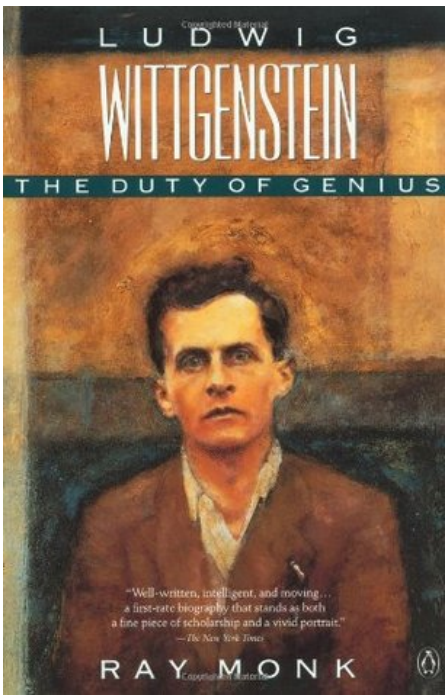


# Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius

*Ray Monk*

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**Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius** Ray Monk
"Great philosophical biographies can be counted on one hand. Monk's life of Wittgenstein is such a one."--"The Christian Science Monitor."

## Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius Details

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# From Reader Review Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius for online ebook

### howl of minerva says

Most surprising for me was the religious-mystical-spiritual thread that runs through Wittgenstein's life and work. He was very far from the coldly rational uber-logician that he's often presented as being. As his friend Drury put it: commentators have made it appear that Wittgenstein's writings 'were now easily assimilable into the very intellectual milieu they were largely a warning against'. He's talking of course of the Vienna Circle, technical analytic philosophy, logical positivism…

A few quotations:

"My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk on Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics… can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it." p277

"I am honestly disgusted with […] a kind of idol worship, the idol being Science and the Scientist." p405

One can imagine the contempt he would have had for the likes of Dawkins and Sam Harris…

"An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it." p464

"It isn't absurd, e.g., to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end for humanity; that the idea of great progress is a delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are." p485

Wonderfully:

"A picture that intruded upon him, he wrote, was of our civilization, 'cheaply wrapped in cellophane, and isolated from everything great, from God, as it were'." p489

And a personal favourite that gives some insight into Wittgenstein's sense of humour:

"I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again 'I know that that's a tree', pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell them: 'This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy.'" p578

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### Rishabh Shukla says

This is by far the best biography I have read so far (though I confess I haven't read that many biographies). Before I started reading this book, I was not even aware of the name Ludwig Wittgenstein, but after reading

this, it's difficult to not admire and fall in love with his raw intelligence, childish innocence and unblemished heart that remained true to himself and everyone whose life he touched.

At many places in the book, it breaks ones heart to think of the loneliness Prof. Wittgenstein suffered throughout his life for in his own words, "his too little faith and too little courage in love." and inability to express his feelings. But more than that, I feel, throughout his life, Prof Wittgenstein suffered from an acute self-deprecation about his feelings and the work he did as a Professor and professional philosopher. This self-deprecation was so acute that from time to time, he left philosophy to take on jobs that involved, in what he termed as "real work". Things like, working in an army or as an apprentice in a lab or even a small town mathematics teacher. What is though completely unintuitive is that most of his best work came from this period where he was not doing active philosophy.

The book connects the dots of explaining his work as a philosopher through his life and his life through his philosophy. All in all, it's a reminder, if not a life lesson, for anyone who wants to do some work but often falls in the trap of illusion of grandeur. While the entire world that knew Ludwig Wittgenstein during and after his lifetime remained convinced of his raw genius and importance of the work he was doing (even if they were not necessarily convinced of its correctness), the one person that was never pleased with his work and was always critical of it was Ludwig Wittgenstein himself.

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### Jeff Jackson says

I'd enjoyed "Wittgenstein's Mistress" and "Wittgenstein's Nephew," so I figured it was time to find out something about the man himself. Ray Monk's book turned out to be one of the best bios I've ever read. A compelling recounting of Wittgenstein's extraordinary life (hails from Europe's wealthiest and most talented family with numerous sibling suicides, insists on serving in WWI trenches, went from Cambridge professor to day laborer) that also makes his philosophy more comprehensible, tracing his tumultuous metamorphosis from mathematical logician to metaphysical cobweb clearer. His true talent was for stripping down arguments and perceptions to their useful essence.

I also learned a number of endearing tidbits: (1) Wittgenstein loved pulpy crime stories, but only from Street & Smith's "Detective Story Magazine." No substitutes! (2) He was a remarkably adept whistler. And would correct the pitch of those who whistled around him. (3) He loved to go to the movies, especially westerns. (4) His favorite movie performer was Carmen Miranda. Next was Betty Hutton. (5) In his early days, he was so entrenched in the Viennese aristocracy that he despised the lower classes and was against suffrage for women. Later, he gave away all his money and tried to work as a menial laborer in the Soviet Union. (6) He trained the birds near his cottage to eat from his hands. (7) His last words were: "Tell my friends I've had a wonderful life."

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### Philipp says

Monk writes great biographies - I loved the Oppenheimer biography, and here we have one on Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher of logic, psychology and mathematics, youngest son of the large and prosperous Wittgenstein family of Vienna.

I knew very little about Wittgenstein "the person" before, and even less about his philosophy. This servers as

a very good introduction to Wittgenstein's philosophy - his writing is famously concentrated down to sentences as concise as possible. Here you get explanations from discussions with other philosophers, or from lectures he held.

Some things I noted:

- Many "famous" names appear here. Hitler was in a school class with Wittgenstein in Vienna for one year; later on, Popper, Feyerabend, Turing are all discussing/fighting with Wittgenstein. And of course, Wittgenstein's professors at university like Russell or Frege feature prominently, up to their eventual falling-out.

- Monk manages to show all the times Wittgenstein himself was weirdly naive without any judgment; I can't see how a 50-ish year old Professor of Philosophy can seriously entertain the notion of becoming a "manual laborer" in Soviet Russia ("the life of a manual labourer in Russia was the epitome of a life without treacle"). Soviet Russia didn't really want him, quote Monk: "The one thing that was not in short supply in Soviet Russia was unskilled labour." However, Monk defends Wittgenstein's remarks to Drury on the eve of Austria's Anschluss to Hitler's Germany as Wittgenstein trying not to worry Drury too much about Wittgenstein's family's situation. I'm not convinced.

- The *intense* part of Wittgenstein's personality is very well portrayed here. It was apparently very hard to be around him or hold "small-talk", and in philosophical discussions his directness was often abrupt to the point of being rude. This is how he wanted to prepare for a wedding:

> Early in the summer he invited Marguerite to Norway to prepare, as he thought, for their future life together. He intended, however, that they should spend their time separately, each taking advantage of the isolation to engage in serious contemplation, so that they would be spiritually ready for the new life that was to come.

As expected, she left after two weeks.

- He wouldn't survive in today's academia - he published little to nothing, most is published posthumously. His teaching was kept "under wraps":

> In order to keep his class down to a size with which he felt comfortable, he did not announce his lectures in the usual way in the *Cambridge University Recorder*. Instead, John Wisdom, Moore and Braithwaite were asked to tell those students they thought would be interested about the classes. No more than about ten students attended.

This is impossible in the age of standardised tests, degrees and the Bologna process.

- Wittgenstein's remarks and Monk's expansion about logic and concepts not being as simple as logicians wanting them to be are eye-opening, recommended reading

- In his remarks about language I'm reminded of Stanislaw Lem's SF:

> This is because the commonality of experience required to interpret the 'imponderable evidence', the 'subtleties of glance, gesture and tone', will be missing. This idea is summed up in one of Wittgenstein's most striking aphorisms: 'If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.'

Most of Lem's SF is about mankind encountering talking lions!

- Wittgenstein's very dry humor is amazing and noted in many episodes like this one:

> Never having seen Wittgenstein before, he [Mabbott] assumed that this [Wittgenstein] was a student on vacation who did not know this hostel had been given over to those attending the conference. 'I'm afraid there is a gathering of philosophers going on here', he said kindly. Wittgenstein replied darkly: 'I too'.

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### Taka says

Exhaustive & Exhausting--

Maybe that's the nature of biographies—you get *everything*, or everything known about the person, and it flatly goes against our narrative preference to read only what's interesting and skip what's not (a strategy fiction adopts to keep us interested). We learn so much about Wittgenstein that, yes, he does become human, and yes, you feel like you understand his philosophy a lot better, but at the same time, there are so many instances of his life that are just not interesting at all (his advice to his friends about their job situations during the war, or his political delusions and trip to Soviet Russia to find, unsuccessfully, a menial job, or his peripatetic existence toward the end of his life and where he was staying and so forth).

What *was* fascinating was anything that touched on his philosophy, especially—for me—his later philosophy (which is something I'm planning on studying). Also fascinating was his spiritual life that led him to fulminate against Scientism, and it is this spiritual side of his personality in *Culture and Value* that attracted me to his philosophy to begin with. As Monk himself puts it: "For, in a way that is centrally important but difficult to define, he had lived a devoutly religious life" (580).

Apart from his spiritual and philosophical strivings, we get a portrait of an intense, stubborn man very difficult to get along with. His insecurity is written everywhere. When he was young, he wanted others to recognize him as a genius and tried everything in his powers to get the recognition. A sensitive and hopelessly awkward soul, he'd take offense at nothing and break off even long-standing friendships. A lonely man, he'd demand HOURS of friends' undivided attention about philosophical and personal problems he wanted to discuss. Or confess what he deemed were his "sins" to his friends at a cafe in a loud voice, making the listeners uncomfortable to say the least. In short, someone you'd try to avoid if you come across him in your life.

And yet, I came away with the feeling that he lived his life in the only way he could: passionately. And that's something. Despite all his psychological baggage, despite his loneliness, internal struggles, self-loathing (at his own sexual desires and philosophical work), he *lived*, really lived. And for that I admire him and his work.

Onto *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*!

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### Isabel says

A thoughtful and thorough portrait. Seriously tasteful.

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### Maaike says

Aangezien ik dit boek in het Nederlands las, ga ik er ook in het Nederlands over schrijven.
Dankzij de prachtige bibliotheeksticker stond er op de rug van mijn versie uiteindelijk: Ludwig Wittgenstein: Portret van een Wittgenstein. (Wat naar mijn bescheiden mening een stuk beter klinkt 'gekwelde geest').
Om maar direct even heel eerlijk te zijn, dit was de eerste biografe die ik ooit heb gelezen en het komt ook direct het dichtst in de buurt van een filosofisch boek. Ik heb geen idee waarom ik het geleend heb maar ik weet wel dat ik absoluut niet verwacht had het zo leuk te vinden.
Ik deed er ongeveer een maand over om dit boek uit te lezen: het kostte me telkens moeite er weer in te komen, maar wanneer ik er eenmaal weer in zat (vaak na zo'n vijf pagina's), bleef ik ook lezen zodat de meeste leessessies minstens een uur duurden.
De schrijfstijl is niet eens heel boeiend, vrij droog, weinig gevoel, ik had het idee dat dit deels ook door de vertaling kwam. Gelukkig bestaat het boek voor een groot deel uit primair materiaal: brieven, dagboekfragmenten, zelfs kranten- en tijdschriftartikelen. (Opnieuw had ik wel het idee dat deze aangetast waren door de vertaling, ze schenen in schrijfstijl veel overeen te komen.) Maar het was fantastisch, alsof je in een archief gegooid werd en snipper voor snipper iemands leven in elkaar zette. Het was fascinerend om te lezen hoe personen verschenen en verdwenen, wie er overbleef en wie je dacht dat zou blijven maar nooit meer terugkeerde. Het is vreemd om je te beseffen dat het leven afgelopen was: dat het al plaatsgevonden had. Wanneer je fictie leest kan alles nog gebeuren, lijkt elke bladzijde op dat moment plaats te vinden maar hier ken je het einde al, hier is alles al voor je gedaan.
Daarnaast zat er in het boek genoeg filosofie om te voorkomen dat het simpelweg een soap werd. Toevallig zijn we op dit moment op school met kennisleer bezig en de dingen waar Wittgenstein zich mee bezig hield, sluiten hier best op aan. Ik merkte dat bepaalde dingen me opvielen in de les door wat ik in het boek gelezen had, maar dat daarentegen ook het boek duidelijker werd door achtergrondinformatie uit de les: ik vermoed dat ik sommige passages zonder niet begrepen had.
(Ook nu nog waren er genoeg dingen die ik niet begreep. Maar het is geruststellend om te weten dat een groot filosoof er niet voor terugdeinsde zijn gedachten en meningen radicaal te veranderen. Dat ik over veertig jaar nog kan zeggen: "Nu weet ik hoe het echt zit.")

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### David M says

I'm afraid I've never been able to get much out of either the Tractatus or the Investigations (aside from the

extremely quotable line here and there), but there's no question their author had an incredibly captivating personality. The agony of thought, the unintentional humor of purity. Ray Monk's portrait is masterful & highly entertaining.

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### Robert says

Ray Monk's excellent biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein portrays the intense, ascetic, conscience-ridden philosopher in all the phases of his difficult life, childhood to death.

Wittgenstein was born into one of the wealthiest families in Europe, began his higher level studies as an engineer and became perhaps the most highly regarded philosopher of the first half of the 20th century.

His Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus gained him early fame with which he was never comfortable and ultimately became a work he disavowed. Bertrand Russell was his best-known supporter, helping him establish himself at Cambridge, but Russell, like many others who were close to Wittgenstein, ultimately gave up on him. As Monk makes clear, Wittgenstein was uncompromising, harsh, and exhausting. He fled from and to Cambridge on numerous occasions, lectured by shouting sometimes and maintaining silence at other times, and ultimately adopted a philosophical style that was a quarrel with convention. If Socrates was a self-described gadfly, then Wittgenstein was an inveterate nuisance to himself and others. He could outargue anyone but apparently did not so much enjoy doing so as felt obliged to do so.

In Monk's view, Wittgenstein's philosophizing was a restless, relentless attempt to discredit or overturn the scientific/technological culture overwhelming Europe and the United States. He mistrusted theories and generalizations. He bullied himself and others into finding ways to think logically and live ethically. He would have everyone live more slowly,not more rapidly, and disbelieve in Progress.

The pity of this biography and Wittgenstein's life, it seems to me, is that despite the enormous amount of documentation Monk is able to weave into its telling, we still don't really have a good picture of the man in action. Like Coleridge, he was a voluble and brilliant talker, much more prolific in person than in print. After the Tractatus, he spent years and years fiddling with new work that he could not bring himself to finish. He did leave a substantial cache of manuscripts and typescripts that have found their way into print post-mortem, but like the Tractatus--and unlike Wittgenstein the man-these texts are gnomic provocations that insist on the importance of context in interpreting words and events while eschewing their own context. They are brief, brilliant, anti-systematic outbursts that lack the impact of Wittgenstein's facial expressions, his tones of voice, his abruptness, dismissiveness, philosophical personhood, if you will.

People did not know what to do with him. He was acknowledged as a great philosopher, but he was not much interested in the work of the philosophers who preceded him. He would philosophize about psychology or mathematics without spending much time discussing psychology or mathematics. He was interested in how we should think about psychology and mathematics...and how psychology and mathematics should think about themselves.

Famous as he was, he famously did things like becoming a factotum at a London hospital during WWII when he could quite easily have stayed at Cambridge as professor of philosophy. (And he also famously gave away the fortune he inherited from his father, transforming himself from one of the richest men in Europe to one of the poorest.)

Monk spends a lot of time on Wittgenstein's romantic relationships, with one woman in particular and many men. Some of these relationships, but far from all, were unconsummated. Wittgenstein was so self-punishing and self-critical that one wonders if he was deeply at odds with his predominantly homosexual preferences, but in an interesting appendix, Monk essentially knocks this notion down, addressing sexual identity questions more directly than he does in the main text. Withholding some of these comments so long may not be the best way to present them.

Ironically, most of us who might find Wittgenstein fascinating would have the opposite effect on him. This biography is a good way of getting around the perils of his immediate personality, but I still would love to have seen him in action.

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### H says

ray monk's duty of genius

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At about the same time, in fact, he surprised Russell by suddenly saying how much he admired the text: 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul':
"[He] then went on to say how few there are who don't lose their soul. I said it depended on having a large purpose that one is true to. He said he thought it depended more on suffering and the power to endure it. I was surprised -- I hadn't expected that kind of thing from him." (51)

For the rest of his life he continued to regard the feeling of being 'absolutely sfe' as paradigmatic of religious experience. (51)

Russell then asked him how he would feel if he were married to a woman and she ran away with another man:
"[Wittgenstein] said (and I believe him) that he would feel no rage or hate, only utter misery. His nature is good through and through; that is why he doesn't see the need of morals. I was utterly wrong at first; he might do all kinds of things in passion, but he would not practise any cold-blooded immorality. His outlook is very free; principles and such things eem to him nonsense, because his impulses are strong and never shameful." (52)

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" . . . deep inside me there's a perpetual seething, like the bottom of a geyser, and I keep hoping that things will come to an eruption once and for all, so that I can turn into a different person." (97)

"Perhaps you regard this thinking about myself as a waste of time -- but how can I be a logician before I'm a human being! *Far* the most important thing is to settle accounts with myself!" (97)

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"Don't be dependent on the external world and then you have no fear of what happens in it . . . It is x times easier to be independent of things than to be independent of people. But one must be capable of that as well." (116)

Wittgenstein once told Bieler that he would make a good disciple but that he was no prophet. 'I could say about him', writes Bieler, that: 'he had all the characteristics of a prophet, but none of a disciple.' (133)

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The connection between Wittgenstein's thought on logic and his reflections on the meaning of life was to be found in the distinction he had made earlier between *saying* and *showing*. Logical form, he had said, cannot be expresed *within* language, for it is the form of language itself; it makes itself manifest in language -- it has to be *shown*. Similarly, ethical and religious truths, though inexpressible, manifest themselves in life:
"The solution to the problem of life is to be seen in the disappearance of the problem.
"Isn't this the reason why men to whom the meaning of life had become clear after long doubting could not say what this meaning consisted in?"
Thus: 'Ethics does not treat of the world. Ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic.' (142)

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'Normal human beings are a balm to me', he wrote to Engelmann, 'and a torment at the same time.' (181)

[Engelmann] "If I am unhappy and know that my unhappiness reflects a gross discrepancy between myself and life as it is, I solved nothing; I shall be on the wrong track and I shall never find a way out of the chaos of my emotions and thoughts so long as I have not achieved the supreme and crucial insight that that discrepancy is not the fault of life as it is, but of myself as I am . . .
"The person who has achieved this insight and holds on to it, and who will try again and again to live up to it, is religious." (185)

"I know that to kill oneself is always a dirty thing to do. Surely one *cannot* will one's own destruction, and anybody who has visualized what is in practice involved in the act of suicide knows that suicide is always a *rushing of one's own defences*. But nothing is worse than to be forced to take oneself by surprise." (187)

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"As to the shortness of the book I am *awfully sorry for it; but what can I do?* If you were to squeeze me like a lemon you would get nothing more out of me. To let you print the Erganzungen would be no remedy. It would be just as if you had gone to a joiner and ordered a table and he had made the table too short and now would sell you the shavings and sawdust and other rubbish along with the table to make up for its shortness. (Rather than print the Erganzungen to make the book fatter leave a dozen white sheets for the reader to swear into when he has purchased the book and can't understand it.)" (207)

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He went on to show that the things one is inclined to say after such experiences are a misuse of language -- they mean nothing. And yet the experiences themselves 'seem to those who have had them, for instance to me, to have in some sense an intrinsic, absolute value'. They cannot be captured by factual language precisely because their value lies beyond the world of facts. In a notebook of the time (277) Wittgenstein rote a sentence which he did not include in the lecture, but which crystallizes his attitude perfectly: 'What is good

is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics.' (278)

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The colour octahedron is an example of grammar, in this sense, because it tells us that, though we can speak of a greenish blue, we cannot speak of a greenish red. It therefore concerns, not truth, but possibility. Geometry is also in this sense a part of grammar. 'Grammar is a mirror of reality.' (291)

In explaining his view of the 'internal relations' established by grammar, Wittgenstein explicity contrasts it with the causal view of meaning adopted by Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* and by Russell in *The Analysis of Mind*. A causal relation is *external*. In Russell's view, for example, words are used with the intention of causing certain sensations and/or images, and a word is used correctly 'when the average hearer will be affected by it in the way intended'. To Wittgenstein, this talk of cause and effect misses the point. In his notes he ridiculed Russell's account by the following analogy: 'If I wanted to eat an apple, and someone punched me in the stomach, taking away my appetite, then it was this punch that I originally wanted.' (291)

"If a person tells me he has been to the worst places I have no right to judge him, but if he tells me it was his superior wisdom that enabled him to go there, then I know he is a fraud." (294)

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"Our [with Waismann] thought here marches with certain views of Goethe's which he expressed in the *Metamorphosis of Plants*. We are in the habit, whenever we perceive similarities, of seeking some common origin for them. The urge to follow such phenomena back to their origin in the past expresses itself in a certain style of thinking. This recognizes, so to speak, only a single scheme for such similarities, namely the arrangement as a series in time. (And that is presumably bound up with the uniqueness of the causal schema). But Goethe's view shows that this is not the only possible form of conception. His conception of the original plant implies no hypothesis about the temporal development of the vegetable kingdom such as that of Darwin. Whatn then *is* the problem solved by this idea? It is the problem of synoptic presentation. Goethe's aphorism 'All the organs of plants are leaves transformed' offers us a plan in which we may group the organs of plants ccording to their similarities as if around some natural centre. We see the original form of the leaf changing into similar and cognate forms, into the leaves of the calyx, the leaves of the petal, into organs that are half petals, half stamens, and so on. We follow this sensuous (303) transformation of the type by linking up the leaf through intermediate forms with the other organs of the plant.
"That is precisely what we are doing here. We are collating one form of languge with its environment, or transforming it in imagination so as to gain a view of the whole of space in which the structure of our language has its being." (304)

Likewise the truth, the value, of religion can have nothing to do with the *words* used. There need, in fact, be no words at all. 'Is talking essential to religion?' he asked:
"I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions, in which there is thus no talking. Obviously the essence of religion cannot have anything to do with the fact that there is talking, or rather: when people talk, then this itself is part of a religious act and not a theory. Thus it also does not matter at all if the words used are true or false or nonsense.
"In religion talking is not *metaphorical* either; for otherwise it would have to be possible to say the same things in prose." (305)

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Connected with the inclination to look for a substance corresponding to a substantive is the idea that, for any given concept, there is an 'essence' -- something that is common to all the things subsumed under a general term. Thus, for example, in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates seeks to answer philosophical questions such as: 'What is knowledge?' by looking for something that all examples of knowledge have in common. (In connection with this, Wittgenstein once (337) said that his method could be summed up by saying that it was the exact opposite of that of Socrates.) In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein seeks to replace this notion of *essence* with the more flexible idea of *family resemblances* . . . (338)

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"It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our words in unheard-of ways. "For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. -- The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. -- Instead we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. -- Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. (365)

"If I perform to myself, then it's this that the style expresses. And then the style cannot be my own. If you are unwilling to know what you are, your writing is a form of deceit." (367)

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Rather than trying to answer the traditional questions of aesthetics ('What is beauty?' etc.), Wittgenstein gives a succession of examples to show that artistic appreciation does not consist (as one might think from reading some philosophical discussions of aesthetics) in standing before a painting and saying: 'That is beautiful.' Appreciation takes a bewildering variety of forms, which differ from culture to culture, and quite often will not consist in *saying* anything. Appreciation will be *shown*, by actions as often as by words, by certain gestures of disgust or satisfaction, by the way we read a work of poetry or play a piece of music, by how often we read or listen to the same piece, and how we do so. These different forms of appreciation do not have any one thing in common that one can isolate in answer to the question: 'What is artistic appreciation?' They are, rather, linked by a complicated series of 'family resemblances'. Thus:
"It is not only difficult to describe what appreciation consists in, but impossible. To describe what it consists in we would have to describe the whole environment." (405)

"It seems to me as if all that wisdom has come out of the ice box; I should not be surprised to learn that he [Tagore in his play The King of the Dark Chamber] got it all second-hand by reading and listening (exactly as so manyg among us cquire their knowledge of Christian wisdom) rather than from his own genuine *feeling*. Perhaps I don't understand his tone; to me it does not ring like the tone of a man possessed by the truth. (*Like for instance Ibsen's tone*.) It is possible, however, that here the translation leaves a chasm which I cannot bridge. I read *with interest* throughout, but without being gripped. That does not seem to be a good sign." (408)

'Russell and the parsons between them have done infinite harm, infinite harm.' Why pair Russell and the parsons in the one condemnation? Because both have encouraged the idea that a philosophical justification for religious beliefs is necessary for those beliefs to be given any credence. Both the atheist, who scorns religion because he has found no *evidence* for its tenets, and the believer, who attempts to *prove* the existence of God, have fallen victim to the 'other' -- to the idol-worship of the scientific style of thinking. Religious beliefs are not analogous to scientific theories, and should not be accepted or rejected using the

same evidential criteria. (410)

There was, on his view, nothing for the mathematician to discover. A proof in mathematics does not establish the truth of a conclusion; it fixes, rather, the *meaning of* certain signs. The 'inexorability' of mathematics, therefore, does not consist in *certain knowledge* of mathematical truths, but in the fact that mathematical propositions are *grammatical*. (418)

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Freud's work is interesting precisely because it does not provide such a scientific treatment. What puzzles us about a dream is not its causality but its *significance*. We wnt the kind of explanation which 'changes the aspect' under which we see the images of a dream, so that they now make sense. (449)

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"When I talked of courage, by the way, I didn't mean, make a row with your superiors; particularly not when it's entirely useless & just shooting off your mouth. I meant: take a burden & try to *carry* it. I know that I've not any right to say this. I'm not much good at carrying burdens myself." (461)

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The problem could have only an existential, never a theoretical, solution. What was required was a change of spirit: 'Wisdom is cold and to that extent stupid. (Faith on the other hand is a passion.)' To breathe again, it was no use merely thinking correctly; one had to act -- to, as it were, rip the cellophane away and reveal the living world behind it. As he put it: ' "Wisdom is grey". Life on the other hand and religion are full of colour.' The passion of religious faith was the only thing cpable of overcoming the deadness of theory: "I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you h ave to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life.)" (490)

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Understanding humour, like understanding music, provides an analogy for Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical understanding. What is required for understanding here is not the discovery of facts, nor the drawing of logically valid inferences from accepted premises -- nor, still less, the construction of *theories* -- but, rather, the right point of view (from which to 'see' the joke, to hear the expression in the music or to see your way out of the philosophical fog). (530)

'What would a person who is blind towards these aspects be lacking?' Wittgenstein asks, and replies: 'It is not absurd to answer: the power of imagination.' But the imagination of individuals, though necessary, is not sufficient. What is further required for people to be alive to 'aspects' (and, therefore, for humour, music, poetry and painting to mean something) is a culture. (531)

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"How do I know that two people mean the same when when each says he believes in God? And the same goes for belief in the Trinity. A theology which insists on the use of *certain particular* words and phrases, and outlaws others, does not make anything clearer (Karl Barth). It gesticulates with words, as one might say, because it wants to say something and does not know how to express it. *Practice* gives the words their sense." (573)

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We reach the end of doubt, rather, in practice: 'Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc., etc., -- they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc., etc.' Doubting is a rather special sort of practice, which can be learnt only after a lot of non-doubting behaviour has been acquired: 'Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is a first only if there is a second.' (578)

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### Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

Portrait of the Thinker as a Man

If you want to understand Ludwig Wittgenstein, the thinker and the man, turn to the very last page of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the only philosophical work published in his lifetime. There you will find in all of its gnomic beauty one of the best remembered and most quoted propositions of all: *Whereof we cannot speak thereof we must be silent.*

That's just the thing: he wasn't silent. Most of his life after the publication of the *Tractatus* was a pursuit of the very things that could not be touched on in a work of uncompromising logic, whether it be the nature of language, the way language is used in practical terms, the nature of thought, of ethics, of psychology, of the relationship of philosophy to the wider world of human experience.

"If a lion could speak, we could not understand him", he wrote in the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein spoke. Most who followed, particularly the Vienna School of Logical Positivists, which had as good a claim as any to be the apostles of the text, could not understand him.

Bertrand Russell, who wrote a preface for the *Tractatus*, could not understand his brilliant protégée. The truly remarkable thing is that when the two met at Cambridge before the First World War Wittgenstein was a novice, Russell a mature and respected professor of philosophy, the author with A. N. Whitehead of *Principia Mathematica*, a seminal work of mathematical logic.

But Wittgenstein quickly established complete intellectual dominance, so much so that by 1912 Russell told his sister that he expected the next big step in philosophy to be taken by her brother. It's salutary to remember that he was still only a twenty-three-year old undergraduate!

Ray Monk understands the man, the thought and the life in thought, enough to write *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. I came to this lately, in the paperback edition, determined to get to grips with one of the great thinkers of the last century.

He is one of the people I have long admired for his clarity of expression, for those parts of his work that are accessible to me, those parts that are not too deep in an ethereal and mathematical mode of expression. Admired, yes, but from afar, like some intimidating demigod. Monk has brought me far closer to the man in what is a surprisingly readable and at points gripping biography.

Surprising? It's just that I did not expect so difficult a thinker to be reducible to such ordinary human terms. This is the key, in fact, to this book: in its own brilliant and lucid way it humanises the idol, if that makes sense, painting a detailed and comprehensive portrait. Monk has a commendable grasp of the material to hand, quoting liberally from letters, diaries, notebooks and interviews, coming close to understanding the

thinker as a whole. There is Wittgenstein, uncompromising in his self-critical brilliance, relentless in the pursuit of ideas and of people, full of self-assurance at some points, and at others full of the most crushing and debilitating forms of self-doubt.

As usual, given that this is the paperback edition, the cover is replete with laudatory praise. I have no argument here; it's richly deserved. It is, as the *Observer* says, a book that is much to be recommended. The *Guardian* adds that Monk's biography is deeply intelligent and generous to the ordinary reader, statements with which I fully concur. But the reviewer goes that one step further, saying that it's a beautiful portrait of a beautiful life. Hmm…a beautiful portrait? Well, yes. I suppose, though I think the expression just a tad hyperbolic. But was it a 'beautiful life'? I'm not sure. It was an important one, yes, but that's quite different.

*Ecce homo*; behold in whole. The fact is the more I delved into the thinker the less I began to like the man. He was far too intense, far too opinionated, far too wearing. This is genius, and supposedly everything is excused, all normal standards suspended. But I still came away with a feeling that, for all his brilliance, this was a man better not to know; better for some of the less able children in the Austrian elementary schools he taught not to know; better not to know a man rather too free with his fists.

He was a huge influence on the young men who came his way, turning some away from academic philosophy and Cambridge, both of which he paradoxically despised, towards more 'practical' endeavours. He embraced a kind of Tolstoyan view of life, encouraging others to work alongside 'ordinary' people in preference to academia. I could not help but feel that Francis Skinner, a brilliant mathematical scholar, Wittgenstein's disciple and sometimes lover, might have been happier if he had never met him. In his pursuit of a bogus authenticity he went to work in screw factory at the behest of his mentor, a place where he was deeply unhappy. Earlier on he and Skinner had planed to go to Soviet Russia in the mid-1930s to work as labourers. Fortunately for them, at least fortunately for Skinner, the harebrained project failed to mature.

I suppose it's another measure of Monk's skill as a biographer that he gives us a cogent warts and all portrait. I'm probably far too conscious of the warts, but it's comforting to see that while Wittgenstein could be a mystic he was no saint! He is a man whom I would both loved and hated to have known, with the latter perhaps now a little more pronounced than the former. If I had met him I would have one question to ask: who could anyone, least of all a man with your degree of insight and sensitivity, have been taken in by Otto Weiniger's bizarre, misogynist and self-hating monograph *Sex and Character*? It's complete trash! I'm glad to say that *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* is not. Rather, in itself, it's a biography of genius.

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### Geoff says

I'm not going to have any time in the next couple of weeks to write something proper about this great book and this insanely intriguing, captivating, gloriously flawed & brilliant man, Wittgenstein, so I'll direct you to Jimmy's review of this book, which sparked my interest in it, and is full of great stuff about Witt, Robert Musil, Vienna, writer's block, among myriad other things. Jimmy is a real treasure on Goodreads so give his lovely review some much deserved votes:
http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...

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## Jimmy says

A book that illuminates Wittgenstein's ideas by showing us his life. Alternately, it illuminates his life by showing us his ideas. Flip-flop, mish-mosh, two sides of the same coin. His ideas grew organically from his life, in the same way that his Picture Theory claims that a picture is not a mental representation of a fact but is a fact itself, so that understanding comes immediately from seeing (not through abstraction and representation). This method of illumination works more for Wittgenstein than it would for other philosophers because for Wittgenstein, philosophy was not a mere game (perhaps that's one of the reasons he despised academic philosophers so much, and called them un-serious), philosophy was a way of living and thinking rightly in the real world, by stripping oneself of all the comforts of illusion. If it didn't do that (and he doubted if it did many times) then what good was it? Perhaps that's why he was intent on destroying philosophy as it was known then, uprooting it from its illusions of logic by exposing it to the sun. In life too, he was obsessed with questions of honesty and self deception, and tortured himself terribly over moral questions.

At times he seemed less like a philosopher and more like a religious figure with his ascetic lifestyle and exacting standards for his inner life. At other times, he was more like an artist with his severe judgements and social outbursts, and his tendency for perfectionism in his writings. Obviously, he was not always likeable, but he was always so much *himself*, a singularity whose contradictions made him even more who he was.

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Most of my reading falls into two categories. First are the books that I actively seek out because someone recommended it to me, or I've been thinking about certain topics. These constitute the majority of my reading. The second category are books that seek me out. These are happy accidents that happen to fall along my path so that I could not ignore them. This book belongs to this second category.

I've never read any Wittgenstein before this, and I rarely read any philosophy either, but I came across this book at just the right time: I had finished the first book of The Man Without Qualities and was awaiting the second book's arrival via Amazon. So I picked this up and just started reading, thinking I'd put it down after just a taste, but it wouldn't let me stop! I read it compulsively. What's odd about the timing of this book (between the Musil volumes) is that as I read it, I inevitably began to draw parallels between Wittgenstein and Musil.

I've also noticed that for the last few months my Goodreads reviews have become increasingly Reviews Without Books... as the Man Without Qualities is necessarily a man possessing all qualities, my reviews have increasingly tried to incorporate all my recent readings (Walter Benjamin, Hopscotch, and Man Without Qualities have crept up most often) to swallow them in a shameful act of gluttony. But hopefully (I hoped) out of it will come some kind of a larger picture, where colors complement each other, yet differences in shape are still preserved, even appearing more distinguished instead of falling into a big mush. It seems to me that reviewing one book in isolation is rather like taking a photograph of someone against a blank background: useful only for official documents and passports.

(This recent urge is also similar to a striving for context that both men (Musil and Wittgenstein) incorporated into their visions, with one big difference, this context is completely contrived internally. These books don't really have anything to do with each other per se, other than the fact that I read them together, so in this way contextually weaving them together can only give the reader an idea of *my* mind, as if each book were a

spider’s web I can only free myself from by stumbling into another one)

So I will talk about Musil here, and I will not be apologetic about it. First comes the superficial resemblances: both Musil and Wittgenstein were born in Austria, both were trained as engineers, and studied mathematics and philosophy. Both were around at the same time, and they both fought in the war, though there was no indication from this biography that they ever met.

But it is only when thinking about Wittgenstein’s philosophy that I found deeper resemblances.

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An interesting thing happened to me when I was writing this book review. At this point in my sure-to-be-phenomenal study of the two men, I was overcome with a case of severe reviewer’s block. I had so many good points to make, about Wittgenstein’s interest in bridging distances between the utterable and the unutterable and even a brief mention in this book of imaginary numbers (Musil territory); about the two men’s similar love/hate relationships to science, pushing it away, yet inevitably using its exactness for their very own purposes; of their resistance to systematization, that tendency to boil things down to some kind of essence. Wittgenstein’s emphasis on context that creates meaning, context which is the antidote for science’s constant ‘craving for generality’, and Musil’s obsession with the same which he showed in his novel by playing with each character’s myopic extremes, while showing them completely unaware of the larger society’s constant vacillations between ideas that tend to wipe out all traces of the previous idea. And the concept of ‘genius’ that Wittgenstein was so obsessed about, seeing greatness as a justification for living the way he wanted, and that Musil talked about as the ‘genius of the racehorse’, an elegy to an antiquated idea. No longer do we have real geniuses, now even a racehorse can be a genius. Wittgenstein similarly laments when he sees photos of scientists in a store window instead of Beethoven. But not to stop there, because there are differences too, major differences, how one loved music for example and the other (Musil) hated it. These men also had different ideas about action, where one took the route of ideas, the other man (Wittgenstein) sought to purge all ideas from ideas, to escape from philosophy and into the purity of living (though he was unsuccessful) as Geothe said: in the beginning was the deed. But both courses were, I wanted to show, like two roads around the same block.

I had pages of similar notes not only because I wanted to write this review so badly, but also because I genuinely thought these little things could bring me closer to an understanding of these two men. Afterall, as Basil Reeve, a young doctor and one of Wittgenstein’s friends said years after they worked together, he was influenced by Wittgenstein in two ways:

> first, to keep in mind that things are as they are; and secondly, to seek illuminating comparisons to get an understanding of how they are.

But what constituted an *illuminating* comparison? Things are as they are, and as soon as you compare them, even that comparison becomes an egregious generalization, a way of smoothing over complicated differences, and it would not live up to the original ‘thing as it was’ until you put so many qualifications and exceptions to your comparisons between the subtleties of one thing verses the subtleties of another thing that you might as well not make any comparisons to begin with! This is essentially the crux of the problem of writer's block: being confronted with the unutterable, feeling your irrelevance in the face of it, and not being able to capture that which overcomes one without reducing it to something obscene. Essentially the only way to write about a book would be to include the entire text of the book, and nothing else:

> And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be -- unutterably -- *contained* in what has been uttered!

Maybe that was why it was so difficult for me to continue writing where I had stopped for weeks, looking over my notes in cafes and reading over lines I had underlined twice, three times, with exclamation marks penciled in the margins. I wanted so much to capture something inexpressible about this book, this life. I found myself emphatically in agreement with many of Wittgenstein’s points, but I had to admit to myself that afterall I had not really read any of Wittgenstein’s own writings. I had to admit that I was slightly intimidated by the logical propositions, and the rigorous uncompromising language. So that in the end what I had were only a collection of loose inexpressible feelings arising from the man’s life (as portrayed in this book) that I felt vaguely good about, and Wittgenstein’s own quiet insistence that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

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### Anton says

As introspective and bookish as you might expect a philosopher as head-spinning as Wittgenstein to be, his actual day-to-day life is pretty interesting. Two anecdotes that most immediately come to mind: 1. After fighting in World War I (throughout which he was hellbent on fighting on the front-lines), Wittgenstein, by inheritance one of the richest men in Austria at the time, gave away ALL of his money to become a country school teacher, believing that he could not live authentically otherwise. 2. When explaining his meticulous designs for his sister's house, which included the size and shape to the tiniest millimeter of every door knob and window, Wittgenstein drove one of the house-builders to tears because of his implacable exactitude. Both these anecdotes exemplify qualities of character that cannot but make a life compelling: a passion for ideals at once admirable and profoundly alienating. Ray Monk renders the narrative well, making, for instance, the publication history of Wittgenstein's "Tractatus" a thing of page-turning drama (at least for this reader). While knowing about Wittgenstein's life and times in general does serve to contextualize Wittgenstein's ideas, I was a bit disappointed overall in Monk's explication of his writings. Monk's treatment of the philosophy at times seemed piecemeal and inconsistent: he'd explain simple points at length, but gloss over more esoteric ideas as if they were obvious. His discussions of Wittgenstein's reading early on in the book were very illuminating, however, and I will say that the book as a whole succeeds in humanizing and making more approachable this philosopher's demanding and enigmatic texts.

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### R. says

For non-philosophers, this is probably the book to read if you are curious about who that Wittgenstein fellow was. For philosophers, I noted three things. First, I did not experience any professional winces (an example of a professional wince--once, when I was taking a literature class in graduate school, the professor commented in lecture that the most important philosophical event of the 20th century was Wittgenstein's suicide, to which I replied patiently that perhaps it would be, except that Wittgenstein died of prostate cancer). That's good. Second, the cultural agenda of his thought is far clearer when he is encountered biographically--his affinities with Heidegger jumped out at me, and never would have done so if I had I not read this. I was unaware of his reading of Spengler for example. Third, without especially trying to, the "Wittgenstein was a saint" is deftly punctured by the endless supply of anecdotes illustrating his social insufferability. It looks more like Keynes, Moore, Russell et. al. were the saints... for putting up with him!

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