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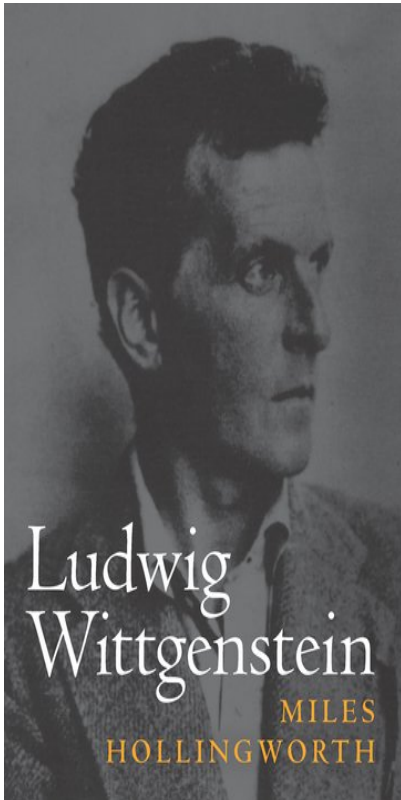
Review Essays

Author Interviews

About

HOME

[Link to Publisher's Website](#)



Ludwig Wittgenstein



Miles Hollingworth

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Review

“We are already deep into the experiment of it. We are deep into seeing what happens when Wittgenstein’s philosophy is allowed to have its way with a book about Wittgenstein” (34). The idea that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy has something fundamental to say about the nature of writing and the practices of philosophy animates Miles Hollingworth’s new book, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*. There is much to say for this premise. If one judges Wittgenstein’s approach to philosophy to be valuable, then perhaps it should affect how one philosophizes.

Inspired by this insight, Hollingworth’s latest book is a “biography” of Wittgenstein; though not as the genre is conventionally understood—as a chronological narrative of a person’s life, with themes that draw together the elements of that life. In that respect, this book would sit uneasily on the shelf next to Brian McGuinness’ groundbreaking, painstaking study of Wittgenstein’s early life *Young Ludwig: Wittgenstein’s Life, 1889-1921* (Clarendon Press, 1988) or Ray Monk’s monumental *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (Penguin Books, 1990). Instead, Hollingworth presents—in five chapters—a wide ranging collection of remarks on disparate topics with overlapping themes that relay the existential themes he believes are critical to grasping Wittgenstein’s philosophy and life.

Approaching this book is challenging due to its writing structure and style of argumentation. The chapters consist of a series of unlinked remarks or episodes, frequently eschewing the overt development of a single thesis; the themes of the book crisscross the chapters. It is only after reading through—and across—the book that the idiosyncratic elements, as puzzle pieces, begin to reveal the image which they have been presenting all along. Hollingworth sees in Wittgenstein a fundamental concern with God and the self, motivated by two dynamics that threaten subjectivity: the looming and increasing mechanization and quantification of all that matters to human beings, and the reduction in sexuality of a person to their body, to a biological mechanism. With its complicated structure and intersecting episodes on sexuality, Christian faith, and the confinement of humanity within a worldview characterized by scientism, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* is an aesthetic performance using biographical and philosophical materials; discovering the book’s main themes through comparing these disparate episodes requires the free play of contemplation which one employs when encountering artworks.

The forms of argument used in the text are unconventional. At times, Hollingworth makes sweeping assertions about a topic, some of which may be very surprising or controversial; it is argument not through marshaling evidence but by provoking the audience into assessing, and perhaps accepting, the truth in those controversial statements. The first chapter, “On the Spirit of a Man,” begins with the following statement: “[e]verything that Ludwig Wittgenstein ever wrote was about him and God, and everyone has always known this—Except that at exactly the same time it has had to be treated like philosophy’s great secret” (1). This claim shows a great deal about Hollingworth’s rhetorical approach: a blanket generalization about the topic, followed by another about the audience, and then, again, by an assertion of psychological compulsion on the part of that audience. Hollingworth suggests that philosophy operates by compulsion, and that Wittgenstein tried to think his way out of this confinement.

In Hollingworth’s reading, Wittgenstein found both mechanization and sexuality threatening to his subjectivity. In pursuing a reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy and life through this dual lens, numerous episodes recur through the text that are concerned with biography, knowledge and truth, science and technology, good and evil, Christianity, and sexual identity. For those interested in meta-biographical reflection, Hollingworth’s remarks throughout the book on what is at stake in biographical writing, and how it can, perhaps ironically, reduce its subject to an object are especially recommended.

There were many times while reading this book that this reviewer wondered about the rhetorical value of hyperbole. A provocative remark may bring to mind associations that otherwise would have eluded. In *Wittgenstein*, Hollingworth sees a radical criticism of all forms of knowledge-gathering, and indeed, of writing itself. My sense is that Hollingworth’s distillation of Wittgenstein’s relevance to epistemology and writing comes from the notion of grammar, and how it can hide its own idiosyncrasy and contingency from view. Following this reading of Wittgenstein, the task of philosophy would then be to identify this grammatical confinement in the hope that doing so might free one’s mind. If instances of knowledge-gathering or writing do not exactly fit this diagnosis, one is missing the overarching tendency, distracted by exceptions to what is otherwise “always” true.

Perhaps, but then again, for a book on a philosopher who famously wrote in the preface to the *Tractatus*, “[w]hat can be said at all can be said clearly” (Pears and McGuinness, 1961), the use of hyperbole seems unharmonious with themes of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Hollingworth’s tendency to generalize about “the Western intellectual

tradition,” “Western knowledge,” “the age,” “language, truth, and logic,” is not in tune with Wittgenstein’s admonitions to notice the differences in instances of language and resist assuming that what is the case in one context must be the case in another.

Various episodes in the book are relevant to an audience of religious studies scholars. Early in the book, Hollingworth envisions undergraduate study of religion as being strictly comparative, scientific, and uncritical about the category of “religion” (xvi). While there are textbooks and institutions in societies that reify “religion” and perpetuate the “world religions” paradigm, the example omits a genealogical study of the term “religion”—sometimes influenced by Wittgenstein’s philosophy—which has been a mainstay in religious studies scholarship and education in recent times.

Wittgenstein’s relationships to Judaism and Christianity also appear in the text. Christianity looms large over the book. This is fitting as Wittgenstein had a nominally Catholic upbringing and was preoccupied with elements of Christianity across much of his philosophical life—for example, his reading of St. Augustine, Søren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and Leo Tolstoy. Indeed, Augustine appears frequently as a counterpart to Wittgenstein. Hollingworth also writes about Wittgenstein’s own complicated relationship with his Jewish heritage, especially in remarks made from the 1930s (84-85).

While Ludwig Wittgenstein is an aesthetic performance, drawing on philosophical and biographical raw materials, Hollingworth’s form of argumentation has drawbacks when it comes to persuasion. Additional care, with respect to generalizations, concern with evidence-based argumentation, and attention to what might not be clear to a reader would have made the argument more effective. An exception to this tendency of argumentation is found in “Thirty-Six Facts as Cards” (107-121), with this section juxtaposing a collection of discrete moments from Wittgenstein’s life—from childhood to death—each element in the sequence displaying a juncture in Wittgenstein’s personal and/or philosophical development. This reviewer was left wishing that more of the book had embraced this indirect, yet evidence-based, style of presentation.

Ultimately, a book should be assessed with an eye to its own objectives and the extent to which it achieves them. This book displays an inheritance from Wittgenstein’s philosophy and life that is different than many other interpretations. Hollingworth has chosen to write the text in a way that is inherently self-conscious, and one can see how this style of writing could emerge from studies of Wittgenstein’s own self-criticism and forms of writing. It is good to be reminded that there are many possible ways in which a philosopher’s life and work may be received. Of course, that acknowledgement works both ways, and perhaps not all readers will conclude that this book has been successful in allowing “Wittgenstein’s philosophy to have its way with [this] book about Wittgenstein” (34).

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About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Miles Hollingworth is the author of several books, including *Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography* (OUP 2013). He has received the Jerwood Award for Non-Fiction from the Royal Society of Literature and the Elizabeth Longford Scholarship from the Society of Authors.

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