

WILLIAM H. BRENNER

Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations



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Wittgenstein's
Philosophical Investigations

SUNY series in
Philosophy

George R. Lucas Jr., editor

WITTGENSTEIN'S
PHILOSOPHICAL
INVESTIGATIONS

WILLIAM H. BRENNER

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To My Parents

In Grateful Memory

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Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of
our intelligence by means of language.

My way of philosophizing consists essentially in leaving
the question of *truth* and asking about *sense* instead.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

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Contents

PREFACE	xi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xiii
ABBREVIATIONS	xv
CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION	1
Thales to Wittgenstein	
CHAPTER TWO THE PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS	9
Philosophical Investigation	9
Language	12
<i>Pictures of the Essence of Language</i>	12
<i>Logic and Philosophy</i>	23, <i>Following a Rule</i> 32
Mind	42
<i>Sensation</i>	42, <i>Thought</i> 53, <i>Kinaesthesia</i> 77, <i>Aspect Perception</i> 78,
<i>Concept Formation</i>	84, <i>The Concept of the Soul</i> 91
CHAPTER THREE SENSATION AND THE SOUL	93
Sensations, Beetles, and “Private Language”	93
The Soulless Tribe	100
CHAPTER FOUR COLOR AND NUMBER	117
Color Grammar	117
Arithmetic as Grammar	127
CHAPTER FIVE GOD	139
Theology as Grammar	139
Religions, Language, and Ethics	148
CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION	157
Philosophy and the Yearning for the Transcendent	157
BIBLIOGRAPHY	163
INDEX TO SECTIONS IN <i>PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS</i>	171
INDEX	173

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Preface

Among the most original thinkers of the twentieth century, Ludwig Wittgenstein has remained one of the least accessible. In this book I seek to demonstrate the essential intelligibility of his writings, the continuing freshness of his ideas, and the power of his methods.

The heart of my book is a study of selected sections of the chief work of his later period, the *Philosophical Investigations*. Presented as “a companion to the *Investigations*,” its aim is to assist prospective readers find their way around the “forest of remarks” that make up this unique classic. Although I cover quite a lot of ground, I make no attempt at completeness. (“Going through the *Investigations* from cover to cover” is for *after* the sort of preliminary “field trips” described here.)

The study is preceded by an introductory essay relating Wittgenstein’s ideas and methods to Parmenides, Aristotle, and other formative figures in the history of Western philosophy. It is followed by a set of essays that further develop a major theme of the *Investigations*: that there are *various* kinds of language use (“grammar”)—a variety philosophy needs to look at but tends to overlook.

“Sensations, Beetles, and ‘Private Language’” is a brief and (I hope) incisive interpretation of the much-discussed “private language” argument. “The Soulless Tribe” draws on Wittgenstein’s last writings to clarify and deepen what he had said in the *Investigations* about “the inner life.”

Colors, numbers, and the grammatical analogies between them exerted a continuing fascination on Wittgenstein; the chapters on arithmetic and color are meant to bring out the logico-philosophical depth of that fascination.

The sections headed “God” organize and develop some of Wittgenstein’s fragmentary remarks on religion, theology, and ethics.

In the concluding chapter I return to the Parmenidean origins of philosophy, and to Wittgenstein’s conception of its nature and limits.

The picture on the cover is of Theseus forcing the marauder Procrustes into the same iron bed he had so nefariously used on the passing travellers he robbed. I think of Wittgenstein as a philosophical Theseus doing battle against metaphysical marauders who force all varieties of language (and life) into the procrustean bed of what he calls “the model of object and designation.”

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Acknowledgments

Without following them in every detail, the writings of Oswald Hanfling and of Cora Diamond have been particularly important in forming my understanding of Wittgenstein. I am also indebted to Professor Diamond for a wonderfully careful critique of an earlier version of this book.

The introductory chapter and parts of chapter 5 are based on material from chapter VIII of a book I published with the University of Notre Dame Press in 1993. The chapters on “the soulless tribe,” color, and theology¹ are revised versions of articles published in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Nancy Simco, editor. “Arithmetic as Grammar” is a revised, augmented version of an article that appeared in a journal edited by D.Z. Phillips, *Philosophical Investigations*. I am thankful to the editors and publishers for their kind cooperation. Thanks also to: Wittgenstein’s literary executors and Basil Blackwell, Ltd. for permission to quote extensively from the *Philosophical Investigations*; Alice Ambrose Lazerowitz for permission to quote extensively from *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–35*;² and Cora Diamond for permission to quote extensively from *Wittgenstein’s Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: Cambridge, 1939*.³

Ken Daley of the Old Dominion University Art Department drew the image used on the front cover, for which I am most grateful. It is based on a detail from a piece of Greek pottery depicting the labors of Theseus.

The five anonymous readers for the State University of New York Press made useful comments on my manuscript, as did Curtis Brooks and Duncan Richter. I thank them for their help—and apologize to those whose help I have forgotten to acknowledge.

I have tried to write in such a way that any thoughtful reader will find what I say intelligible and illuminating. Where I have succeeded, much of the credit belongs to the editorial advice of my wife Mary.

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1. The theology article also contains an early version of the first few pages of chapter 2.
 2. Edited from her own lecture notes and those of Margaret Macdonald.
 3. From the notes of R.G. Bosanquet, Norman Malcolm, Rush Rhees, and Yorick Smythies.

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Abbreviations

Full references are under “Wittgenstein” in the bibliography.

BB	Blue and Brown Books
CV	Culture and Value
LC	Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief
LFM	Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: Cambridge 1939
LW I	Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I
LW II	Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. II
NB	Notebooks: 1914–16
OC	On Certainty
PI	Philosophical Investigations
PO	Philosophical Occasions
PG	Philosophical Grammar
PR	Philosophical Remarks
RC	Remarks on Color
RFM	Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics
RPP I	Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. I
RPP II	Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Vol. II
TLP	Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus
WLA	Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1932–35 (Ambrose, ed.)
WLL	Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge 1930–32 (Lee, ed.)
WLG	Wittgenstein’s Lectures on Philosophical Psychology: 1946–47 (Geach, ed.)
WVC	Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle
Z	Zettel

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

[W]e are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks.... because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions.

—*Culture and Value*, p. 15

THALES TO WITTGENSTEIN

Becoming

The ancient Greeks worked out many of the fundamental concepts of our civilization, including the concept of reality as a single dynamic system. The earliest of them agreed among themselves about the existence of this “system” but differed about how to describe it. While Thales said that the principle of all things is water, his successor Anaximander argued that it could be neither water nor any definite substance. Thales and Anaximander flourished in the early sixth century B.C.; later in the same century, Heraclitus spoke of reality as an “everlasting fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures” (Fragment 30). He, like his predecessors, saw unity amidst change as the essence of things; his distinctive contribution was the idea that change implies a unity of opposites (“The path up and down is one and the same” [Fragment 60]).

Early in the fifth century B.C. Parmenides of Elea challenged the fundamental assumption of “natural philosophers” from Thales to Heraclitus, arguing that reality is changeless and homogeneous (a “well-rounded sphere”), rather than a dynamic unity of opposites. He, like his famous pupil Zeno, regarded “motion” and every other term for change as names devoid of meaning. Why devoid of meaning? Parmenides’ line of thought comes out most clearly in his argument against the sort of change called “coming into being”:

That which can be spoken of and thought needs must be [that is, exist] . . . (Fragment 6, in part)

How can what does not exist come into existence? For if it came into existence, then earlier it was nothingness. And nothingness is unthinkable and unreal. (Fragment 8, in part)

In other words (and with added interpretation):

Whenever we think of something, we must think of it as existing. (To think is to *picture*; to picture something is to picture it as existing.)

If it makes sense to say that something will come into existence, then it makes sense to say that it does not (now) exist.

If it makes sense to say that it does not exist, then it must be possible to think of it as not existing. That is not possible, however, because (to return to the first point) whenever we think of something, we must think of it as existing.

A number of philosophical theories were generated in response to Parmenides' perplexing arguments—notably, the “atomism” of Democritus, the “two worlds theory” of Plato, and the “seeds theory” of Anaxagoras. The last is relatively easy to explain. “Composite things contain the seeds of everything,” according to this fifth-century philosopher. “For how could hair come from what is not hair, or flesh from what is not flesh?”¹ This “solves” the problem of how hair (for example) comes into being by saying that it didn't, really—it was there all along, hidden under other things! To “explain” something (here: coming into being) by explaining it away, as Anaxagoras seems to be doing, is an example of what we now call “reductionism.” (Other examples of reductionism would be Zeno's analysis of the moving arrow into a series of discrete states—as if only what is captured in a set of “still shots” could be real, and [much later] St. Augustine's analysis of time into the threefold “present” of memory, contemplation, and expectation—as if time were a psychological phenomenon. While Zeno reduced the dynamic to the static, Augustine reduced the objective to the psychological.)²

Responding to the provocative arguments of his predecessors, Aristotle appears to have been the first to articulate a thoroughly nonreductive account of change. Looking at what is involved in everyday talk about coming into being, he saw that it presupposes a number of concepts—including not only

1. From Philip Wheelwright, ed., *The Presocratics*, p. 160.

2. Rejection of reductionism in philosophy does not imply rejection of scientific developments such as the reduction of Mendelian to molecular genetics. Zeno-like analyses of motion explain away motion; molecular theory in genetics does not explain away its Mendelian starting point.

opposites, as Heraclitus had emphasized, but also *potentiality*. The air of paradox Parmenides sensed in “What is *not* an oak becomes an oak” (and similar statements) dissipates once we recall that what-is-not-an-oak is an acorn, that is, something potentially, but not yet actually, an oak tree. It is not that the oak comes from what is absolutely nothing, or absolutely non-oak: it comes from what is actually acorn and potentially oak. The reality of an acorn, like the reality (“being”) of other natural things, goes beyond its present actuality. “That which goes beyond present actuality”—potentiality—is no thing (no object, no present actuality), but it is not absolute nothingness (pure non-being) either.

In comparing reality to “a well-rounded sphere” enclosed within itself, Parmenides was (in effect) equating it with “present actuality.” In Parmenidean philosophy:

being = *being there*
to be = *to be complete*.

In Aristotelian philosophy (and common speech): “to be” is not only “to be actually such and such” but also “to be potentially so and so”; “to be” is to be in some respects incomplete, as well as in other respects “well rounded.”³

Time and the Mind

Viewed in a philosophical spirit, everyday matters—change, time, knowledge, etc.—are objects of wonder. But when we proceed to reflect on these matters and theorize about them, we are often led into misunderstanding and paradox. And then we need to investigate the everyday, prereflective use of the words in which our reflections are expressed. What tends to block such an investigation is the same as what creates the need for it in the first place: the mind’s fixing on a single, narrow case and making it the model for everything else. As the Presocratic Parmenides fixed on the “present actual-

3. In Aristotelian physics, natural things strive to actualize their potentialities. That may sound like an instance of the mind’s tendency to project itself onto inanimate nature. But Aristotle does not speak, absurdly, of acorns consciously striving to become oaks; he speaks of nature as “unconscious art.” Rather than dismissing this way of speaking as error, it would be better to characterize it as a secondary use of terms that in everyday speech are applied primarily to human and animal activities. This secondary use is Aristotle’s way of expressing a certain perspective on nature as a whole—one not to be dismissed as erroneous just because it is at odds with the view of nature constructed by modern “scientific” philosophers. That it *has* been so dismissed may be an expression of the scientism permeating our civilization. Compare Wittgenstein, CV, pp. 60 j, 37 c.