

Wittgenstein, Concept Possession
and Philosophy

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Wittgenstein, Concept Possession and Philosophy

A Dialogue

H. A. Knott

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To my mother and to the memory of my father

Ummon's verse:

A sentence which does not reveal its meaning
Attains its end before being spoken.
You press forward with mouth a-chatter
Betraying your not knowing what to do.

(Trans. R. H. Blyth, Zen & Zen Classics)

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Abbreviations of Works by Wittgenstein

- BB *The Blue and Brown Books*, ed. R. Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).
- BT 'Philosophy', Sections 86–93 of the "Big Typescript" in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, eds J. C. Klagge and A. Nordmann, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1993).
- CE 'Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness', in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, eds J. C. Klagge and A. Nordmann (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1993).
- CV *Culture and Value*, eds G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
- LW1 *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume I, eds G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
- LW2 *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume II, eds G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
- NFL 'Notes for Lectures on "Private Experience" and "Sense Data" ', in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, eds J. C. Klagge and A. Nordmann, trans. R. Rhees (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1993).
- OC *On Certainty*, eds G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).
- PI *Philosophical Investigations*, eds G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- RFGB 'Remarks on Fraser's *Golden Bough*', in *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, eds J. C. Klagge and A. Nordmann, trans. J. Beversluis (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1993).
- RFM *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, eds G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).
- ROC *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. L. L. McAlister and M. Schättle (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

- RPP1 *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume I, eds G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
- RPP2 *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Volume II, eds G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
- TLP *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1971).
- Z *Zettel*, eds G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

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I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting many improvements and especially for identifying those elements that were only of self-indulgent interest.

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Prologue

The radical view of Wittgenstein's achievement in philosophy is that it signalled an end to the age-old dominance of a tradition based on opposing theories: rationalist versus empiricist, idealist versus realist, correspondence versus coherence theories of truth, and many more. This view of Wittgenstein's philosophy is not currently popular; but it is my view and it is the aim of this book to maintain it. It is usual to describe Wittgenstein's prime preoccupation in philosophy as being with language. This is not wrong, but I have preferred to make my approach in terms of *concept possession*; for I think that it is by this avenue that questions central to an understanding of the human form of life can be seen more clearly to cross with questions of the nature of philosophy. Together they force the departure from the former tradition.

This claim about the nature of Wittgenstein's achievement is, of course, also a claim about where philosophy should be going in the future.—And my purpose is indeed to look forward. But it is also a claim about Wittgenstein's relation to the past. And so, while wishing to avoid burdening both the reader and myself with heavyweight scholarly comparisons, it did nevertheless seem apposite to *frame* my discussions with a glimpse down that long perspective to the origins of Western Philosophy.

Among these opposing theories, the dichotomy between rationalism and empiricism is perhaps the most fundamental. The struggle between the two has certainly been a dominant feature in philosophical debate for much of the time since Descartes. But its origins are more ancient. Indeed, if asked to choose just one theory to epitomize—or even caricature—rationalism, most would probably still opt for Plato's Theory of Forms, which still stands out vividly at the gateway to Western philosophy. The reasons for its status are partly historical—for the influence it has had throughout the development of Western culture, both within and beyond philosophy—but no doubt also because of the very simplicity of its outlines and the extremeness of its contrast with empiricism.

The rationalism in the Theory derives from the fact that reason resides in the Forms, which exist as independent intellectual objects *prior* to experience. And what a Form holds within itself is the immutable essence of the nature of a thing. Of this we have direct knowledge; indeed, it is *only* the Forms that we can truly be said to *know*. The world

and the objects of sense experience, on the other hand, are what they are only to the extent that they participate in the Forms; and we learn of them and form beliefs about them only to the extent that they *recall* the Forms. This is the theory of learning by Recollection. So the Theory of Forms is a part of a theory of knowledge at the heart of which is a rationalist theory of ideas or concepts: of what they are, of our relation to them and of their relation to the world.

The Theory also contains within it a conception of the nature of the soul and, combined with this, a profound view of the nature of philosophy. The soul is conceived of as co-extensive with the Forms and sharing their immutable essences. But unlike the Forms, the soul is also conceived of as corruptible by contact with the body and the world. Hence, it is through the purifying effect of reflecting upon the Forms away from these influences, which is the way of philosophy, that the soul finally emancipates itself from the body and the world and prepares itself for eternal life after death.

Now a comparison in *outline* between the philosophies of Plato and Wittgenstein is clear. Wittgenstein's philosophy too is an investigation into the nature of human knowledge, with at its heart an account of the nature of concepts, of our relation them and of their relation to the world. It is also true that the possession of concepts through the acquisition of language is, in his philosophy, *constitutive* of our natures as persons or souls. Moreover, Wittgenstein's reflections on the nature of concepts and the life with language are of a piece with his views on the nature and purpose of philosophy.—For Wittgenstein too, philosophy was a path to self-knowledge. And so, even across the great period of time that separates them, there remain these similarities.

But as regards the *content* lying within that outline, the contrast with Plato's vision could hardly be greater; so great in fact that it takes us beyond even the dichotomy between rationalism and empiricism—of which Wittgenstein's philosophy is equally critical. For the conceptual world and the soul, far from being separated from the body, experience and the world, are now seen together with these as aspects of the one thing: the human form of life. It should be impressed here that 'form of life' is not a theoretical construct but is a 'grammatical' device. It is a way of saying that the concepts of language, meaning, concept, reason, person, soul, experience, action and reality are all interdependent.—They are *internally* related to each other, which means that they are only intelligible in relation to one another. The problems of philosophy arise out of a failure to see clearly into these relations; and so its work is no more and no less than their elucidation. This is why there is no longer

any room for any 'transcendental' perspective,—and hence why it marks the end of theoretical explanation in philosophy.

It is because of these similarities and contrasts, and because of its historical status, that Plato's Theory of Forms was the obvious choice to provide the long perspective I sought. However, as I have implied, the reader should not expect an in-depth account of Plato's Theory of Forms and its relation to the philosophy of Wittgenstein. This is because the aims and objectives of the book remain contemporary and philosophical rather than of the history of ideas. And so to keep this reference to the past alive throughout but without intruding, I also chose to present my thoughts in the form of a dialogue between Lato and Crates—the *alter egos* of Plato and Socrates, whose names I have fictionalized precisely to keep them a part of the frame but out of the picture.

The choice of dialogue form was also made with the intention of allowing the reader more ease in following the intricacies of the arguments. At times the form is exploited to the full with question and answer and critical interventions; but elsewhere and for a lot of the time it serves simply as an additional way of punctuating the arguments—which I think is reason enough for its choice.

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