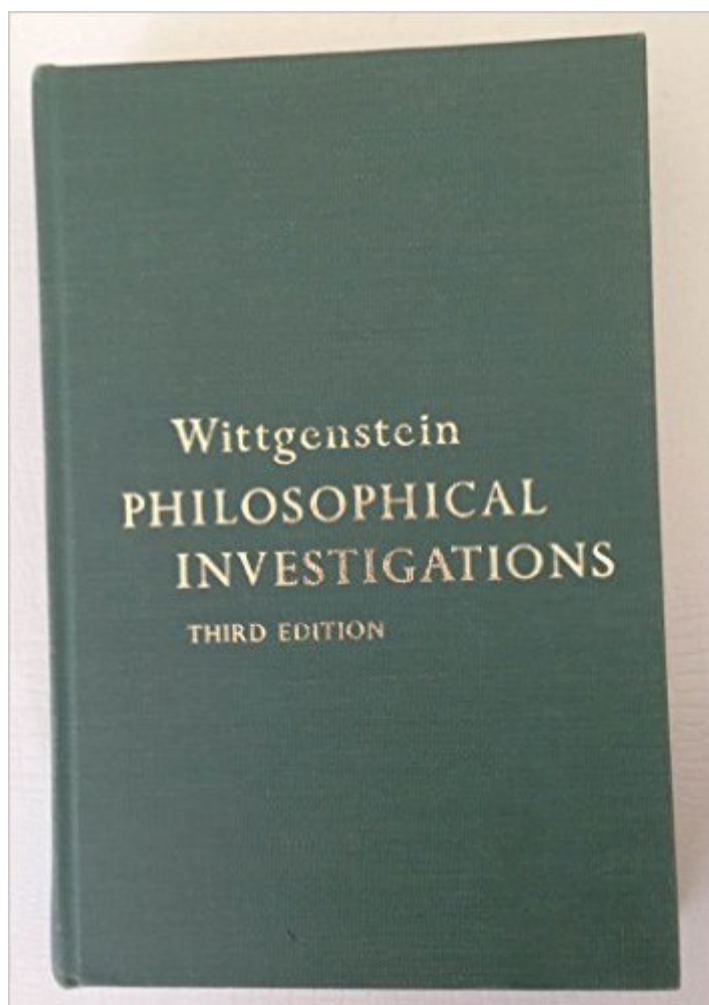


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Philosophical Investigations. 3rd Edition.



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

The two greatest works of philosophy of the 20th century are, I believe, Wittgenstein's PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS and Heidegger's BEING AND TIME. The famous distinction between Analytical or Anglo-American Philosophy on the one hand, and European or Continental Philosophy is symbolized by these two books. I have to confess that I found the Wittgenstein absolutely fascinating, and has become one of the most important books in my life and library. I have studied the Heidegger, but perhaps because of the extraordinary moral failings in his life (he was a member of the Nazi party from 1933 to 1945, though he apparently was more of a fan of Nazism than Hitler, his great break with Hitler being that he saw the Jewish problem as being an intellectual problem, and not a biological one, i.e., he felt like traditional anti-Semites that Jews need only change their beliefs to be reintegrated into society, while Hitler felt the problem was in their blood, and the only solution was isolation of the Jews or their destruction), or perhaps because of the tortured and obscure mode of writing that he felt he had to use to express his thought, I found the Heidegger to be remote, uninteresting, and inaccessible. Ultimately, not worth the effort. But BEING AND TIMES's status as a classic is incontestable. As a grad student in philosophy at Yale and the University of Chicago, I was subject to a growing conviction that most university professors

teaching Wittgenstein should, perhaps, not. The problem is that most American professors teaching Wittgenstein teach him as an extension of Russell, Tarski, and Carnap. Their background is logic, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of science, and their philosophy of language is rooted in logical and scientific issues.

This book inspires heartfelt testimony. My own experience is that it liberates. Wittgenstein introduces a method that's fitted to the questions he treats, so that anyone who is bothered by the same questions can finally get a decent grip on them. The questions I mean are the usual philosophical ones: what is value? what is a fact? what is logic? what makes a thing what it is? what is essence? what is explanation? what is thinking? and so on. But (and this is a clue to his method) the basic question among all of these is about meaning: what is it, what conditions it, and what is the relationship between meaning and world (it turns out to be intimate). A couple of "warnings": Wittgenstein is not a philosopher who likes jargon, in fact the tendency to jargon cuts directly against his philosophical point that language is just fine the way it is. But he can be weirdly hard to read anyway and very smart people walk away from him bewildered all the time. Mostly (I think) that's because the questions are uniquely "close to us" and Wittgenstein's approach is totally unlike familiar approaches to problem-solving (in science, math, politics, car mechanics, etc.) It's as though we are used to inspecting things at arm's length but what's at issue in these questions changes at arm's length, the problem is only right at our noses. So he takes another approach which you'll have to see first-hand - what he himself called his "new method". Now every rule must have an exception, and that brings me to the second point. Actually Wittgenstein does rely on some technical vocabulary - nothing far-out, but it can present an obstacle to deeper reading.

Philosophical Investigations is a classical work in the history of philosophy. It is a book which holds a position similar to that of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, Plato's Meno and Heidegger's Sein und Zeit. Let's take a look at Wittgenstein's investigations. I have presented Wittgenstein's life in my review of Ray Monk's Wittgenstein biography, let me here focus more on his philosophy. Wittgenstein starts with a quote from St Augustine. Augustine believed that the principal function of language is to refer to external reality, he believed that all words function similar to names and according to Wittgenstein he seems to have held the view language is learned through ostensive definitions. Wittgenstein, however, rejects this referentialist view of language, believing that language is far more complex than what Augustine thought. Language is an activity, or connected to a number of activities, which Wittgenstein called language-games. Language-games

have different purposes, not all of them are centered around referring. There are many contexts for using words and many kinds of speech acts. While the logical positivists believed that the meaning of a statement was its method of verification, and Frege believed in two different entities (Sinn and Bedeutung), Wittgenstein rejects these views. According to this thinker from Vienna, meaning is use, and to understand a linguistic expression is to master how to use it and the accompanying techniques, not merely to understand the verification principle, grasping some Platonic/Fregean entity or have some sense impression in one's head (Locke). Language is behaviour, practice gives the words their sense according to Wittgenstein. This also relates to the private language argument, presented in paragraphs 199ff.

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