

Book Review
Wittgenstein in Exile

by James C. Klagge, Cambridge: MA, MIT Press, 2011

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The work of James Klagge is an interesting operation of exploring Wittgenstein's philosophy. It assumes exile as the favourite point of view of looking at Wittgenstein's life and work as two sides of the same coin. The dimension of exile here is encompassed in its all manifold facets: existential, geographical, historical and intellectual. Thus Klagge draws a picture of Wittgenstein intertwining biographical moments with the nature of his philosophical work. He seems to suggest that we may get an authentic understanding of his philosophy by engaging with Wittgenstein as a distant "other", namely by seeing Wittgenstein as a spirit that felt himself as stranger within its time.

The first chapter, *No one Understand me*, describes Wittgenstein's intellectual exile. Here Klagge accurately portrays Wittgenstein's worry of *not be understood*: it was indeed a repeated obsession of Wittgenstein that his thoughts would have failed to hit upon the people who were coming across his thought. His two main works, the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, do reflect this concern. A similar fear seems to have followed Wittgenstein even in his later philosophical activity. What interestingly emerges by Klagge's descriptions is Wittgenstein's perpetual idiosyncrasy of showing his work in front of a large public: the restricted number of students at his lectures and the few people truly acquainted of his work speak in favour of Wittgenstein's refusal of talking in front of a broad audience. Moreover, looking back at the genesis of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Klagge presents Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a kind of "esoteric" work (Klagge, 2013a). He suggests that even "the two voices" of the *Investigations* would hint at "a dialog" of Wittgenstein with himself that, according to Klagge, would further indicate his difficulty of sharing his work publicly. Even though

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it may be questionable thinking of Wittgenstein's later work as *esoteric*, Klagge's description sheds light on important biographical aspects often overlooked in regard of the background of his later philosophy.

Chapters 2, *Can we Understand Wittgenstein?* and 3, *What is Understanding?* focus on some of the methods of the examination of language exposed by Wittgenstein within the *Investigations*. Drawing on the influence that Spengler had had on Wittgenstein, Klagge describes the historical background of his time, in which Wittgenstein thought about himself as an exile; namely, as living in an era of a declining civilization where he thought his ideas could not flourish. Wittgenstein's concepts as *family resemblances*, *language games*, *seeing aspects* as *seeing as* are explained in light of his criticism of Platonic essentialism. Klagge takes these concepts as similar to the spirit of Goethe's morphological investigation of nature – as presented in Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plant*: the spirit of the *Faustian era*, in which Spengler places Goethe's temperament, contrasts with the spirit of the ancient civilization of which Socrates's attitude, at least in early Plato's dialogues, would represent a sort of pre-modern prejudice of the scientific spirit of precision. Wittgenstein's critique of both the method of science and Platonic essentialism would be representative of this transitional passage from an era of "culture" to "civilization", in Spengler's terms. Thus, Klagge places the reception of Wittgenstein's ideas in such a difference of temperament. He writes: "The most important point is that the diagnosis and the treatment that Wittgenstein finds are attitudinal and not cognitive. They have to do with our needs and the direction of our attention. It is possible to say that the difference between Socrates and Wittgenstein is a spiritual difference, and not simply an intellectual one" (p. X). Therefore Wittgenstein's philosophy is seen as contrasting not only intellectual tendencies, but as having a temperament alien to "the darkness of this time" – as Wittgenstein himself wrote in the preface of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Further on Klagge writes: "We can criticize Wittgenstein's presentation of his ideas, as himself does, but we have to recognize what it is in *us* that leads us to be unreceptive to those ideas" (p. X).

Wittgenstein's critique of language is further analysed in chapter 7, *Philosophy and Science*, in connection with science. Here Klagge remarkably distinguishes between science and "scientism". This distinction is often overlooked in regard of Wittgenstein's relation to science: namely, if Wittgenstein's attitude towards science was part of its alienation from the modern world, that does not amount to say that he fully rejected science as a

form of understanding as such. His knowledge of physical theories of Boltzmann, Hertz, Maxwell and Einstein proves the opposite. He was rather hostile to the idea of progress of the modern spirit of “civilization” that excludes other forms of understanding. In the draft for a preface to a book in 1930 Wittgenstein writes: “Our civilization is characterised by the word progress [...] Typically it constructs [...] And even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as and in itself. For me on the contrary clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves. I am not interested in constructing buildings, so much as having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings. So I am aiming at something different than are scientists & my thoughts move differently from theirs” (Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 7). Wittgenstein was contrasting then the tendency in philosophy of adopting methods of science by so reducing philosophy as a form of scientism. Thus, assuming Wittgenstein’s idea of “clarity as an end in itself” Klagge takes philosophy responsible for how science changes meanings of words by introducing new concepts. Klagge attributes to Wittgenstein what he calls an *insulation thesis* for which “science is not relevant to the resolution of philosophical problems” but philosophy either is powerless for what regards the resolution of scientific problems. All that philosophy can is looking at language, calling it critically into question to understand how scientific discoveries affect the use of our concepts, to the extent that either they may extend their meanings, by so completely changing concepts itself; or if it is the case that they do not affect the meanings of our old concepts at all. Although Klagge takes the insulation thesis as widespread throughout Wittgenstein’s philosophical career, he focuses more on his later work: here *criteria* have a central role to understand how meanings of concepts can change. By following Wittgenstein Klagge argues that “any change in the criteria – that fix the meaning of a concept – constitutes a change in the concept [...] Changing the criteria changes the subject” (p. X). That is the case of mental and psychological concepts, which Klagge deals with from chapter 7 to chapter 9, *Science and Mind*. Klagge applies Wittgenstein’s examination of language to changes that neurosciences may operate on the meaning of mental concepts like pain sensations. Here Klagge isolates two different approaches to this problem. The first is *eliminative materialism theories*: if neurosciences can radically change the meanings of mental concepts, it will substitute them with concepts that will explain mental and psychological phenomena in chemical or physical terms. That is the case when our ordinary mental concepts can be

replaced by *technical* ones. As Klagge writes: “If our ordinary notions of mental states are eliminated, as predicted by eliminative materialists, then the problem will disappear, because the concepts that gave rise to it will have disappeared (and any parallel problem regarding the new concepts can be resolved by direct inspection of people brain’s)” (p. X). That is a possibility that according to Klagge Wittgenstein’s himself did not exclude: “Perhaps the concepts of such a language would be more suitable for understanding psychology than the concepts of our language” (Wittgenstein, 1986, §577). Nevertheless, I think here Klagge is misquoting Wittgenstein, because in the context of §577 Wittgenstein seems to referring to concepts of psychology more in a broad sense, rather than to scientific psychology as such or – as Klagge does – to neuroscience in particular. However, in another place Wittgenstein criticizes the eliminative materialist hypothesis in a way similar to Klagge’s way of rejecting it. In *Zettel* §611 Wittgenstein writes: “The prejudice in favour of psychophysical parallelism is a fruit of primitive interpretations of our concepts. For if one allows a causality between psychological phenomena which is not mediated physiologically, one thinks one is professing belief in a gaseous mental entity”. Therefore, on the other hand Klagge presents the possibility of there being *identity theories* according to which meanings of ordinary language or folk psychology’s concepts can remain the same in spite of neuroscientific progress. That is expressed by Wittgenstein’s saying that “we can’t alter the mark of concept without altering the concepts itself” (Wittgenstein, 2005, p. 182) *but* “we don’t [always] use language according to this strict rules either” (Wittgenstein, 1986, p.25). That is the case of words like “desire” in regard of the work of psychoanalysis. As Klagge suggests: “Should we, under pressure of Freud’s work, for example, allow there to be *unconscious* desires? Should *those* – whatever we call them – count as desires too? But by now, if not in Wittgenstein’s time, it is widely accepted in society that this makes sense. On what ground could one insist the unconscious desires is not a desire? To hold that the concept of desire *could not apply* to what Freud was talking about seems excessively *a priori*” (p. X). That is a form of what Klagge calls *compatibilism*, that is, a kind of *bilingualism* in Klagge’s words, for which both concepts of neuroscience and folk psychology can coexist for different practical purposes.

However, Klagge takes Wittgenstein not as to fully reject the position of *materialist eliminativism* for the sake of *compatibilism* as such; but in face of Wittgenstein’s criticism he is rather to ask “what kind of life we want to live in

face of progresses of science? Since science changes our language, our conceptual life, and therefore the ways we relate to reality, how does it affect the way we decide to live?" That is the case when Klagge writes: "The only philosophical resolutions of puzzles is by Wittgenstein's method, to which science can lend no assistance in any form. Wittgenstein articulates this point carefully in a manuscript (February 9, 1948; MS 137, 15a):

One must just take the concept of seeing as one finds it; not want to refine it. – But really, why not. – Because it is not our problem to change it, to introduce (as science does) one adapted for some purpose or other, but to understand it; on order not produce a false conception of it.

And further on he adds: "Whether one employs current measures or advanced neuroscientific ones, however, it is not obvious that humankind will be better off by pursuing neuroscience. If compatibilism is true, do people want science to continue a policy that, by eliminativists' own admission threatens rational agency? To put the issue in Wittgenstein's terms: which form of life do we want to live in? Reflecting on this very question during his Lent term, 1939, lectures, Wittgenstein is reported as saying: "Although is conceivable that if we had a mechanism that would show all this, we would change our terminology – and say, "He's as much compelled as if a policemen shoved him". We'd give up this distinction then; and if we did, it would be very sorry". Therefore, I think the way Klagge takes Wittgenstein's methods of clarifying language is epistemological as much as ethical, to the extent that it also suggests a moral reflection. The case of medicine is a clear example. The purposes of medicine of "predict the course of suffering, prevent the suffering from spreading to others, and cure the suffering" stand beside the necessity of comforting the sufferers, of "acknowledging the humanity in a man" (Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 1), of having "an attitude towards a soul" (Wittgenstein, 1986 p. 178) as Wittgenstein would say. If our concepts might be significantly altered – as the hypothesis of eliminative materialism argues – or if they are compatible with those we already have, that cannot change the meaning of fundamental attitudes like comforting. That is something that Wittgenstein reminded to Drury when he was studying psychiatry. Remembering his experiences at the Guy's Hospital and in Newcastle as an orderly during the World War II, he said in 1948 to Drury: "Always take a chair and sit down by the patient's bedside: do not stand at the end of the bed in a dictatorial attitude. Let your patients feel that they have time to talk with

you”. So here Klagge fully captures this ethical aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought: “To the extent that traditional concepts of health care embody a concern for comfort and suffering, their whole purpose will not be subsumed by the concepts of scientific medicine. If they are nevertheless replaced by the concepts of scientific medicine, something valuable may be lost” (p. X).

At any rate, Klagge deals with a more ethical aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought in chapter 10, *Das erlösende Wort*. The title represents Wittgenstein’s attitude on which Klagge focuses: Klagge provides a collection of recurrences – from Wittgenstein’s secret war diaries to his later manuscripts – in which Wittgenstein was speaking of looking for the *erlösende Wort*: he points out that this expression has been mistranslated by E. Anscombe with “key word” rather than as “the redeemer word” as it correctly should have been. If in his early work, especially in the *Tractatus*, the “redeemer word” was a claim of silence, it nonetheless has an important role in his later work. Regarding clarity as a philosophical goal *per se* Wittgenstein warned us against the hazard of not acknowledging when in philosophy clarity is achieved. Thus, the *erlösende Wort* requires, according to Klagge, Wittgenstein’s temperament of realising when to stop, namely of “suppressing the urge to explain, justify” on pain of distorting clarity – as Wittgenstein himself often repeated: “It’s important in philosophy to know when to stop – when not to ask a question”; “The difficulty here is: to stop” (Wittgenstein, 1967, §314); “The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to”; (Wittgenstein, 1986, §133). “If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.” (Wittgenstein, 1986, §217). Klagge explores this attitude of Wittgenstein in three different trajectories: by addressing it to Wittgenstein’s approach to *Divine Command Theories*, i.e., his ideas on moral imperative and religious beliefs; the different attitudes of Alyosha and Ivan of *The Karamazov Brothers* and his interests towards the Mormons. Although Klagge captures important aspects of Wittgenstein’s attitude towards religious beliefs, in some passages it gives the impression of attributing such an attitude of Wittgenstein as something inaccessible to others devoid of his temperament. That is the case when Klagge writes: “So too with the *erlösende* word – what works may well depend on the person the person’s state of mind” (p. X) or “The *erlösende* word does not work in the face of all temptations – in all traditions – and can only be effectively spoke under the right circumstances. It may not easily be

understood by us” (p. X). But if this is the case, Klagge’s words here sound misleading. We won’t get the importance of what Wittgenstein aimed to convey, namely the fact that acknowledging the *erlösende* word is an attitude which as to work as reminding us how to improve what Wittgenstein called “an attitude towards a soul”, no matter in what circumstances or state of mind we might be, neither who is speaking or to whom we are speaking to. Knowing when to stop is so an attitude that has to be cultivated rather than taken for granted or as spoken on behalf of a limited number of people who shared (or might be able to share) Wittgenstein’s temperament. If that is a matter of temperament, Wittgenstein’s teaching of when to stop is a task that no one can carry out before us; rather it urges us to acknowledge *the humanity in a man* behind his religious beliefs or his moral imperatives. The very fact that Wittgenstein spoke of the *erlösende* word as the need of knowing when to stop that is too something we can get from him in regard of religious beliefs and others’ moral imperatives. That is even more true if in ethics we are to adopt a realist view that is of pluralism rather than simply of relativism. If this is what we can get from Wittgenstein, it does not mean that we have to share his temperament and his exile full blown.

However, Klagge himself seems to be aware of this in other places. In the last chapter, *Wittgenstein in the Twenty-First Century*, he describes how Wittgenstein’s teachings have been undertaken by other philosophers until today in different and autonomous directions. He refers to the cognitive scientists Eleanor Rosch and Carolyn Mervis, “who undertook empirical investigations of categorizations using the structuring of Wittgenstein’s family resemblances”, to Putnam’s mental experiments about construal of mental states in regard of meaning and to constitutivism’s theories like Quine and J. Kim’s concepts of supervenience. These are meant to be a sign, in Klagge’s view, of how Wittgenstein’s ideas can be of a great help within present debates, despite the fact that “something was obstructive in his temperament – [despite] his own difficulties of engaging with people” (p. X). Klagge traces such a difficulty back to his condition of exile explored throughout his book. How much his exile influenced his temperament is difficult to say, no more than judging in light of other relevant factors such as his personal considerations of “how best to live” and “what was most important for him”. I do think these considerations, often repeated by Wittgenstein himself, can be part of his temperament as much as his exile, without which his ideas would not have had the impact they still have on philosophy.

At any rate, if we accept Wittgenstein's exile as a key to approach his philosophy – as presented by Klagge's book – we should also resist to the temptation of not being much caught in Wittgenstein's temperament, if that might obstruct any possible cultivation of our own temperament. Once again, that is the best reminder that Wittgenstein has to give us. I read in this way one of Klagge's final remarks: "No doubt exiles have difficulty engaging with those around them. But that does not mean those around them have to suffer from the same difficulties. Perhaps Wittgenstein helps us to properly appreciate the differences there are between people and not to underestimate the difficulties. But in this century we hardly need reminding of that".

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