

# Wittgenstein on the Meaning of Life: From Theory to Therapy

Michael Maurer, Vienna, Austria

In the philosophical Œuvre of Ludwig Wittgenstein explicitly ethical remarks *appear* as scattered islands within the ocean of logical and linguistic investigations. The fact that precisely these remarks motivate Wittgenstein's *Denkbewegungen* was articulated by the author himself several times.<sup>1</sup> In the following article we attempt to provide hints for the ethical dimension of Wittgenstein's "authorial strategy" (Conant, 2000, 175) by reflecting on the importance of the question of the *meaning of life* for the development of Wittgenstein's philosophical *style of thinking*. When referring to the "close relationship between his life problems and his philosophical way of thinking" (DB, 8, *my translation*), we are not following the impulse of reductionist psychologization, but are offering an invitation to a reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy that emphasizes the 'tone of voice' (Monk, 2001, 4) of his *language*.

## 1. The Problem of Life

When we become a „*terra difficultatis*“ (Augustinus, X, XVI, 25) for ourselves by looking into the mirror of diffuse reflection and the painful questions of metaphysics make our entire life questionable, philosophical thinking organizes an attempt to give an answer to the elementary questions of our existence.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's diary notes written when he was a volunteer soldier in the First World War give a picture of a desperate psychological state which provides the origin of the *metaphysical need* that is made to disappear at the end of the *Tractatus*. In relative analogy to Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein keeps a continuous *journal* in which biographical and philosophical notes penetrate each other. The partial encoding of the entries and the phenomenological structure of the diary allows for a remarkable insight into Wittgenstein's *style of thinking and working*: from diaries and notebooks - *strictly thought through* - the philosophical core, which gives the *Tractatus* its enigmatical form, becomes distilled. Philosophy and biography penetrate each other in the form of a doubled bookkeeping. *Recto* and *verso* of the manuscript mark the two invisibly interacting spheres of the personal and the philosophical.

In a state of deep disconcertment about the painful disruption of human existence, the young Wittgenstein asks himself the metaphysical question *par excellence*:

„Kann man aber so leben daß das Leben aufhört problematisch zu sein? Daß man im Ewigen lebt und nicht in der Zeit?“ (BEE, Ms 102, 117r [1.6.1915])

In asking this question Wittgenstein recapitulates a figure of traditional philosophical thought: the idea of an approach *sub specie aeternitatis*. The finite nature of human understanding is to be abolished in favour of a deeper insight into the hidden rules of the world. This is the expression of a passionate desire to be *redeemed* by the ordering of metaphysical knowledge, wherein the untiring longing for the *right* form of life *comes to an end*:

„Das große Problem, um das sich alles dreht, was ich schreibe; ist: Ist a priori, eine Ordnung in der Welt, und wenn, ja, worin besteht sie?“ (BEE, Ms 102, 117r [1.6.1915])

Inner loneliness and depression make the idea of suicide possible throughout Wittgenstein's whole life. Suicide is no more than the *destruction of life* (*In this way* Weininger removed the contradictions between his moral ideal and human reality). In a conversation with his close friend David Hume Pinsent, Wittgenstein said that the care of Bertrand Russell ended "nine years of lonely suffering, in which he constantly considered suicide". (Monk, 2004, 57, *my translation*)

There is sufficient autobiographical and biographical evidence to show, that also for the rest of his life, Wittgenstein's inner moral struggle *with* his own imperfection and continuously growing feelings of meaninglessness never came to a standstill. Throughout his entire life Ludwig Wittgenstein continues to search for the *right* form of life. Tormented with inner strain and restlessness, in permanently new drafts he will try to make vanish the *problems of philosophy* and the *problem of life*, which stand in a complex relationship to each other.

In the *Tractatus* we come across the attempt to give the *problems* a logically strict form in order to make them dissolve on the critical point of their condensation.

## 2. The Vanishing of the Problem?

At a decisive point in the *Tractatus* the question of the *meaning of life* gains paradigmatic importance for Wittgenstein's philosophical method:

„Die Lösung des Problems des Lebens merkt man am Verschwinden dieses Problems.

(Ist nicht das der Grund, warum Menschen, denen der Sinn des Lebens nach langen Zweifeln klar wurde, warum diese dann nicht sagen konnten, worin dieser Sinn bestand?)“ (TLP, 6.521)<sup>2</sup>

As a reaction to the logic of the *problem of life* – which is the *prime example* for the paradoxical nature of philosophical problems – Wittgenstein carries out the radically therapeutic project of a final distinction between sense and nonsense (TLP, p. 9). The philosophical questions turn out to be unsolvable, i.e. meaningless in the medium in which they are posed to us – *language*.

The author of the *Tractatus* wants to make the problems vanish by leading the reader to the understanding that their existence is based on a meaningless way of asking, which is inherent to the limited logic of our language. The original dissolution of the basic question of ethics (TLP, 6.521) turns out to be the paradigmatic birthplace of the *elucidative method* (Conant, 2000 et 2002b) of the *Tractatus' sentences*. Following the instructions given by the author, their *elucidative* function consists of creating an awareness of their fundamental meaninglessness in the

<sup>1</sup> Two *sign posts*: CLF, 35: „(...) denn der Sinn des Buches ist ein Ethischer. (...) mein Werk bestehe aus zwei Teilen: aus dem der hier vorliegt und aus alledem, was ich *nicht* geschrieben habe und gerade der zweite Teil ist der Wichtige. (1919)“ and VB, 511: „Friede in den Gedanken. Das ist das ersehnte Ziel, dessen, der philosophiert. (1944)“.

<sup>2</sup> This central remark stems from the third diary (note) book (Ms 103, 13r [6.7.1916]) and can be found both in the *Prototractatus* (Ms 104) and in all 3 typescripts of the *Tractatus* (Ts 202, Ts 203, Ts 204). In *Wiener Typoskript des Tractatus* (Ts 204) these sentences even mark the end of the carrying out.

reader's mind. In the reader's consciousness the *Tractarian* sentences converge – when they are *strictly thought through* – into their own meaninglessness. The narrative structure makes of the text a mirror in which the reader finds herself in the situation of the monkey that recognizes itself for the first time in his own mirror image. „Ein Bild hielt uns gefangen.“ (PU, § 115)

The convergence of the *Tractatus* shows us that every attempt to transcend the borders of our language remains unconscious of the limited nature of human thought and existence. In the end the attempt to leave the place of the absolute empty and to ascribe to it an inexpressible and unrecognizable existence, unmasks itself as no more than the final *residue* of the metaphysical spirit of abstraction. This spirit wants to hold onto at least the possibility of truth about the world and stops on the last rung of the *Tractarian* ladder without throwing it away. (TLP, 6.54)

The ethical dimension of our existence can not be positively determined in a definitive system of philosophy. The *Tractatus* shows that the logic of our language does not meaningfully permit substantial metaphysics. Every attempt to transcend the border drawn by the author inevitably leads to self betrayal and intellectual dishonesty. In this sense the *Tractatus* has limited the ethical „gleichsam von Innen her“ (CLF, 35).

The *Tractatus* ends with its author remaining silent. We have made the problems therapeutically vanish. But was the therapy sustainably successful? Is *one* disillusioning view into the mirror of our own vanities enough? Is one experience of *climbing over* the ladder of our inclination to intellectual hypocrisy enough? Can our *metaphysical need* be eased by once and forever recognizing the meaninglessness of its query?

The eschatological demand of the *Tractatus*, „die Probleme im Wesentlichen endgültig gelöst zu haben“ (TLP, p. 10), and its orchestrated aesthetics unmask an inconsistency. The weight of the world can not be weighed by reference to logic, because the latter operates *inside* the world. The problems are not seized upon *deep* enough (i.e. in their real *Gestalt*; Ms 123, 9v!) in order to implement the therapeutic act within the reader's consciousness. The pathos of the desire to overcome metaphysics (TLP, 6.54) continues to express the pathological spirit of theory. The language of the text remains enclosed within the solipsistic cocoon of logics. It seems as if the author of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* when using an intellectually designed therapy method (Cahill, 2004, 54) has fallen victim to his own verdict:

„Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.“ (TLP, 5.6)

### 3. From Monologue to Polylogue: From Logical Form to the Form of Life

Wittgenstein's time as an elementary teacher in the area *in which* we are now gathered together was no more than the attempt to realize the theory of his order of silence, in which the *Tractatus* had culminated. The ambition to establish the unity of theory and practise – *life and language* – expresses one aspect of the ethical dimension of his style of philosophizing. His human and pedagogical failure, which provoked severe inner doubts and serious suicidal tendencies, were the prelude to Wittgenstein's return to philosophy. It appears that he felt that he had not *definitely* solved the problems.

Similarly to the therapeutic method of the *Tractatus*, which had originated in the mirror of an innovative variant to make the *problem of life* vanish, we also find material in the *Nachlass*, which contains a paradigmatic remark for the *morphogenesis* of Wittgenstein's *philosophical style* on the same subject:

„Die Lösung des Problems, das Du im Leben siehst, ist eine Art zu leben, die das Problemhafte zum Verschwinden bringt. Daß das Leben problematisch ist, heißt, daß dein Leben nicht in die Form des Lebens paßt. Du mußt dann Dein Leben ändern, und paßt es in die Form, dann verschwindet das Problematische.“ (BEE, 118, 17r - 17v [27.8.1937]).

The author of the *Tractatus* has enclosed the natural plurality of our linguistic phenomena of our *In-der-Welt-sein* into the solipsistic narrowness of the *logical room* and followed the *logical form* of a strictly linear and systematic therapy method. In the transition to the *Philosophical Investigations*, he opens windows to the linguistic polyphony of divergent forms of life. This opening of windows makes what can be thought visible, depending on the *direction in language* from *which* one is coming. Wittgenstein's atonal philosophical composition no longer expresses a dogmatically narrowed desire for harmony (i.e. the overweighing of logic). It shows that there is no extraordinary grammatical position from whose archimedean point all doubts and contradictions dissolve. The therapeutic method is now adjusted to the dialogical form of real life - to the condition of language usage of everyday life – and no longer follows the monological form of an abstract ideal of language. The logocentric form of the *Tractarian* therapy was abandoned in the grammatical purgatory of a gradual transition period (Pichler, 2004, 132-142 et 175)<sup>3</sup> in favour of a polyphonic treatment of the illnesses of thinking, that language contains for us; a treatment which is orientated by the real forms of speech.

In the *Investigations* we follow the course of a *circum-flexive* polylog, that is adjusted to empirical language usage instead of holding onto a theory of an essence of language in its *aesthetical core*. It is not *one single* fundamental *tractatus*, but a plurality of textual micro-entities that creates the missing consciousness of our being entangled in the grammar of language:

„Es gibt nicht *eine* Methode der Philosophie, wohl aber gibt es Methoden, gleichsam verschiedene Therapien.“ (BEE, Ms 116, 186 [1.9.1937])

Wittgenstein's last attempt, his „philosophische[n] Gedanken in eine Reihe zu ordnen“ (BEE, Ms 117, 112), leads him to an inevitable approximation to the *form of life* that against our will proves to be a permanent attempt and hence always remains fragmentary.

### 4. From the Final Solution to an Endless Denkbewegung: Laboro in Me Ipso

Within the internal therapeutics of Wittgenstein's practice of philosophizing, the idea of a final solution becomes an endless *Denkbewegung* circulating in small loops around the subject who is meditating on her linguistic references. The natural aesthetics of the *Philosophical Investigations*

<sup>3</sup> Alois Pichler argues convincingly that the transformation of Wittgenstein's *style of thinking* took place in late autumn 1936 and consisted of a *morphogenesis* from a linearly systematic to a polyphonically open representation of his thoughts. There is no sharp division but a complex relationship between inner continuity and discontinuity.

reveals the ethical sense where the indirect message of the *Tractatus* appears to have failed.

The *ethical demand*, which Wittgenstein's activity as a writer requires from each individual reader, consists of interacting with the questions posed by the *Investigations* instead of taking the text as a positive textbook. The clearing of our individual, grammatical confusions requires of us that we confront the blind spots of our thinking and transcend *our* borders:

"I don't try to make you *believe* something, you *don't* believe but to make you *do* something you won't do." (Wittgenstein *after* Rhees, 1970, 43)

As pivotal points which remain out of sight, they reveal the unexpressed presuppositions which compose the background in front of which what we say, think or do becomes meaningful.

Wittgenstein's polyphonically open therapeutics transfers the centre of its philosophical explorations from the problems to the *origin* of the problems: the sharpening of consciousness - *via philosophizing* - of grammatical obsessions and illusions turns out to be a wrestling match with *our own individual language*. „Arbeit an Einem selbst. An der eigenen Auffassung. Daran, wie man die Dinge sieht. (Und was man von ihnen verlangt.)“ (VB, 472)<sup>4</sup>.

Our search for truth about the world had its original starting point in the problematic question regarding who we are; here we close the circle of natural dialectics – which in the history of Western Philosophy has so often been artificially interrupted by *θεωρία* – when we transform our *Selves*:

„Revolutionär wird der sein, der sich selbst revolutionieren kann.“ (VB, 513)

Depending on what *direction in language* one comes from, one will perceive the rabbit or the duck (PU, p. 520) from Ludwig Wittgenstein's '*tone of voice*'. But indeed there is – and that is the suggestion of this essay – sufficient reason to view Wittgenstein's philosophical activity as an expression of an *ethical demand* whose aim is to guide us from our personal standpoint towards a more profound understanding of ourselves.

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Email: pascalwitt@hotmail.com

<sup>4</sup> BEE, Ms 109, 174: „Es ist eine Haupttätigkeit der Philosophie vor falschen Vergleichen zu warnen. Vor (den) falschen Gleichnissen zu warnen, die unserer Ausdrucksweise – ohne dass wir uns dessen ganz bewußt sind – zu Grunde liegen. Ich glaube unsere Methode ähnelt hier der Psychoanalyse die auch Unbewußtes bewußt und damit unschädlich machen will und ich glaube daß diese Ähnlichkeit keine rein äußerliche ist.“