

Wittgenstein and Woolf. Approach to the ordinary.

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Virginia Woolf (1882 - 1941) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 - 1951) worked in different fields but both made exceptional contribution to the radical change of our attitude to the ordinary, to the everyday. What was their view to the ordinary and how did they come to it? My essay is addressing these questions.

Woolf's attitude to the everyday is expressed by the thoughts of Lily Briscoe, the heroine of the famous novel "To the Lighthouse" [1]:

What is the meaning of life? ... The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark;

"Don't wait for some grandeur to happen, live your life and look for the miracles in everyday!", Woolf seems to be saying. She depicted two ways of dealing with the questions of meaning in "To the Lighthouse" [2]. Mr. Ramsay was a philosopher and was trying to understand the world through knowledge (typical Enlightenment approach). His wife lived differently. She struggled for unity, for intimacy. It becomes crystal clear in the scene of the dinner where Mrs. Ramsay united isolated people around her, made one common world for them to be [2]. She was not looking for knowledge [1]:

It was not knowledge but unity that she desired, ... nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge.

Attention to the everyday, desire for intimacy instead of knowledge - these are the key elements of Mrs. Ramsay's (and Woolf's) approach to the ordinary.

What about Wittgenstein? We can anticipate different attitude from him because of his area of interest - philosophy. Is his attitude towards knowledge and everyday similar to Mr. Ramsay's attitude? No. Not at all. Wittgenstein shared with Mrs. Ramsay her scepticism towards language's ability to reflect reality. He insisted that any language has its limits [3]:

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain non-sense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.

Words don't get us closer or further from reality, *they don't mirror reality*. Words get meaning through use and their meaning depends on the context. This was the key move in philosophy [4]. Wittgenstein realized how disappointing his conclusions sound [4]:

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important?

He gave an optimistic answer by appealing to the ordinary [4]:

What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand. ... The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something - because it is always before one's eyes.)

Wittgenstein started his journey from totally different angle than Woolf. He was studying limits of the language; she was trying to understand human nature and paid special attention to the Freudian interpretations of it. Wittgenstein came to the conclusion which is very similar to Woolf's - everyday life is crucially important. Reality (may be even *the Truth*) is hidden in the ordinary, not in the books of the great philosophers.

On the one hand, this match in the views does not sound as a huge surprise - they were contemporaries and lived in the same country for decades. There is no evidence they ever met [5], but it looks very plausible they were well aware of each other's works. Woolf belonged to the Bloomsbury group of intellectuals in which the dominant figure was the economist John Keynes

(1883 - 1946). He was instrumental in bringing Wittgenstein back to Cambridge after First World War [5]. Another person who could act as a mediator between Woolf and Wittgenstein was Bertrand Russell (1872 - 1970), famous British philosopher and mathematician. He was connected to Bloomsbury group and to Wittgenstein.

On the other hand, it is always intriguing to see how art and philosophy came to the same conclusion starting from totally different grounds. In my opinion it is a strong argument against sceptics - the reality exists and it is the common ground for art, science, philosophy and other creative activities of human being.

References

1. Virginia Woolf. *To the Lighthouse* (1927).
2. Michael S. Roth. *Intensity and the Ordinary: Art, Loss, Forgiveness, part 3*. Video lecture, 2013.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe.
4. Michael S. Roth. *The Postmodern Everyday, part 4*. Video lecture, 2013.
5. Maxwell Bennett. *Virginia Woolf and Neuropsychiatry* (2013).