

**Béla Szabados**

*Ludwig Wittgenstein on Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity: Philosophy as a Personal Endeavour.*

Lewiston, NY and Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press 2010.

300 pages

\$129.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-7734-3817-0)

As should be clear enough from the title, this is ‘essentially’ a book about Wittgenstein—about the man and his philosophy and what Bela Szabados convincingly argues to have been the intimately close relationship between the two. For Szabados, one of the most significant differences between the ‘earlier’ and the ‘later’ Wittgenstein lies in what he calls (and endorses as) “his turn away from *Tractatus*-style essentialism” (125) in favour of a ‘family resemblance’ account of meanings, yet he himself, as Laurence Goldstein pointed out in his perceptive review of this book (Notre Dame’s electronic journal of *Philosophical Reviews* for 2010.08.07), is prepared to “claim that since philosophy is essentially a personal endeavour in truth and in Wittgenstein there is no facet of Wittgenstein’s personality which can be said in advance to be irrelevant to an understanding of his philosophy.” (2) This sentence provides, incidentally, a not too untypical example of those which justify Goldstein’s grumble that “this is a book that deserved better editing”, and deserved it not least because Szabados writes overall in an engagingly direct and personal style.

I have to confess that, unlike both Goldstein and Szabados himself, I am no sort of Wittgenstein specialist as such. That said, I found myself fascinated by Szabados’ detailed discussions of the evolution of Wittgenstein’s views on women, music (and more especially on Mahler), and his own Jewish roots, based, as his discussions are, on an extensive and careful use of Wittgenstein’s personal notebooks, his correspondence and other material never intended for publication, but now publicly available. Indeed, one does not have to be a Wittgenstein specialist to find both the man and his philosophy profoundly interesting—and in particular, and by no means least, the relationship between the two. But over and beyond matters of strictly Wittgensteinian scholarship and understanding, with which this book is primarily and directly concerned, the issues at stake here are of great general interest.

Whatever one may or may not make of Szabados’ claim that philosophy is essentially a personal endeavour in truth, and of his view that attempts to separate “what is of philosophical import and what is of a merely personal nature [are] likely to blind us to the philosophical aspects of the personal and the personal aspects of the philosophical”, these are claims with a clear relevance to any proper understanding of philosophy and of philosophers far beyond an understanding of Wittgenstein’s philosophical development alone. There is, of course, nothing surprising in the thought (a) that the particular areas or topics in or on which philosophers may choose to work, as well as the style that they may adopt, may depend in one way or another on the general circumstances of their lives and (b) that these circumstances are bound to include in their wider aspects the principal features of the social and (in the broadest sense of that not very precise term) cultural context in which they have grown to be the persons and philosophers that they turn out to be. Nor, equally of course, is there anything surprising in the emphasis given to the characteristically Wittgensteinian point that the notion of culture is very much to be taken as

including a crucial reference to language in all its particularities as an inseparable aspect of anyone's cultural context and of the conceptual frameworks within which all those who inhabit it must form, structure and seek to order their thoughts. But the closeness of any connection between the more peculiarly personal circumstances and character of individual philosophers and the principal features of their philosophical work will surely vary widely from one case to another.

Drawing extensively on his reading of Wittgenstein's diaries and notebooks, Szabados makes a highly persuasive (if forgivably somewhat repetitive) case for seeing him as one who "perceived philosophical activity as related to autobiography and confession, to temperament and culture, ways of life and art... [and who] was keen to put his methods to use to improve our thinking about important questions in everyday life." (vii/viii) I have, as it happens, considerable sympathy with this way of looking at philosophy. However, while every more or less recognisable philosopher—whether recognised as such by themselves or by others, by institutionalised title or simply by common reputation—will have their own tale to tell of how they came to be caught up in the subject, for many it is quite likely to have been a matter of largely contingent circumstances at least as much as, or even rather than, one of deliberate and well thought out choice. In this day and age, to be recognized as a philosopher is for many to be accepted as a member of an academically organized profession; and the question of just where, intellectually speaking, to carve out and establish one's initial place within it will in many cases have been very largely determined, on the one hand, by considerations of what happen to be the main areas of contemporary debate, in terms both of topics and of dominant authorities, and, on the other hand, by the need to establish a distinctive position of one's own—to carve out one's own especial niche within the profession, however narrow the foothold that such a niche may provide. Such 'essentially' contingent local considerations may indeed have a proper place in many a philosopher's personal autobiography in so far as its author is honest to himself or herself. These considerations, humdrum though they may be, may have to be taken into account by those for whom a proper philosophical self-understanding must include an account of just how it is that they have come to pursue philosophy in the ways and in the topic-areas that they do. Szabados construes Wittgenstein as holding that "the aim of the philosophical practice is [to be] seen as therapeutic and ethical", and quotes him as writing, "Peace in one's heart. That is the goal someone who philosophises longs for. The philosopher is someone who has to cure many diseases of the understanding of himself before he can arrive at the notions of common sense." "So", Szabados comments, "the two sets of practices—philosophy and autobiography—are twinned through Wittgenstein's idea of 'working on oneself' that is crucial for his therapeutic conception of philosophy as clarification." (54)

An appropriately early section of this book entitled 'Self-deception and philosophy' is particularly revealing of its prevailing theme. "For Wittgenstein philosophy is largely a battle with self-deceptions, prejudices and preconceived notions which, if left undetected, cripple the enterprise... They come from shared sources: language and the shared forms of life embedded in language... In the *Philosophical Investigations* and elsewhere Wittgenstein exhorts himself and his readers to identify and overcome these 'pictures that hold us captive' by 'engaging in a struggle with language.' This involves, of course, 'working on oneself.'" (9–10) Whatever the surface appearances of his main published texts may be, the Wittgenstein with whom Szabados presents us is thus someone deeply concerned, both as a philosopher and as a troubled human

being living in particularly troubled times, with intricately intertwined issues of ethics and truth. Indeed, the very concept of self-deception provides a prime and conceptually notoriously perplexing example of just such intertwining. This is, no doubt, in the first place a book for those who have a special interest in Wittgenstein and his times and in his ways of understanding and doing philosophy. But it is itself a very Wittgensteinian enterprise in presenting a sustained and stimulating challenge to anyone engaged in philosophy, whether Wittgenstein specialist or not, to think again about what it is that they are doing, about the ways in which their struggles in philosophy may have their origins in and a potential bearing upon so many *prima facie* other aspects of their lives; and to reflect anew on the extent to which the form and contents alike both of their own philosophical and not so obviously philosophical thinking, as well as of their relations with other people, may be a function of the whole cultural (including linguistic) context in which that thinking is carried on.

So a fair message to prospective readers of this book might be: “If you already have a special interest in Wittgenstein, this is surely one to add to your reading list. But even if Wittgenstein, his personal history and his writings, are not among your especial interests, it is still one that you should find rewarding for the stimulus that it may provide to further philosophical as well as autobiographical thinking about your own relations to philosophy.”

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