



Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1889-1951)

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The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is considered one of the most significant thinkers of the twentieth century, especially for his valuable contributions within the field of Linguistic Philosophy.

His major works on language and linguistics include *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), and *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), which was published posthumously.

Early Life and Education

Born Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein in Vienna on April 26, 1889, he was the youngest of eight children raised in a wealthy and cultured Jewish family. Initially educated privately at home, at the age of 14 he began attending a school in Linz, Austria that specialized in mathematics and natural science. In 1906, he went to Berlin to study mechanical engineering and two years later registered at the University of Manchester in England to study for his doctorate in engineering.

Over time, however, Wittgenstein developed a greater interest in mathematics and mathematical logic, and he transferred to Trinity College, University of Cambridge, where he took courses from 1912 to 1913 given by the distinguished philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell.

In November 1912, on the recommendation of fellow student John Maynard Keynes, Wittgenstein was elected to the elite Cambridge society known as the Apostles, which at that time had an aura of homoeroticism. This homoerotic atmosphere made Wittgenstein uncomfortable, however, and he stopped attending meetings.

Finding Cambridge a less than ideal place to work, since he felt that his fellow academics lacked depth, Wittgenstein went to Skjolden in Norway and continued his mathematical and philosophical investigations in seclusion. This was a particularly fruitful period for Wittgenstein, during which he focused on the ideas that would later form the foundation of his philosophical concepts.

In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Wittgenstein returned to Vienna and joined the Austrian army. He was sent to northern Italy in 1918 where he was captured and taken prisoner by the Italian army. From his prisoner-of-war camp he was allowed to mail the manuscript he had been working on to Bertrand Russell in England.

Wittgenstein's Philosophy

This manuscript was published in German in 1921 as *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* and, then, in a parallel English-German text, in 1922 as *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Apart from one short article, this was the only work published by Wittgenstein in his lifetime.

Dismissive of most traditional philosophy, the *Tractatus* is a dense and austere treatise on language and

linguistics.

Wittgenstein argued that language is composed of complex propositions that can be analyzed until one arrives at less complex or elementary propositions. Correspondingly, the world is composed of complex facts that can be analyzed into less complex or "atomic" facts. Therefore, according to Wittgenstein, the only meaningful language is the language of science. All other attempts to transcend "atomic" facts and reach for something "higher"--such as ethics, aesthetics, or metaphysics--are cognitively not meaningful.

As Wittgenstein wrote in the preface to this work, "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." Wittgenstein's thesis had a powerful influence on the logical-positivist movement then emerging in Vienna.

His Later Life and Work

After World War I, Wittgenstein gave up philosophy and became an elementary school teacher in Austria. He then took a job as a monastery gardener's assistant, and later became involved in the design of a mansion for his sister.

However, in 1929 he returned to Cambridge, where he accepted a research fellowship at Trinity College. During this time he also had a brief intellectual and sexual relationship with the young philosopher Frank Ramsey. Ramsey died in 1930 at the age of 26.

In 1938 Wittgenstein became a naturalized British citizen. He remained at Cambridge, lecturing on logic, language, and the philosophy of mathematics, until his retirement in 1947, whereupon he moved to an isolated cottage on the west coast of Ireland to work on his second great treatise, *Philosophical Investigations*.

Wittgenstein had become dissatisfied with his earlier philosophical position, and began to believe that the narrow view of language reflected in the *Tractatus* was mistaken. He rejected the idea that language has a single essential function. Now he argued that words are like tools, and just as tools serve many different functions, linguistic expressions also serve many functions.

Although some linguistic propositions serve to express facts, others are used to question, to pray, to create, and so on. This recognition of linguistic flexibility and variety led to Wittgenstein's concept of "language games" and to the conclusion that people play many different language games--a scientist, for example, is involved in a quite different language game than a theologian.

It was not until 1953, two years after his death, however, that this second work was published. Additional works by Wittgenstein, all published posthumously, include *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1956), *The Blue and Brown Books* (1958), and *Notebooks 1914-1916* (1961).

While in Ireland Wittgenstein's health began to deteriorate, and in 1949 he was diagnosed with cancer. He continued to work on his ideas until a few days before his death, on April 29, 1951, at the age of 62. He is buried in St. Giles Churchyard, Cambridge.

His Homosexuality

Ludwig Wittgenstein seems to have been uncomfortable with his homosexuality. Certainly, he was very secretive about his sexual interests and activities. His secretiveness is not altogether surprising, considering the fact that homosexuality was illegal in Austria and Britain during his lifetime. Therefore, details of his emotional and sexual life are sparse.

William W. Bartley first broached the subject of Wittgenstein's homosexuality in his 1973 biography and

received considerable censure and disapproval from the philosophy establishment.

Apparently, in his student days in Vienna, Wittgenstein occasionally cruised the Prater, a large public park, where he met rough trade youths; he seems to have continued this activity later in England. However, Wittgenstein is also believed to have had long-term affairs with men of his own class, such as the philosopher Frank Ramsey and the architect Francis Skinner.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.