

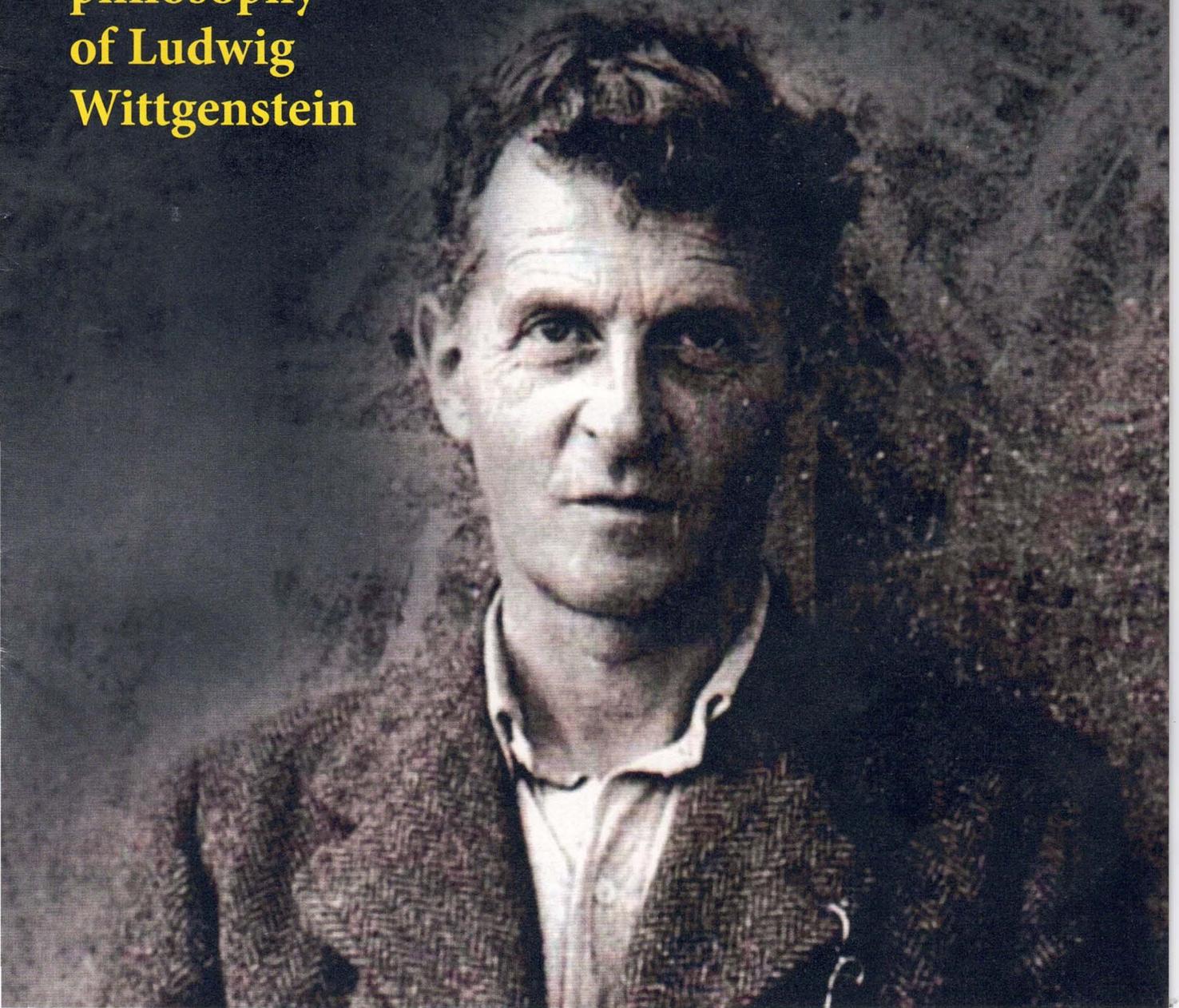
theFriend

7 July 2023 | £2.00

Full
copy

*'He was more like the
rabbi who will not utter
the name of God.'*

**The moral
philosophy
of Ludwig
Wittgenstein**



The rest is silence: Jonathan Wooding on the moral philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein

'He was more like the rabbi who will not utter the name of God.'

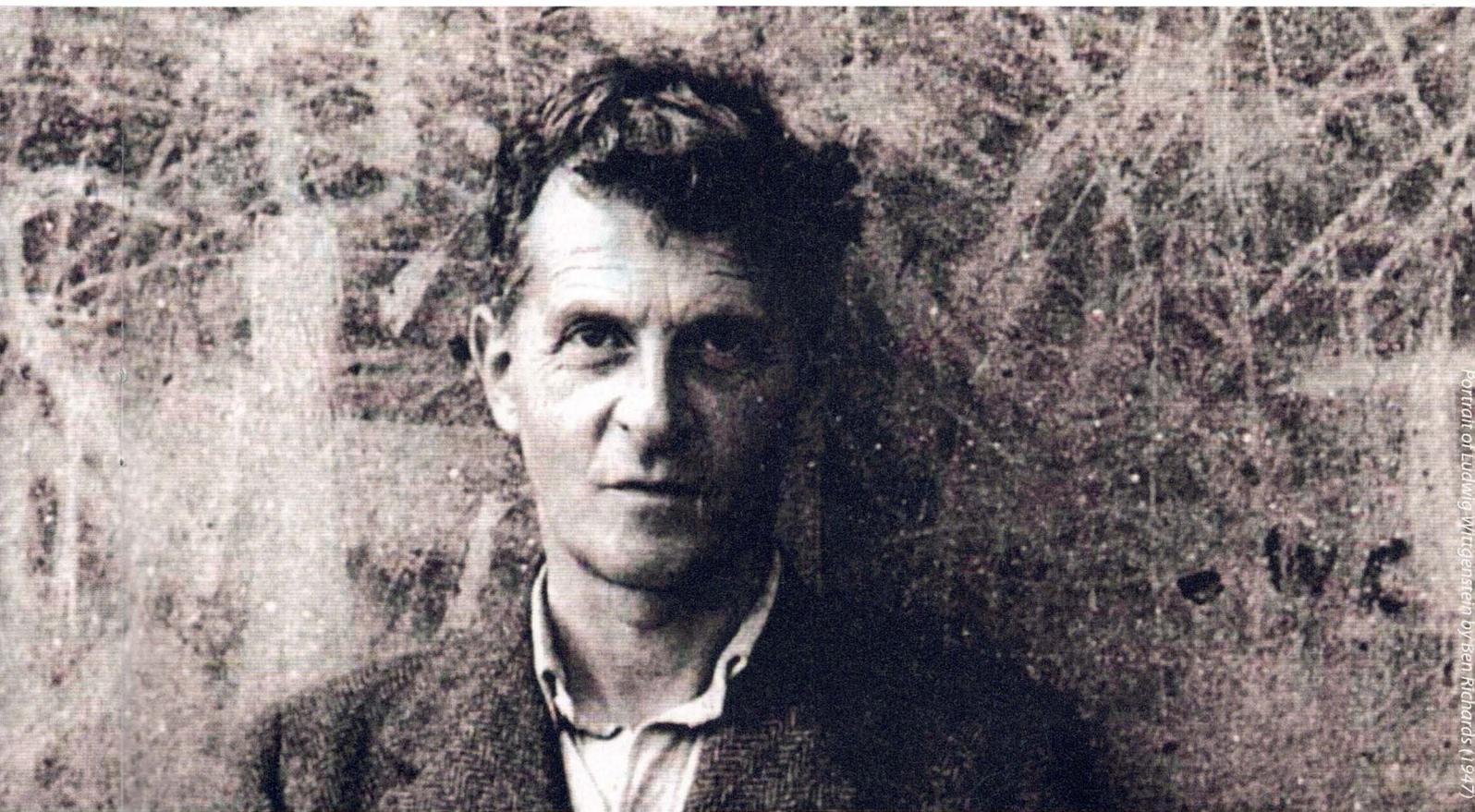
George Fox's *Journal* played a not-insignificant part in the life and work of one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). He kept a copy with him for many years, even giving one as a gift to a fellow philosopher. He also knew the portrait of Fox contained in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). He would affirm the reality of specifically-religious experience all his life, despite the attempts by the irreligious and the atheistical, the materialists and the positivists, to recruit him to their cause. In 1912 Wittgenstein was reading *Varieties*, and told his disapproving mentor, Bertrand Russell: 'This book does me a lot of good.'

To this day scholars 'pore over Wittgenstein's texts like Talmudic scholars divining wisdom from the Torah', or so say David Edmonds and John Eidinow, the authors of *Wittgenstein's Poker* (2001). Their essay explores a battle of wits between Wittgenstein and his professional rival Karl Popper, which took place on 25 October 1946 at the Cambridge Moral Science Club. Perhaps surprisingly – for this Quaker in any case – the notion of philosophy as 'love of wisdom' seemed under threat on this occasion. Edmonds and Eidinow might say that this means I am muddle-headed with mumbo jumbo – we should all be upholding true science, they say, and the rest is silence, or ought to be. But we might ask whether this was what Wittgenstein actually understood by keeping silence. We all know what it is to be traduced or caricatured, and I think Wittgenstein felt so on that occasion. Famously, after fiddling absent-mindedly – though perhaps threateningly – with a poker, he left the room.

Popper could not have known the offence he had caused to a man who declared enigmatically: 'I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.' This doesn't sound like a materialist or anti-metaphysician at work. Ray Monk reveals in his biography *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The duty of genius* (1990), that, in 1916, on the Russian front, while serving with the Austro-Hungarian army, Wittgenstein and his philosophical writing underwent a sea change through discussion with Max Bieler. They talked not about Wittgenstein's work on logic and linguistics but instead of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Wittgenstein knew whole passages of *Karamazov* by heart. It is a novel that includes, of course, the story of the grand inquisitor, a totalitarian cleric who gives a diatribe before a revenant Jesus on the necessity of an authoritarian church. He is met with silence (and an enigmatic kiss, rather than the brandishing of a poker). Here, divinity lies in the inexpressible, in the silent one. Monk writes that Wittgenstein's work was transformed 'from an analysis of logical symbolism... into the curiously hybrid work which we know today, combining as it does logical theory with religious mysticism.'

The work Monk is referring to was published in English under the title *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1922. I find it impenetrable and opaque at times, but there's lucidity too, and love of wisdom, and, yes, the advocacy of silence. At the close of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes, as if at Quaker Meeting, 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.' Popper won't have liked that. In his autobiography, *Unended Quest*, he writes a scornful footnote about Wittgenstein, who had by then died of cancer. 'It is his facile solution of the problem of depth – the thesis "the deep is the





Portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein by Ben Richards (1947)

unsayable” – which unites Wittgenstein the positivist and Wittgenstein the mystic.’

In a memoir of Wittgenstein from 1958, Norman Malcolm gives this remarkable picture of Wittgenstein’s teaching method: ‘There were frequent and prolonged periods of silence, with only an occasional mutter from Wittgenstein, and the stillest attention from the others.’ Malcolm also recalls, rather comically, a remark from another Cambridge philosopher: ‘Peter Geach once observed that it had the appearance of a Quaker prayer meeting.’ And in a biographical sketch by Georg Henrik Von Wright:

‘There’s lucidity, love of wisdom, and the advocacy of silence.’

‘He had no manuscript or notes. He thought before the class.’ We might say, well, he’s imitating Socrates, or even Jesus. We might also make a connection with the ‘extemporaneous’ quality of George Fox’s ministrations – and of Quaker practice to this day. Malcolm writes: ‘The Journal of George Fox, the English Quaker, he read with admiration – and presented me with a copy of it.’

Ray Monk gives his biographer’s verdict: ‘In a way that is centrally important but difficult to define, he had lived a devoutly religious life.’ He held in very high esteem Augustine’s *Confessions*, and the literature of ‘religious awakening’ – Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* for instance. Popper ignored Wittgenstein’s religiosity, and misunderstood his call for silence. Others, like AJ Ayer and the logical empiricists, welcomed his apparent reductiveness in the name of evolutionary reality. But Wittgenstein was more like the rabbi who will not utter the name of God, or an apophatic theologian illuminating God’s nature through eliminating imposture. So, he writes at the end of his *Tractatus*, ‘What we cannot speak about

we must pass over in silence.’ This is not, however, just a simple rebuke to the bungling theologian in each one of us. Wittgenstein was also fond of quoting a witty paradox from Augustine: ‘One should put a stop to the nonsense of chatterboxes, but that does not mean that one should refuse to talk nonsense oneself!’ His biographer marks the salient point: ‘it is equally important to see that something is indicated by the inclination to talk nonsense.’ Popper et al had no time for this.

Wittgenstein, in a ‘Lecture on Ethics’ from 1929, about which Popper can have had no knowledge until its publication in 1965, makes it clear what he means by keeping silence: ‘My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk on Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language.’ Wittgenstein is not just tinkering with propositional grammar while the world burns. He is a moral philosopher after all, despite his championing by the materialists and irreligious. They misunderstand his latter-day *via negativa* – which asserts that no finite concepts or attributes can be adequately used of God – as simple atheism. We need you, professor, to defend our open society from threats to liberal democracy and human rights. Part of this, surely, is to defend our concepts of God and holiness. This, I think, is what Wittgenstein ultimately does. As his friend Norman Malcolm concluded: ‘I do not wish to give the impression that Wittgenstein accepted any religious faith... But I think that there was in him, in some sense, the possibility of religion.’ It is when we ‘share silence’ that we dare to enter into religious society. No need to brandish pokers, but an open society will always help. The shared silence of our own open society is true to that continuing possibility. ●

Jonathan is from Plymouth Meeting.