

Chapter 1

Life and character

Ludwig Wittgenstein was a philosopher. Philosophy in the twentieth century has become a pursuit for specialists, and accordingly most philosophers who have recently acquired reputations are famous only among their fellows. Wittgenstein, however, is famous far beyond the boundaries of philosophy. Among non-philosophers his name is mentioned surprisingly often and in a surprising variety of connections. It seems that by many he is regarded as quintessentially representative of twentieth-century philosophy, as if he exemplifies – not just in his work but in his personality – what philosophy itself is like: difficult and profound. Perhaps for this reason his writings are plundered for aphorisms. They lend themselves to that treatment because of their style and structure, and because they seem to distil something of wisdom.

The layman's estimation of Wittgenstein derives from the fact that many contemporary philosophers think he is the twentieth century's greatest thinker. Whether or not that is true remains for history to decide; the judgement of peers is not infallible. Whatever the decision is, however, it will not alter the fact that Wittgenstein's life and thought were, at the very least, extraordinary.

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein was born in Vienna on 26 April 1889, the youngest in a family of eight children. His father was an industrialist,

and one of the richest men in Austria; the Wittgensteins' home was a centre of Viennese social and cultural life.

Wealth and culture had characterized both sides of Wittgenstein's family for several generations. His paternal grandfather was a wealthy Jewish wool-merchant from Hesse who had converted to Protestant Christianity and married the daughter of a Viennese banker. Soon afterwards he transferred his business headquarters to Vienna, where he and his wife established themselves as patrons of the arts. They gave their son Karl, Ludwig Wittgenstein's father, an expensive classical education, but Karl rebelled and at the age of 17 ran away to America, where for two years he lived by working as a waiter and giving violin and German lessons. On his return to Vienna he studied engineering. Within decades he had added a fortune to his inheritance by successful involvement in the iron and steel industry, establishing himself as one of the foremost industrialists of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was able to retire in his early fifties, and devoted part of his time thereafter to publishing articles on economics in the Viennese press.

Wittgenstein

It was Wittgenstein's mother Leopoldine who did most to encourage the family's cultural and musical activities. She too was a banker's daughter, with connections among the Styrian landed gentry. Her musical interests were particularly strong. At her invitation Brahms and Mahler were regular visitors to the house, and with her encouragement Wittgenstein's brother Paul became a concert pianist. Ravel and Strauss were among those who wrote one-handed concertos for Paul after his loss of an arm in the 1914–18 war. Wittgenstein himself was gifted with a fine musical sensibility. In adult life he taught himself to play the clarinet, but his most striking musical talent was the ability to whistle entire scores from memory.

Leopoldine Wittgenstein was a Roman Catholic and Wittgenstein was therefore brought up in that persuasion. Religion remained a powerful theme throughout his life; on several occasions he seriously



1. The Wittgenstein family at the dinner table in the Hochreit (left to right): housemaid Rosalie Hermann, Hermine, grandmother Kalmus, Paul, Margarete and Ludwig.

contemplated becoming a monk. His religious sentiments were unorthodox, however, and he kept their exact nature a secret. Hints of them appear in his writings.

Perhaps because of his own experiences Karl Wittgenstein's views on education were idiosyncratic. He had all his children taught at home, to a curriculum of his own devising, until they were 14 years old. The plan was not a success. When the time came for Wittgenstein to attend school he could not get into a *Gymnasium* (the equivalent of a grammar school) or even a *Realschule* (the equivalent of a secondary modern) in Vienna, because he had not attained the required standard. Eventually he passed the entrance examinations for a provincial *Realschule*, in Linz, where his exact contemporary Adolf Hitler was also a pupil. He spent three unhappy years there, leaving in 1906 without the qualifications for university entrance. This was a setback because he had conceived an ambition to study physics with Boltzmann in Vienna. However, he had always shown an aptitude for engineering, his father's profession; it is said that he demonstrated this in childhood by constructing a working model of a sewing-machine. His parents accordingly sent him to a technical college in Berlin-Charlottenburg.

Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein was not happy there either and left after three terms. He had, however, developed an interest in aeronautical engineering, then the newest branch of his prospective profession. He went to England in 1908 and spent the summer flying experimental kites at the Upper Atmosphere Research Station near Glossop in Derbyshire. In the autumn he entered as a student of aeronautical engineering at Manchester University.

Wittgenstein remained on the register at Manchester for two years, although for most of that time he was in Europe. By the end of his stay he was working on the design of a propeller with jet-reaction nozzles at the tips of its blades. He became intrigued by the mathematics of the design, then by mathematics itself, and finally by philosophical



2. Ludwig Wittgenstein with William Eccles, at the kite-flying station in Glossop, Derbyshire, summer of 1908, before becoming a student of aeronautical engineering at Manchester University.

questions about the foundations of mathematics. He asked acquaintances what he could read on this subject, and was directed to Bertrand Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*. The impact of this book on Wittgenstein was great. Hitherto his philosophical reading had been limited; he had read some of Schopenhauer's work but little besides. Russell's book introduced him to the latest developments in logic and philosophy, developments for which Russell himself and Gottlob Frege were responsible. Wittgenstein was excited by these ideas and decided to study them. In 1911 he contacted Frege at Jena University to show him an essay he had written and to seek his guidance. Frege advised him to study with Russell at Cambridge. Early in 1912, accordingly, Wittgenstein arrived in Cambridge and registered as a student.

Wittgenstein spent a mere five terms at Cambridge. Nevertheless it was an immensely formative time for him. He discussed logic and philosophy with Russell, who in a letter written at the time said of him '[he is] the ablest person I have come across since Moore'. The relationship between Wittgenstein and Russell quickly ceased to be that of pupil and teacher, and although Wittgenstein's friend David Pinsent remarked in his diary 'it is obvious that Wittgenstein is one of Russell's disciples and owes enormously to him', the influence was not all one-sided, as we shall later see.

Travel interested Wittgenstein greatly. In 1913, with Pinsent, he visited first Iceland and then Norway. He was attracted by Norway and returned later in 1913 on his own. In a remote corner of a farm near Skjolden he built himself a hut, and remained there, apart from a short visit to Vienna for Christmas, until the summer of 1914. He devoted his time to research in logic. G. E. Moore came on a visit, and while there, took notes of some of Wittgenstein's work. This work represented the earliest phase of progress towards Wittgenstein's first book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

When war broke out in 1914 Wittgenstein was at home in Vienna.

Within a few days he had enlisted in the Imperial Army. For most of the next two years he served as a mechanic with an artillery workshop unit on the Eastern Front, first in Cracow and then near Lwow. In 1916 he was sent to Olmütz for officer training. While there he met Paul Engelmann, and they discussed religion together; Engelmann subsequently published a record of their friendship which shows how much significance religious questions had for Wittgenstein at that time.

Wittgenstein rejoined his regiment in 1917 and served as an artillery observer. Early in 1918 he was posted to a mountain artillery regiment in the Tyrol on the southern front. When in November the Austro-Hungarian war effort collapsed, most of the Imperial Army in the south, Wittgenstein included, was taken into captivity by the Italians. Wittgenstein remained a prisoner near Monte Cassino until the later part of 1919.

The war had a significant effect on Wittgenstein in at least two ways. One was that it caused in him a profound change of personal outlook, particularly in connection with possessions and manner of life. Before the war he had been left a substantial fortune by his father. Prior to that he had lived as one might expect a generous millionaire's son to live. For example, it is reported that when one day he missed a train from Manchester to Liverpool he promptly set about trying to hire a private train, at that time something one could do if rich enough. Again, Pinsent records that on their trip to Iceland (for which Wittgenstein paid) they travelled so royally and with such a long train of attendants that they attracted the sardonic notice of other tourists. And it seems that before the war Wittgenstein was scrupulous in his choice of neckties. All this changed. Wittgenstein gave the whole of his fortune to his siblings – he took the view that since they were already rich more money would not corrupt them – and thenceforth lived with complete simplicity and lack of ornament, among other things rarely, if ever again, wearing a necktie.

The reasons for the change are not wholly clear. Possibly they relate to the fact that on the eastern front, at some time during the first half of 1915, Wittgenstein acquired and read Tolstoy's account of the Gospels, *The Gospels in Brief*, and was profoundly moved by it. (It seems that later, when he read the Gospels themselves and found them to be somewhat different, he had to be persuaded of their superiority over the Tolstoy version.) Also it may have been that the austerity and simplicity of army life proved congenial to him; he had shown traces of ascetic inclination before the war, as his Norwegian solitude suggests, and the experience of army ways may have confirmed that predilection. In any case, Wittgenstein's letters and recorded conversations show that he had a dark sense of what he took to be his own sinfulness, perhaps because of his homosexuality, and in consequence he was given to self-mortification. Whatever the reasons, when Wittgenstein left the prisoner-of-war camp in 1919 he had recognizably become the unusual, even eccentric, often prickly individual whose later years are so well described by the chief memoirists.

The second matter of significance was that when Wittgenstein was taken prisoner, he had in his big knapsack the manuscript of his book, the *Logische-Philosophische Abhandlung*, known to its English-language readers as the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (a name suggested for it by Moore in imitation of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*). Wittgenstein had been working on it throughout the war years, and it came to completion in the Monte Cassino camp, where by good fortune he met someone interested in logic with whom he could discuss his ideas.

During the early part of 1919, Wittgenstein managed to send letters to Russell from Italy, telling him of the *Tractatus*'s existence and even, through the influence of John Maynard Keynes, getting a copy of the manuscript to him. After his release Wittgenstein made a number of attempts to have the book published, all unsuccessful. In despair he left the matter to Russell, who eventually arranged publication by agreeing

to contribute an introduction. The *Tractatus* appeared in German in 1921 and in English translation in 1922. When Wittgenstein saw Russell's introduction he was angry, complaining that even though he and Russell had discussed the book line by line at a meeting in Holland in late 1919, Russell had misunderstood his views and misrepresented them.

The *Tractatus* was the only philosophical book Wittgenstein published in his lifetime. When it was finished he thought he had solved all the problems of philosophy, and consistently with that view gave up philosophical work and turned his attention elsewhere. He had decided while imprisoned to become a schoolteacher, and quickly put this decision into effect. He took a one-year course in primary school teaching, graduating in July 1920. That autumn he commenced as schoolmaster in Trattenbach, a village in the hills south of Vienna. He spent two increasingly unhappy years there before transferring to Puchberg-am-Schneeberg. Here, as at his first post, friction arose between Wittgenstein and some of the parents of his pupils, and within two years he transferred again, this time to Otterthal. While there he wrote and published a pronouncing dictionary for use in primary schools. Yet again trouble arose with parents; it seems that Wittgenstein's temper and the alleged severity of his disciplinary methods caused complaints. In April 1926, before official action could be taken over the complaints, Wittgenstein resigned and returned to Vienna.

The failure of his schoolmastering career depressed Wittgenstein intensely. He took a job as a gardener at a monastery in Hütteldorf outside Vienna, and for the third time contemplated becoming a monk (the first was just before the Great War, the second after his release from prison camp). He went so far as to make enquiries about joining an order; at the interview he was advised that his motives for wishing to become a monk were inappropriate ones, and that he would not find in monastic life what he sought.

From this despairing state Wittgenstein was rescued by two developments. One was that he became increasingly involved in the design and construction of a house for one of his sisters. At first he worked in collaboration with the architect, who was his friend Paul Engelmann, but soon assumed full control. Every detail of the house received his painstaking attention; heating radiators, for example, had to be exactly positioned in order not to disturb the symmetry of the rooms. From some the house has evoked high praise; in the opinion of G. H. von Wright it has the same 'static beauty' as the *Tractatus*. It is a building in an ornamented modern style, influenced by the work of Adolf Loos whom Wittgenstein admired.

Wittgenstein

The excursion into house building did much to restore Wittgenstein after his difficulties, and it disposed him favourably to the second development, which was that philosophers at Vienna University contacted him and invited him to have discussions. Wittgenstein agreed, and in consequence began slowly to resume philosophical work. He had in fact been in touch with philosophy during his schoolmastering years through the medium of a young English philosopher, F. P. Ramsey, who had assisted in making the English translation of the *Tractatus*, and who visited Wittgenstein in Austria on a number of occasions. But although Wittgenstein discussed the *Tractatus* with Ramsey in some detail he could not be persuaded by him to take up philosophy again. Now, however, he was sought out by Moritz Schlick, professor at Vienna University and founder of the 'Vienna Circle', an active group of philosophers and scientists who worked closely together from 1925 onwards. Schlick did not succeed in drawing Wittgenstein into the Circle itself, but he and various of his colleagues met Wittgenstein on an occasional basis. As Wittgenstein's philosophical interests revived he saw that his *Tractatus* did not, after all, solve the problems of philosophy. This was the stimulus to the development of his second and in many ways quite different phase of philosophical work.

An important result of Wittgenstein's contacts with Schlick and others of the Circle was his return to Cambridge in 1929. He had discovered that he could submit the *Tractatus* for the degree of Ph.D. after one further year's residence. He duly registered, with Ramsey as his supervisor and Russell and Moore as his examiners. Moore, who with others of the older generation disliked the Ph.D. degree, then a new import from the United States, is said to have written in his examiner's report: 'The *Tractatus* is a work of genius, but it otherwise satisfies the requirements for a Ph.D.' After the award of his degree, Wittgenstein set about securing a position at Cambridge. He applied for a five-year Fellowship at Trinity College, and with Russell's generous help, given in a report to the college on Wittgenstein's research proposals, was awarded it in 1930. He now entered upon his most fertile and productive philosophical phase, in which he wrote copiously.

When his Fellowship was drawing to a close, Wittgenstein decided to emigrate to the Soviet Union, then enjoying a certain vogue in Cambridge circles. As a passionate admirer of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky he had in any case long nourished an admiration for Russia. Accordingly he learned Russian and in 1935 visited the USSR with a friend. It is not clear why he reversed his decision to settle there, but after a year in his hut in Norway, he returned to Cambridge and in 1939 succeeded Moore as Professor of Philosophy. Before he could begin his professorial duties war broke out. Until 1944 Wittgenstein worked as a porter first at Guy's Hospital in London and then at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle upon Tyne. He had taken British nationality and was therefore not subject to internment.

In the two academic years 1945/46 and 1946/47 Wittgenstein lectured in Cambridge. Life as a don was highly distasteful to him, particularly in its detail; he found, for example, High Table conversation so disagreeable that he avoided dining there. At the end of 1947 he resigned his Chair and went to Ireland, living for part of the time in a cabin on the Galway coast, and later in a Dublin hotel. Here he

completed the major work of his later philosophy, the *Philosophical Investigations*. His health was poor; after a short visit to the United States in 1949 he discovered that he had cancer. From then until his death in 1951 he lived with various friends in Oxford and Cambridge. He continued to make notes of his philosophical ideas, whenever his health permitted, until close to the end.

Wittgenstein

There are vivid portraits of Wittgenstein in memoirs and reminiscences. Most of these were written by people much influenced by Wittgenstein, and consequently do not offer impartial views of him. Nevertheless, when taken together with the few more objective depictions that exist, and Wittgenstein's own letters, they provide a dramatic picture of the man and his character. In them Wittgenstein appears as a powerful, restless, dominant individual, an intense and complicated man, to whom people responded either with adulation or aversion. The chief memoirists came to know Wittgenstein when they were young students and he was nearing fifty years of age, which may in part explain their hero-worship. They describe him as about five feet, six inches tall, with a transfixing gaze and a fierce, uncompromising manner. Almost everyone who has left a record of encounters with Wittgenstein comments on the power of his personality, and mentions the way people fell under his spell as if mesmerized by the intensity of his expression and the striking gestures he made when discoursing.

Wittgenstein taught by thinking aloud before a group of students in his rooms at Trinity. They knew him to be famous because of the *Tractatus*, yet during those seminars he was repudiating many of that book's central tenets and working out a series of new philosophical ideas in their place. They therefore felt they were witnesses to something important. And not just important but dramatic; it was Wittgenstein's style of teaching to struggle with his problems before them, at times crying out 'I'm stupid today!' and at other times sitting in intense, prolonged silences. Remarks from students, if they did not meet his



3. A portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein in Swansea, communicating the power of his gaze and intensity of his personality.

approval, evoked crushing replies. The ordeal of Wittgenstein's classes did not suit everyone's taste, but so profound an impression did they leave on some that they were unable to think of philosophy in any but Wittgenstein's way thereafter.

The picture of Wittgenstein which has him seated in a deckchair in his sparsely furnished Trinity rooms, conducting his classes in the manner just described, is in a way an unrepresentative one, for Wittgenstein spent only a small part of his life teaching in Cambridge. He was, in truth, a nomad, a rootless wanderer, trailing from one country to another and one place to another, varying longer stays with many restless shorter travels, living alone except when visiting or journeying with friends. His sojourns in one place rarely lasted more than a few years. This was paralleled by the number of different occupations which circumstance or his own choice led him to take up: student, soldier, primary school teacher, gardener, architect, gypsy, don – none of which appears to have given him satisfaction. His was therefore a fragmented and displaced life, and, it seems, not often or for long a happy one.

Wittgenstein

To some people Wittgenstein showed kindness. Before the 1914–18 war he made an anonymous and generous gift of money to two poets. He was capable of close friendships, and although he was fiercely demanding as a friend, most of those who had this relation to him became deeply attached and loyal. He had some particularly close relationships with several of his pupils. To others, however, Wittgenstein could be cruel and dismissive. Some memoirists – those who were not disciples – speak of him as capable of arrogance, intolerance, and rudeness. He caused anxiety among the families of some of his pupils because of the strength of his sway over them. He always sought to discourage people from pursuing academic careers; several gifted pupils abandoned philosophy at his insistence, one of them – to Wittgenstein's satisfaction – spending the rest of his life employed in a canning factory.

One neglected consideration which may go towards an understanding both of Wittgenstein's character and of his philosophy is the nature of his formal education. The sketch given of it above shows that after being taught at home under his father's eccentric regime he had three years at school followed by short stays at various institutions, ranging from a Berlin technical college to Cambridge University. Apart from his teacher's certificate, Wittgenstein's only academic qualification was the Cambridge Ph.D., gained at the age of forty. He was by no means a scholar; he did not study the classic philosophers carefully (most of them he did not study at all) and he actively discouraged his students from doing so.

In contrast to this scattered and piecemeal education, there is the fact that Wittgenstein's early years were spent in a highly cultured home. In addition to musical interests he acquired several languages, and later added others, including Latin, Norwegian, and Russian. Undoubtedly, he took an interest as a young man in the flourishing intellectual life of Vienna. An indication of this is that he read some of Schopenhauer's philosophy, then fashionable among Viennese intellectuals and artists (one of Mahler's gifts to the young Bruno Walter was a complete set of Schopenhauer's works). This mixture, with on the one hand Wittgenstein's fragmentary formal education and on the other his cultured and patrician home background, may in some part explain the unusual character of his mind and interests. Perhaps unorthodox educations foster originality; or it may be that native originality is stifled by too much formal schooling. Whatever the case, Wittgenstein was not the product of a typical education, and the character of his work bears testimony to that fact. It gives him another distinction: he may well be the last considerable figure in philosophy not to have followed a strict and orthodox academic regime as a condition of being taken seriously by the philosophical community.