AN APPROACH TO WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY

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Derek Bolton

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To My Parents

Wenn es möglich gewesen wäre, den Turm
von Babel zu erbauen ohne ihn zu erklettern,
es wäre erlaubt worden.

FRANZ KAFKA

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Preface

I attempt in this commentary to elucidate Wittgenstein's philosophy, by examination of the text, and by use of an historical perspective. The main aim is to show that his early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, marked an ending of the modern philosophical tradition, i.e. that which dates roughly from the seventeenth century; and further, that in his later work, particularly in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein moved away from the fundamental assumptions of that tradition, towards a philosophy more suited to the present time. This historical perspective is intended to fill a gap in Wittgenstein scholarship to date.

Wittgenstein began his working life as an engineer, but his interest soon turned to philosophy and logic, and at the age of 22, in 1911, he went to Cambridge to study under Russell. He wrote the *Tractatus* largely while on active service in the Austrian army during the First World War. In the Preface he claimed to have solved, on all essential points, the problems of philosophy. In accordance with this belief, he gave up philosophy, and turned to school-teaching, and to architecture. However, Wittgenstein came to doubt what he had earlier written, and once more took up philosophy. He returned to Cambridge in 1929, and worked there almost continuously until his death in 1951. Many works from this 'later period' have been published posthumously, the best known being the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the Preface to this work, Wittgenstein wrote that he had recognised 'grave mistakes' in his *Tractatus*. We may assume that he saw the *Investigations* as correcting those 'mistakes'. Thus Wittgenstein's philosophy falls broadly into two parts; our task is to understand each, and the relation between them.

Whatever view be taken of the relation between the early and later philosophy, it is clear that Wittgenstein's *method* altered drastically. The *Tractatus* is densely written, uses technical vocabulary, contains much apparently dogmatic assertion and generalisation, and is little clarified by examples. The opposite is so in the *Investigations*. The later work appears so different that Russell judged

it to be of little philosophical interest (Russell, 5: pp. 216–17). The difficulty is to see the point of Wittgenstein's plain remarks and observations. Thus the two works present the reader with different kinds of problem: the *Tractatus* appears as a particularly difficult piece of abstract philosophy, whereas the *Investigations* is superficially easier to understand, but its philosophical import may well seem elusive.

The difference of style has led me to use different methods of commentary in each case. Concerning the *Tractatus*, I have aimed to make explicit its major doctrines and the connections between them. These doctrines are defined with the aid of a new interpretation of the *Tractatus* numbering system. This system has often been neglected by the commentators, notable exceptions being Stenius and Dietrich. In general I make no piecemeal criticisms of the *Tractatus* doctrines, believing that they are best understood, at least to begin with, as essentially part of a system, not as plausible in their own right. The system rests on certain axioms or assumptions, and it is these that are of special relevance to the main aim of this commentary.

It seems less appropriate, however, to elucidate the meaning of the *Investigations*. For what Wittgenstein meant to say in this work is generally plain; the problem is rather why he said it. Why, for example, did he describe in detail people's use of a simple language on a building site? The question arises whether there are philosophical theses here, comparable to what we are familiar with. And if there are, why are they not explicit? Why did Wittgenstein, master of philosophical theorising, abandon it in his later work? I have approached questions of this kind from an historical point of view. The significance of the *Investigations* lies largely, I suggest, in its overturning certain fundamental ideas characteristic of the modern philosophical tradition. And it is to this tradition that the assumptions of the *Tractatus* system belong.

The relation of the *Tractatus* to previous philosophy is problematic. The book was a formative influence on the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, and was generally assumed to belong to the empiricist tradition of modern thought. However, Professor Anscombe showed that the concerns of the *Tractatus*—the nature of reference, description, truth and falsity, and so on—are not empiricist ones; they belong rather with Frege's logical philosophy, and are more akin to ancient, than to more modern, philosophy (1: pp. 12ff. and 25ff.). Correct as this assessment was, particularly as a

corrective to then prevalent misinterpretations of the *Tractatus*, it does not necessarily exclude there being strong links between the work and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. The possibility explored here is that several fundamental doctrines of the *Tractatus* are to be found in the modern tradition. For example, the spatial ontology of the *Tractatus* is closely connected to the conception of nature on which much modern philosophy was based. The question then arises why and how several traditional concepts, such as 'sense-experience', and problems, such as the problem of knowledge, have no place in the *Tractatus*. The answer to this question lies, I suggest, in the fact that *language* is now taken to be the medium of thought or representation. For although the *Tractatus* shares assumptions with previous modern philosophy, it also contains an innovation of great consequence: that the assumptions were made to produce a philosophy of language. The result was the so-called 'picture theory' of language.

In order to define the traditional views with which the *Tractatus* is to be compared and contrasted, I have chosen statements from philosophers such as Descartes, Newton and Locke. I do not attempt a 'history of ideas', nor a full account of a particular philosopher's aim or theory. My concern has been more with the assumptions of seventeenth-century philosophy and the problems they immediately generated, than with major solutions to those problems. In particular there is no detailed discussion of the connections between Wittgenstein's work of either period and the Kantian philosophy, which have been treated by, among others, Stenius, Pears and Hacker.

Part I concerns the *Tractatus*; the first chapter analyses the work, the second assesses its relation to some previous philosophy. These chapters may be read in either order. The reader unfamiliar with the *Tractatus*, but acquainted with the general problems of modern philosophy, may prefer to begin with the second chapter.

It has been increasingly realised that the *Investigations* is not, as Russell and others thought, an abandonment of philosophy. The commentaries by Kenny, Pears and Hacker, among others, have shown that Wittgenstein's later work may be compared with the *Tractatus*, and with positions familiar in the history of thought. The recognition that there is more in common between the early and later work than was previously supposed, has naturally led to the stressing of similarities, as well as of differences, between the two, particularly by Kenny. The view presented here is that the

Investigations makes a radical break from the *Tractatus*; the two works are, I suggest, as different as two works can be, which are still comparable, and written by one man.

Part I helps provide a context for describing the revolution in Wittgenstein's later work. At the beginning of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein criticises a very general conception of language, one which has the *Tractatus* theory as a special case. The importance of this change is great; for if the *Tractatus* theory of language is rejected, so too is the whole *Tractatus* system, and with it also a major part of the modern philosophical tradition. The *Investigations* is largely (some would say entirely) critical. The objects of criticism are diverse, including some doctrines clearly identifiable with those in the *Tractatus*, but others which are not, such as dualism. The aim of the second chapter, to find what is common between the *Tractatus* and the modern tradition, thus helps to find a connection between the diverse targets of criticism in the *Investigations*, and also a coherence in the positive philosophy which stands opposed to them. The general theme in Part II, chapters 3 to 5, is the replacement of various philosophical theories, some major and some minor. The instrument of change is always the new conception of language, or what underlies it, the central importance of human activity. Comparison is made mainly with seventeenth-century thought, but not entirely. The deeper the rejection of modern assumptions becomes, it appears that the break is in fact away from Greek thought, namely Plato's. Thus in the fourth chapter there is discussion of the relativity of truth, in the light of Plato's critique in the *Theaetetus*. Also, in the third chapter, some essential points of Wittgenstein's new philosophy are compared with Einstein's physics. This comparison is of particular relevance to the aim of this commentary; for just as the *Tractatus* is closely linked to seventeenth-century natural philosophy, so Wittgenstein's later work stands close to the physics of the present time.

In order to relate Wittgenstein's later work to traditional philosophical theories, it must be presented in a like form, the form of a theory. This is not the form of Wittgenstein's writing, and consequently the commentary at times must leave the text. However, this recasting of Wittgenstein's thought serves to clarify the nature of its originality, and also the purpose of its new method.

In pursuing the aim of this commentary, it has not been necessary to touch on every aspect of Wittgenstein's work. I do not discuss his development, in the pre-*Tractatus* notes, treated for example by

Griffin, and in the so-called 'transitionary works', the *Philosophical Remarks* and the *Philosophical Grammar*, discussed by Kenny. Also omitted from discussion is the influence of Frege and Russell, examined particularly by Professor Anscombe and by Kenny. Wittgenstein's later philosophy of mathematics, though relevant to the theme of this commentary, lies outside its scope. Also of direct relevance is Wittgenstein's last work, *On Certainty*, and I hope to devote a second commentary to it.

I should like to express my gratitude to Dr S. W. Blackburn and Dr E. J. Craig, my tutors at Churchill College, Cambridge, for teaching me methods of philosophical analysis. My thanks go also to Professor G. E. M. Anscombe and Dr C. Lewy who supervised my doctoral work with patience and encouragement; and to Dr J. E. J. Altham and Dr J. Griffin who made useful criticisms as my examiners. I am also indebted to Dr P. Williams of Westfield College, University of London, for his help with the discussion of Newtonian and Relativity mechanics. The views expressed in this work do not, of course, necessarily coincide with theirs. I am grateful to my friend, Dr J. D. Adler, for many helpful suggestions in the preparation of the final version. The doctoral dissertation which formed the basis of this work was written while I was in receipt of a grant from the Department of Education and Science, and the book was completed with the aid of a generous award from the Leverhulme Trust.

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London, 1978

D. E. B.

References and Abbreviations

Commentaries referred to in the Preface are to be found under the authors' names in the Bibliographical References. References are made in the text when possible, otherwise in the Notes. Wittgenstein's works are referred to by name, with the following abbreviations: *Notebooks* for *Notebooks 1914–16*, *Tractatus* for *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, *Investigations* for *Philosophical Investigations*. References to works by other authors are made by the author's name, together with a number in brackets, and are given in full in the Bibliographical References. Several works by the same author are numbered chronologically by date of publication. References to parts of works are made following the number of the work, either in standard mode (chapter, section, etc.), or by page number to the particular edition cited in the Bibliographical References.