

Interview with Prof. James C. Klagge

by Ehsan Sanaei

1- *Wittgenstein in Exile* ends with a mystical passage from *Culture and Value*: "in order to enjoy a poet [dichten], you have to like the culture to which he belongs as well. If you are indifferent to this, or repelled by it, your admiration cools off/only a cold admiration is possible". The passage also concludes a chapter which argues that Wittgenstein's influence in 21st century is diminishing. Elsewhere in his preface to a 1930 manuscript, Wittgenstein contends that "this book is written for those who are in sympathy with the spirit [Geist] in which it is written. This spirit is, I believe, different from that of the prevailing European and American civilization".

My question is how do you, as an analytic philosopher who've been trained, and has spent his whole career in the American civilization, have already overcome all those difficulties in reaching the very interpretation of Wittgenstein you've elaborated in the book? And why do you believe that this interpretation is the right one?

Klagge: At the end of Chapter 3 of my book (p. 45) I try to address the question you are asking. Wittgenstein said, over and over, that people would not understand him. By this I think he meant that they would not appreciate, in the sense of agreeing with, him. I try to show why that is so—because agreeing with him on certain important points depends on having a non-scientific temperament that is willing to STOP asking questions at a certain point. I do not claim that I agree with him, or that I am happy to STOP asking questions. But I draw extensively on what Wittgenstein said about himself, and what his close friends said about him, to make clear where these problems of understanding Wittgenstein come from. I believe my interpretation is extensively supported by evidence from his writings, his lectures, and his conversations. I draw on a lot of material that is not so familiar to students of Wittgenstein.

ES: Your esoteric/evangelical distinction of Wittgenstein's philosophical career has also led me to think why his so-called *middle* period is often ignored when one is trying to interpret his later works. The main ideas elaborated in *Philosophical Investigations* - e.g. those about language games and grammar - are often straightforwardly interpreted as a critique of his project in *Tractatus* (a view that, I think, has more to do with the mainstream dialectical conception of the history of philosophy than analyzing Wittgenstein's philosophical evolution), whereas an important work of his middle period like *The Big Typescript* - which, according to von Wright, is Wittgenstein's most edited and revised work after *Tractatus* - has often no place in these interpretations. In this work, Wittgenstein has repeatedly used terms like *phenomenology* and *internal relations*, which have explicit continental connotations. Even at the end of the section 128, we read: "Isn't what I'm saying here what Kant meant by saying that $5+7 = 12$ is not analytic but synthetic a priori?"

My questions are:

a) Since your esoteric/evangelical distinction of Wittgenstein's philosophical career is not explained under such a title in your book, could you please, at first, explain it briefly to your readers? And in what senses do it differs from early/later distinction of Wittgenstein's philosophy?

Klagge: In a paper published in 2013, after my book was published, I drew a distinction between those periods in Wittgenstein's work when he seemed mostly to be writing for himself and those who thought like him (I call this "esotericism"), and those periods when he seemed interested in reaching out and influencing people who were not inclined to think as he did (I call this "evangelism"). This difference in motivations was actually discussed in Chapter 6 of my book, though I didn't use that terminology. I see his *Tractatus* and work in the early 1930's when he returned to philosophy as esoteric. Then once he was teaching at Cambridge and had to engage with a variety of students I think he became evangelical in his writing. Finally, when he gave up teaching in 1947, I conjecture that he became somewhat esoteric again. What I call his evangelical period includes the writing of the *Philosophical Investigations*—and you can see how he is always addressing the reader/listener's temptations to think about things in a misguided way. These differences seem to me to be well supported by how Wittgenstein talked about what he was doing, especially in prefaces and drafts of prefaces for his writings. The distinction does not exactly line up with the early/later distinction, which mostly has to do with the differences of beliefs and methods between the *Tractatus* (early) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (later).

ES: So it seems to me that, despite his own views, Wittgenstein was indeed a modern Socratic figure – of course not as an essentialist, because it's explicitly refuted by him, but in the sense that he tried to challenge our inherently sophistic language of the modern philosophy using his multi-voice writings and rhetorical questions. However, I wonder whether his interpretation of Socrates' point (with regards to essentialism) could actually be similar to that of, say Vienna circle, of his own point in *Tractatus*? In other words, does not *our* failure in understanding Wittgenstein's point (in the context of a Western culture) literally translate into *our* (including Wittgenstein himself) failure in understanding Socrates' point (in the context of Athens' sophistic environment at the time)?

Klagge: Wittgenstein is quoted by Waismann as saying (p. 27 in my book): "I can characterize my standpoint no better than by saying that it is the antithetical standpoint to the one occupied by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues." So I think we should avoid drawing too close of a comparison between the two. Socrates thought philosophizing would draw us away from unreflective beliefs and closer to the truth. Wittgenstein thought that philosophizing had the danger of drawing us away from unreflective language and further from the truth!

b) To what extent do you think the continental/analytic distinction can be applied to Wittgenstein's philosophy as a whole?

Klagge: I think that Wittgenstein straddles the distinction between continental and analytic. He is certainly influenced by central figures in the analytic tradition, such as Frege, Moore and Russell, and he is trying to figure out how to solve or dissolve problems they addressed. On the other hand, he is familiar with and sometimes influenced in some ways by figures from the continental tradition, such as Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Goethe. And the direction in which Wittgenstein takes issues sometimes gets more sympathy from contemporary people working in the continental tradition than from contemporary people working in the analytic tradition. In the last chapter of my book, "Wittgenstein in the Twenty-First Century," I discuss ways that his views are not congenial to those currently working in analytic philosophy. But, on the other hand, I don't think Wittgenstein would have much sympathy for the views of those currently working in continental philosophy either. Nevertheless, there are figures from both sides of the divide that try to claim him for their own.

ES: Why do you think Wittgenstein would have not much sympathy for the views of contemporary continental philosophers?

Klagge: Some figures in the continental tradition are turning to a sort of metaphysical orientation that Wittgenstein would not like. I do not know the tradition well enough to make specific comments. In general terms, Wittgenstein is not interested in sounding clever, and he is not cynical.

2- In one hand, the metaphor of *Exile*, as is used in your book, strikes me as an embodiment of the main reason for why Wittgenstein should be read in a hermeneutic way – so that all his remarks should be interpreted in the context of his *Nachlass*. On the other hand, Allan Janik, in his review of your book, is wondered why you haven't paid enough attention to "*the notorious difficulties in translating and interpreting*" Plato, while citing him in the text. Taking both these views into account, couldn't one attribute your metaphor of *Exile* to all the eminent figures in the history of philosophy who've been historically selected in a Darwinian way from the rest of the society in their persistent critique of the commonsense? In other words, can one treat your arguments in *Wittgenstein in Exile* as grounds to support philosophical hermeneutics in general?

Klagge: I agree that philosophers are often different from other people, partly because they do not want to take things for granted. But my characterization of Wittgenstein as an exile goes beyond that. I go into a lot of detail about the concept of an exile, and I use important aspects of that to show why Wittgenstein handles issues the way he does. "Hermeneutics" is a broad term, and I am not sure exactly what is meant by it, but in general I believe it is important to examine what a philosopher says in the cultural and historical context in which it is said. To understand WHAT a philosopher means, we also have to think about WHY he or she writes it. So I see my book as using and supporting contextualism.

ES: May I should elaborate on what I here meant by *philosophical hermeneutics*. It seems to me that your work, in its characterization of Wittgenstein's place not against a dialectical conception of history, but in the context of what Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the founding fathers of philosophical hermeneutics has referred to as the "*historical self-consciousness of post-romantic scientific epistemology*", alludes implicitly to the concept of *Horizontverschmelzung* - i.e. *The Fusion of Horizons* - as a way to appreciate Wittgenstein's esotericism.

In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer defines the *fusion of horizons* as follows: "*If the "historical" question emerges by itself, this means that it no longer arises as a question. It results from the cessation of understanding - a detour in which we get stuck. Part of real understanding, however, is that we regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way they also include our own contemplation of them. Above I called this "the fusion of horizons"*". This "*cessation of understanding*" is thoroughly discussed in both your analysis of our failure in appreciating Wittgenstein's temperament, and in Wittgenstein's analysis of philosophical problems against which he asked us to STOP questioning at certain points. But I think the metaphysical horizons of our so-called *scientific* temperament and Wittgenstein's *non-scientific* one (or any distinction as such) could hermeneutically be fused together in the light of his conception of the ultimate *a priori* - i.e. the grammar of *our* words; and in this case, the grammar of the term "*stopping to ask questions*" (which in contrast to, say, *persuasion* or "*giving philosophy peace*" which have an internal connotation, is used when an external potentiality of asking questions already exists, in spite of the fact that Wittgenstein actually meant "*I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned*"). In *The Big Typescript*, we read: "*One could talk about an external and internal geometry. What is arranged in visual space is situated in this kind of order a priori - i.e. by virtue of its logical nature, and in this case geometry is simply grammar*". Even not to mention his famous assertion that "... *really one should write philosophy only as one writes a poem*", elsewhere in *The Big Typescript*, he concedes "*phenomenology is grammar*", giving his *contextualism* a literally *textual* - i.e. hermeneutical - basis.

So, my question is: Isn't our failure in appreciating Wittgenstein's temperament indeed rooted in our *misuse* of words in describing or classifying his philosophical ideas, but not vice versa? – e.g. using the term *non-scientific temperament* (along with its various implicate *nota benes* including most importantly the one that says "*this did not constitute an opposition to science, but an insistence on the proper place of science*" and etc) instead of what Gadamer has referred to as the *hermeneutical consciousness*? I mean, isn't it better to search for the ways of fusing isolated horizons – e.g. those of science, philosophy, religion and etc. – through grammatical similarities of their corresponding *texts* in a Wittgensteinian sense (in the sense that he wrote: "*like everything metaphysical, the (pre-established) harmony between thoughts and reality is to be discovered in the grammar of the language*") instead of trying to objectify Wittgenstein's stance with regards to those issues as something metaphysical as *Wittgenstein's philosophy*?

(As an example, Niels Bohr, one of the founding fathers of quantum mechanics, has famously said "*we must be clear that when it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet, too, is not nearly so concerned with describing facts as with creating images and establishing mental connections*". Here, one can "*divide through*" Bohr's conception of the quantum reality by his changing conception of the way a *fact* is related to a *mental image* – i.e. a Tractarian view revised. One can, hence, exploit Wittgenstein's later conception of language, as the Finnish physicist Stig Stenholm has done in his recent book *The Quest for Reality*, in order to "*giving [quantum paradoxes] peace*").

Klagge: You ask, following Gadamer: "Isn't it better to search for ways of fusing isolated horizons—e.g., those of science, philosophy, religion, etc?" To start with, I think it is important to Wittgenstein to see and acknowledge the differences between science, philosophy, religion, etc. This is connected with his notion of "language games". Each of these can be seen as a different language game, or a different collection of language games. They operate very differently in what they consider to be reasons and evidence. We get into philosophical confusions if we try to take the standards of evidence and reason in one area and apply them in another area. But that does not mean that there is no interaction between these different areas, and they can have influences on one another. But, you ask, shouldn't we try to fuse them? First, I'm not sure that is possible. But second, I'm not sure that would be a good goal. It seems like there is value to the various DIFFERENT aspects of human life—the scientific drive for evidence, the religious search for faith, the philosophical search for meaning. These all have value in different ways. I think much would be lost in each by trying to fit them all in the same box.

ES: But doesn't it lead to some sort of relativism? In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: "*The agreement, the harmony of thought and reality consists in this: if I say falsely that something is red, then, for all that, it isn't red. And when I want to explain the word "red" to someone, in the sentence "That is not red", I do it pointing to something red*".

But can a philosopher, a religious man, or a scientist know what is *not* philosophy, religion, or science without transcending his own language games?

Klagge: I think much of the supposed conflict between science and religion comes from scientists who think they know what religion is (but they don't), and from religious people who believe they know what science is (but they don't). So it would be good if we had more people who really ARE familiar with multiple language games. Just as there are people who are bilingual (or multi-lingual) with languages, so there should be more people who are bilingual with language-games. But that does NOT mean combining the language-games—any more than bilingual speakers combine their languages. I think that the goal is to be conversant in multiple language-games, rather than trying to transcend language-games.

3- Ironically, Wittgenstein continued to remain silent about the issues which he has just briefly mentioned as, or has turned out to be, the most important aspects of his later philosophy. From the language of poetry (which he believed that is the only language through which a ultimate philosophy is possible) to forms of life (which, according to the leading Wittgenstein scholars, is the most significant concept in his later philosophy), and from the question of being (which he has exemplified as an embodiment of pure wonder) to the religious view (through which he saw "*every problem*"), he discussed neither in an explicit manner, say, as a continental philosopher like Heidegger did. My question is:

- a. Why this is so? and does it have anything to do with his earlier, Tractarian silence?

Klagge: I think that an important concern for Wittgenstein is knowing when to STOP asking questions. Sometimes that leads people to call Wittgenstein an "anti-philosopher," in contrast to the famous philosopher, Socrates, who always kept asking questions. But if you STOP asking for further explanations, that can lead to a sort of silence. So I think there is some similarity to the last proposition of the Tractatus: "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence."

- b. Can one argue, based on Wittgenstein's last words in his deathbed, as well as his radically critical stance in his published remarks, that his silence about these matters was indeed an indication of the fact that the Utopian *time* he was seeking to settle was the very life he lived in *wonder*?

Klagge: This sort of silence can leave space for wonder. That is one sense in which Wittgenstein might have had, as he said, a "wonderful life." That is to say, a life full of wonder.

ES: In his 1930 *Sketch for a Foreword to Philosophical Remarks*, just before he began to express his feelings about "*the prevailing European and American civilization*"; he wrote in an evangelical sense: "*I would like to say 'This book is written to the glory of God', but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood*". How much do you think this *wonder* had religious connotations – or, at least, would have been better appreciated in a religious temperament?

Klagge: Actually I do not think that the appeal to God in that Foreword is "evangelical", since he emphasizes in the Foreword that what he says there is directed at people who think like he does. I am using the word "evangelical" NOT to emphasize its religious connotation, but to emphasize the desire to reach out and influence others who think differently from yourself. But, you ask, to what extent does Wittgenstein's search for wonder have a religious side. That is a good question. I think it sounds religious, because religious people also value a sense of wonder. But I do not think Wittgenstein's search was primarily a religious one. He often struggled with the idea of God and belief in God. But he did once say to a friend: "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."

4- One important aspect of Wittgenstein's life and work which is worth to be clarified in the light of your ideas in chapters 7 to 9 is the role of science in the society. Actually, the transition to calling *science* what had formerly been referred to as *natural philosophy* was paralleled with that of Goethean culture to the modern civilization. In other, Wittgensteinian terms, one can treat the word *science* as a *technical term* for the *mechanistic inquiry of nature* which obviously associates with apriorism and reductionism.

But as Lars Hertzberg has pointed out in his review of your book, you "*seem to concede too much to the reductionists*", so that, I think, your critique of today's role of science in the society is somehow calling the criteria for the meaning of the word *science* into question. Taking it as an example, and considering the fact that for Wittgenstein himself the ordinary language is the ultimate "*bedrock*" of reasoning, my question is on what grounds do you have transcended the current use of ordinary language in the Western civilization in favor of criticizing the mechanistic spirit of the Western civilization itself?

Klagge: Wittgenstein is generally happy to accept what people say in ordinary language—when they are NOT philosophizing. The difficulties arise, according to Wittgenstein, when we go beyond our ordinary ways of talking and try to theorize about issues. This is what brings in the mechanistic spirit that worries him. Mechanistic theorizing may be fine for science, but not for philosophy. Wittgenstein worries when we put science on a pedestal and worship it, and take it as a model for all ways of thinking.

ES: But doesn't it translate into the fact that only those who know what *philosophizing* actually means already know what it meant to accept *ordinary* language? The question is what does an *ordinary* language mean from a philosophical perspective? How does a philosopher distinguish between an *ordinary*, and a *philosophical* proposition?

Klagge: Those are good questions. To Wittgenstein the danger of philosophy was often the danger of theorizing—trying to come up with a theory about some realm of life, like the nature of the mind, or free will. This would lead us astray. For the most part he thought philosophical problems were created by philosophers. Our ordinary ways of talking about free choice or mental life were just fine, according to him.

5- What do you think would be the worst misinterpretation of your project in *Wittgenstein in Exile*?

Klagge: Some scholars of Wittgenstein have confidence that they know just what he thought, and that he was right about everything. My book argues that what Wittgenstein thought about certain issues is rather complicated, and often different from what scholars have supposed. Furthermore, I sometimes bring out what I think are problems with the positions that Wittgenstein takes, so I don't always agree with him. The biggest misinterpretation is to assume we understand Wittgenstein just fine, and that he was right about everything.