

Lecture 1; Wittgenstein's Life

1. The aim of these lectures is to assist in the critical reading of some of the texts

belonging to the later period of Wittgenstein's life. The crucial task of anyone

studying a philosophical authority is to read the writings and engage with them

The texts to be engaged with are the following. The central text is the *Philosophical*

Investigations (1953). Only a few of the topics in that book can be looked at. I shall

also look at the *Blue and Brown Books* (dating from the mid-30's, but properly

published in 1958), and also *On Certainty* (dating from the end of his life, but

published in 1969).

2. W is a fascinating character. Anyone studying him should read about him and his

life. A good introduction is; Norman Malcolm *Ludwig Wittgenstein – a Memoir*

(OUP, 2001). Two good biographies are; B. McGuinness *Wittgenstein: a Life 1889 -*

1921 (Duckworth, 1988), and R. Monk *Ludwig Wittgenstein; the Duty of Genius* (

Jonathan Cape, 1990). A readable recent biography is E. Kanterian *Ludwig*

Wittgenstein (Reaktion Books, 2007).

3. A good recent introductory book on the philosophy of Wittgenstein is Marie

McGinn *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (Routledge, 1997).

4. What is meant by W's later philosophy? This is encouraged by both the facts of

W's life and the contrasting character of his philosophy over his life.

W was born in Vienna, 1889. His family was cultured and wealthy. One brother, Paul,

became a concert pianist, losing his right arm in the war, and so had a concert career

with only one arm. W aimed to become an engineer but read Russell and went to

Cambridge instead in 1911. He worked on philosophy from then on – examining the

nature of language and logic and necessity; during the 1st World War he became a

soldier in the Austrian army, but carried on writing. In 1922 he published the

Tractatus . Before publishing it he gave up philosophy, and between 1921 and 1929 he did a variety of things in Austria, including being a primary school teacher in rural Austria, and then a gardener. He also designed a famous house in Vienna for his sister. It is usually said that W did these things because he felt that he had solved the problems of philosophy! (It is reasonable to point out that W's early interest in engineering and his life as a teacher contributed to the way he wrote philosophy; thus, often he uses engineering metaphors, eg rods not being connected in machines, and it is very hard to escape the impression that when he is discussing teaching rules and word meaning he was not influenced by his life as a teacher.)

Once back in Vienna, after his disastrous teaching episode, two things happened; he began discussions of the Vienna circle, - including Carnap and Schlick - who had taken his *Tractatus* as propounding a view like their own – this experience revealed how misunderstood he had been – but he was also visited by the Cambridge philosopher, F. P. Ramsey, who discussed with him the *Tractatus*. Ramsey was an incredibly intelligent young philosopher and economist, who died aged 26 – a tragedy for British philosophy. His brother Michael later became Archbishop of Canterbury. These encounters rekindled W's interest in philosophy.

He returned to Cambridge in 1929. The leading philosopher there was then G. E. Moore. He submitted the *Tractatus* for a doctorate; was then made a lecturer and finally professor in 1939. He retired in 1947 and died in 1951.

5. W's life can naturally be divided into the earlier and the later period – separated by his foray into teaching. It is also clear that in the later period he rejected much of what he had earlier thought; moreover, his later style of philosophising totally different – one slogan would be that he is looking and seeing in the way he approached language in the later period, rather than saying – this is how language must be.

6. The overwhelming plausibility of viewing W's life and writings in this way leaves open the question whether there are significant continuities in W's thought. This is hotly debated.

7. Elisabeth Anscombe gave a memorable description of the relation between the earlier and the later Wittgenstein; she said that the later W was like a dog returning to lick its own vomit.