H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Carl Klagge. *Wittgenstein in Exile.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011. 264 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-01534-9.

Reviewed by Allan Janik (University of Innsbruck)

Published on HABSBURG (April, 2011)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan

Disenthralling Flies, or Approaching Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy in 2011

The goal of philosophy according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his later philosophy at least, is to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle. This form of fly trap is originally an oriental invention (less than accurately described by Prof. Klagge) that exploits 1) the fly's hunger and 2) its instinct to fly towards light. The fly enters the bottle through an opening at the top to get at meat that has been put inside the bottle as bait. Since the opening at the top of the round or conical clear-glass bottle is black, the fly's instincts to move towards the light and away from darkness systematically prevent it from escaping through the opening in the black metal top through which it entered in order to obtain the bait. The metaphor is an apposite description of Wittgenstein's philosophical method, i.e., what he himself considered his most important contribution to philosophy, inasmuch as it emphasizes how philosophical questions about themes like mind and knowledge arise from "natural" temptations to misunderstand them. Our intellectual instincts "naturally" lead us to a form of confusion and frustration when we pose questions about, say, certainty or intentions because we are inclined to answer them the way we would respond to questions about natural phenomena such as temperature or viscosity. Like the confused fly, the confused philosopher–or indeed the mere mortal when confronted with a philosophical conundrum like "what does it mean to know something? "–looks for the wrong kind of answer, typically overlooking facts such as the embeddeness of intentions in human action and the multiplicity of ways of being certain about things. In that respect both resemble a puzzled museum-goer looking at an abstract painting for the first time and posing questions to him/herself concerning what it depicts when it in fact represents nothing beyond the very relationships of color, texture, and volume on the canvas. The solution to their respective problems lies not in obtaining an informative definition or identifying a subject of representation but in reorientation to a highly unusual, anomalous situation in which they find themselves. In both instances the first step to clearing up the perplexity is to establish that there is more than one form of knowledge and more than one way of painting, respectively. In the case of the fly it would seem that it would be necessary to put the bottle in a completely dark environment and some sort of illumination into the opening through which the fly entered. The activity of philosophizing according to Wittgenstein by its very nature involves radical departures from everyday thinking, paradoxically, precisely in order to capture the extraordinary character of "ordinary" human thinking and knowing (as Stanley Cavell especially has emphasized). For Wittgenstein professional philosophers–and the philosopher that lurks in each of us–think crazily when they raise problems to such an extent that coping with those problems essentially involves thinking yet more crazily than they do. Thus, the need to think crazier than the philosophers dictated that the face that Wittgenstein had to present to the world was a highly unusual, if not actually, bizarre one when considered from the point of view of mainstream philosophy from Plato via Descartes and Kant down to Bertrand Russell and the Vienna Circle.

James Klagge's service in *Wittgenstein in Exile* has been to produce an account of the roots of Wittgenstein's thinking that proceeds in the course of eleven crisp chapters from Wittgenstein's own nagging doubts about being understood by anyone whatsoever to the difficulties

involved in our understanding him given his estrangement from twentieth-century culture and his skepticism with respect to the role of science in philosophy, culminating in a subtle analysis of a non-religious man's paradoxically religious perspective on philosophy and, finally, raising the question of whether he fits into twenty-first-century thought at all. Throughout Klagge's presentation Wittgenstein's self-image as an exile is the point of orientation in a lively narrative which seems to be addressed to bright, engaged undergraduates but will be no less provocative and intriguing to the initiated than it is to beginners (the hand of a skillful instructor of undergraduates is all-pervasive in the book). Prof. Klagge's detailed knowledge both of the minutest details of Wittgenstein's biography and the whole range of his posthumous philosophical papers lends the study depth; whereas his pellucid prose carries the reader through a complex discussion of Wittgenstein's thought replete with accounts of how Wittgenstein's views of mind contribute to today's discussions of such matters as "folk psychology" or "eliminative materialism" within cognitive psychology (which is unfortunately also replete with its jargon). Klagge does an excellent job of presenting the eccentricities in Wittgenstein's mature thought as reflections of an alienated thinker, who is, nevertheless, enormously profound for all that. In short, you could do worse than to begin a philosophical encounter with Wittgenstein guided by *Wittgenstein in Exile*. That is, of course, not to say that James Klagge has the last word on the subjects he discusses but that his account is a gripping starting point for learning to philosophize with Wittgenstein or at the very least getting a sense of his basic self-perceptions and their significance for his way of doing philosophy and ultimately for us.

The informed critical reader will have a number of points upon which (s)he will want to quibble with Prof. Klagge as well as a couple of more serious criticisms of his presentation of Wittgenstein. For example, throughout the book he plays Wittgenstein off, largely successfully, against Plato, especially the Plato of the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates basically makes mince-meat of the pious Euthyphro because he is unable to give an account of what he himself is best known for, namely, piety. Most of this discussion transpires in lengthy footnotes but some of it is in the text. As you read it you have the impression that there was to have been a chapter on that theme but it somehow did not materialize and the author just couldn't bring himself to discard the material (which clearly has pedagogic value), so it is all annoyingly in there someplace. Moreover, since it is an old adage that Plato is all things to all men, you wonder why Klagge does not at all treat the ancient writer in the scholarly way that he treats Wittgenstein. There are ample references to the dialogues but none to the notorious difficulties in translating and interpreting them–something which stands out in a study that insists on being meticulous with respect to Wittgenstein. Does not Plato have the same rights? Then there is the question of the role of the endnotes in Klagge's study: some are simply references, some elucidations, and yet others mini-essays almost. They constitute some two-fifths of the book, which seems quite a lot really, as Monty Python put it with respect to the amount of rat in the tart. Then there is the case of Goethe, who is alleged, rightly I think, to have exerted a fundamental influence upon Wittgenstein. Klagge is puzzled by why Wittgenstein does not acknowledge that influence and refers to an article of his where he argues that Wittgenstein probably failed to acknowledge Goethe because he got his Goethe via Oswald Spengler, who plays a relatively large role in *Wittgenstein in Exile*. One would like to know more but, alas, there is only a reference to the aforementioned article, which is not itself in the book. At the same, time there is no mention of the Goethean dimension of Schopenhauer's thought, which Wittgenstein also acknowledged as a primary "influence" upon his thinking. This is important because already during his lifetime Goethe recognized Schopenhauer as a kind of philosophical pendant to him (on the basis of the latter's defense of his Theory of Colors against the ridicule of the Newtonians) and also because Wittgenstein's philosophy of color perception is Goethean in nature. Moreover, there is no doubt whatsoever that Schopenhauer exerted a decisive influence on Wittgenstein, so there is no reason whatsoever for neglecting him in a study like this. But these really are quibbles.

There is a serious misunderstanding of Wittgenstein towards the beginning of Klagge's book where he alleges that Wittgenstein protects certain forms of discourse such as religious language games by "ghettoizing" them (in fact the Popperian expression "immunizing" would be better here); whereas others such as the (alleged) language games of philosophy are simply arbitrarily dismissed out of hand. This is a serious charge that cannot be ignored. Does it hold water? I think not. In order to see why we must consider the relationship between how philosophical discourse, in contrast to religious discourse, arises. Religious discourse (not theology!) is rooted in a form of enculturation. We have to be drilled into behaving in a particular way in order to see

the world rightly as our religious group does. What believers take to be religious "knowledge" is insight into life gained on the basis of living itself. Thus religious belief might be termed a form of life. That is why religion is so fundamental to believers, so foreign to non-believers and immune to their criticisms. Philosophy, on the other hand, is rooted in a certain kind of purely intellectual puzzlement that is foreign to everyday life. Conventional training in philosophy as Wittgenstein sees it involves completely ignoring the comfortable certainties of everyday life, in fact, even calling them into question in a way that only mentally disturbed people do. This is something that academic philosophers actually tend to be proud of; it is what makes philosophy "profound" in their eyes. Wittgenstein happily sides with the servant girl who laughed at Thales when he fell into the well gazing up into the heavens. Religion is rooted in the practices that make human life possible; whereas analytic philosophy, the only kind that Wittgenstein took seriously, is rooted in contempt for them; no humanly useful work gets done; the engine is idling; language has gone on holiday when we attempt to create philosophical language games.

Of course, that is not the only kind of philosophy there is, as Pierre Hadot has reminded us in his interesting *Wittgenstein et les limites du langage* (2004), which explains why some people have been seeking the "real" philosophy behind Wittgenstein's very curious arguments for the last fifty years. But as Klagge points out elsewhere in the book, Wittgenstein did not want to encourage that: he simply wanted to sway us from posing philosophical problems by making them dissolve into human action. Klagge's problem here is that he considers Wittgenstein to be arbitrary about when and where we have come to a stop; whereas Wittgenstein, like his mentor in this matter, Heinrich Hertz, responds: precisely when the tormenting perplexities that have driven us to philosophize have ceased to bother us–when we have exchanged the misery induced by questions about, say, whether the class of all classes is a member of itself, for mere unhappiness, i.e., in practicing mathematics we do not have worry about it but simply to get along with the hard work of solving problems (as Freud might put it). The fact that this task by its very nature cannot be something that is accomplished once and for all to everybody's satisfaction, as Wittgenstein would appear to have liked, is what made him despair of his own philosophizing–but that is another story.

A final point of criticism bears upon the way in which Klagge brings Wittgenstein into the discussion of "folk psychology" in contemporary cognitive psychology. Klagge rightly puts Wittgenstein on the side of the "folk" over and against the cognitive scientists but not necessarily for the best reasons. Wittgenstein's position is not simple in this debate. Indeed, the first thing that has to be done to achieve clarity in the discussion of the legitimacy of "folk psychology" is to establish, as Klagge does not, just what we should understand under that rubric. Are we talking about an individual or a group phenomenon? Is it a matter of individuals not being capable of giving an account of how they do the things they do or is it a matter of not being able to produce an adequate account of human action except on the basis of a neurophysiological explanation? Wittgenstein's view of the embeddedness of knowing in action, like that of Michael Polanyi (the idea of "tacit knowing"), is entirely compatible with the notion that individual practitioners must not necessarily be capable of explaining how they do what they do. This is where Wittgenstein and Socrates part ways and precisely what "tacit knowing" or "intransitive knowledge," as Wittgenstein calls practical knowledge in *Philosophical Grammar*, is all about; it is the normal state of things. That incapacity does not in any way imply that a group of practitioners reflecting together systematically cannot explain how they do what they do, how they learn what they learn (i.e., the pragmatic criterion for knowing), on the basis of analogies, metaphors, examples and stories, i.e., in terms that are non-scientific in the sense that they are non-propositional. In fact, just such collective reflection has been the basis for much serious research into professional knowledge inspired by Wittgenstein and Polanyi (which this reviewer has been involved in himself for more than a quarter of a century). Neurophysiology, as Wittgenstein rightly understood, has not a clue about these matters.

Klagge is certainly right to pose the question whether this way of philosophizing has a place in the twenty-first century; for, although the name of Wittgenstein is on the lips of all sorts of people in philosophy today, very few are capable of or even interested in his prime preoccupation: dissolving the problems of analytic philosophers on the basis of the pragmatics of language.

Briefly, despite the fact that there is considerably less arbitrariness in Wittgenstein's thought than Klagge thinks, he has written a book that is as intelligible as it is humane, which will certainly be immensely useful in helping beginners to appreciate the difficulties but also to enjoy the rewards of learning to philosophize with Wittgenstein.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg

Citation: Allan Janik. Review of Klagge, James Carl, *Wittgenstein in Exile*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32492

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.