

The War as Moral Experience in Wittgenstein's Secret Diary

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When he stopped his studies of engineering in Manchester, Wittgenstein moved to Cambridge to study logic under the guidance of Bertrand Russell because he believed that by comprehending the fundamentals of language, and therefore the limits of language, he would understand its essence, as well as that of human beings, *in primis*, himself.

For Wittgenstein, knowing oneself was indispensable because only the man who knows himself can improve himself and become morally decent. When World War I broke out, Wittgenstein volunteered in the Austrian Army because he trusted "in the fact that the experience of war would permit him to understand, beyond any fiction and illusion, who – which kind of man, so to say, – he really was. Thus, it was clarity and truth about himself that Wittgenstein expected from the war" (Perissinotto, *Wittgenstein*: 13).

Wittgenstein spoke about the experience of World War I in two different diaries: the first one is a work-notebook in which he wrote his thoughts, questions and the progress of his work on logic (which was eventually published under the name of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*), as well as his reflections on ethics, the function of philosophy, and such concepts as the will, the good, evil and suicide. The second one is a personal diary, composed of three notebooks which begin on August 9, 1914 and end on August 19, 1916, written in a secret code so that none of his comrades could read it. During the war years, in contact with other soldiers and immersed in the military life, Wittgenstein went on working on the problems of language, but he slowly changed the focus of his research and broadened his interest beyond logical problems: in a letter of May 22, 1915 to Russell, Wittgenstein wrote that the problems in which he was interested "have become more and more precisely and general", and that his method "has drastically changed" (Wittgenstein, *Lettere*: 75): now, it was fundamentally oriented toward ethics.

For Wittgenstein, the encounter with the other in war was an existential experience that allowed him to look within the depths of himself in order to question himself and understand who he was. This in turn would allow him to correct errors in his thought, to eliminate prejudices, faults and erroneous judgments and, finally, to act well. To reach this state of deep knowledge, Wittgenstein had to understand which role the

passions and reason play in making moral decisions, so as to put the former under the control of the latter: in other words, at this time in his life, acting as a decent and moral person meant for Wittgenstein being able to understand and control his own passions which, generally, lead a person to make practical decisions in order to satisfy private and egoistic desires without considering whether the action is good or bad. At first, Wittgenstein believed that the war would make men better; however, early in the conflict the promiscuity that he saw in other soldiers made him start to believe that war cannot change the nature of human beings: if possible, it makes people's moral tendencies even worse. Wittgenstein changed his mind because, in his opinion, his comrades did not attempt to understand what was happening to them, even though they were going through a new and traumatic experience that demanded understanding; instead, they kept on following irrational passions and base desires. If, as Wittgenstein wrote on August 12, 1916, "a bad life is an unreasonable one"; if living in sin – i.e. living enslaved to passions and desires – means living "in discord" (Wittgenstein, *Diario*: 118); and if a life without knowledge is evil, then his comrades could not logically appear to him as good persons.

From the first notes of his diary, Wittgenstein wrote that he was horrified by his comrades' vulgarity: he did not consider them stupid, but he believed that they were limited by the "typical attitude of the majority of men, according to which they mirror themselves in what they *have* instead than in what they *are*" (Gargani, *Il coraggio di essere*: 11). Since, in his opinion, his comrades chatted only about "nonsensical" things based on prejudices and superficialities, Wittgenstein felt deep disquiet (*Unheimlichkeit*), and as a result he depicted them as scoundrels dominated by the most selfish instincts and lust, which led them to a loss of self-control and to immorality. On August 21, 1914 Wittgenstein wrote: "The lieutenant and I have spoken about many different things. He is a very kind person. He can cope with the worst scoundrels and be kind to them. If we hear a Chinese speak, we tend to consider his speech an inarticulate gurgle. The person who understands Chinese will recognise the language. Thus I often cannot recognise humanity in man, etc. [...] all concepts of my work have become 'foreign' to me. I cannot really SEE anything!!!" (Wittgenstein, *Diario*: 54).

In contact with the other soldiers, Wittgenstein could no longer see what might be called humanity, nor could he recognise in others his own human essence, i.e. a rational creature who strives to know himself in order to be morally good. Therefore, Wittgenstein was not able to perceive others as friends, because friendship for him could only arise between good men: he had an elitist sense of friendship, founded on respect, dialogue, loyalty, love and a deep sense of ethics which, in his opinion, his

comrades seriously lacked. On August 15, 1914 he wrote: "The crew is a gang of scoundrels! No enthusiasm, incredible vulgarity, stupidity and cruelty. Therefore, it is not true that the great common cause necessarily makes man nobler... According to all our external conditions, our duty on the boat should provide us with a wonderful and happy time, but alas! As a result, it will be very difficult to communicate with the others" (Wittgenstein, *Diario*: 52-53).

Moreover, two days before, on August 16, 1914, he wrote that "the stupidity, the insolence and the evil of these people have no limits" (53). Beyond these severe and *tranchant* judgments, Wittgenstein did not believe that he was a better man than his comrades, but that he had a stronger will to become better. In fact, one of the major differences that Wittgenstein perceived between himself and the other soldiers was the *awareness that he was not yet a good man*. In the letter of March 3, 1914 to Russell he wrote: "we both have our weaknesses, but *I* do especially, and my life is FULL of the most awful and miserable thoughts and actions (and this *is no* exaggeration)... Until today my life has been full of filth" (Wittgenstein, *Lettere*: 67); on March 7, 1915 he moreover wrote: "I feel like a completely burnt out stove, full of impurities and filth" (Wittgenstein, *Diario*: 101).

Nevertheless, during the war Wittgenstein went on trying to improve himself, to control his body's weaknesses and get close to the order that derives from reason, which however belonged in its pure form only to God. At that time young Wittgenstein believed that such an order is located in our language: for him, there was a correspondence between good use of language and good action, thus it followed that thinking well *is* acting well. According to this correspondence, thanks to a constant effort to free himself from linguistic errors (prejudices, common statements, nonsense, false and erroneous reasoning) a person might aspire to live a decent life: on July 20, 1916 Wittgenstein wrote to himself in his diary: "continue to work and you will become a good man" (116).

The will moves man to strive for absolute good, beyond the partiality of a mundane 'good' corresponding to private desires. To reach absolute good, one needs a full view (*Überblick*) of things even if this seems to be a desperate attempt: on November 12, 1914 Wittgenstein wrote: "I have worked quite a lot, but without seeing very clearly (79); on November 13, 1914: "I cannot see clearly" (*ibid.*) and on 16 November 1914: "no clarity yet. Although I am right in front of the solutions to the deepest questions, so near as to almost crash into them with my nose!!! Now my spirit is simply blind to these things! I feel as if I am RIGHT IN FRONT OF the door to the solution, but I cannot see clearly

enough to open it" (81). Moreover, if on July 29, 1916, in a moment of desperation after being shot at, Wittgenstein wrote that he was afraid of dying and losing the pleasure of life, some days before, on 8 July 1916, he had written that such a fear was a misleading feeling because "fear of death is the best sign of a false life, i.e. a bad life" because "he who is happy must not fear. Not even death" (Wittgenstein, *Quaderni*: 219). Even if it is a desperate attempt, one always should (or better, must) try to go beyond one's own limits because only in this way is it possible to fight the irrational fear in which lies the sin that leads men to believe that a false conception is true.

Contrary to the common experience of war, wherein a soldier considers his comrades to be his friends and the opponents, the unknown soldiers, the enemy who must be fought, Wittgenstein considered his comrades his principal enemy, from whom he had to defend himself. Wittgenstein's concept of friendship, however, was embodied in David Pinsent with whom he was in a close contact during the war: they had become friends when both of them were studying in Cambridge. During the war, since Wittgenstein was fighting in the Austrian Army and Pinsent was fighting in the English Army, they should have considered themselves enemies. Pinsent died on May 8, 1918. Wittgenstein was informed of his death by a letter from Ellen Fanny Pin, David's mother, sent dated July 6, 1918, to which he replied, writing that Pinsent had been his first and only friend: "I have indeed known many young men of my age and have been on good terms with some, but only in him did I find a real friend; the hours I have spent with him have been the best in my life, he was to me a brother and a friend. Daily I have thought of him and have longed to see him again. God will bless him" (Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*: 155).

To him Wittgenstein dedicated his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*.

References and further reading

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