

James C. Klagge

Wittgenstein in Exile.

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Anyone who has read him knows that Wittgenstein (W), early or late, is a difficult philosopher who himself feared that he and his work were unlikely to be understood. As Mr. Fawlty (John Cleese) in the TV comedy *Fawlty Towers* put it in connection with Manuel's tenuous grip on English: 'It's not difficult to understand, Manuel. This is not a proposition by Ludwig Wittgenstein.' In fact, after more than half a century of scholarly effort, W is still not properly understood, contends James Klagge in this impressive, fresh work. Combining rigorous historical scholarship, creative philosophical work and insightful cultural critique, *Wittgenstein in Exile* will be of lively interest to readers of W on all levels.

I start with a bit of skepticism: perhaps we have understood and assimilated whatever is worthwhile in W, in that he left us a toolbox packed with anti-essentialism, family resemblance, the idea of language games, an argument against private language, the importance of examples for doing philosophy, and so on. Such 'tools' are used by well-trained philosophers even if they disagree with W on substantive matters, so the very practice of philosophy was transformed under his influence. Yes, Klagge nods, but we have not understood what made W tick: his aims, his ethical/spiritual concerns, and the cultural backdrop that motivated his philosophical practice. This leads Klagge to remark that for us in the twenty-first century W may seem a distant figure: his apparently anti-science stance, his strange spiritual/ethical attitudes, and his emphasis on difference all give the impression of a retro thinker. One might say that in an age of conflict the crucial need is to find common ground, not difference.

Klagge suggests that seeing W as 'twice exiled'—geographically dislocated and culturally displaced—helps to understand why W himself feared that he and his work would not be understood. W was often out of place and out of time; he felt at home in an earlier cultural age, the poetic/musical age of Schumann in the first half of the 19th century. That cultural home is in sharp contrast to the scientific spirit of the twentieth and the twenty-first century Western civilization we inhabit. Science and technology have become dominant modes of understanding, elbowing aside other ways of knowing.

Exile is appropriate for a philosopher, since the outsider status offers cognitive privilege. A tourist can see things natives do not. The exile can see with fresh eyes, discern assumptions and mistakes hosts ignore or are blind to. Thus, being an exile can be an asset for a philosopher. W's remarks about philosophy resonate with the condition of exile: 'The philosopher is not a citizen of a community of ideas. That is what makes him a philosopher' (*Zettel* §455). 'A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about"' (*Investigations* §123). W was skeptical about the prospects of traditional philosophical writing, as it is unlikely to accomplish his aim of a non-scientific culture.

Perhaps only an artist like Dostoyevsky can change the way people live. ‘Really’, says W, ‘one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem’ (*Culture and Value* 28e).

But if cultural impediments to understanding W pervade the spirit of our times, how can contemporary readers understand him and his work? And how could he understand himself? Klagge responds: W lived in our civilization without acquiring its character, which leaves room for resistance and critique. One reason W may seem alien to us is his perceived anti-science attitude. To put it in a Spenglerian vocabulary: the sea change in the West from culture to civilization, already characteristic of W’s times, is even stronger, with science and technology now a predominant force—an idol, as it were. ‘All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols’ (*Philosophy* 171), and the importance of philosophy depends on the importance of these idols. So W was not opposed to science, but he was opposed to the idolatry of science. He wanted to put science and philosophy in their proper place, and his ideas and methods, Klagge argues, are tools for undermining *scientism*—missives for a *non-scientistic* culture where the variety of methods and ways of life get their due.

Scientistic culture is a form of dogmatism that oversteps the limits of science attempting to reduce or replace plurality of ways of life and associated vocabularies. Consider the relevance of science to philosophy: for W, philosophical problems were conceptual, not empirical; they are not resolved by coming up with new discoveries—in fact, such discoveries may generate further problems—but by assembling what we are familiar with, through insight into the workings of our language. The criteria for the application of philosophically puzzling concepts are within our grasp. W was especially keen to press this line about how neuroscience, ‘the science of the mind’ (and one of Klagge’s central interests), relates to our ordinary psychological concepts.

Progress in neuroscience helps us understand the physical correlates of the mental, but it does not change our use of mental concepts or resolve our philosophical difficulties about the mental. Both ‘identity theorists’ (who predict that correlations will bring about conceptual shifts), and ‘eliminative materialists’ (who predict that concepts of our ‘folk psychology’ will be replaced by concepts of neurophysiology) suppose that our mental concepts are technical terms—an assumption W questions. Although there is no insulation of mental concepts from those of neuroscience, the mental and the physiological constitute different language games. Imagine the change in our lives and attitudes if talk of grief and pain were replaced by talk of neurological processes. For W the purposes of ‘folk psychology’ go beyond those of neuroscience and have to do with agency and our attitudes to one another.

Klagge suggests that contrary to appearances W is really a compatibilist who thinks that, like bilingualism, everyday psychological concepts and the concepts of neuroscience will co-exist, but serve different purposes. If what is at stake is prediction, explanation or treatment, then the ordinary concept may be transformed into the concept of neuroscience. If what is at stake is practical deliberation and agency, then the everyday psychological vocabulary gets the job done. Worse, were incompatibilism true, Klagge has W arguing, then replacing folk psychology with neuroscience would dehumanize us

and we would be robbed of our self-conception as rational agents. Who knows, Klagge's Wittgenstein asks, what our attitudes of holding people responsible, of praising and blaming would come to if we could see the actual causes at work.

This leads Klagge to discuss causality. He distinguishes between a 'mechanistic' conception prevalent in our age of civilization, and an 'organic' view characteristic of an age of culture. W prefers the organic view—another reason why, Klagge avers, he seems opaque to us. The mechanistic view is wedded to constant explanation, while the organic view sticks to description and is hospitable to a sense of wonder. The practices of science presuppose 'mechanistic causality': we look for a causal difference where there is a different effect. W showed that we can resist the urge to essentialism concerning concepts, but to resist 'mechanistic causality', Klagge seems to criticize W, is pragmatically futile, because of the crucial role science and technology play in every nook and cranny of our lives.

Under what conditions could we give up or limit mechanistic causality? Klagge imagines three scenarios: science might have a different role in our society; we might be able to insulate some of our ordinary practices from mechanistic causality; or—and this approach seems closest to W's heart—science will not look for mechanisms and we will adopt a non-mechanistic view of causality about at least *some* aspects of our lives. For example: 'Let's represent (the phenomenon of) seeing as enigmatic, as an object of wonder.'

Another but related respect in which W may seem alien to us late moderns has to do with his spiritual/ethical attitudes and their connection to his philosophical practice. Throughout his philosophical activity, '[t]he philosopher strives to find the saving word, that is, the word that finally permits us to grasp what until now has intangibly weighed down our consciousness' (*Philosophy* 165). In the *Tractatus* the bid to silence seems its proper expression, and in the *Philosophical Investigations* 'the saving word' is a cluster of apt 'reminders for a particular purpose' (§127). The purpose of the saving word is to put a stop to (unreasonable) demands for explanation. Hence W identifies with certain figures in cultural history as he sides with Euthyphro's 'divine command theory' against Socrates' rationalism, endorses Dostoyevsky's Father Zossima and the Mormons because they are ready to come to a full stop with their questions. What is more, W privileges certain kinds of experiences expressed by: 'I wonder at the existence of the world', 'I am safe; nothing can injure me whatever happens' (*Lecture on Ethics* 41). Today such attitudes are widely regarded as strange and as matters for concern; more reasons W may seem a distant figure to us.

Now for a few questions and comments. Klagge's metaphor of exile is apt and illuminating: to do philosophy it helps to be an outsider in some sense. Picture W trying to understand the concept of humor as he is eavesdropping on a bus: 'Two people are laughing together, at a joke perhaps. One of them has said certain somewhat unusual words & now they both break out into a sort of bleating. That might appear very bizarre to someone arriving among us from a quite different background. Whereas we find it quite reasonable. Witnessed this scene recently on a bus & was able to think myself into

the skin of someone not accustomed to it. It struck me then as quite irrational & like the reactions of an outlandish animal' (*Culture and Value* 88e). Yet, in another sense, don't you also have to be an insider? And wasn't W an insider too—a friend of Russell, Ramsey, Keynes and Sraffa? Don't you have to know the city as you re-draw its map or bring a philosophically misunderstood expression back home to ordinary practices and language games? W was in and out of place and on the move most of his life between Austria, England, France, Norway, and later Ireland. He was the quintessential European, equally estranged and at home in any European country. If W found his life 'wonderful' (full of wonder), then, as Klagge observes, the metaphor of exile is apt again, because exiles (and children) are good at wonder.

In his pioneering discussion of the neglected topic of W's relation to science, Klagge might have further questioned W's assumption about 'the unity of science', a picture that is un-Wian since it conflicts with his anti-essentialism. Perhaps we need a Wian critique of W on science, where the idea of overlapping threads provide or replace the idea of unity. Finally, can W's apparent nostalgia for a different cultural era be regarded as a case of self-deception and hence a vice rather than a virtue? Given that he was acutely aware of when and where he lived and that 'the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value but simply of certain means of expressing this value,' the charge of self-deception does not stick. Yet W contemplated the (then) current of European/American civilization 'without sympathy' and questioned if it had any coherent and sensible aims. I have plenty of sympathy, but I submit that, *mutatis mutandis*, W's assessment of the roots of our cultural malaise is worthy of serious reflection, and a striking feature of Professor Klagge's fertile and important book is that it does not shirk this issue.

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