

CARL HUMPHRIES

RADICAL HISTORICALITY
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LATER WITTGENSTEIN

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One of the last photographs taken of Wittgenstein, in the garden at the
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book sets out to explore, from several angles, the thought of there being, for a given set of human beings in a given set of historical circumstances, aspects of how they make sense of themselves, their lives, and their relations to their surroundings that are *radically historical* inasmuch as they have been, for want of a better word, “fundamentally” affected by events. Focusing mainly, but not exclusively, on the later thinking of Wittgenstein, it examines some philosophically motivated ideas about what this could mean – ones whose overall common feature is that they resist the temptation to assume that it can be reduced to, or explained away as, a purely epistemological matter.

Possible sources in our civilizational history for this kind of thought – above and beyond the actual lived experience of particular individuals and communities – include Homeric epic, Attic tragedy, and, especially, the longstanding epiphanic dimension of Judeo-Christian religious thought. The idea has, arguably, also implicitly informed a broad strand of speculative theorizing about modernity influenced by Hegel and Romanticism, up to and including contemporary forms of political theology. Nevertheless, the present book concentrates on establishing the interest of the topic from a different angle – one with a more contemporary focus. Firstly, with reference to the author’s previously published work,

it argues that the divergent perspectives opened up by contemporary political developments – notably the emergence of political populism as a response to social changes brought about by globalization – create a pressing need to explore what is involved in attempting to articulate a notion of radically historical situatedness in non-speculative and non-dogmatic terms.

Secondly, as an initial step in the direction of such an exploration, it puts forward a broad critique of several ways in which one might seek to approach this issue in philosophical terms (including historicism, existentialism, messianism, and the notion that one might apply conclusions drawn from contemporary ground-theoretical analysis to articulate a notion of historical fundamentality). It argues that these exhibit a common fallacy, whose effect is to make the entire issue theoretically intractable, if not invisible. (The fallacy, I argue, consists in assuming that some account of historical matters can only justifiably claim to be irreducible to the nomological explanationism of the natural sciences if it offers an alternative *nomologically founded* perspective of its own, of either an explanatory or a purely descriptive kind.)

In seeking to specifically address the problem of radical historicity from a *non-speculative* and *non-dogmatic* perspective, the book then embarks upon an examination of how such a goal might be illuminated through being viewed in the light of its relationship to central elements within the thought of the later Wittgenstein. After considering how issues connected with radical historicity arise in this philosopher's personal and cultural reflections dating from the 1930s, it analyses the implications of each of the three principal strands of interpretation of his mature later philosophy (i.e. "orthodox", "New Wittgenstein" and "elucidationist" readings). In doing so, it treats each of these as potentially revealing, and thus stops short of committing itself to any single definitive interpretation of his intentions.

Finally, an appendix to the book adopts a somewhat different perspective, concentrating as it does on what it might mean to entertain thoughts *about oneself* (individually, or perhaps also collectively) in radically historical terms. It does so by drawing on ideas developed by analytical

Preface and Acknowledgements

philosophers in recent decades – independently of Wittgenstein – in order to better understand the phenomenon of indexical self-reference.

In developing the ideas that went into the writing of this book, I benefitted in one way or another from contact with a number of individuals. In particular, Michael Tanner kindled my interest in philosophy when I attended his inspiring lectures as a student at Cambridge University in the 1980s, and Carl Erik Kühl helped later to refashion and deepen that interest over an extended period of regular discussion about philosophical matters. Aaron Ridley, my doctoral supervisor at Southampton University from 2000 to 2006, through his supportiveness on many fronts, opened up the possibility of some kind of a career in philosophy, while Stanisław Hanusiewicz (now sadly deceased) gave me my first contact with the Polish philosophical milieu in 1990s Krakow. In Tromsøe in northern Norway, Jakob Meløe showed me what maps – and maybe other sorts of picture of reality – can really show, while Lars Hertzberg, in just a few words, set me thinking about the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic (non-)defeasibility – an issue that emerged later as central to parts of this book. Piotr Janik introduced me to Edith Stein's distinctive early exploration of how we encounter other human beings, which may have influenced my perspective on Wittgenstein, and Jan Wawrzyniak helped me to make better sense of the role of nonsense in the *Tractatus*. Nothing would have happened without the love and support of my parents (Donald and Christel) and my wife (Agnieszka), and the inspiration that comes from having two children (Kajetan and Klara).

The opening chapter of this book, which functions as a single extended example intended to illustrate the problem with which the rest of book is concerned, is a close paraphrase of part of an account of certain aspects of contemporary political populism which I wrote and published in the Polish journal *Principia*. Hence its significance *here* is as source material, rather than as part of any new and original investigation unique to the present work itself. Since that material underwent an extensive process of revision in response to suggestions from Krzysztof Guczalski, the editor-in-chief of that journal, I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude for his critical engagement with my work.

INTRODUCTION

Two of the most challenging ideas to have emerged (or perhaps re-emerged) in Western philosophical thinking in modern times are, arguably, the following:

(i) the thought that our understanding of “things”, “the world”, etc., may have been *radically and irreversibly* shaped by particular *historical* developments, in the sense of events, outcomes, situations, and so forth, of the kind loosely referred to (by at least some philosophers) as “actualities”;

(ii) the notion that to properly understand “things”, “the world”, etc., as a human being amongst other human beings, is to be engaged in something inextricably bound up with certain contexts furnished by our shared and distinctive *ways of living*.

The first of these two ideas has come to be chiefly associated with speculative philosophizing, either of the kind that we find embodied in the post-Hegelian tradition or in that exemplified by various sorts of political theology.¹ The second, on the other hand, is most

1 As the present book is not a study in what has come to be known as “the history of ideas”, I will not seek here to substantiate the suggestion, put forward in the Preface, that the historical sources for this as an element within Western culture are located

prominently (though not exclusively) associated with the philosophy – and above all the “later” philosophy – of the 20th-century Austrian thinker Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose writings have, however, given rise to several distinct – and, to some extent, competing – lines of exegetical interpretation. Broadly construed, these imply three divergent accounts of the basis for adopting such an idea about the role of contexts in human understanding:

- a) “orthodox readings” hold that such contexts are required just to make *descriptive* (as distinct from explanatory) sense of the (linguistic, practical, cultural, etc.) *intelligibility conditions* presupposed by our understanding;
- b) “New Wittgenstein” readings hold that acknowledging such contexts serves an *ethically* valuable *therapeutic* purpose by helping us overcome entrenched theoretical assumptions, so that we may adopt a stance of open-ended responsiveness to the lives of ourselves and others – one that is altogether theoretically unframed and unbiased;
- c) “elucidationist” readings hold that exploring such contexts serves an *elucidatory* (i.e. clarificatory) goal by highlighting differences between how elements of such an understanding are operative in actual contexts of language use and in the context of *explanatory theorizing*, and thereby hope to free us from certain sorts of *unfounded assumption* associated with the latter.

Returning to the first of our initial two ideas, and as a way of noting an initial, tentative point of possible interconnection between both of them, we may note that its proponents are typically committed in some way or other to adopting not only a notion of *radical historicity* with respect to the significance of certain events that have occurred, but also a notion of *radical historical situatedness*. As regards the latter, at least when taken at face value, the thought would seem to be that the very horizons of our understanding are somehow in the process

a great deal farther back in time – in Homeric epic, ancient Greek tragedy, and early forms of Judeo-Christian theology. Nevertheless, I do think there is a plausible case to be made for thinking that this is so.

of shifting, or have somehow already shifted, in response to some radically transformative or “world-altering” development or other.

Of course, to talk about such developments as “world-altering” is, more often than not, to imply a reference to “things” or “the world” construed as irreducibly and powerfully reflective of human concerns and values. Hence, the kind of philosophers who have tended to invoke notions of “radical historicity” or “radical historical situatedness” when seeking to make sense of such developments have tended to be those who begin from positions extensively committed in advance in respect of how they construe reality itself in value-relative terms – positions that may well appear speculative, mystificatory, or simply dogmatic to those not already sympathetically disposed towards them. In contrast to such a tendency, in the opening chapter of the present book, I argue that we need to take seriously the notion of radical historical situatedness precisely to *avoid* lapsing into speculative dogmatism. My point is that we need such a notion to be in play in our discourse if we are to stand a chance of addressing the very real and concrete challenges posed by the contemporary politics of populism and globalization – at least if we are to do so in ways that, when faced with profound divergences of perspective, do more than simply appeal to dogmatic grounds as a pretext for dismissing opposing viewpoints as incoherent. At the same time, in the second chapter I argue that this requires us to avoid falling into the trap of thinking it sufficient for such purposes to posit some notion of radical historicity in terms that turn out to ultimately themselves be ahistorical. (On my analysis, the inclination to think that any notion of radical historicity would have to be explicable in such terms to be intelligible at all, from which it can then seem reasonable to infer that it ought to be rejected altogether on pain of self-contradiction, reflects a deeper and ultimately fallacious assumption implicit in some of the most important strands in Western thought.)

In contrast to the kind of speculative theorizing about temporal matters in which notions of radical historicity tend to show up or be implicitly touched upon, the later philosophy of Wittgenstein has increasingly come to be appreciated as offering – in one way or another,

depending on one's preferred interpretation – a trajectory of philosophical reflection that can sensitize us to the dangers of speculative and dogmatic forms of theoretical assumption and generalization, even while maintaining a powerfully non-reductionist stance when it comes to conceptions of “things” or “the world” as being irreducibly reflective of human concerns. This suggests that we might stand a chance of arriving at a better understanding of the notion of radically historicity, and of vindicating its non-speculative or non-dogmatic credentials, through considering how it relates to Wittgenstein's later philosophy as it has come to be understood today. At any rate, that is the thought that principally motivates the present book.

At the same time, and I think it is important to note this from the outset, one of the features shared by practically all advocates of the Wittgensteinian appeal to context-dependence mentioned above is an indifference to exploring the philosophical implications of precisely this notion of horizon-shifting historical change and the notions of radically historically situated forms of understanding it brings with it.

Within a certain intellectual context this is fairly understandable. Those seeking to make sense of the later Wittgenstein have tended to take their cue from the fact that his philosophy emerged from an involvement with early-20th-century analytical philosophy, whose principal target was the speculative theorizing typified by late-19th-century neo-Hegelian idealism, at least some of whose characteristics can easily also be discerned in the wider sphere of post-Hegelian theorizing about historicity-related matters. Logicism, and the issues it raised for the *early* Wittgenstein, clearly operated at a level of significance – be it epistemological, metaphysical, ethical or linguistic – that was conceived as being absolutely synchronic in respect of its internally defined concerns. Equally, whatever view one happens to have regarding the proper exegetical interpretation of the *later* Wittgenstein, the fact remains that his prime concern does seem to have been with getting clear about (and, of course, questioning) the true character and significance of the radical *continuities* – the sources of stability – in human affairs, rather than doing so with respect to any more or less radical *discontinuities*

such as might be revealed over time. We might opt to place the exegetical focus, in this respect, on a *normative* conception of the role of conceptual-grammatical commitments, on an open-ended *ethical* stance towards other human beings and their lives actively *held open* in perpetuity (so that no yet-to-be-disclosed possibilities of meaningful living are ruled out in advance), or on an elucidatory grasp of how the intelligibility of our everyday thoughts and concepts contrasts with more supposedly theoretical forms of commitment in respect of being supported by more thickly specified contexts of intelligibility. However, no matter which of these lines of interpretation we give preference to, we are in each case surely in the first instance addressing (if only, sometimes, in terms not unrelated to forms of scepticism) matters pertaining to the *stabilities and continuities* of understanding and *commitment* that pervade human lives and human involvements, as distinct from any radical changes affecting these.

Even so, having acknowledged that this might well be the case, it still seems to me that there are good reasons to doubt whether such an indifference to historico-temporal matters on the part of almost all commentators on the later Wittgenstein is really as benign and innocuous as it may seem. As a preliminary move in the context of my own engagement with this issue, I aim, in the third chapter of this book, to show that there are reasons to think that Wittgenstein did, in fact, find *himself* to be living out his life, both professionally as a philosopher and on a personal level, in what was, essentially, the context furnished by a profoundly historical situation of sorts. This chiefly pertains to the challenges he faced in attempting to making ethical sense of his relationship to what he perceived as the ongoing decline of Western high culture – a decline which, through a self-reflexive turn, he may have eventually come to see himself as being implicated in as both a philosopher and a human being.²

2 This particular discussion will be largely devoted to summarizing potentially relevant conclusions stemming from my own previously conducted research in areas connected with Wittgenstein and/or the tragic (see Humphries 2017b; 2019; 2020 – forthcoming). Its purpose is that of helping to establish the framing context in which the

What is actually central to the present project, though, is the material that follows on from this. The task that I undertake in the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters of the present study is that of demonstrating that Wittgenstein's later thinking, when properly understood through the interpretative lens of *any* of its major interpretative variants as pursuing an *anti-dogmatic* agenda, turns out to be *not at all* supportive of the assumptions – be they metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, or more narrowly language-related – that have prompted philosophers in the tradition of Western thought to often turn a blind eye to the notion of radical historicity and its potential theoretical implications for their own projects.³ In effect, then, I am suggesting that the perception that matters are otherwise – that one might appeal to Wittgensteinian concerns and insights as a basis for disregarding this topic – stems from *a failure to articulate in the most rigorous terms what it means to attribute an internally consistent non-dogmatic stance to the philosopher himself*.

Because this is essentially the direction from which I intend to approach the later Wittgenstein, some significant figures who might have been expected to figure prominently in any context involving analytical approaches to philosophizing about issues pertaining to temporality and the past as these relate broadly to Wittgensteinian concerns and themes will be strikingly absent. Thus, to give a couple of obvious examples, I do not see any point in attempting to discuss either G.E.M. Anscombe's or Michael Dummett's position on how talk about the past

ensuing arguments of the book are best understood, rather than constituting any substantial part of the philosophical investigation itself.

- 3 For an overall reading of the development of Wittgenstein's thinking that proved highly relevant to my concerns in this respect, and to which I am indebted, see Kuusela (2008). At the same time, though, it is worth emphasizing that unlike Kuusela, I am not in the business of stressing Wittgenstein's anti-dogmatic aspirations or credentials for the sake of any role this might play in settling disputes between proponents of "orthodox", "New Wittgenstein", and "elucidationist" readings. (That project is surely of immense interest, but would constitute a needless distraction in the present context.) Instead, I work from *within* each of these broad currents of interpretation to identify which elements should be regarded as pulling towards or away from a robustly anti-dogmatic position of the kind that, in my view, this philosopher has, in one form or another, the potential to deliver.

is to be construed from a perspective reflecting their particular takes on late-Wittgensteinian issues (Anscombe 1950; Dummett 1969). This is because I take both of these to be espousing principled, essentially theoretical, positions about the nature of linguistic meaning and reference, of the kind that, in my view, fall into that particular *subclass* of “orthodox” interpretations of the later Wittgenstein that saddle him with theoretical commitments in a way that ultimately turns out to be uncharitable. Why? Because these readings of his intentions invite accusations to the effect that he was engaged in a self-contradictory and self-undermining project of charting the inescapable context-specificity of our linguistically manifested understanding of things in descriptive-theoretical *terms* that only make sense *themselves* if they can be sensibly construed as retaining a fixed significance across all variations with respect to contexts of employment – exactly the possibility that the position itself purports to rule out.

It is for distinct but related reasons that I likewise devote little or no space to some of the other major figures in mainstream analytical philosophy whose work might be thought of as contributing significantly to the reception of Wittgenstein’s later thought, and the understanding of its wider implications. Thus, thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Donald Davidson, John McDowell and Robert Brandom are barely mentioned in these pages. This is not because I am inclined to regard their contributions to analytical philosophical discourse as insignificant – quite the opposite. It is simply that their respective projects all involve moves in respect of the later Wittgenstein that I am inclined to regard as aggressively assimilatory. This is because they pull in the direction of an approach to philosophy that seeks to frame the latter’s central issues in terms of quite general and essentially epistemological concerns. These, in turn, are ones that only arise if one has first accepted an assumption to the effect that human beings are obliged to inhabit an inescapably theoretical stance towards themselves, their lives and their surroundings, just as a condition of participating in whatever everyday involvements they have that also bear on the intelligibility of these. Once again, this seems to me to take us in quite another direction from

the one relevant to our topic, since it ties Wittgensteinian ideas and methods that I would wish to see deployed for rigorously anti-dogmatic purposes to a quintessentially modern – and therefore historically parochial – set of intuitions about what it means to be a human being (in mundane but nevertheless putatively essential terms).

In case the reader is tempted to suspect me of some kind of intellectual bias here, I should point out that these well-known figures of 20th-century analytical philosophy are by no means the only recipients of such treatment in the ensuing pages. In the context of a brief account of how some of the issues covered in the book figure in certain currents within “Continental” philosophy in the second chapter, the phenomenological account of temporality put forward by Husserl (1928/2019) receives no mention, as I take it to reflect a similar epistemologically founded understanding of human experience generally to that which I have attributed to the analytical philosophers just mentioned. I therefore hold that it, too, runs counter to the anti-dogmatic role that the thought of the later Wittgenstein is above all called on to play here. Indeed, Wittgenstein *himself* is an object of equally brutal treatment! That is to say, he is so inasmuch as I do not seek to engage in any significant way with the content or method of his earlier philosophy (notably the *Tractatus*). Nor do I concern myself with the various transitional phases that he is now known to have passed through as he progressed, in his work on language and in other fields, towards his most robustly anti-dogmatic phase (which I date as being, roughly, from about 1937 onwards). As regards the various additional elements of his later thinking that came to light still further on in his career, I am not inclined to see these as marking a step back from that anti-dogmatic point of arrival in his development, but rather as subsequent enrichments of it.

The fact that I seek to focus on a particular way of understanding the later Wittgenstein in anti-dogmatic terms that I take to be relevant specifically to the issue of radical historicity, while not seeking to establish any one of the three main lines of interpretation as exegetically superior to the others, means that my way of writing about

Introduction

Wittgenstein-related issues differs substantially from that which has become the norm amongst commentators working on this philosopher. That is to say, I do not engage in anything like the kind of slow, painstakingly detailed reading of source material that involves a commentator assembling some particular selection of remarks into a potentially revealing constellation – one whose exegetical validity is then required to be backed up by considerations pertaining to the exact chronological provenance of these remarks across multiple manuscript and typescript sources. Rather, I focus on the broad contours of what I take to be uncontroversially involved in each of the main lines of interpretation of the later Wittgenstein's philosophical intentions, and then proceed to subject these to critical examination as to their anti-dogmatic credentials. In each instance, this is accompanied by an attempt to draw conclusions as to what the implications might be for the issues and problems surrounding the topic of radical historicity outlined in the earlier chapters of the book.