

Rush Rhees

Wittgenstein's On Certainty:

There Like Our Life.

Ed. D.Z. Phillips. Malden, MA: Blackwell 2005.

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This volume of seminar notes from 1970 (plus sundry related items) is a frustrating read. Rush Rhees is not the best of writers, and it is often difficult to make out his argument, never mind how he came to his conclusions in the first place. (I wasn't at all surprised to learn [134] that the 13 pages of 'Wittgenstein's Builders', his best-known paper, was distilled from a draft of 170 pages.) Nor does it help that Rhees strings together incongruous ideas without explanation, and quotes Wittgenstein as though he were crystal clear. Still there is much that is valuable, even indispensable, in the book, and nobody curious about *On Certainty* — or Rhees or Phillips — should give it a pass.

Working through Rhees' discussion armed with Phillips' Afterword, the bulk of which is given over to explaining how Rhees interprets *On Certainty*, where he goes beyond Wittgenstein and what sets him apart from other commentators, one can see why Rhees is regarded so highly in some quarters and why Phillips is so keen to promote his cause. (Incidentally, Phillips' title is, as Rhees says of Wittgenstein's, 'not altogether a happy one' (3). Like *On Certainty*, *Wittgenstein's On Certainty* deals with much more than advertised.)

Central to Rhees' interpretation of *On Certainty* is his conviction that Wittgenstein is not branching out in a new direction and his discussion is not different from 'the sort of discussion [he] had had before' (4). This is hardly a new point (the editors of *On Certainty*, possibly prompted by Rhees, say something similar). But it is important and bears repeating: as Phillips observes (135), a comparison of *On Certainty* with earlier works 'brings out the *kind* of questions' with which Wittgenstein was grappling. Rhees has a sharp eye for 'the continuity in the *problems* that Wittgenstein addressed' (vii), and is a fine guide to 'the constant connections between [the remarks of *On Certainty*] and [Wittgenstein's] earlier discussions ... going back at least to 1930.' Lest there be any residual doubt on this score, Phillips supplements Rhees' account of 'the philosophical background to [*On Certainty*]' (1) with a handy six-page appendix of 'comparisons' extracted from Rhees' personal papers. In any event Rhees is surely right that 'Wittgenstein's work is [not] devoted to a polemic against Moore's writings' (3; also 104, 134) and Phillips right that '[w]e cannot appreciate Wittgenstein's concerns ... if we remain within the parameters of Moore's interests' (150).

Rhees takes *On Certainty* to be 'a work in logic' — indeed conjectures that Wittgenstein 'would have said that the whole set of remarks (the whole book) is a discussion of logic' (48). In this connection Rhees underscores Wittgen-

stein's observations about the logical character of the language-games of knowing, believing, and the rest (see Chapter 9 and 171-4), in particular his observations about the logical dependence of linguistic practice on empirical regularities (Chapters 12 and 14), the 'peculiar role' of Moore's propositions (ix, 10, 104), and 'the *sureness* involved in the various ways in which we *do* judge and act' (124, also 150). All this is, I think, to the good though, like the point about the continuity of Wittgenstein's thought, much less fresh than when Rhees was writing. Had Wittgenstein not been troubled by logical questions of the sort Rhees singles out, I very much doubt he would have embarked on the investigations detailed in the book (and in *Remarks on Colour* and other works from the same period), still less pursued them to the last days of his life. I am less sure that the question of how language-games are 'conditioned by' facts was 'for Wittgenstein the most important of the whole discussion' (91); my impression is that that he had many irons in the fire, all equally important.

For the most part Rhees portrays Wittgenstein as engaged in an explanatory enterprise, and promotes what Phillips refers to as 'Wittgenstein's conclusions' (170, 171). He holds that 'Wittgenstein's earliest and last concern was: what does it mean to say something?' (6; also 34, 135, 177) and takes him to have accorded considerable theoretical weight to the phrase '[i]t is there — like our life' (83; also 140). Moreover, Phillips tells us, Rhees deprecated interpretations of Wittgenstein as some sort of therapist, his view being that he wished to 'restor[e] a contemplative relation between philosophy and the world,' a task that required spelling out the relation itself (179, 182). Phillips writes (153): 'While recognizing the importance of clarifying conceptual confusions, [Rhees] always emphasized that, for Wittgenstein, this was in the service of the big questions of philosophy.' Yet Rhees also speaks of Wittgenstein in ways that suggest he sees him as involved in a fundamentally critical endeavour and, in Phillips' words, as 'not trying to *establish* anything' (170). It was Rhees' practice in his seminars to return — presumably in the exploratory spirit Wittgenstein favoured — to 'the same points again and again from different angles' (ix). And he was of the opinion, apparently, that Wittgenstein believed we get into trouble when philosophising about our knowledge because 'we are looking in the wrong direction altogether' (150). Perhaps Rhees can have it both ways, but I was unable to figure out how he thought he could pull off the trick.

I could cavil some more. The treatment of Russell, Quine and the logical positivists struck me as overly harsh and dismissive, even — dare I say it? — unWittgensteinian (29, 44, 108; also 136, 173). And not unexpectedly (nobody seems to agree with anyone else about Wittgenstein), I was brought up short by some of the interpretations offered for individual passages of *On Certainty* (and the *Philosophical Investigations*). Mostly, however, I found myself wanting to see how Rhees and Phillips read Wittgenstein, and to learn from them. A great deal of labour has gone into producing the book, and I only regret that — for all Phillips has done to elucidate Rhees' thinking — we are still getting just the tip of the iceberg.

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