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“Back to the rough ground!”

On Jan Estep’s “Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein”

Chantal Bax

- 3 Jan Estep’s “Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein” both has the form and the function of a hiking map, though it is also part travel report.² Estep, who holds a PhD in Philosophy as well as an MFA in Fine Arts, devised the map after visiting the site of a hut where philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951) would often retreat to write. Born into a wealthy Viennese family, Wittgenstein time and again showed a preference for a more ascetic lifestyle. He famously gave away his inheritance and spent significant parts of his life, not in bustling Vienna or in intellectual Cambridge (where he was a Fellow and Professor in Philosophy), but in remote Austrian villages and the Norwegian countryside. Wittgenstein first visited Norway in 1913, when he traveled to the fjords ; impressed with the natural surroundings, he commissioned the building of a small cabin near the village of Skjolden. Over the years, Wittgenstein would often retreat to his hut, going on long walks and working on manuscripts that would later be published as the *Philosophical Investigations* and *Culture and Value*, among others.
- 4 Estep travelled to the site of Wittgenstein’s cabin in 2005, when she was visiting the Wittgenstein Archives in Bergen. Her exact motives for the trip were unclear to her, as she explains in a text placed under an official map of the Skjolden area : “I had a vague hope that I would somehow understand Wittgenstein better, but I did not know what to expect or what I would find.” In addition to conveying information about Wittgenstein and his hut, the text relates Estep’s thoughts and experiences on the trail to the cabin and upon arriving at its remains. They are mixed at best, but this precisely makes “Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein” into an interesting project. During the entire expedition Estep has a hard time reconciling what she knows and likes about Wittgenstein with what she comes across along the way ; it even makes her wonder whether her project is really of a Wittgensteinian nature. Regardless of Estep’s doubts, however, her expedition can in fact be explained as being very much in the spirit of Wittgenstein, at least as I understand his work. I will come back to this after discussing her project in more detail and after explaining the cause of her not being entirely satisfied with the trip.

Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein

- 5 Mixed feelings are already behind Estep’s reason for creating the hiking map in the first place. She starts her expedition with a map drawn by Wittgenstein himself, but this map is very minimal and Estep cannot completely wrap her head around that fact. Although it is in line with Wittgenstein's trust in ordinary, everyday communication, she explains, it seems to sit uneasily with his philosophical method more generally : “Here was a man so meticulous in his analytic pursuits, yet his directions to the hut were sketchy and vague.” This vagueness prompted Estep to devise a more detailed map of her own - out of a desire to make it easier for other Wittgensteinians to find the cabin’s site, as Estep herself puts it, but perhaps also out of a desire to correct what she sees as Wittgenstein’s very unwittgensteinian representation of the route. Her map is printed on the reverse of the side with the official Skjolden area map (where Wittgenstein's own drawing is reprinted as well, along with an even more minimal map drawn by the owner of a nearby campsite). Estep has also supplemented her drawing with several pictures she took during the hike. They are printed alongside her map, with lines connecting them to points on the trail.
- 6 Estep then goes on to describe her walk to Wittgenstein’s hut. Again, she recounts a mixed experience. The route starts out on an unmarked dirt road, crosses a stream and continues through a number of muddy fields. Or not so much muddy as covered in manure, Estep points out ; the land is still used for farming. But Estep can also appreciate the muckiness of this part of the route : “How appropriate that one should have to wade through shit prior to reaching any higher state of philosophical understanding.” Once the trail reaches the woods, markings left behind by other Wittgensteinians can be discerned, and the route becomes easier to follow. Even though her initial reaction to these human signs on a natural trail is one of chagrin, Estep finds the red “W” and “TW” markings welcoming and reassuring for invoking “a community

of Wittgenstein devotees, each of us on our own but heading in a similar direction." She also enjoys the thought of crossing the same obstacles Wittgenstein himself had to cross in order to reach his hut.

7 Upon arriving at the site of Wittgenstein's cabin, ambivalence prevails once more. Of the hut, only the stone foundation and a cellar remain, but they are becoming more and more overgrown by the surrounding vegetation. Estep is also underwhelmed by the direct surroundings of the hut : "the scenery is generically nice, not spectacular." To add insult to injury, there is nothing to remind visitors of the fact that a brilliant philosopher once called this place his (second) home : "There are no markings or commemorative plaques. [...] If I did not know who Wittgenstein was, the place would not stand out, just another abandoned relic left to fade away in the pretty Norwegian countryside."

8 This double consciousness, as Estep calls it, is a recurring topic in her work. As beings endowed with both a mind and a body, we always experience phenomena on two levels : that of our visceral, worldly subjectivity and that of our analytical reflection and interpretation. In the search for Wittgenstein's cabin, this duality becomes all too clear, as Estep is unable to reconcile her knowledge of and admiration for Wittgenstein with a mostly unexciting hike to a plainly unexciting site. While she tries to resolve the tension by reminding herself that the non-occurrence of an epiphany at the end of the trail is completely consistent with Wittgenstein's notion of a failed metaphysics, her overall experience seems to have been one of disappointment. Even if she did not know exactly what to expect from her visit to Wittgenstein's hut, she was apparently not prepared for this anticlimax.

9 Estep's anticlimactic feelings are primarily the result of her understanding of Wittgenstein, whom she sees, not so much as a philosopher in the traditional sense of the word, but as a thinker whose main goal consists in preventing other philosophers from devising intricate theories, or even from devising philosophical theories as such. Estep, in short, takes Wittgenstein to be an anti-philosopher. This already becomes clear in the opening section of her travel report, in which she quotes Wittgenstein's famous remark "What is your aim in philosophy ? – To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (*Philosophical Investigations* § 309). Estep is reminded of this quote by the numerous thick and distressing flies she encounters on her hike, and she uses this to briefly introduce Wittgenstein's philosophy (or anti-philosophy) to her readers.

10 "The comment is a direct attack on the myopic ways philosophers can trap themselves in their own gnarly problems," Estep explains. Wittgenstein maintained that many or even most philosophical problems arise from a misuse of language. These problems have nothing to do with the things themselves, but everything with our speculating about them outside of everyday language games. Instead of joining other thinkers in their speculative endeavors, therefore, Wittgenstein set out to free philosophers from their self-inflicted confusion. He hoped that "by clarifying the navigable landscape of human knowledge, [or] by showing what we can and cannot do within philosophy," the majority of philosophical problems would simply disappear. The fly in Wittgenstein's quote thus stands for the philosopher, the bottle for the problems in which he has entangled himself.

11 Estep's understanding of Wittgenstein's method is a widely shared one ; a reading of this kind has for instance been defended by the Oxford scholars Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, whose interpretation of Wittgenstein has been highly influential.³ Other interpreters have however argued that presenting Wittgenstein as an outright anti-philosopher does not entirely do justice to his work. Stanley Cavell has for instance pointed out that Wittgenstein does not think there are hard and fast rules as to what counts as an instance of ordinary language, and that he accordingly is not trying to lay down what other philosophers can and cannot say.⁴ There is therefore another way of understanding Wittgenstein's position vis-à-vis philosophy – one that may have made Estep's experience on the Wittgenstein trail less disappointing than the reading that in fact informs her project.

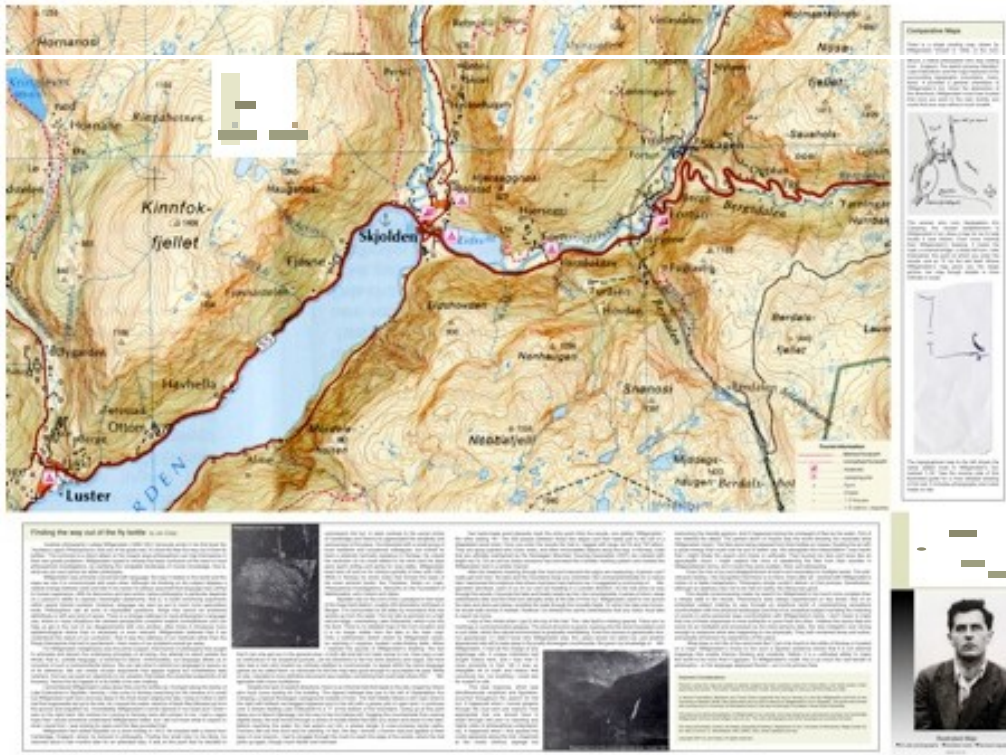
Interpreting Wittgenstein's method

- 12 Wittgenstein's method as it is understood by interpreters like Baker and Hacker can be summarized by focusing on one single notion, namely that of essence. It figures in one of Wittgenstein's key methodological remarks : "When philosophers use a word –"knowledge", "being", "object", "I", [...] and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? -- What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*Philosophical Investigations* [PI] § 116). This is often taken to mean that whereas philosophy concerns itself with the nature or essence of things, Wittgenstein will have nothing to do with this. Questions about essences solely arise when we detach ourselves from actual uses of language, so philosophical problems actually form quasi-problems; there is no such thing as "the nature of being" or "the essence of language" to reflect upon. This also means that the solution to philosophical problems is in fact equally simple as effective: they can be solved, or more precisely dissolved, by bringing words like "object" and "being" "back from their metaphysical to their everyday use." According to a very common reading of Wittgenstein, then, he takes philosophy's preoccupation with essences to be wholly misguided and his own method is designed to remove this confusion at its roots.
- 13 Another look at Wittgenstein's methodological remarks, however, reveals that his thoughts on the notion of essence are a little less dismissive. He starts what is usually considered to be the *Investigations'* discourse on method (namely, §§ 89-133) by asking in what sense philosophy is something sublime. It after all appears to differ from the sciences, he explains, in not dealing with mere "facts of nature" but with the "basis, or essence, of everything empirical" (PI § 89). Wittgenstein does not take this to mean that philosophy is a sublime activity – not because it does not concern itself with the nature of things, but because this nature or essence should not be understood as something sublime or "pure and clear-cut" (PI § 105). For one could say, Wittgenstein continues, that "we too in these investigations are trying to understand the essence of [things like] language"; its essence in the sense of "its function, its structure," (PI § 92) to be precise. All too often, however, philosophers work with a different understanding of what the nature of something is: "they see in the essence, not something that already lies open to view [...] but something that lies *beneath* the surface."
- 14 Wittgenstein, in other words, does not object to philosophy's interest in essences as such, but more specifically takes issue with a particular conception of what the nature of a thing must be: something "of the purest crystal" (PI § 94), immune to "empirical cloudiness or uncertainty" (PI § 97). In the grip of this (pre)conception, philosophers traditionally assume that even if everyday phenomena are characterized by complexity and ambiguity, the essence of these things must be simple and exact, and must accordingly be found somewhere beneath or behind the messiness of the everyday.
- 15 This, however, is where the traditional philosopher makes a fundamental mistake. "For the crystalline purity of logic was [not] a *result of investigation*," Wittgenstein points out, "it was a requirement" (PI § 107). Instead of enabling philosophers to approach their subject matter with an open mind, this requirement limits the outcome of philosophical investigations beforehand. It makes philosophers blind to the fact that there is more to meaning than reference, say, or that there is more to man than mind. In declaring these things to be the essence of language or of human being, philosophers reduce highly complex and multifaceted phenomena to just one instance or aspect of them, and can accordingly no longer do justice to the very phenomena they set out to explain. Or as Wittgenstein puts it in an analogy that fits well with Estep's hiking project : "We have got on slippery ice where there is no friction, so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk" (PI § 107).
- 16 Yet, if philosophers fail to achieve what they set out to do precisely because they are looking for simple and sublime essences, there is a solution to their predicament. We want to know the nature of things, i.e. "[we] want to walk," hence, Wittgenstein states, "we need *friction*" or, in other words, we must look for nothing above or beyond the complex and messy phenomena as we encounter them in everyday life. It is by giving what Wittgenstein calls a "perspicuous representation" of this very complexity that philosophers can contribute to our understanding of the nature of things. They need to see that if "our real need" is to understand "the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language" or of human being, say, they should not be telling stories about "some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm" (PI § 108). Instead, they should help us get

an overview of the many different things we count among the uses of language, or among the manifestations of mind, as well as of the (family resemblance) relations between these different uses and manifestations.⁵

Reinterpreting "Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein"

- 17 To come back to Estep's project, the mixed feelings she experienced on her hike can all be explained in terms of the conception of essence - and thus of the aim and method of philosophy - of which Wittgenstein was trying to liberate philosophers (himself included ; the *Investigations* often cite the *Tractatus* as an example of the way philosophical theory can go awry). Take Estep's disappointment, even before starting the trail, with the sketchy and vague directions that make up Wittgenstein's own map of his hut. Estep takes this to stand in contrast with Wittgenstein's philosophical analyses, but on the reading I have just laid out, it is in fact perfectly in line with his understanding of the way philosophers should and should not proceed. For if the nature of phenomena like mind and meaning do not come in the form of a pure and precise essence, the answer to a philosophical question need take the form of pure and precise theory. As Wittgenstein puts it: "If I tell someone "Stand roughly here" – may this explanation not work perfectly? And cannot every other one fail too?" (PI § 88). When it comes to phenomena like language or human being, an inexact explanation might actually be the most viable or precise one, precisely because of their multifaceted nature.
- 18 Estep thus need not have been disappointed with Wittgenstein's map, but Wittgenstein himself already anticipated that people might experience his novel approach to philosophy as a bit of a letdown : "When we believe that we [...] must find the ideal" beneath or behind everyday phenomena, "we become dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called 'propositions' (PI § 105) or 'persons' or 'norms'. Just as Estep is underwhelmed by the trail to Wittgenstein's hut and the surroundings of its site, philosophers in the grip of the idea of crystalline purity cannot be impressed by mundane instances of language or normativity. They should however occupy themselves with nothing more and nothing less than these phenomena in all their everydayness, Wittgenstein maintains. For far from being uninteresting, this is exactly where insight into their nature can be found : "we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful" (PI § 129).
- 19 Hence, to reinterpret a last one of Estep's mixed experiences, it is not appropriate that she had to wade through manure on her way to Wittgenstein's hut because philosophical understanding can, in his view, only be reached by transcending the messiness of the ordinary. That she came across these mucky fields is appropriate because philosophy as Wittgenstein sees it does not try to rise above messiness and mundaneness. Or as he ends his remark about the slippery ice on which philosophers are unable to walk : "Back to the rough ground!" (PI § 107).
- 20 Estep, of course, went precisely back to the rough ground, but she all the same feels that she did not follow in Wittgenstein's footsteps in any meaningful sense of the word. According to the reading I have just offered, however, there is no reason for Estep to be dissatisfied with her expedition, for it was in fact entirely in the spirit of Wittgenstein. He was not so much an anti-philosopher as a thinker who wanted philosophy to focus on the ordinary instead of the sublime ; that Estep discovered nothing extraordinary on her hike is thus much more Wittgensteinian than she seems to realize. In all its mundaneness, Estep's expedition can precisely be said to symbolize philosophy Wittgenstein-style.





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Notes

1 Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), *Land and Environmental Art*, London, Phaidon, 2010.

2 Jan Estep, *Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lake Eidsvatnet, Skjolden, Sogn, Norway*, 2007, illustrated folded sheet map, four-color offset print, 32" w x 24" h (unfolded), 3" w x 8" h (folded). The essay is also available online at *Cultural Geographies*, Issue 15, 2008, 255-60, <http://cgj.sagepub.com/content/15/2/255.extract> and on Estep's website http://www.janestep.com/?page_id=1417.

3 See e.g. Baker and Hacker, 1985.

4 See e.g. Cavell, 1962.

5 This short explanation still leaves a number of difficult questions about Wittgenstein's method unaddressed ; in the second chapter of Bax, 2011 I give a more detailed interpretation of PI §§ 89-133.

Pour citer cet article

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