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Alone with One's Thoughts: Wittgenstein on Philosophical Thinking in Isolation

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Alone with One's Thoughts: Wittgenstein on Philosophical Thinking in Isolation

Jack Manzi

1.1

The COVID-19 pandemic has overseen drastic changes to the structure and organisation of our lives. The infectiousness of the virus has necessitated the implementation of social distancing and isolation measures in many countries, which in turn has forced us to reconsider how we operate within our personal and professional spheres. Academic research has been no exception. With the temporary closure of universities and research spaces, many researchers have had to re-evaluate their work and the environment within which it is conducted.¹

How does philosophy fare when conducted in isolation? There is something of a tradition of isolation amongst some of the great philosophers. Boethius wrote *The Consolations Of Philosophy* in isolation whilst under house arrest.² Martin Heidegger insisted that seclusion was the best environment for philosophical thought. More pertinently to this paper, Wittgenstein also spent long and philosophically productive periods in isolation. This pattern of great philosophers working in isolation raises the question: what is it about isolation that is (perhaps occasionally) conducive to thinking?

To answer this question, I approach this issue by examining Wittgenstein's own experiences of isolation, and how they intersect with his philosophical thought.³ In this paper, I offer a semi-philosophical, semi-biographical overview of Wittgenstein's experiences of isolation.⁴ I examine certain correlations between Wittgenstein's time in isolation and the philosophical themes found in his work and writings. In doing so, I hope to understand some of the benefits that isolation might have for thinking, in encouraging multi-perspectival approaches to intellectual problems and undermining ingrained

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Wittgenstein's Philosophy in Times of Crisis virtual seminar group on the 3rd July 2020. I am grateful to the attendees for their comments and feedback.

² Boethius, S. (1962). *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.

³ Wittgenstein extensively chronicled his life experiences alongside his philosophical writing — to the point where they are arguably indistinguishable from one another and often published and cited alongside one another.

⁴ For an argument in support of philosophical-biographical pieces (particularly on Wittgenstein) see Monk 2001. Additionally, for a general biography of Wittgenstein's life see Monk 1991.

intellectual dogmas. I conclude with some observations on how the findings of this paper might be read through the lens of what has been coined the ‘liberatory’ reading of Wittgenstein by Rupert Read.

1.2

Although Wittgenstein underwent various periods of isolation in his life, it was to a small hut in Skjolden, Norway, that he would most often retreat, and there that he produced some of his finest philosophical work. In 1913-1914, he wrote the notes that would form the basis of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In 1936 he wrote the first 188 remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations*. A year later, he would write the material that would become the first part of *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*.

Luckily, we have a good picture of what his original reasons for choosing to self-isolate in Norway were, from the writings and anecdotes of those closest to him at the time:

To wit: that he should exile himself and live for some years right away from everybody he knows — say in Norway. That he should live entirely alone and by himself — a hermit’s life — and do nothing but work in Logic. His reasons for this are very queer to me — but no doubt they are very real for him: firstly he thinks he will do infinitely more and better work in such circumstances, than at Cambridge, where, he says, his constant liability to interruption and distractions... is an awful hindrance. Secondly he feels that he has no right to live in an antipathetic world ...- a world where he perpetually finds himself feeling contempt for others, and irritating others by his nervous temperament — without some justification for that contempt etc.; such as being a really great man and having done really great work.⁵

This comment comes from Wittgenstein’s companion David Pinsent toward the end of their holiday in Norway in 1913. Although the holiday had been less than pleasant for Pinsent, who had to endure the full force of Wittgenstein’s mercurial moods, Wittgenstein decided it had been one of the best holidays he had been on, finding Pinsent’s company immensely comforting whilst he struggled with Russell’s ‘beastly theory of types’. The routine of work, combined with the distraction-free environment of the isolated part of Norway that they were staying in, provided the ideal conditions for Wittgenstein, and by the end of the holiday Wittgenstein had settled on going into exile for some years, so that he might continue to work in peace.

⁵ From David Pinsent’s diary. 24.9.13, to be found in G.H Wright (ed) *A Portrait of Wittgenstein as a Young Man from the Diary of David Hume Pinsent, 1912-14*, Wiley-Blackwell (1990), p. 79.

Bertrand Russell notes his reaction to Wittgenstein's plan, and Wittgenstein's response with the following:

I said it would be dark, & he said he hated daylight. I said it would be lonely, & he said he prostituted his mind talking to intelligent people. I said he was mad & he said God preserve him from sanity. (God certainly will).⁶

The responses from Wittgenstein that both Pinsent and Russell record are telling descriptions of what Wittgenstein saw as the benefits of isolation. Most obviously, isolation provided Wittgenstein a physically distraction free space for engaging in philosophical work. But can this be it? Surely one does not need to go to the extremes of retreating to the Norwegian wilderness to find a less distracting workplace. Interestingly however, both Pinsent's and Russell's accounts of Wittgenstein's decision to go into exile make note of Wittgenstein's concerns over his relationships with people and the influence of those relationships on his work. Both reflect a concern that these relationships, in some way, impinge on his ability to do great work.

Wittgenstein would routinely return to isolation. The time spent in Norway during the 1930s made up the bulk of his experiences of isolation, within which Wittgenstein came to substantially revise his earlier philosophical work in the *Tractatus*, and form the material that would come to be known as the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is surely here then that answers to what Wittgenstein must have got from his time in isolation are to be found. In examining this passage of Wittgenstein's time in isolation, however, we must first explore one of the central problems he struggled with in the later part of his career: the problem of dogmatism.

1.3

The problem of dogmatism is introduced explicitly in PI §131 as a problem that is easy to fall into when doing philosophy. Broadly speaking, the problem of dogmatism relates to a practice in philosophy of asserting philosophical models as necessary descriptions of what reality *must* be like, independently of any future experience, as opposed to using these models as *objects of comparison* to be compared alongside reality (with both similarities and dissimilarities between the model and reality being noted).

⁶ Letter from Bertrand Russell to Lucy Donnelly, 19.10.13, quoted in Monk (1991) p. 91.

Wittgenstein perceived the threat of dogmatism in philosophy as relating to ‘injustice’. He writes that it is only by using our models in this comparative way that we can avoid ‘injustice’ in our philosophical statements, and consequently, dogmatism (PI §133). In this context, injustice can be understood as the unfair representation of the conceptual phenomena under investigation by means of simplification or misrepresentation (through the insistence of said particular model over the possibility of alternatives).⁷ Philosophising dogmatically can then be seen as the practice of pursuing a philosophical model for the sake of the model itself rather than for the sake of arriving at any kind of clarity or insight around the reality which it is intended to describe. The dangers of doing so are immediately obvious. As an individual, one opens themselves up to claims of disingenuity and dishonesty when thinking, and risks discrediting themselves if they are thought to be thinking with a particular agenda or bias in mind. There is also the possibility of future philosophical work done on the back of such a philosophical model being similarly unjust or vacuous, and thus also at risk of being thrown out if the foundational philosophical model is proven to be either problematic or undesirable in some way.⁸

But how is it that we arrive at this kind of thinking, and why does Wittgenstein diagnose this as something that is ‘easy to fall into’, specifically when philosophising? One could speculate a number of reasons for why a particular philosophical model might be attractive for contextual reasons. Luckily, and as is observed by Gabriel Citron, we need not speculate.⁹ We can look to a passage from Schopenhauer that Wittgenstein quoted multiple times. Schopenhauer describes how barriers in philosophy arise from people not wanting to admit they were wrong, or wanting to deliberately take a radical and unorthodox position, or other such contextual reasons.¹⁰ This certainly accords with remarks that Wittgenstein makes over the course of his philosophical career: the idea that difficulty in philosophy is not just the intellectual difficulty of grappling with problems, but is also the difficulty to define struggle with one’s

⁷ This is the line taken by Oskari Kuusela. For a full account of Wittgenstein’s conception of dogmatism, see O. Kuusela *The Struggle Against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Concept of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press (2008).

⁸ Kuusela makes a similar argument relating to hierarchical arrangements in philosophy. See Kuusela (2008) p. 81.

⁹ Citron, Gabriel ‘Honesty, Humility, Courage, & Strength: Later Wittgenstein on the Difficulties of Philosophy and the Philosophical Virtues’. *Philosophers’ Imprint* 19. (2019). In fact, this is the precise kind of criticism that Wittgenstein makes about W.E Johnson, when he quipped that ‘[h]is life’s work has been his three volumes on logic. You can’t expect him now to see that there is something fundamentally wrong with what he has written. I wouldn’t try and discuss with Johnson now’ (F:III:193).

¹⁰ MS:158:34v.

will against the desire to see things in a particular way.¹¹ Wittgenstein illustrates this kind of difficulty thus:

It is as if a man is standing in a room facing a wall on which are painted a number of dummy doors. Wanting to get out, he fumblingly tries to open them, vainly trying them all, one after the other, over and over again... And all the time, although he doesn't realize it, there is a real door in the wall behind his back and all he has to do is turn round and open it. To help him get out of the room all we have to do is to get him to look in a different direction. But it's hard to do this, since, wanting to get out he resists our attempts to turn him away from where he thinks the exit must be.¹²

The point Wittgenstein is trying to make is that we get so ingrained in certain patterns and rituals of thought that it can be difficult to see that, sometimes, better ways of characterising and understanding the world around us exist. In this example, thinking well does not *just* involve the cognitive task of 'finding the right door', it also involves the willingness to be able to examine one's preconceptions regarding the task at hand and to consider alternative ways of characterising the problem and its solution.

That Wittgenstein's concern with this struggle is linked to a more general concern over honesty is evidenced by a number of remarks he makes about the difficulties this kind of struggle involves, and a related question, what goes into good thinking. Despite their non-linearity, these remarks are often examined together under the loose categorisation of Wittgenstein's 'ethical remarks' as they all express a concern over character, and in this instance, the impact of character on intellectual work. One of the most oft-quoted of these so-called 'ethical' remarks, and perhaps one of the most helpful for our purposes, is the following: 'If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself...he will remain superficial in his thinking'.¹³ This remark is often taken to be representative of the general feeling of the ethical remarks, in that it expresses the importance that Wittgenstein places on the role of honesty and self-examination in intellectual thinking.¹⁴ As James Conant rightly observes, this is as much a general concern over superficiality for Wittgenstein as it is a philosophical one — insofar as it even makes sense to distinguish

¹¹ For example, see the following heading from BT 86: 'Difficulty of Philosophy Not Difficulty of The Sciences, But A Difficulty Of A Change Of Attitude: Resistances Of The Will Must Be Overcome'.

¹² D.A.T. Gasking, and A.C. Jackson 'Wittgenstein as Teacher', in K.T. Fann, ed. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and his Philosophy*, 1967:49–55, p. 52, see also CV 42.

¹³ Rush Rhees (ed.) *Recollections of Wittgenstein: Hermine Wittgenstein--Fania Pascal--F.R. Leavis--John King--M. O'c. Drury*. Oxford University Press (1984) p. 19.

¹⁴ James Conant lists this remark amongst four others as a representative sample of these so-called ethical remarks made by Wittgenstein. See James Conant 'On Going the Bloody Hard Way in Philosophy' in J Whittaker (ed.), *The Possibilities of Sense*, New York: Macmillan (2001).

between these two categories on Wittgenstein's terms.¹⁵ For if someone is superficial in their general character, then for Wittgenstein this will translate over to their thinking and writing, and vice versa. This is evident in the consistent appeal to character that Wittgenstein makes in both his positive and negative judgement of various philosophical figures, such as praising William James for being 'a real human being' and deriding Schopenhauer for being superficial in his thinking and 'never taking stock of himself' (CV:41).¹⁶

Wittgenstein understands this kind of self-honesty to be extremely difficult. He writes: 'How difficult it is to know oneself, to honestly admit what one is!' (PPO:221) and:

It is... difficult to think, or try to think, really honestly about your life & other people's lives...thinking about these things is ... often downright nasty. And when it's nasty then it's most important (WC:370).

Despite its apparent difficulty, it is for Wittgenstein paramount to being able to engage in decent thought. It is only through being honest with oneself and coming to see clearly how one thinks that one can come to recognise the underlying preconceptions and intellectual dogmas that Wittgenstein understood as skewing the way we characterise and conceptualise the world around us.¹⁷

1.4

Returning to the topic of this paper, what then is it about isolation that is conducive to fostering this kind of self-honesty? And what was about his relationships with other people that Wittgenstein saw as being detrimental to this? As we've seen, intellectual dogmas aren't just manifested by the characteristics of the thinker themselves, but can also be the product of the context and the environment that the thinker is in. We've also seen that this is not just limited to the philosophical sphere for Wittgenstein but is also connected with the personal -- struggling with these dogmas is just as much a matter of one's character as it is dealing with the intellectual conditions of that dogma.

¹⁵ Conant (2001), p. 88.

¹⁶ Rhees (1984) p. 106.

¹⁷ For a full account of Wittgenstein's conception of dogmatism, see O. Kuusela *The Struggle Against Dogmatism: Wittgenstein and the Concept of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press (2008).

As such then, we can say that the contextual and environmental influences on intellectual dogmatism aren't limited to the academic sphere — but can also stem from the more immediate and personal environment of the thinker themselves that can cause us to maintain intellectual dogmas. One's living conditions and the stresses of day-to-day living can have a hand in making us adopt philosophical and intellectual positions for other reasons beyond the sake of the inquiry itself, and thus make us reluctant to change or adapt those positions when our academic inquiries suggest that we should do so.

Dealing with these issues is not then just a matter of getting one's intellectual affairs in order. For Wittgenstein, becoming an honest thinker necessitates that one first becomes an honest person, and involves the greater task of getting oneself in order more generally. As such, we should understand Wittgenstein's demands for self-examination and bringing oneself into a state of honesty as not being restricted to any one aspect of his life (such as his work), but as instead involving the monumental task of re-evaluating everything in the search of dishonesty through which dogmas can manifest.

But how? How can such a monumental task be possible? Are we not constantly immersed in a string of environmental and contextual episodes that have unseen influences on our thinking? This, I propose, is a problem that faced Wittgenstein upon forming his conception of the importance of honesty in philosophical and intellectual work. Becoming honest with oneself in an intellectual sense necessitates becoming honest with oneself in a much more general sense — that is, in how we relate to *others*. Becoming honest with oneself in this way is made easier when one is extricated (or perhaps *liberated*, as we shall come to see) from the contextual web of day-to-day obligations in which one is typically immersed.

It is no coincidence that, shortly after his second spell of self-isolation in 1936, Wittgenstein decided to embark on a series of confessions, admitting to instances where he had been both dishonest with himself and to others. These confessions took place as live recitations to two groups: one consisting of close family and friends in Vienna, and another consisting of G. E. Moore, Maurice Drury, Fania Pascal, Rowland Hutt and Francis Skinner in Cambridge. Unfortunately, an exhaustive list of the supposed 'sins' that Wittgenstein confessed to isn't available, but we can get an idea of the kinds of things that Wittgenstein owned up to from Pascal's account. Two of Wittgenstein's 'sins'

stood out to Pascal in particular: that Wittgenstein had covered up the nature of his Jewish ancestry (claiming to be three-quarters Aryan and one-quarter Jewish when, in fact, the opposite was true), and that Wittgenstein had in some way lied about a violent altercation with a student during his time as a primary school teacher in Otterthal.¹⁸

Reflecting on these confessions, Wittgenstein wrote: ‘Last year with God’s help I pulled myself together and made a confession. This brought me into more settled waters, into a better relation with people, and to a greater seriousness.’¹⁹ Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘seriousness’ here is indicative that the benefit of this confession was partly philosophical, given his consistent use of the term in relation to the quality of philosophical and intellectual work.²⁰ As is observed by Citron, ‘seriousness’ appears regularly in connection with Wittgenstein’s reflections on the qualities of decent philosophical work, and is identified by Citron as one of several ‘intellectual virtues’ that Wittgenstein purportedly espoused during his career.²¹ With this in mind, the above remark becomes a comment on the positive impact that Wittgenstein felt such confessions (themselves the result of isolation) had on the quality of his philosophical thinking.

As the above remark shows these periods of self-isolation had the upside of ultimately improving Wittgenstein’s relations with people and his philosophical work more generally. This is re-enforced by the earlier observation on the relationship that Wittgenstein held between superficial character and superficial thought. If confession was a means to getting honest with himself and being less superficial in his general character, then it stands to reason that, on his own terms, it would also ultimately move him into a better philosophical position. That Wittgenstein would go on to produce some of the only work of his later period that he was satisfied with is further testament to this, for it was around this period of working on himself that Wittgenstein produced the first 188 remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations*

¹⁸ Rhes (1984) p. 37-38.

¹⁹ Rhes (1984) p. 173.

²⁰ For example: ‘My work (my philosophical work) is ... lacking in seriousness & love of truth’ (PPO:153). See also (F:IV:116), in which Wittgenstein is reported to have described what he means by an honest thinker.

²¹ Citron specifically links ‘seriousness’ with the willingness to endure the suffering of self-examination for a worthy purpose (i.e, the truth) and not for the sake of self-flagellation or impressing others (or any other contextual reason). Whilst I find Citron’s argument for the presence of so-called ‘intellectual virtues’ in Wittgenstein’s canon problematic with other aspects of Wittgenstein’s meta-philosophy, I nevertheless find myself in agreement that Wittgenstein consistently employed terms such as ‘seriousness’ to describe stable aspects of honest philosophical thinking. See Citron (2019) p. 2, 13.

— the material out of the later phase of his career that came closest to being published in his lifetime.

Accordingly, we can see the philosophical precursor to this period of work in earlier remarks made by Wittgenstein, wherein he proposed that similarities between the intellectual labour of philosophical work and the emotional labour of working on oneself:

Working in philosophy — like work in architecture in many respects — is really more work on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them) (Ms 112 46: 14.10.1931)

The edifice of your pride has to be dismantled. And that is terribly hard work (Ms 157a 57r: 1937)

If, as Wittgenstein contends, philosophy involves dealing with these kinds of difficulties of the will, then it stands to reason that engaging in a period of isolation where one is extricated from certain environmental and contextual influences allows for a similar process of reflection to occur with one's intellectual and philosophical labours.

1.5

What this paper is proposing is, in effect, something akin to the 'liberatory' reading of Wittgenstein put forward by Rupert Read, in that I am suggesting Wittgenstein's experience of isolation can be considered a liberatory experience from the kind of environmental and contextual influences that can distort our thinking.²² According to Read's view, the essential message of Wittgenstein's philosophy is a liberatory or emancipatory one, whereby the philosopher frees (or rather, *liberates*) their interlocutors from dogmatism and restrictive tendencies of thought. As Read contends, this liberation radically extends beyond the merely academic exercise of philosophy towards both political and personal forms of life.²³ However, whilst the liberatory reading understands liberation to be the end goal of Wittgenstein's philosophy, what I am suggesting in this paper is that it ought to be seen as the starting point: namely, that philosophical thinking begins from a position of honesty, which in turn is brought about by the liberatory experience of freeing oneself from the various contextual and environmental influences that

²² R. Read, *Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy: Thinking Through His Philosophical Investigations*, Routledge, New York: Routledge (2021).

²³ See Read (2021), particularly chapters 2 and 4.

can distort our perceptions of ourselves and our work and ultimately inhibit such honesty. Accordingly, Wittgenstein's experiences of isolation can be seen and perhaps even understood in this light.

By examining Wittgenstein's experiences and how they intersect with philosophical remarks made at the time, this paper has suggested that a potential benefit of self-isolation is that it affords an opportunity to reflect on oneself honestly, without the distraction of being an active member in a socially performative web of obligations, expectations, and duties. As we have seen, despite the difficulty and potential unpleasantness of reflecting on how we interpret and think about ourselves, the benefits of doing so are that it can bring us into more 'settled waters' -- with ourselves, with the people around us, and with our work. But this is not to say that there is no risk involved in isolating oneself. Despite the benefits that a period of self-isolation can bring, there are also very real challenges to one's mental and emotional health and wellbeing. One must have strategies that they can turn to, if one is to make a healthy use out of isolation.

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Wittgenstein Abbreviations Reference Key

BT: *The Big Typescript*

CV: *Culture and Value*

F: *Portraits of Wittgenstein*

PI: *Philosophical Investigations*

PPO: *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*

WC: *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911-1951*

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