

Wittgenstein and his philosophical concept of humility

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When considering the context and cultural background of Wittgenstein's philosophy, including the circumstances that influenced both the formation of his ideas and the broader philosophical landscape, it is striking that Wittgenstein's concept of humility has been little explored in the secondary literature. Yet it was of paramount importance to Wittgenstein's life and thought and can be said to have been a key concept in his thinking. This is especially true if one sets oneself the task of examining Wittgenstein's vision from a different angle. I would like to clarify the following three questions in my contribution: What does Wittgenstein mean by humility? How are self-knowledge and metaphysics connected in Wittgenstein's understanding of humility? What view of the present is opened up to us by Wittgenstein's understanding of humility?

Like Socrates and, in particular, St Augustine, Wittgenstein equates humility with self-knowledge. Humility is an attitude that Wittgenstein endeavoured to cultivate throughout his life and which is always strongly reflected in his thinking. Wittgenstein's attitude of humility is closely linked to his life and his philosophy. For him, the “whole person” is evident everywhere in his philosophical work. The greatness of what someone writes and thinks depends on everything else he writes and does. The whole being of the thinker is reflected in his style. Style is the image of the human being, says Wittgenstein in reference to Buffon. In Wittgenstein's work, life and labour merge to a certain extent into an organic structure, and life itself becomes a work of art, according to an old idea by Goethe. Anyone who renounces radical self-knowledge, according to Wittgenstein, deprives himself of originality and, instead of being guided by his nature, allows himself to be guided by the example of others. The renunciation of humility levels everything. Ambition and vanity are the death of thought, according to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein sought and found his attitude of humility confirmed time and again when reading the works of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, for example. On the one hand, a humble view places him in an adequate self-relationship. On the other hand, humility places him in a right relationship with the absolute. In modesty and selflessness, it allows him a new view of God, the world and life. For Wittgenstein, humility means a selfless recognition of reality. For him, it is reflected in a metaphysical attitude in which the inexplicable is willingly and marvellously accepted as inexplicable. And in which the groundlessness that something is and not nothing must be accepted. In this attitude, we must recognise that we cannot explain everything scientifically, that we cannot control everything technically; and we must refrain from trying to explain something where we can no longer explain anything. If we adopt this attitude, we must recognise the inexplicable and yet not simply deny it out of offended cognitive vanity. Wittgenstein's understanding of humility, which has some astonishing parallels to Einstein's, is therefore of the greatest interest for our time and we can only learn from him. Just consider the way humans treat nature today, for example, or the occasional human overconfidence in science and technology. A look at Wittgenstein's understanding of humility puts human nature in a new light: we recognise that modernity lacks humility.