Wittgenstein, Biography, and Religious Identity

2.1 The uses of biography in philosophical study

It might seem obvious that the philosopher, while perhaps intrigued by details of biography or history, need not consult these disciplines when doing philosophy. After all, the validity of an argument is not affected by who asserted it and what he or she was really like as a person. To suggest otherwise invites concern that an interpreter may be committing an *ad hominem* fallacy or may be otherwise losing track of the important things—claims and reasons. The view just described is common sense, but like all sensible principles, it admits of exceptions, or so I argue. For many philosophers and on many topics, knowing their biographical details or historical context is strictly speaking irrelevant to understanding their philosophical achievements, but for Wittgenstein and the topics of religion and the nature of philosophy, this is not so. The reasons why are because for Wittgenstein, philosophy was a personal practice as much as an academic discipline, something that can be readily seen in biographies; and because the fragmentary and enigmatic remarks on religion, typically coming from sources that were not prepared for publication, can be better appreciated against the background of Wittgenstein’s life. This chapter argues for a pair of claims regarding the use of biography and historical-contextual study for interpreting Wittgenstein’s philosophy. The first, modest claim is that context may help scholars avoid misinterpretations of Wittgenstein’s philosophical texts; this strategic use of historical-contextual study is common in the history of philosophy. The second, perhaps more controversial claim is that context can aid in interpreting claims that have philosophical import that come from fragmentary sources, such as Wittgenstein’s remarks on Judaism and Christianity.
Biographer Ray Monk, too, was drawn to link the person and the philosopher, having the sense that the latter would be better understood through knowledge of the former. As Monk writes in his Introduction to *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*, ‘I hope to make it clear how this work came from this man, to show – what many who read Wittgenstein’s work instinctively feel – the unity of his philosophical concerns with his emotional and spiritual life’ (Monk, 1990, p. xviii). Commenting on Monk’s biography, James Conant observes, ‘Wittgenstein neither wanted to, nor thought he could, separate the task of becoming the sort of human being he wanted to be from the task of becoming the sort of philosopher he wanted to be’ (Conant, 2001, p. 29). Wittgenstein’s philosophical work was bound up with a life of intellectual and moral striving, and one can see this striving both in works prepared for publication as well as in private sources, such as diaries, correspondence, and memories of conversations.

The claim that study of Wittgenstein’s life is relevant to understanding his philosophy is hardly new, but the present chapter undertakes to consider the consequences of this claim for approaching Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Brian McGuinness’ study on the first half of Wittgenstein’s life, *Wittgenstein A Life: Young Ludwig 1889–1921*, and Monk’s biography have displayed the effectiveness of studying Wittgenstein’s life for understanding his philosophy. McGuinness begins the preface to his book connecting his scholarly interest in the *Tractatus* with a need to know more about the philosopher beyond his published words. McGuinness writes:

I do not here pretend to publish a reference book containing all that is known (and nothing but what is known) of Wittgenstein. Rather I attempt to present his life (part of it, at first) as an intelligible whole, as something capable of being seen as a unity, as the development of just such a Daimon as Goethe describes in a favourite poem of Wittgenstein’s...I believe that Wittgenstein wanted to see his own life in such a way: what I have to describe is as much the character he tried to create as the character he was (if the two are really distinct). (McGuinness, 1988, p. xi)

In seeking to portray ‘an intelligible whole’ to Wittgenstein’s life and philosophy, note here that McGuinness observes two characters of Wittgenstein: first, ‘the character he tried to create’, and second, ‘the character he was’. I claim that we should think of the first as being fashioned by the ethic of perspicuity running through Wittgenstein’s