

Title: **Post Analytic Thought**
 What Wittgenstein Did to Me

Synopsis

Ludwig Wittgenstein changed my intellectual life. He transformed the very way that I think about, and behave toward, assertion. He made me see that my field, political science, was lost. He made me abandon my early research agenda. He showed me that my other field, law, was greatly impoverished. And he showed me that philosophy was in grave trouble -- and that other fields, like science and even mathematics, were often impaired by practitioners who could not see philosophical flaws hiding in the work product.

At this point, there is one of two conclusions. Either I am blinded by my own indulgence for Wittgenstein – I am a dogmatic oaf -- or my thesis has merit. Do academic fields often behave inadequately toward assertion? The point of this book is to settle this matter by showing what, exactly, I learned from Wittgenstein, how it transformed me and why it is of immense importance. For, what is written in this book is neither dogma nor idolatry; it is merely something that Wittgenstein himself called “the new thinking.” And it is what I call “post-analytic thought.”

The book, therefore, is a presentation of an intellectual orientation. It covers how to think about language, meaning, assertability conditions, aspect-sight, “picturing” in argumentation and connoisseur judgment. It shows how to behave toward assertion -- how to dissolve a confusion therapeutically rather than trying to refute an argument or “win a debate.” And it shows the inherent limitations in formalistic thinking (logic) and traditional approaches to argumentation (such as finding contradiction). It exposes readers to the values of intellectual sincerity and of shunning pretense. And, as the book does this, it pays much attention to inadequacies commonly found in the fields of law, politics and philosophy. Ultimately, the goal of the book is *clinical*: it wants to show scholars and their students how to behave toward assertion (propositions) with a *reflective* intellect more than an analytical one.

Introduction.

Ludwig Wittgenstein has been described by many scholars as a spellbound genius who had acute philosophic ability.ⁱ One scholar even compared him to a prophet.ⁱⁱ He is consistently regarded in numerous polls as the most important philosopher of the 20th century.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, there is a peculiar paradox about this: many philosophy departments, today, shun Wittgenstein. My own daughter is a philosophy major in her senior year at UNC and has been taught nothing about him. Some scholars have even called Wittgenstein a charlatan.^{iv} And it surely goes without saying that almost any academic field today is not lead, nor even greatly informed, by Wittgenstein.^v Indeed, disciples (like myself) are somewhat of a rare breed in the academy. We are, in a manner of speaking, outcastes.

This book is not about who is right in debates about Wittgenstein’s status. And it is not even directly about Wittgenstein himself. Rather, it is ostensibly about something that Wittgenstein called “the new thinking.” In the years that followed 1929, Wittgenstein began looking at intellectual foundations in ways that he thought quite novel – analogous, I think, to a scientist who had discovered a new source of power. And as he kept doing this, he repeatedly would say, somewhat arrogantly, that he had invented “a new form of thinking.” In 1946, he believed that the new thinking was so important, that it was like

“the switch from alchemy to chemistry” – something that “pull[ed] the problem out by the roots,” causing the old problems to “vanish.”^{vi}

It wasn't just Wittgenstein who thought he had invented a new way to think. Bertrand Russell was greatly concerned with it. Not wanting to see certain intellectual pillars overthrown, he would negatively comment upon what he called “the new philosophy”^{vii} or Wittgenstein's “new doctrine.”^{viii} Modern-day Wittgensteinians, of course, scoff at this characterization. They believe Wittgenstein never advocated any theory or proposition for its own sake, but only used the same as an instrument for better insight – “philosophy as therapy,” as it is called. One of my favorite sayings is that Wittgenstein really left us with nothing other than an example of how to be incredibly insightful.

Perhaps the real truth of what Wittgenstein left us lies in the fields of brain study. Wittgenstein probably had a psychological abnormality that left him with heightened and acute cognitive abilities in some areas, with great deficits in others (e.g., social intelligence). He surely had an autistic personality of some kind. Some scholars believe he had Asperger's, though I am not convinced that any existing options for diagnosis are sufficient. (I could imagine a true diagnosis breaking new ground). In any event, one cannot come to understand Wittgenstein's academic contribution without also believing that he had a freakish intellect of some kind.

But what is promising about this issue is that, to a certain extent, what he gave us can be *learned*. As O.K. Bouwsma once wrote, “One thing I know is that one does not understand Wittgenstein until he is able, not to repeat what he says, but to work with his ideas. The latter requires long practice.”^{ix} This book is written in the spirit of Bouwsma's view. It is an attempt to create, in an almost clinical way, a program for thinking like a Wittgenstein-inspired scholar.

But I have to be careful here. Debates over what Wittgenstein believed are often contested. In fact, they can become real food fights. And inevitably, one fears that they degenerate into a kind of hagiography. The approach I take in this book is that “getting Wittgenstein right” is less important of a thesis in need of defense than whether an orientation purportedly derived from him is, itself, “valid.” The former is a biographical question; the latter is divorced from this concern. And it is just this divorce that I want to maintain in this book. I don't have the slightest care for whether one believes that I have “gotten Wittgenstein correct.” And I don't want to be accused of idol worship either. Rather, I care only about the value of the orientation that I present in this book – whether it can stand on its own making and speak for itself. I care, therefore, only about the value of what I have called a “post-analytic mind.” For I warrant to my reader that, just as this orientation changed my own intellectual life, properly understood, it shall change yours as well.

ⁱ See Ray Monk, *The Duty of Genius*. Bertrand Russell described Wittgenstein as “the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived; passionate, profound, intense, and dominating.” Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life: Young Ludwig 1889–1921*, University of California Press, 1988, p. 118. British philosopher and mathematician Frank P. Ramsey concurred:

In my opinion, Mr. Wittgenstein is a philosophic genius of a different order from anyone else I know. This is partly owing to his great gift for seeing what is essential in a problem and partly to his overwhelming intellectual vigor, to the intensity of thought with which he pursues a question to the bottom and never rests content with a mere possible hypothesis. From his work more than that of any other man I hope for a solution of the difficulties that perplex me both in philosophy generally and in the foundations of mathematics in particular.-- *Philosophical Occasions*, P. 48 (G.E. Moore)

ⁱⁱ O. K. Bouwsma, writing to a friend and former student, said that Wittgenstein "... struck me as the height of perspicuity, the most intense intellectual activity, the swiftest and keenest mind I have met. It was like a miracle. His words were like a beam of light through a fog in almost any conversation." OK at xv. Several weeks later, Bouwsma wrote the following:

What is a prophet like? Wittgenstein is the nearest to a prophet I have ever known. He is a man who is like a tower, who stands high and unattached, leaning on no one. ... But other men fear him. And why? Not at all because he can strike them or take their money or their good names. They fear his judgement. OK at xv. His words I cherished like jewels. And do so now. But the main point is that he robbed me of a lazy comfort in my own mediocrity. There is no one to whom I owed so much, no one to whom I listened as I listened to him, no one whom I have feared, no one who was so clearly my rightful judge, my superior. ... In any case the acquaintance with Wittgenstein has given me some inkling as to what the power of the prophet was among his people. OK at xvi

ⁱⁱⁱ See Leiter Reports, a Philosophy Blog, for a reader poll of the most influential philosopher of the last 200 years (600 votes): <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2009/03/so-who-is-the-most-important-philosopher-of-the-past-200-years.html>.

^{iv} See Freeman Dyson's view in Phillip F. Schewe's book, *Maverick Genius: The Pioneering Odyssey of Freeman Dyson*, published by Macmillan (2013), on page 33.

^v I'm thinking here that the only two that are "greatly informed," regardless of what they teach, are philosophy and linguistics.

^{vi} Wittgenstein writes:

Getting hold of the difficult deep down is what is hard.

Because if it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots; and that involves our beginning to think about these things in a new way. The change is as decisive as, for example, that from the alchemical to the chemical way of thinking. The new way of thinking is what is so hard to establish.

Once the new way of thinking has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment. --CV, 1946 at 48.

^{vii} Bertrand Russell writes in *My Philosophical Development*:

Although I feel strongly about the importance of analysis, this is not the most serious of my objection to the new philosophy. The most serious of my objections is that the new philosophy seems to me to have abandoned, without necessity, that grave and important task which philosophy throughout the ages has hitherto pursued. Philosophers from Thales onwards have tried to understand the world. I cannot feel that the new philosophy is carrying out this tradition. It seems to concern itself, not with the world and our relation to it, but only with the different ways in which silly people can say silly things. If this is all that philosophy has to offer, I cannot think that it is a worthy subject of study. --(London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p.230.

^{viii} Russell continues in *My Philosophical Development*, "The later Wittgenstein seems to have grown tired of serious thinking and to have invented a doctrine which would make such an activity unnecessary." (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p.161.

^{ix} OK at xvii.