

Philosophy and Life

Some of you may have watched the moving PBS series on “The War,” by Ken Burns. Our local PBS affiliate in Blacksburg took advantage of the interest in that series to re-air a regional 1991 documentary called “Through Their Eyes,” in which soldiers from Southwestern Virginia were interviewed about their experiences in World War II. One of the men interviewed had married late in life and had had a son in the late 1970s. He volunteered that during the Vietnam War he had been “critical of those who fled to Canada—very critical. But now I’m not so sure what I think.” The interviewer asked him what had changed his mind. He thought for a moment and then replied: “Having a son of my own.”

I can well imagine this veteran during the Vietnam era. He was probably much like my Great-Uncle Charlie, a Chicagoan who cheered the Chicago police as they beat anti-war demonstrators at the Democratic National Convention in 1968. Charlie had a son too, but Charlie had not been to war himself. At that time, this veteran had been to war, but did not have a son. Somehow, for the veteran, knowing what war was like and identifying with his own son were experiences that combined to change his mind.

The veteran doubtless had had reasons why avoiding the draft was wrong, but those reasons lost their force for him. Were they outweighed by better, contrary reasons? We philosophers might imagine that they were: If one position wins out over another in someone’s mind, then there must have been better reasons for the position that won out. This man changed his assessment of the reasons. But if we tried to track the reasons given, and their shifting weights, we’d be missing out on something important—the experiences this man had, which

caused him to view the reasons in different ways. The experiences aren't themselves reasons, and they can't justify a conclusion.

Well, you might be thinking, that's how it is with ordinary folks—but what about philosophers? Surely, if you are assessing the position of a philosopher, you can focus on the reasons. The experiences might be interesting to a biographer, but they have nothing to do with philosophy. Philosophy stands or falls by reason. The rest is, or should be, irrelevant. To be provocative, I'll call this the Rationalistic Fallacy. Like G.E. Moore's Naturalistic Fallacy, it's not really a fallacy, in the technical sense. But I want to say it's a mistake—one to which philosophers are readily prone.

There's a related position, which I do *not* want to label as a fallacy. That's the view that a person's life and experiences are irrelevant to deciding the *truth* of the views they hold. In fact, in this case, the fallacy goes the other way. If I claim that you are wrong about something, and in doing so point out that you are a big fat hypocrite—that's what we call an *ad hominem* fallacy: claiming a position is wrong because the person who holds it has some objectionable characteristic. Here we need to carefully separate the position from the one who holds it—the message from the messenger. Fair enough.

But there is much more to philosophy than deciding whether a certain view is right or wrong. In fact, it is widely acknowledged in philosophy that a crucial preliminary to evaluating a position is understanding it—we can't say whether a position is right or wrong until we know what the position is. Socrates is famous for saying “a good man cannot be harmed” (Apology 41d). Is he right? Well, it all depends on what he *means*. Certainly a good man doesn't walk around protected by a force-field—like the robot on “Lost in Space”! And often we cannot know

what someone means by a position without knowing some things about the person who has formulated it.

Perhaps one would wish to take the view that a philosophical position is like a Fregean Thought: an abstract object that exists in a third realm—neither physical nor psychological, a sort of weaving of Platonic Forms. In this case the thought, or position, exists on its own, quite independent of the one who formulates it. But even if such abstract thoughts exist, the question remains as to *which* abstract thought Socrates was expressing by *his* claim that a good man cannot be harmed. If an abstract thought cannot be ambiguous, then there must be several such thoughts that could be expressed by that sentence, and it remains to determine which one Socrates had in mind, so to speak. So, even if it is possible to divorce thoughts from those who think them, a discussion of a given thought will require us to somehow identify that thought, which will bring us back to a thinker after all.

Furthermore, we are often interested, not only in a certain thought that a philosopher endorses, but where and how that thought fits, or does not fit, into the larger constellation of thoughts that philosopher holds. Only in this way can we tell *what is at stake* in that thought, for that philosopher.

So far, I have proceeded at quite an abstract level, so let me come down to earth and offer three cases to examine in more detail.

1) Plato's *Republic*:

One of the most striking things about Plato's *Republic*—both the book and the society sketched therein—is how much attention is paid to safety—both safety from external attack, and security from internal dissension. A student reading this for the first time is apt to find all this concern

quite implausible. Why would these things be valued so much more than individual freedom? Surely, as Popper insisted, this is a closed and objectionable society.

But isn't it important to know that Plato lived through the Peloponnesian Wars—not only the external battles with Sparta, but the internal factional strife between democracy and oligarchy? Only by knowing the horrific history of Athens during this time can we appreciate the values that Plato built into his *Republic*. Furthermore, this reminds us that there is no such thing as a utopia per se. All societies exist in a historical and political context, populated by people with a certain history and psychology. Unless we know what Plato thought he was working with, and working for, we are really unable to see what he is offering to us, and what things were at stake for him in that offering. To an opponent who questioned Plato's repressive society, it would be natural for Plato to answer: "you apparently have not lived through such horrors as I have." That's not an argument, or even a reason. But to ignore it is to misunderstand Plato, and to fail to appreciate what is at stake for him.

It is interesting to have taught the *Republic* both before and after 9/11. Though the USA post-9/11 is by no means as insecure as Athens was during the Peloponnesian Wars, students do now have more of an appreciation of security issues than they once did. And although I have not taught the book this year, I imagine Virginia Tech students now have even more of an appreciation of the kind of insecurity that drove Plato in the ways that it did. What kind of society would *you* design *in those circumstances*? We have to know about Plato's life to understand and know what is at stake in his philosophy. We have to avoid the rationalistic fallacy.

2) Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

Why do people have such difficulty understanding Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and why was Wittgenstein so sure that they would not? Consider:

- Letter to Russell, from a prisoner of war camp, March 13, 1919: "I've got the manuscript here with me. I wish I could copy it out for you; but it's pretty long and I would have no safe way of sending it to you. In fact you would not understand it without a previous explanation as it's written in quite short remarks. (This of course means that nobody will understand it; although I believe it's all as clear as crystal...)."
- Letter to Russell, June 12, 1919: "In short I'm now afraid that it might be very difficult for me to reach any understanding with you. And the small remaining hope that my manuscript might mean something to you has completely vanished....And it's equally galling to think that no one will understand it even if it does get printed."
- Letter to Russell, August 19, 1919, two days before his release from prison camp: "I also sent my MS to Frege. He wrote to me a week ago and I gather that he doesn't understand a word of it at all."
- Letter to von Ficker, concerning a prospective publisher for the *Tractatus*, 1919: "I told him quite frankly that he would not make any money with my book since no one will read it, even less understand it."
- Letter to von Ficker, whom Wittgenstein was trying to convince to publish the book, 1919: "For you won't—I believe—get too much out of reading it. Because you won't understand it; the content will seem strange to you."

- Letter to von Ficker, presumably about an outside referee, November 22, 1919: “As far as I’m concerned you can show the manuscript to the philosophy professor (although showing a philosophical work to a professor of philosophy is like casting pearls...). At any rate he won’t understand a word of it.”

With this kind of recommendation, it’s not surprising that Ludwig von Ficker ultimately declined to publish the book!

Wittgenstein’s conviction that the *Tractatus* would not be understood was pervasive. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein says little about why. Russell had warned him early-on that his style was unhelpful (May 28, 1912, letter from Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell about Wittgenstein):

I told him he ought not to simply *state* what he thinks true, but to give arguments for it, but he said arguments spoil its beauty, and that he would feel as if dirtying a flower with muddy hands. He does appeal to me—the artist in intellect is so rare. I told him I hadn’t the heart to say anything against that, and that he had better acquire a slave to state the arguments. I am seriously afraid that no one will see the point of anything he writes, because he won’t recommend it by arguments addressed to a different point of view.

When Frege studied the manuscript before its publication, he raised similar concerns: (June 28, 1919, letter to Wittgenstein): “I find it difficult to understand. You place your propositions one after the other mostly without giving reasons for them, or without giving enough detailed reasons.” Frege later (September 19, 1919) shared with Wittgenstein his qualms about whether he was among “those who will understand your book” and added: “Hardly, without your aid.”

Part of the explanation lies in the wide terrain that the book traverses. Before the First World War, and during the first years of that war, Wittgenstein's work had been limited to issues of logic and language. But after he was transferred to the front, in late March of 1916, and later came under heavy attack in June, he began to reflect on a wider range of issues including God, fate, the will, good and evil, the purpose of life, and death. These new lines of thinking were recorded by Wittgenstein in his *Notebooks* at the time. Wittgenstein himself noted this transformation when he wrote (NB, August 2, 1916, p. 79): "Yes, my work has broadened out from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world."

Another part of the explanation lies in the difficulty of seeing the motivation of some of these new remarks, and their connection, if any, with the earlier parts of the book. In the heat of the June attacks Wittgenstein worried in the coded portion of his notebooks (July 6, 1916): "Have thought a great deal on every possible subject. But curiously I cannot establish the connection with my mathematical modes of thought." And then the very next day he reassured himself: "However the connection will be produced!"

Consider three key remarks near the end of the *Tractatus*:

6.373 The world is independent of my will.

6.43 If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts....The world of the happy man is a different one from the world of the unhappy man.

6.4311 ...If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. ...

Taken in the context of the *Tractatus* it is very hard to see why Wittgenstein makes these assertions, or why he thinks they are plausible. The more elaborate comments in the *Notebooks* are helpful, but fail to illuminate the motivations or bolster their plausibility. But taken in the context of his experiences at the front, as recorded in the coded remarks in his notebook, they make a great deal more sense.

The antecedents for these propositions in the *Tractatus* appear in the *Notebooks* beginning in July, as Wittgenstein is under attack. We know this from the coded remarks, where he records that he was first “shot at” April 29, 1916. “In constant danger of my life” (May 6, 1916). The Brusilov Offensive began June 4, 1916, and he records on the 6th: “Colossal exertions in the last month.” And this mortal danger continues through the end of July. During this time he is constantly coaching himself about how to hold up under such conditions—conditions which are quite out of his control. (Cf. Burns’ “War” documentary.)

It is only after he is shot at that God and death are first mentioned in the *Notebooks* (May 6 and July 5, respectively). He had been calling on God regularly (in the coded remarks) since he entered the service, but it is apparently mortal danger that propelled the concepts into the philosophical *Notebooks*, from where they then found a place in the *Tractatus*.

Only in the sort of extreme circumstances Wittgenstein was in would someone find it plausible to say that the world was independent of his will. This assertion is made in so many words in the *Notebooks* on July 5, but is preceded (the date is uncertain—probably June 11) with: “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.” Then Wittgenstein goes on stoically to recommend: “I can only make myself independent of the world—and so in a certain sense master it—by renouncing any influence on happenings.” The

remark takes life as a form of self-coaching, but then after reflection takes on a metaphysical cast—“the world is independent of my will”.

Having renounced the role of the will in changing the facts of the world, he retains a role for it in changing ones *view* of those facts. He had earlier reflected (in the coded remarks, May 6): “In constant danger of my life. . . . From time to time I despair. This is the fault of a wrong view of life.” On July 29 in his coded remarks he goes on to equate sin with “a false view of life.” And on the same day in his philosophical *Notebooks* he twice states what would become proposition 6.43 (“If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts. . . . The world of the happy man is a different one from the world of the unhappy man”). Wittgenstein encourages himself to be happy rather than unhappy in his circumstances as they are. This is up to him, a matter of the will: “A man who is happy must have no fear. Not even in the face of death” (*Notebooks*, July 8).

While Wittgenstein took no consolation in the notion of an afterlife (6.4312: “Not only is there no guarantee of the temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say of its eternal survival after death; but, in any case, this assumption completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. . . .”), he sought something similar in the present. In the philosophical *Notebooks*, he tells himself (July 8): “For life in the present there is no death. . . . If by eternity is understood not infinite temporal duration but non-temporality, then it can be said that a man lives eternally if he lives in the present.” and (July 14): “Whoever lives in the present lives without hope and fear.” This self-coaching in the midst of battle then becomes proposition 6.4311(b) in the *Tractatus* (“. . . If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. . . .”).

That Wittgenstein's self-coaching was (relatively) successful is shown by the Silver Medal for Valor that he was awarded for actions during the first days of the offensive, and the accompanying report (McGuinness, p. 242):

Volunteer Wittgenstein was attached to the Observer officer during the engagements...from 4-6 vi 16 [the 4th-6th of June, 1916]. Ignoring the heavy artillery fire on the casement and the exploding mortar bombs he observed the discharge of the mortars and located them. The Battery in fact succeeded in destroying two of the heavy-caliber mortars by direct hits, as was confirmed by prisoners taken. On the Battery Observation Post...he observed without intermission in the drumfire, although I several times shouted to him to take cover. By this distinctive behavior he exercised a calming effect on his comrades.

As for his fearful worries of May 5: "Will I endure it??" he had shown that he could.

How important is it to know the life from which these philosophical remarks grew? Especially the remark that the world is independent of my will. I would say it is *all*-important. We have no idea how Wittgenstein could have found this plausible, or even what it could mean, without knowing of his battle experiences. We would not know what was at stake. Those who stare at the obiter dicta of the *Tractatus* until their eyes glaze over are committing the rationalistic fallacy—as though it's all there is the propositions—if only we could figure them out.

3) Finally, I close with an example closer to home—myself:

I will not hold it against you if you do not know that I wrote my dissertation on Moral Realism, and earned tenure mostly defending moral realism from various attacks deriving from the nature of supervenience. I was mainly concerned to defend the idea that there is a right answer to moral questions. After I earned tenure, I drifted away from those issues and began to work on the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Let's imagine a graduate student in philosophy a hundred years from now wanting to write a dissertation on the evolution of Klagge's philosophy. I choose this case not for its plausibility—I'll never be famous—but for its accessibility. I know more than anyone else about this topic!

We all wish our work provoked more attention and response, even if not more agreement. Did someone publish an article that convinced Klagge that he was wrong? Did he come to doubt one of his arguments? Perhaps the students' notes from some of his graduate seminars in the early 1990s would show him retracting one of his claims. I'll tell you right now—and for the historical record—none of that happened.

What did happen? Well, let me tell you a little about myself. When I was in High School I was on the debate team—where we debated propositions like: Resolved that the US should refrain from all unilateral foreign military interventions. When I went to college I thought that I would go to law school. I continued debating and got into philosophy. All of these endeavors reinforced the idea that one offers reasons for a position, and there should be some outcome about who is right. The judge might get it wrong—the debate judge or the legal judge—but there is a right and wrong that the judge is trying to approximate. In philosophy and morality there is no human judge, but there still seems to be a truth nonetheless—that embodies what is right. In fact, I was also a Christian, and so the idea of God as a divine judge could even

help affirm the idea that there really is a right answer, even if we haven't figured it out. Is it any surprise that I wrote a dissertation on moral realism? Not that that was inevitable. Not that it was simply a matter of wish-fulfillment. But, it all fit.

What happened in the 1990s? Well, three things, actually. My marriage ended, I ran for political office and served on the local school board for eight years, and I became certified as a mediator for Juvenile and Domestic Relations cases. There are some commonalities here: I came to see the problems in holding that only one person is right when it comes to marital strife; I came to see that in politics there is positive damage done by the insistence that I'm right and my opponent is wrong; and I learned the value of this alternative perspective through mediating cases with families in conflict. The most significant political dispute I dealt with on the school board was the question of whether Blacksburg High School should change its mascot from the Indian. This was a very divisive issue, exacerbated by the tendency of both sides to insist they were right—indeed, *morally* right.

So much more can be accomplished in relationships and in politics when we find ways to appreciate that we are all in this together and we need to find acceptable ways that we can move forward together. This involves finding compromises and making trade-offs. Although politics has come to have a bad name, politics at its best is what I came to appreciate.

Did someone convince me that there is no right answer in situations of conflict? No. But I came to see, through many different kinds of experiences, the damage often done by the insistence that there is a right answer (*my answer!*). Incidentally, I'm still a Christian, and I never *had* seen God as a divine judge overseeing all conflicts and passing on right and wrong. But I did come to appreciate more the fact that Jesus spent his time telling parables, rather than deciding who was right and wrong. And, by the way, my increasing interest in Wittgenstein

really did not have anything to do with his association with a pragmatic, anti-realist approach to issues. In fact I tend to be skeptical of that interpretation of him. He just happened to be a long-standing interest of mine, which I now felt safe to pursue, having finally secured tenure—and having lost the need or the urge to defend realism!

But a future grad student who tried to understand the evolution of my views through studying the journal articles and lecture notes from the time would ultimately misunderstand what was going on through committing the rationalistic fallacy. OK—enough about me.

I hope to have shown, not only—what is obvious—that people’s experiences, their lives, impact what views they hold, but that they can be crucially relevant to our understanding what their views *are*, seeing how those views fit together, and appreciating what is at stake in those views. These issues will not settle the legitimacy of those views, but their meaning and import.

When Duncan invited me to give this evening talk, he explained that it usually was “either serious but non-technical, or else funny but with some philosophical point to it.” So far I have been “serious but non-technical.” I’d like to close with something “funny but with some philosophical point.”

Some of you may know, or know of, the feisty philosopher Marjorie Grene, who has been resident at Virginia Tech since 1988. A few years back she became the first woman honored with a volume in the “Library of Living Philosophers” series (the philosophical equivalent of receiving a Nobel Prize). She is now in her late nineties, but she has been an inspiration and provocation to many of us in Blacksburg.

I want to tell two brief stories about her. I often teach a course in 20th Century Philosophy in which I cover both Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre. I would always have

her give a guest lecture about the antecedents to Sartre's philosophy, since she had attended a course of lectures by Heidegger, and written books on Sartre. But she also knew Russell, having taught at University of Chicago during the time that Russell visited there for a year in 1940. I asked her what she thought of Russell. She delighted the students by saying: "Russell—he was an absolute bastard!" I'll leave it to you to decide whether that is helpful in understanding any of Russell's views.

The other is this: She tells the story of a conference she attended in the 1960s at which Georg Henrick von Wright was giving a paper. Von Wright, a very serious and reserved Swedish Finn, was talking about deontic logic—the logic of terms like "ought," "may," and "must." In typical philosopher fashion he was speaking abstractly about the kinds of actions one ought to do, or may do, using the variables p , q , and r , for the actions that someone, say "Norman," might perform. The talk was the late afternoon talk—the time slot Goldman had today—and it was a warm afternoon, and lunch was weighing very heavily on the listeners, who were straining, sometimes with mixed success, to follow von Wright's cases: Ludwig ought to r , Elizabeth may q Straining, that is, until von Wright started to discuss the case where "Norman must p ." Well, Marjorie said that the audience practically busted a gut trying not to offend the poor speaker, who had no idea what the commotion was about.

You might think these were stories about Russell and von Wright—but really they were stories about Marjorie. Because you cannot appreciate her philosophy unless you know how *irreverent* she is. She does a fine job of showing this herself in her autobiographical book, *A Philosophical Testament*, where she claims to have learned important philosophical lessons from her many years as a farmer milking cows.

(Added 2/24/2018: Two more lines from Marjorie Grene, who passed away March 16, 2009. Said near the end of her long life: “At least I can’t die prematurely.” Looking back on her long career: “I guess I’m going to perish, but not for lack of publishing.”)

James C. Klagge

Virginia Tech

Virginia Philosophical Association, Norfolk, VA,

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