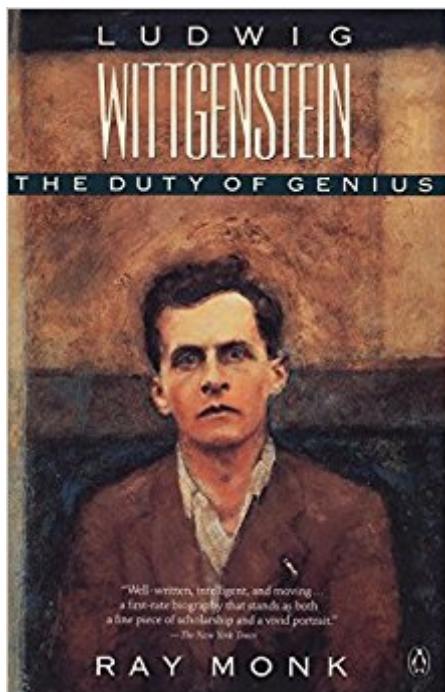


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Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty Of Genius



Synopsis

"Great philosophical biographies can be counted on one hand. Monk's life of Wittgenstein is such a one."¹⁵¹The Christian Science Monitor.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ray Monk's biography of Wittgenstein has correctly been called 'definitive'. In the introduction he states as his goal the writing of a biography which neglects neither the humanity of the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, nor his philosophical views, complicated though they may be. He succeeds brilliantly. The result is that the reader is treated to two books at once: one on 'the man', and one on his thought. Monk's is a tough job. If you know anything about Wittgenstein, you know he is enigmatic - both in terms of his personality and lifestyle, and also his perplexing, yet genius, philosophical views. Yet Monk presents both in as transparent a manner as is perhaps possible, given the nature of his subject. The book is eminently readable, which makes its length a ~positive~ feature. For example, I read the book a chapter at a time, to savour it. The readability comes in large part through Monk's extensive quotations from Wittgenstein's own diary and letters, and the letters of those who corresponded with him. This means that one is transported back to Wittgenstein's world, instead of reading just the dry prose of a biographer (Monk's own writing, of course, is anything but dry). Most importantly, though, Monk presents Wittgenstein in such a way that many people will be able to befriend this incredible and mysterious man. Wittgenstein was driven by passions - his need to express his thought in a way intelligible and meaningful to others drove him close to suicide on several occasions. He was a man deeply in need of feeling that he

was 'understood' - both philosophically and humanly - which were the same for him. (Thus his mentor for a time Bertrand Russell failed on both accounts, as Monk finely illustrates). He loved his friends and detested all things which he considered base.

Ray Monk has written an excellent book about Wittgenstein. I can say without doubt that this is one of the best books I have ever read. Ray Monk is professor of philosophy at the University of Southampton in England. He studied Wittgenstein at Oxford University, and has also written an extensive biography about Russell. In an interview I did with Monk for a Norwegian newspaper, Monk emphasized that he admired Wittgenstein's intensity, and that he sees two important traits in Wittgenstein's personality: (1) his demand for intellectual clarity, (2) his demand for ethical perfection. The book gives you insight into the person and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. One learns that Wittgenstein's life and philosophy are intimately connected, and one may wonder whether it is possible to understand Wittgenstein's work without knowing something about his life. Monk describes how the young Wittgenstein came into philosophy from engineering and mathematics. Wittgenstein showed an intense interest in philosophical problems, as Bertrand Russell said "he had to understand or die". Wittgenstein studied in Cambridge, lived as a hermit in Norway, was a soldier under the first world war, a school teacher in Austria and professor in Cambridge. Monk describes Wittgenstein's life, and one may see how his life and philosophy are connected - for instance how the last part of Tractatus may be understood in light of the fact that Wittgenstein developed a religious attitude to life and read Tolstoy intensively during the first world war. Wittgenstein was a true philosopher. He gave himself to the problems, and he truly struggled with them. The book may be very inspiring for serious scholars in many fields, as well as writers, poets, philosophy students and many others.

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