Review

Wittgenstein: Biography and Philosophy, James C. Klagge (ed.)

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The movement of thought in my philosophy
should be discernible also in the history of my mind,
of its moral concepts & in the understanding of my situation.
(Wittgenstein, Koder Diaries, p.125)

The relationship between Wittgenstein's life and his philosophy is the main topic that informs the contributions of this volume. While Wittgenstein scholarship increased rapidly since the philosopher's death in 1951, it did not confine itself to an analysis of his work but became increasingly interested in his life. The biographers Bryan McGuinness (1988) and Ray Monk (1990), who also are among the contributors to this volume, already made use of the advantage of a variety of memoirs and recollections by people who were somehow close to Wittgenstein. Their work among others helped to foster an interest in Wittgenstein's life for a larger audience. The spectrum of content of the essays, which were originally presented at a conference dedicated to the topic, ranges from reflections on general problems inherent in philosophical biography to investigations about specific aspects of Wittgenstein's personality and their impact on his philosophy. Some of the papers gain particular importance because they focus their attention on material that has only recently been published such as Wittgenstein's diaries from the 1930s or the correspondence with his family.

The conviction that there is an intimate connection between Wittgenstein's life and his work is shared by the authors. It is legitimated in reference to Wittgenstein's own practice of not wanting to separate the task of becoming the sort of human being he wanted to be from the task of becoming the sort of philosopher he wanted to be. Wittgenstein's life can be characterized by engaging in a search for philosophical clarity
as well as ethical decency (*Anständigkeit*). It can be reasonably said that a good philosophical biography illuminates aspects of this connection between life and philosophy. This ideal is not just confined to the special case of Wittgenstein. We have to keep in mind that most ancient philosophers equated the search for truth with the search for the good life. Socrates would not even have understood how a good philosopher could be differentiated from a good person. This historical fact might at least throw some doubt on the legitimacy of the modern understanding of philosophy as a predominantly professional endeavor and an autonomous discipline among others without any relation to biographical issues.

One might still ask the question whether one should be interested in a thinker's biography at all when one wants to understand his philosophy. Is there any possibility that biographical information can enlarge our understanding of a philosopher's work in a way that is not possible by simply studying his work directly? What distinguishes a philosophical from any other form of biography is that it purports to represent the life of a person in such a way that it enlarges an understanding of that person *qua* philosopher. But can it really do so? Popper suggested that a biography is independent of any questions of philosophical importance. This seems to have been the most common position in the philosophical community for quite a long time. According to this position, Wittgenstein's character might help to explain his personal influence, but is irrelevant to his philosophy. James Conant suggests differentiating between two standard ways of answering the above questions concerning the legitimacy of philosophical biography: (1) reductivists claim that biographies hold the secret to understanding the work of a philosopher while (2) compartmentalists hold that an understanding of a philosopher’s life is irrelevant to an understanding of his work and that philosophy and biography should be strictly separated in every case (Conant, p. 17). While the first position, which often adheres to psychoanalytic and Marxist models of explanation, interprets the work of a philosopher mainly as an effect of factors external to the work, the second resists these models and does not want to mistake a story about the external causes that might have led a philosopher to say certain things for an internal understanding of the work itself.

Conant tries to argue that the exclusive choice between reductivism and compartmentalism is a forced one. He wants to show that successful philosophical
biographies, which are few, do indeed increase our understanding of a philosopher *qua* philosopher. He claims that the case of Wittgenstein shows, first, that turning to biographical aspects helps to foster an understanding of his philosophy and, second, that Monk's biography accomplishes this goal. Conant does a great job in showing that Wittgenstein did not draw a sharp line between personal and philosophical problems; he observes, for instance, that Wittgenstein's work is sprinkled with remarks on the internal connection between life and philosophy. One might ask, however, why this should prove the compartmentalist wrong. The compartmentalist could simply hold on to his thesis and argue for a very similar claim, namely that Wittgenstein's philosophy entailed a refusal to separate questions of life from philosophical questions, by pointing to the same evidence as Conant does, namely remarks taken from the *work* of Wittgenstein. In order to distance himself from the compartmentalists, Conant would have to argue that *personal* remarks within discussions about *philosophical* issues have to be understood as belonging to the life, not to the work of a philosopher. Then he would have to show in order to prove his thesis that philosophical biographies can be a good thing, that reference to *personal* remarks are of value in discovering a thinker's philosophy. Still we are left with the no less controversial problem of how to demarcate the *personal*, i.e. the factors external to the work, from the *philosophical*, i.e. factors internal to the work. Thus the controversial issue, which is unfortunately not touched upon by any contribution in this volume, boils down to the question where a philosopher's work starts and where it ends. If we limit a philosopher's work to what he published during his lifetime, we would deprive Wittgenstein's work of everything besides the *Tractatus* and one minor essay. Of course there are writings, especially the correspondence and diaries, that seem clearly to belong to the category of the private. These can and often do include philosophical thoughts. Not only that, they also often help to date manuscripts or determine the importance a philosopher placed on certain elements of his published work. What the compartmentalist is opposing – and I think rightly – is the attitude that we can get around critical reflections of philosophical basic sources by assembling biographical data and anecdotes out of pure curiosity that does not aim at a larger understanding of a philosopher's work.

The authors largely agree about the potential of successful biographies to enhance an understanding of a philosopher's work. They are eager to show that not every
philosophical biography is reductionistic, that is that not every biography leads to reducing philosophical components to factors of a philosopher's life. Successful biographies help not just to discern tensions and ambiguities but at best enable a fresh view on the thoughts of a philosopher, a view that uncovers aspects which hitherto have been invisible or unrealized. These aspects enrich the general understanding of a philosophy by way of revealing it through description rather than explaining it through theorizing. As Conant says, "In Wittgenstein's case, seeing the philosophy in the light cast by Monk's biography helps us to see the rigor and depth and purity that characterizes Wittgenstein's work as a whole and, more importantly, perhaps to see more clearly what sort of rigor and depth and purity it is that Wittgenstein strove for in his thinking and living." (Conant, p. 37). General understanding is equated with getting a grasp of the spirit, character, or tone of a philosophy (Monk, p. 4ff.) as opposed to suffering from what Wittgenstein himself called "aspect-blindness" (cited p. 6).

If we turn to the other essays in this volume that explicitly deal with certain aspects of Wittgenstein's personality and their impact on his writing we could raise the question to what extent these necessary conditions of a successful philosophical biography, i.e. their ability or potential to enhance an understanding of a philosopher's work as a whole, are fulfilled. Kelly Hamilton focuses her attention on Wittgenstein's early training as an engineer and argues that it informed his conception of the Bild or picture theory of language in the Tractatus. Turning our attention to Wittgenstein's education at the Technische Hochschule at Charlottenberg in Berlin, the MIT of the turn of the century, is supposed to "give us deeper insight into the doctrine of what can only be shown and not said" (Hamilton, p.53). Hamilton tries to show that through his training in descriptive geometry Wittgenstein was predisposed to believing that three dimensional reality could be captured in a two-dimensional script, and that it did not make sense to talk about something outside of this reality. Step by step she reconstructs Wittgenstein's process of mental maturation that presupposed him to developing the ontology we can find in the Tractatus. Although I do not see that she really does "give us a deeper insight" into the Bild theory, her essay is highly interesting because one gets to know the background that motivated Wittgenstein's way to write the Tractatus the way he did,
building on a confidence in transferring insights of graphical imagination into developing his theory of language and the corresponding ontology.

Louis Sass's essay aims at clarifying the connection between Wittgenstein's psychological constitution and the aesthetical and ethical stance that prevail throughout his writings. He sees in Wittgenstein a typical example of a modern "schizoid" thinker. These thinkers (e.g. Giddens, Kant, Luhmann) can be characterized by a certain hypersensitivity and vulnerability, and by detachment from both self and world. To use Thomas Nagel's expression, they aim at a view from nowhere. Wittgenstein was constantly facing a human dilemma: "the question whether thinking should be considered the most vibrant expression or the most profound depletion of the vitality of the human condition" (Sass, p. 103). Going back to the critique of the reductivist by the compartmentalist that Conant worked out, Sass writes that he is not trying to reduce Wittgenstein's work to external factors – perhaps the causes of his "schizoid" personality – but merely offering a suggestive outlook or approach from which it is possible to discern ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions and even contradictions that one might otherwise overlook. Sass exuberantly stresses that contrary to his choice of vocabulary (schizoid personality etc.) he does not regard Wittgenstein to be strictly pathological. One might respond: why then does he stick to this kind of clinical vocabulary?

Joachim Schulte points out convincingly in his paper “Letters from a Philosopher” that one of the most central reasons why people turn to philosophical biographies is to get an understanding not just about the philosophical system a thinker developed or the sociopolitical context, but of the intellectual context the person was writing in. This seems to be especially pertinent in the case of philosophers who have lived in a different epoch or a different cultural environment. Schulte focuses on the letter writer Wittgenstein in a very interesting way: he looks for traces of his philosophy in his correspondence, which at first sight might be regarded to be very conventional in style. Schulte dissects simple statements in a skilful way and reveals aspects that can often be read only in between the lines, aspects that are very hard to discover at all if one is not a native German speaker. Schulte uncovers idiomatic allusions and shows how much Wittgenstein's letters have to be read like compositions with various layers of meaning.
Hans-Johann Glock’s contribution addresses the issue of Wittgenstein's relationship to reason. In recent Wittgenstein scholarship one can make out a shift concerning the evaluation of Wittgenstein as a rationalist. Wittgenstein was often interpreted as standing within the Kantian tradition, i.e. the analytic prolongation that concerned itself with claims of reason, rational argument and the endeavor of reason to establish its own nature and limits under a linguistic reformulation. Wittgenstein prolonged Kant's attempt to draw the limits of human knowledge into an attempt to draw the limits of meaningful discourse. This position was questioned by a number of commentators that regard Wittgenstein as ultimately anti-rationalist or irrationalist. Glock distinguishes five variations of the latter position that share the conviction that is based mainly on the mystical part of the *Tractatus*, namely that Wittgenstein's project should be characterized in terms of wanting to show that philosophy should not provide any explanations or justifications (Glock, p. 196):

- **Existential Irrationalism** (Engelmann, Drury) stresses the mystical and ethical aspects of his work
- **Nonsense Irrationalism** (Diamond, Conant) claims that because of the saying/showing distinction image of throwing away the ladder, the *Tractatus* aims not at showing ineffable truths but plain gibberish.
- **Therapeutic Irrationalism** (Bouwsma) holds that the *Tractatus* is proposing to abandon philosophical problems for the sake of intellectual tranquility.
- **Aspect Irrationalism** (Baker) holds that Wittgenstein is not putting forward a philosophical argument but wants the reader to change his outlook.
- **Postmodern Irrationalism** (Rorty) claims that Wittgenstein wanted to abandon the traditional philosophic search for truth in favor of a form of descriptive anthropology.

It is important to note that irrationalism should not be equated with refraining from conceptual clarity and argumentation. Some of the most vocal proponents of reason present their case in a completely irrational manner (e.g. Hegel), while it is conversely possible to attack the intellectualist picture by way of rational argumentation (e.g. some strains of American Pragmatism or Schopenhauer).

Glock does not aim at resolving the tension between a rational and an irrational strand in Wittgenstein. He wants to explain it in terms of its origin in Wittgenstein's intellectual biography and especially with reference to the influence of Schopenhauer
who tried to combine a rational philosophical method with an anti-intellectual
metaphysical doctrine and a pessimistic anthropology. Glock does, however, argue in
favor of a rationalist interpretation of Wittgenstein's work. Glock believes that
"although Wittgenstein's cultural attitudes and his spiritual and mystical tendencies are
important to an understanding of his life and his work, the philosophical value of his
reflections on language, mind, and philosophy itself does not depend on them." (Glock,
p. 197)

Glock’s essay is the most informative one if one is interested in understanding the
intellectual currents Wittgenstein was confronting. He does a great job in showing how
divergent ideals (conservatism/ egalitarianism, intellectual honesty/ clarity, the cult of
the genius/ communism) influenced Wittgenstein throughout his life and in how far
Wittgenstein's changing opinions on these issues influenced the relationship to his
surrounding (especially to Russell and the Positivists).

The last two essays by Brian McGuinness and David Stern set out to investigate
the relationship of Wittgenstein towards Jewishness. This is particularly interesting
because many previous studies of Wittgenstein's philosophy give little importance to
the subject matter. Wittgenstein himself repeatedly expressed his opinions on
Jewishness on various occasions, but mainly in *Culture and Value*. McGuinness argues
that the Wittgenstein family can hardly be described as having been Jewish. This
makes sense in light of the fact that in the last two generations of his family almost all
people of Jewish origin converted and assimilated themselves to the Western Christian
culture. Nevertheless Wittgenstein in his youth in Vienna and still during the first
world war moved within intellectual circles of which most members were Jews. It is
well known that Wittgenstein had a great disgust for any form of organized religion but
still could not help himself by being deeply interested in what he called real religious
faith. One can, however, say that Wittgenstein is strongly influenced by people who
wrote about Jewishness (Weininger) and friends who considered themselves Jews and
Zionists (Zweig, Eng, Engelmann).

McGuinness draws attention to the artificiality of the concept of Jewishness.
There are at least five different phenomena that are couched in the one concept: (1) the
religion, (2) decent from persons professing it, (3) the culture of assimilated Jews who
still formed something of a community, (4) the common genetic heritage of Jews (thought to exist), (5) and (distinct from this) the supposition of such a heritage (McGuinness, p. 228). Stern, however, argues that this list omits some important senses of the term Jewishness. According to him Wittgenstein seems to have regarded the Jews in racial terms and was very skeptical about their ability to produce geniuses. For Wittgenstein the Jews were masters of reproduction of acquired thought. Jewishness, at least from the early 30s onward, was clearly a moral category for Wittgenstein. At times, in periods of harsh self criticism, he did acknowledge his Jewish heritage. Wittgenstein was attracted to use anti-Semitic expressions, but only as a way of thinking about his own failings (Stern, p. 238). After the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, when his family was partially persecuted, Wittgenstein tried to help them and other Jews. He did it by helping them to come to England or by giving them money so they could convert to Christianity. Stern believes that Wittgenstein basically used the concept of Jewishness to denote a personality syndrome. He disagrees with the position stating that Wittgenstein did not really regard himself to be Jewish, a position he attributes to McGuinness. Whether Wittgenstein was or was not a Jew is a question that was not answered by the authors. The merit of their contributions is to differentiate different aspects behind the concept of Jewishness, as well as possible approaches to Wittgenstein's thinking on these matters. The influence of Weininger on Wittgenstein's thinking on Jewishness was often referred to, but what it explicitly consisted in remains untouched.

Overall the volume is a useful read for people who are interested in the connection between Wittgenstein's life and his philosophy. Although the contributions are of very different quality, they all share a clear and understandable style. And though they do not uncover many new aspects in Wittgenstein's life or his philosophy, they help to put his thinking into a larger perspective and offer new ways of approaching his writings.