

Wittgenstein

A Feminist Interpretation

Alessandra Tanesini

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Alessandra Tancini

To Bethan

Preface

A book on Wittgenstein and feminism might seem an odd idea. Wittgenstein probably believed that philosophy was best done when women had left the classroom. He did not have a positive view of intellectual women in general, unless of course they gained the dubious honour of being honorary men.¹ Thus, it would seem that the point of a book on Wittgenstein and feminism could only be to expose the ways in which his misogyny infected his philosophy. This is not what I propose to do here, although the question of Wittgenstein's misogyny will be addressed briefly in the final section of chapter 1.

There is a tendency in feminist philosophy to adopt the philosophical views of a canonical philosopher in order to show how his position is of help in thinking through the problems of women's oppression. This is a tendency which Michèle Le Dœuff has dubbed the 'Heloise complex' (1991, p. 59). In its contemporary form it consists in 'seeking to discover which of the philosophies that are available is the most appropriate for thinking about the liberation of women' (1991, p. 59). Hence, she disparagingly continues, in 'the French women's movement we have seen women advocating the view that Lacan's thought was the way to salvation. We have also seen Foucauldian or Nietzschean feminists. Worse, one is commonly asked whether one is a this man-ian or that man-ian' (1991, p. 59). This phenomenon is not exclusive to France.

In this book I am not advocating the view that Wittgenstein's philosophy is the most appropriate for thinking about women's liberation. It would be odd if it were, since for Wittgenstein philosophy leaves everything as it is. Further, Wittgenstein remarked that he had no

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theories, no substantive philosophical views, to offer. Thus, we cannot go through his writings in search of ideas which could be put to feminist work. That said, there are a few aspects of his work that can be employed for feminist purposes, and I present some of these uses in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Since I am not trying to either expose Wittgenstein's sexism or praise his underdeveloped feminism, there might seem to be nothing left for a book on Wittgenstein and feminism to do. This is not true. Feminist theorists have developed a distinctive methodology for philosophical work on the history of philosophy. They have suggested that we look more closely at the style in which philosophers write, and they have paid attention to the role played by metaphors in philosophers' texts. They have also interpreted philosophical theories without ignoring the broader context of the intellectual preoccupations shared by members of the societies in which the authors of such theories lived. Finally, they have highlighted some important features of modern philosophy: for instance, they have noted the presence of a link between the anxiety to separate oneself from others in order to safeguard one's autonomy and philosophical sceptical attitudes.

In this book I apply these methodological lessons to Wittgenstein's philosophical writings. In chapter 1 I present the framework for the whole book. I argue that Wittgenstein's work is to be read as a critique of the aspirations of modernity. What modern philosophers perceived as liberating, Wittgenstein experienced as asphyxiating. What they saw as a triumph of human freedom, he described as a prison of isolation.

Chapter 2 is concerned primarily with Wittgenstein's therapeutic conception of philosophy as a cure for the ills that philosophy itself contributes to generating. For him, philosophy begins with a sense of homelessness. He tries to address the distress caused by this condition by finding the liberating word which will make him feel at home. In this chapter I also show that this conception of philosophy gives substantial importance to stylistic considerations.

In chapter 3 I develop a novel interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. I argue that this book is intended to counter the sense of meaninglessness which is generated by the modern inability to acknowledge human finitude. I show that Wittgenstein's discussion of the limits of thought provides an original attempt to quieten the impulse towards transcendence.

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Chapter 4 presents a discussion of Wittgenstein's attack on a view of the inner, which, in his opinion, condemns us to isolation and scepticism. I also present Wittgenstein's alternative, which relies on a concept of the human soul whose best picture is the human body.

Finally, in chapter 5, I employ some of the ideas developed throughout the book to discuss Wittgenstein's picture of our lives with words, and of community, as an alternative to a view which is becoming increasingly common amongst political philosophers. This is the view, also endorsed by several feminists, that any description of a 'we' on which to build a community presupposes the existence of a 'they' who are excluded from it.

Acknowledgements

I have been thinking about the topics I discuss in this book for a very long time, during which I have incurred more debts that I can explicitly acknowledge here. My colleagues and students at Cardiff have been subjected to early drafts of portions of this work. I am indebted to them for their questions and criticisms. I am especially grateful to Ed Dain for his comments on the drafts of several chapters. The initial impetus for chapter 5 came from several conversations with Diane Elam; I am indebted to her for forcing me to think afresh about the issues of identity and belonging. Naomi Scheman and Kathleen Lennon read the whole manuscript, and I am grateful to them for many stimulating comments which helped with the revision of this book. I have been fortunate to have Jean van Altena as copy-editor; her excellent work has saved me from many infelicities.

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Finally, I thank Bethan Bateman for her unfailing support, and for her supererogatory willingness to take on tasks so that I could free up time to write this book.

Abbreviations

1. WITTGENSTEIN'S PUBLISHED WORKS

The following abbreviations are used to refer to Wittgenstein's published works, including lecture notes taken by others.

- AWL *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–1935: From the Notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret MacDonald*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Prometheus Books, New York, 2001).
- BB *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1969).
- CV *Culture and Value*, rev. edn, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, tr. Peter Winch (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998).
- LA *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett, compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor (Blackwell, Oxford, 1966).
- LFM *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Cambridge 1939, ed. Cora Diamond (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989).
- LPE 'Notes for Lectures on "Private Experience" and "Sense Data"', in *PO*, pp. 202–88.
- LW I *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1: *Preliminary Studies for Part II of Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, tr. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue (Blackwell, Oxford, 1990).

Abbreviations

- LW II *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2: *The Inner and the Outer 1949–1951*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, tr. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992).
- M G. E. Moore, 'Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930–33', in *PO*, pp. 46–114.
- NB *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 2nd edn, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1979).
- OC *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, tr. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1969).
- PG *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. Rush Rhees, tr. Anthony Kenny (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978).
- PI *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edn, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1997).
- PO *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993).
- PR *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, tr. R. Hargreaves and R. White (Blackwell, Oxford, 1975).
- R *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, ed. G. H. von Wright (Blackwell, Oxford, 1974).
- RFGB 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', in *PO*, pp. 119–55.
- RFM *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, 3rd edn, ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1978).
- RPP I *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1980).
- RPP II *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, tr. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue (Blackwell, Oxford, 1980).
- TLP *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Routledge, London, 1974).
- WWK *Ludwig Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, shorthand notes recorded by F. Waismann, ed. Brian F. McGuinness, tr. Joachim Schulte and Brian F. McGuinness (Blackwell, Oxford, 1979).

Abbreviations

- Z *Zettel*, 2nd edn, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and
G. H. von Wright, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell,
Oxford, 1981).

2. WITTGENSTEIN'S NACHLASS

All references to the previously unpublished material, which is now available in CD-ROM, are by MS or TS number, followed by page number, with the exception mentioned below. For ease of reference the following abbreviation is also used:

- BT 'The Big Typescript' (TS 213). Portions of this typescript are published as *PG*, whilst other parts have been published in *PO*. References to this typescript are made first to the original pagination, followed whenever possible by reference to the published source. For instance, BT p. 422 = *PO* p. 183, refers to remarks which appear on p. 422 of the original typescript and have been published at p. 183 of *PO*.

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Loneliness and Modernity

Ludwig Wittgenstein saw his own philosophical work as unfashionable, as out of step with the prevailing spirit of his era, written for only a few readers.¹ He expresses these sentiments, for instance, when he writes that he finds the spirit of his epoch as ‘alien and uncongenial’ (CV p. 8). These words voice an attitude which is not uncommon among philosophers and other intellectuals at the end of the nineteenth century and at beginning of the twentieth. These are thinkers who experienced modernity as a loss, a kind of spiritual failure.

Wittgenstein perceives his times as times of crisis. Further, as I begin to argue in this chapter, Wittgenstein is a philosopher for whom the failure of the promises of modernity presents a distinctively *philosophical* problem. And thus, he is – like Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche – a philosophical critic of modernity. The aspirations of those who called themselves ‘modern’ were directed toward autonomy and self-sufficiency.² The moderns proposed a new view of what it is to be a human being. It is this picture of an autonomous, self-sufficient human subject that is challenged by the philosophers of the crisis, among whom one must include Wittgenstein. In his work the modern quest for autonomy and independence is shown to generate loneliness and separation from other human beings. What the moderns perceive as liberating, he experiences as a prison.

Several themes, although not all, in Wittgenstein’s philosophy (both early and later) can be read as engagements with the problems generated by the modern picture of the human being as autonomous and self-sufficient. The remarks on the limits of language, the subject and solipsism in his early book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*,

for instance, can be read as trying to free us from this modern (Kantian) picture which fails to acknowledge the reality of human finitude. Also, the extensive discussions of scepticism about other minds, and of the picture of the inner that supports it, in his later work address similar issues. Wittgenstein's treatment of the notion of following a rule, which has generated an immense secondary literature, can also be understood as a reaction against the modern conception of human beings as self-determining: that is, as creatures capable of determining for themselves what reasons or rules to be subject to. These are some of the topics which occupy a large portion of his philosophical writings. Hence, it is appropriate to conclude that the modern picture of the human being was an important target of his work.

Reading many of Wittgenstein's remarks as ultimately addressed to the modern ideal of self-sufficiency, perceived as a problem, allows us to appreciate their originality and depth. This interpretation also highlights why Wittgenstein's philosophical work should be of interest to feminist philosophers. The modern ideal of autonomy and self-sufficiency has been under intense scrutiny within feminist thought, partly because of the gendered nature of this modern conception of the self.³ There is therefore a convergence between Wittgenstein's struggle against the modern ideal of the autonomous subject and feminist criticisms of this ideal.

Further, this reading helps us to make sense of what Wittgenstein wrote about the activity of doing philosophy. This interpretation tries to do justice to – rather than ignore – his warnings that he has no novel truths to offer.⁴ Wittgenstein was concerned with spiritual malaise. He did not offer theories, but therapy. For him, 'the philosopher treats a question; like an illness' (*PI* §255).⁵ He was, in his own words, 'a disciple of Freud' (*LA* p. 41).

Wittgenstein's philosophy is not normally associated with the work of critics of modernity like Nietzsche and Heidegger, because, unlike them, he does not often explicitly discuss his dissatisfaction with his times. Instead, Wittgenstein seems to concern himself exclusively with topics in the philosophy of logic, language and mind which are familiar to analytic philosophers. It is, however, a great mistake to think of Wittgenstein as a philosopher who is only (or even mainly) concerned with such technical matters. These are the issues he discusses. But he discusses them because of the therapeutic effect that getting clear on these matters has on him and, hopefully, his readers.