. Language does not work by picturing in the way he had supposed - in particular, meaning is not a matter of a word standing for an object. The meaning of a word lies in its use in the language game of which it is a part - and describing or picturing is only one of the things we do with language. Thus the task of the philosopher is not to act as the Positivists supposed, as a sort of linguistic policeman, taking various portions of language into custody for failing to live up to the demands of a theory of language which takes one portion of discourse, such as scientific, as normative. Instead, the philosopher has the humble task of attending to the myriad purposes, forms and complexities of language, and so helping us to avoid the bewitchments which philosophy itself casts over understanding when it offers general theories of the proposition and the like.

This philosophy, very different in style and tone from the early work in logic, was developed in the scribbled notebooks and the legendary lectures which Wittgenstein gave through the 30s in his rooms in Whewell's Court, where the austerity of the furniture matched the severity of the demands he placed on himself and those who attended. As ever he toyed with abandoning philosophy and in 1935 he went to offer himself as a labourer in the Soviet Union, where it was explained to him that the Soviet Union had no immediate shortage of labourers, and that even had it such a shortage, Wittgenstein wouldn't be short-listed. After another spell in Norway, he returned to Cambridge and was elected to the chair vacated by Moore in 1939. If you consult the University Reporter for October 1939, under lectures offered by the Board of the Faculty of Moral Sciences, you will find: 'Professor Wittgenstein: Philosophy'. No time is given, but there is a footnote: 'Professor Wittgenstein will be in his rooms at Trinity College, on Wednesday October 11 at 3pm in order to arrange times.' It would have been a brave undergraduate who climbed the staircase to confront the famously difficult Professor Wittgenstein - but very soon undergraduates were saved the

³ Sraffa is supposed to have undermined Wittgenstein's views on the logical form of meaningful propositions by making a particularly rude Neapolitan gesture, and challenging Wittgenstein with the question, 'What is the logical form of that?'

ordeal, and Wittgenstein from his uncongenial professorial obligations, by the war. He undertook work as a porter at Guy's Hospital, and then as a lab assistant in Newcastle - returning to Cambridge in 1944, and drafting shortly after the preface for Philosophical Investigations, which was not published in his lifetime, but like the Tractatus was to determine the shape of subsequent philosophy. His despair at academic life was as lively as ever - 'It is not impossible' he says in that preface, 'that it should fall to the lot of this 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.'

By 1947 he had resolved to retire from his chair. He headed to Ireland - with a renewed sense of alienation - and was there till mid 1949, in deteriorating health, returning finally to Cambridge in 1950, where he died in April 1951 - still writing in his philosophical notebook within two days of his death. In his last year, his thoughts still turn to questions of judgment and salvation, just as these questions had concerned him when he had arrived in Cambridge 40 years earlier and in the intervening years.

The breach with Russell had become fixed by now - and the two continued to think about religion quite differently. For Wittgenstein religion was and remained not some sort of primitive error, but the means by which we imagine and structure the world in a morally serious way. When we talk of life as a blessing; when we know of our need for forgiveness; when we speak of the magnitude of sin; of the compulsion to sacrifice; of the possibility for redemption; of an occasion for thankfulness - our language is not idling nor is it disordered; nor, for that matter, are we reaching out for some other world beyond or apart from this one. Instead, we are seeking to grasp this world in terms which we cannot do without if we are to experience the world's meaning in its human depths.

It has been said (Hacker) that Wittgenstein is one of those thinkers whose cultural reach exceeds the reach of his or her work - in other words, and to put it more bluntly, Wittgenstein is more venerated than he is read. (Though we shouldn't perhaps overestimate his cultural reach - when Moore went to receive his OM at Buckingham Palace in 1951, he emerged in some shock to tell his wife in the waiting car: 'Do you know the king had never heard of Wittgenstein?') But the same commentator offers a possible explanation for interest in such figures: 'Their travails and their intellectual and spiritual strivings are inchoately sensed to incorporate and to represent the deepest tensions and conflicts within the culture of their times. So, perhaps, it has been with Ludwig Wittgenstein.' Indeed. Wittgenstein's thought is not easy to grasp - and its significance even less so. My esteemed colleague

Professor Pelham Wilson asked me earlier in the week whether I would explain in this address the importance of Wittgenstein's thought - to which I had to tell him that one would have to study a lot of philosophy and become very wrong-headed indeed before the significance of Wittgenstein's contribution would be fully apparent. However that may be, I hope it is evident that Wittgenstein did indeed grapple with one of the deepest tensions and conflicts of his times and ours - between the tendency falsely to generalise scientific patterns of thought and reasoning, and traditions of reflection and practice which seek to preserve and convey human values. Here was a man, amongst the greatest of his generation, whose passion for truth and goodness, whose intemperate disregard for status and standing, was nurtured by the Gospels he carried in his pocket in the war. To the left Russell may have been mystified by his mysticism, and to the right, the parsons may have thought this inadequate stuff. But Wittgenstein inhabited and sought to imagine for us a moral world, both compelling to the reason, and reformatory of the will. And for this we rightly hold his name in honour in this house.

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Sources:

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