

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein (April 26, 1889 – April 29, 1951) was one of the most creative philosophers and influential thinkers of the 20th century, noted for his contribution to the movement known as linguistic philosophy. He contributed to two related but distinct philosophies of mathematics. Common to both is his rejection of the Platonic view of mathematics. He maintained that mathematicians were inventors not discoverers. He shunned publicity and preferred to work and live simply in as much isolation as possible, burdened as he was with feelings of religious guilt and self-hatred. He was uncomfortable with his homosexuality and was very secretive about it.



Wittgenstein was born in Vienna, Austria, the youngest of eight children of a wealthy Jewish family that had converted to Christianity. His industrialist father owned the largest steel company in Austria, and the family's home was a cultural Mecca for Viennese artists, musicians, and writers. Wittgenstein was educated privately at home until he was fourteen, at which time he enrolled at the Realschule in Linz, the same year Adolf Hitler graduated from the school. In 1906, Wittgenstein went to Berlin to study mechanical engineering. Intending to take a doctorate in aeronautics, he moved to the University of Manchester in England. He decided he needed to know more mathematics to help him design a propeller with a small jet engine at the end of each blade. This led him to discover Bertrand Russell's *Philosophy of Mathematics*, which so impressed Wittgenstein that it signaled a career change. On the advice of Gottlob Frege, Ludwig went to Trinity College, Cambridge, to study mathematical logic with Russell. In his first paper, entitled "What Is Philosophy?" Wittgenstein identified and addressed the nature of philosophical problems.

While at Cambridge, Wittgenstein continued his research on the foundations of mathematics and mathematical logic. Unhappy in England, he moved to Skjolden, Norway, where he lived in isolation, working on the ideas and language that formed the basis of his philosophy. World War I interrupted Wittgenstein's research and study. He joined the Austrian army, winning several medals for bravery. During his army years, he found time to write his great work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He served on the Russian front and in Italy, where, near the end of the war, he was taken prisoner. The manuscript was found in his rucksack when he was captured, but his Italian captors gave him permission to send it to Russell. In the *Tractatus*, finally published in 1922, Wittgenstein suggested that all mathematical theorems follow from the syntax of the language in which they are expressed. This was interpreted to mean that mathematical theorems are tautologies that tell about the nature of language and are true by virtue of the meanings of their constituent terms. Wittgenstein stated, "There are no genuine philosophical problems, philosophy is simply a byproduct of misunderstanding language." He and his admirers believed that he had succeeded and as a result brought philosophy to an end, because he had definitively solved its key problems. Many "philosophical" propositions could be readily expressed and evaluated within his system, and those that could not, including metaphysical paradoxes, he insisted, were mere nonsense.

Upon his release from the army, Wittgenstein gave away the fortune he inherited and trained to be an primary school teacher, believing that he had solved all the problems of philosophy. He suffered from depression and considered suicide, a remedy for unhappiness that three of his brothers took.

Wittgenstein was a failure as a primary teacher and gave up the career in 1925. He then worked as a gardener's assistant in a monastery near Vienna, followed by two years spent as an architect. In 1929, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge to submit the *Tractatus* as his doctoral thesis. For the next 18 years he worked on his second book, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Investigations), which was not published until 1953, two years after his death. It is an extensive and profound

contribution to the philosophy of mathematics containing the radical view that language, meaning, and necessity provided the foundation of mathematics. He maintained that only in the practice of language could a word have meaning and that linguistic meaning is a function of the *use* to which expressions are put or the *language games* in which they play a role. He argued, “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. He showed that some philosophical problems are simply the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of language. He insisted that language bewitches us to concoct *theories* to solve philosophical problems that arise only “when language goes on holiday.”

Wittgenstein never believed his work ready for publication and his manuscripts show extensive reworking over periods of many years. Throughout his life, Wittgenstein eschewed the narrative style of connected discursive prose. Instead he wrote a series of usually short, disconnected paragraphs, comprising individual thoughts, thought-experiments, remarks, problems, epigrams, or vignettes. His style made understanding his philosophy terribly difficult. Russell wrote an admiring introduction to the *Tractatus*, which, Wittgenstein said, indicated that he did not understand it. The *Tractatus* was the only major work published while he lived, and by the time he became a lecturer at Cambridge his ideas had changed so much that he repudiated them. In the *Philosophische Untersuchungen's* preface, he acknowledged that he had made grave mistakes in the *Tractatus* and he was grateful to Frank Ramsey, who had pointed them out. After his death, some of his notes were published as *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. His students published his class notes as *Wittgenstein's Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*.

Appointed a lecturer at Cambridge, Wittgenstein also became a fellow of Trinity College, and a naturalized British subject in 1938. During WWII, Wittgenstein worked in hospitals in London and Newcastle upon Tyne. He remained at Cambridge until he retired in 1947 to concentrate on writing,

when he moved to an isolated cottage on the west coast of Ireland. By 1949 his health deteriorated, and he was diagnosed with incurable prostate cancer. The death sentence did not bother him, as he did not wish to live any longer. He continued working until a few days before his death. He had been baptized a Catholic and was given a Catholic burial although he never was a practicing or a believing Catholic. His concern with moral perfection led him at one point in his life to confess various sins, including allowing others to underestimate the extent of his “Jewishness.”

The British film *Wittgenstein* was released in 1993, starring Karl Johnson as the eccentric adult philosopher and Clancy Chassay as Wittgenstein as a child. It is told in a series of blackout sketches and features several very prominent individuals including Bertrand Russell, portrayed by Michael Gough, and John Maynard Keynes, impersonated by John Quentin. The film briefly treats Wittgenstein’s unreconciled homosexuality.

Quotation of the Day: “If you know a mathematical proposition that is not to say you yet know anything.” – Ludwig Wittgenstein