

Ludwig Gets a Job: A Short Story

OK, let's suppose Wittgenstein went on the job market in 1929 as he was finishing up his graduate work, using TLP as his dissertation. For his job talks during spring, 1929, he used "Some Remarks on Logical Form". He was examined on TLP by Moore and Russell, and granted the Ph.D. degree from Cambridge in June. We'll assume he had a very strong file, what with TLP and "RLF", and letters from Russell, Moore, and Ramsey.

However, most places were bothered by the gap from 1919 to 1929. "Granted he wrote a great book, but look--he's been out of the profession for a decade, teaching elementary school, working as a gardener, and as an architect!" And private phone calls to members of the Vienna Circle didn't provide too much reassurance: Apparently Wittgenstein could be very erratic, talking logic and philosophy one moment, and turning his back to read poetry the next.

No one outside Cambridge was willing to take a chance on him, so he ended up staying on with a tenure-track appointment at Cambridge. It was a great place to be, but it was a bit embarrassing having to stay at his home department. Anyway, he started with degree in hand.

So he comes up for his 4th year review in the Spring, 1933. Teaching looks fine. He has taught (what Cambridge considered to be) a full load--1 course per term. And he's even taken on an extra course--for mathematicians--during 1932-33. We won't get into his teaching reviews, except to say that they were mixed. As for research, he got RLF published in a good place (Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society), though it was pretty short. Of course there's TLP, but that was his dissertation, and they were looking for a trajectory of new work beyond that. LW has been giving some presentations: The only one outside of Cambridge was a talk on generality and infinity in mathematics in July, 1929, to the Mind Association-Aristotelian Society. But he's also given a talk on ethics to the Heretics Club (November, 1929), a talk on the Foundations of Mathematics to the Trinity Mathematical Society (May, 1930), and a talk to the Cambridge Moral Science Club on Evidence for the Existence of Other Minds (January, 1930). Fortunately, G.E. Moore had been sitting in on all of his classes to this point, and though he can't exactly "follow" all of it, it strikes him as "quite important". LW gets by the 4th year review with a warning, that he needs to step up the publications.

The next year LW's plan to keep teaching the extra class to the mathematicians gets changed. A week or so into the term he decides he needs to do something about publication, so he cancels that class--or rather, he tells most of the students to stop coming to class and he invites 5 to come to special sessions where he'll dictate his ideas to them, and they will write them

down for him. He tells the dismissed students that they'll get a copy of the notes at the end of the year! Needless to say, this did not go down really well with them, but what could they do. So, starting in November LW began dictating 2-3 times a week for the rest of the year. At the end of the year he gets the department to print up 15 copies for him, bound in blue. Other faculty members raised some questions about the ethics of using students this way, but they were at least glad to have something in hand.

LW's stuff goes out for tenure review in the summer of 1934. RLF is the only uncontroversial item included in the dossier. There is discussion about whether to include TLP, but that does not get included because it is simply his unrevised dissertation. There is also discussion about whether to include the Blue Book, and it ultimately gets included, with the explanation that he will be sending it out to publishers "soon".

There is some debate about whom to choose as outside reviewers. Of course, Frege died 9 years ago, so he's out. Schlick is considered, though some have reservations about asking a European who is not familiar with the Anglo-American norms for writing letters of evaluation. Russell is no longer at Cambridge, so he is considered, though LW is no longer on good terms with him. In fact, when asked if there were any people he'd rather not have assess his case, LW already had used up his blackballs when he wrote "all of the philosophers at Oxford". This was unfortunate, because he could probably have gotten a pretty good letter from Ryle. In any case they finally asked Russell, Whitehead (who was now at Harvard and had, unbeknownst to them, become a Process philosopher), Susan Stebbing, Schlick, and Karl Popper, a hot-shot young philosopher who had just published "The Logic of Scientific Discovery."

LW was turned down for tenure. He got mixed support from his own department, but the dean was unwilling to let TLP count for his case, since it was prior to his appointment. Apparently the letters were a problem too. Confidentiality precludes knowing much, but things seep out. Apparently Russell's letter included the line: "Wittgenstein...seems to have grown tired of serious thinking and to have invented a doctrine which would make such an activity unnecessary." That was deadly. The contents of Whitehead's letter have never actually been decoded. Strong letters from Schlick and Stebbing would have probably outweighed Russell's, but then there was Popper's letter. Fortunately LW never knew Popper was asked to write a letter.

LW's negative tenure decision was announced in early 1935. But he must have known which way the wind was blowing, since he began taking Russian lessons in 1934. In September of 1935 he visited the USSR to see if he could get work there doing something other than philosophy. He actually got 2 job offers to teach philosophy there (their standards were notoriously low), but he was sick of philosophy and turned them down. No other offers were

forthcoming. He taught his Cambridge classes in 1935-36, finishing out his 7 years.

LW went off to live alone in Norway in August, 1936. He died of hypochondria exacerbated by a bad conscience in 1937. (Actually, even if Cambridge had granted him tenure, it's doubtful he would have survived post-tenure review.)

James C. Klagge
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