

Walking and Talking with Georg Henrik von Wright

An early memory of Georg Henrik von Wright from my student days: he is walking back and forth in a hallway in the University of Helsinki, carrying on a lively discussion with some other philosopher, I forget who. His walk, with its short, efficient steps, body slightly bent forward, fast but not rushed, is perfectly matched by his way of talking, his voice distinct and energetic, uttering well-formed sentences with a beautiful cadence, fast but not rushed.

Then as later, von Wright had a strong physical presence. His bushy eyebrows and blond hair (imperceptibly turning into grey over the years) as well as his ruddy complexion gave an impression of health, matched by his affable manner and cheerful spirits – though getting to know him meant getting to realize that his exterior hid a health that was not always so sturdy, just as his apparent cheerfulness camouflaged a strong tendency to worry: about his family's safety, academic life in Finland, world peace, the state of the environment.

Long before I got to know von Wright, he was a well-known figure for me. In high school, I had plans to study philosophy, and I read his well-known overview of contemporary philosophy *Logik, filosofi och språk* [*Logic, philosophy and language*]. Yet when time came to enroll at Helsinki, in 1961, my courage failed me and I decided it would be more opportune to take up modern languages. After two years of that, my then fiancée and present wife, Anki (not a philosopher herself), had had enough of it and got me to realize that, whatever the career prospects, I would be happier as a philosopher. She bought me a copy of von Wright's *Varieties of Goodness* that had just appeared, a book that I thoroughly enjoyed reading (though I strongly disagreed with it).

As chance would have it, just when I decided to switch to philosophy, von Wright had been appointed to a fellowship in the Academy of Finland, which meant that he left his teaching duties at the university. It was four years later that I spoke to him for the first time. I had decided to apply for admission as a graduate student of philosophy at some American universities, and I turned to von Wright to ask for letters of reference. So he invited me to his home at Skepparegatan, and we met in his study with its soft carpets, the walls covered with bookshelves, with a view over the Gulf of Finland. I was struck by the warmth and immediacy with which he engaged in my plans. This was an experience that I have shared

with generations of young philosophers before and since, who all came away from their first meeting with von Wright warmed by his concern and encouragement.

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In that same year, 1967, von Wright wrote an article which appeared in several dailies in Sweden and Finland, denouncing the American war effort in Vietnam. This made quite a stir, since it was unusual for academics of the stature of von Wright to take a stand on public issues. For von Wright, that was the start of a series of public stands which continued over the years, and which made him a well-known figure in Finland and Sweden. (For my part, I was surprised by the surprise the article caused: I had come to think of it as part of a philosopher's profession to speak out on matters of public concern.)

I was lucky enough to be admitted to graduate study at Cornell University (in Ithaca, New York). Cornell, for various reasons, had been my first choice, and my application, no doubt, was helped by von Wright's recommendation. Chance entered, since von Wright had an attachment to Cornell as professor at large, and it was actually there that we first got to know one another. The arrangement reflected his long-standing friendship with Norman Malcolm, who held a professorship at Cornell: Malcolm and von Wright had been students at Cambridge together. It meant that he would visit Cornell every year for a shorter or longer period. In the spring of 1970 he gave a lecture series on what was later to appear as *Explanation and Understanding*, and on that occasion we had a number of discussions, about philosophy as well as about the war in Vietnam and other matters. These were troublesome times. Richard Nixon had taken over the presidency, and rather than pull out of Vietnam he had escalated the war. von Wright was deeply troubled by what was going on.

Von Wright was well liked by my fellow students at Cornell. They were also fond of his accent. As one of my friends said, when he spoke English, each letter in the words "stood up". We saw it as an expression of his personal integrity that whatever language he spoke (and he spoke many, taking up Russian, I believe, in his sixties), he would sound more or less the same.

My wife recalls one of the conversations we had in Ithaca. Standing on a hill with a view of the beautiful city on the shore of Lake Cayuga, von Wright spoke about the way, for all his

travels and long stays abroad, he cherished his roots and a sense of home (a topic for a later essay of his on the return of Ulysses). My wife cordially agreed with him, but he was quite taken aback when I told him I was not so sure about our need for geographical roots. He assured me I would come around to his view when I was older. On this occasion, von Wright also spoke of his reluctance to part with old familiar objects, such as clothes.

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After finishing my doctorate at Cornell I returned to teach at Helsinki. At this time, von Wright was busy editing the Wittgenstein *Nachlass*. He asked me to read some of Wittgenstein's typescripts (in particular what later appeared as the four volumes on the philosophy of psychology). In 1972 I faced a conundrum. I had a job offer from the University of Arizona. von Wright, on the other hand, offered me work as his assistant in editing the *Nachlass*. He even offered to help us find a flat in Helsinki, which has never been easy. I was astonished and grateful for his offer, and for the security it would entail. I had to decide whether I was to be a Wittgenstein scholar or pursue a career as a teacher and writer on philosophy. After an inner struggle I opted for the latter, whether wisely or not I do not know.

My family and I moved to Tucson, Arizona, in the summer of 1972, and we stayed there for two years. On returning I had a temporary job offer at Helsinki, but with our two small boys we did not want to live there, so we moved to Ekenäs, a small town on the south coast of Finland. Our landlord was Göran Schildt, a well-known travel writer and essayist, and, later on, the biographer of Finland's great architect, Alvar Aalto, who was a personal friend of Schildt's and who had designed a house for him in Ekenäs. Schildt had acquired the whole block on which his house stood, and he was letting flats at the very time we were looking for a place to live after returning from Arizona.

Here, chance entered again. Göran Schildt and von Wright were friends since their student days, and they had retained a life-long friendship which came to include their wives. Elisabeth and Georg Henrik von Wright would often visit the Schildts. This meant that I got a chance to see von Wright regularly even after I stopped teaching at Helsinki. When they came for a visit he would arrive early, and we would go for a walk across the beautiful islands close to our home, Ramsholmen and Högholmen. He had a favourite beach where he liked to end up, but we were engrossed in discussion and I had the impression that he hardly knew where we were

going. I decided to test this, and on one occasion I chose a different path. He did not take any notice until we reached the end of the path. Then he looked up and asked, “Where’s that beach?”

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von Wright’s extensive international contacts and his great capacity for friendship had a huge impact on philosophical life in Finland. I remember, in particular, two conferences that he hosted. In the summer of 1970, under the auspices of the *Institut international de philosophie*, he organized a conference in Helsinki on the theory of knowledge, in which a number of prominent philosophers took part. The ones I remember are A. J. Ayer, Max Black, A. C. Ewing, Brian McGuinness, Paul Ricœur and Bernard Williams. The conference was not widely advertised, and so the audience was small in relation to the impressive array of speakers.

The next spring von Wright organized a conference on the philosophy of the social sciences which convened in Helsinki and then moved on to the University of Turku. Among the speakers were Peter Winch from Britain, Karl-Otto Apel from West Germany, and Mihailo Marcović, a member of the so-called Praxis group in Yugoslavia (a group of dissident Marxists that von Wright supported when it was being persecuted by the Tito regime; Marcović later became controversial for his role in connection with the rise of Serbian nationalism). The speakers also included two sociologists: Erik Allardt from Finland and Joachim Israel from Sweden.

On this occasion I first met Peter Winch, a meeting which was to develop into a life-long friendship. Winch was famous at the time both among philosophers and social scientists, mainly for his book *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (1958), which was a critique of the attempt to model the social sciences on the natural sciences, though his own interests at the time had already moved in the direction of ethics. He was deeply influenced by the revolution brought about through the work of the later Wittgenstein, and wanted to make it count in connection with various philosophical problems. von Wright, of course, had a close relation to Wittgenstein and his work, but the relation was of a different sort. Among the Wittgenstein executors, I would rate his contribution as incomparably the most influential and salutary when it came to making Wittgenstein’s works known to the

philosophical world. This was so, not in spite of the fact, but rather, I would suggest, because of the fact that as a philosopher he was more distant from the thinking of Wittgenstein than were the other two executors, Elizabeth Anscombe and Rush Rhees. It is true that Wittgenstein did have an impact on some of von Wright's philosophical attitudes, e.g. as regards his suspicion of mind-body reductionism, or his clear idea of the separation between philosophy and empirical science. But still, the fact that he saw a clear distinction between Wittgenstein's project and his own philosophical ambitions helped him approach the work of editing with a dispassionate eye (which is not to say that he was not passionate about the work). All the same, von Wright had a great appreciation for philosophers who, like Winch, chose a path that was further away from the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy, showing more clearly the marks of the influence of the later work of Wittgenstein. In fact, I hope I am not giving away any important secrets if I say that (as I understood it), when von Wright was on the board charged with appointing a professor to succeed Bernard Williams at Cambridge in 1978, he made a bid in favour of Winch, although, in the spirit of those times, the attempt was bound to fail (as, no doubt, it would have failed even today).

On one occasion, Winch and I visited Georg Henrik and Elisabeth in their summer cottage in an island in Ingå. He pointed out his favourite work place: a small table at which he would sit, writing on his old typewriter in the sun. I found this striking: I have never met any other philosopher who likes to do his intellectual work in stark sunlight. At the same time, it appeared fitting to me. In all his work, there is the sense of a strong light being cast over the area of study, creating a sharp distinction between light and dark, with few intermediate shades, bringing to mind a classical Greek temple. This could be regarded both as a strength and a weakness, depending on one's own conception of philosophical clarity. As a philosopher, it seems to me, von Wright was very much a *logician*, someone who is striving to forge a clear and controllable system out of the chaos of human life and thought, rather than what we might call an anthropologist who wants to stay true to the complexity of that chaos. This would account for the difference in his relation to Wittgenstein's philosophy from that of Winch. If it could be said that Wittgenstein was someone who descended from the austere logic of the *Tractatus* into the rich chaos of the *Philosophical Investigations*, von Wright would remain on the Olympic heights of the *Tractatus* while Winch felt more at home in the green groves of the later work.

von Wright was 70 in 1986, which meant that he was retiring from the Academy of Finland. Lilli Alanen (a good friend from my student days in Helsinki) had the idea of organizing a conference in his honour, inviting a number of his friends as speakers. I now had a position at the university Åbo Akademi in Turku, Finland, and it was decided that the conference should be held there. Together with my colleague at the other local university, Professor Juhani Pietarinen, Lilli and I organized the conference. The speakers included Anthony Kenny, Norman Malcolm, Jakob Meløe (a good friend of von Wright's from the University of Tromsø), Thomas Nagel, Frederick Stoutland, Albrecht Wellmer and Peter Winch.

The conference opened with a talk by Norman Malcolm commenting on von Wright's thoughts about mind and action, followed by a response by von Wright. Some non-philosopher colleagues of mine attending the talk were surprised that Malcolm was so critical of von Wright's views. They had expected the person who was the focus of the celebrations to be treated with more reverence. This was as clear an indication as there can be of the difference in intellectual culture between the different academic disciplines. In philosophy (as so often in life), the best way of showing your respect for the other is by openly expressing your disagreements, trusting that your remarks will be received as they were intended, as offerings in a joint project of searching for clarity and truth. In fact, no one who had any insight into the relation between Norman and Georg Henrik could fail to appreciate the esteem and affection they had for each other; for each of them, I believe, the other was one of his closest friends.

In connection with the conference there was a banquet at Turku Castle, followed by an impressive array of after-dinner speeches.

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In that same year von Wright and I took part together in a conference on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* which was organized by two philosophers who were close to von Wright: Jakob Meløe and Viggo Rossvør. The conference site was Skibotn near Tromsø (the northernmost university in the world). The location was an observatory for the study of the aurora borealis. Among the participants at the conference were Stanley Cavell, Norman Malcolm, Joachim Schulte and Knut Erik Tranøy. von Wright and I shared the flight to Tromsø. On the way

there, in order to get into the feeling of the place, von Wright was rereading (in the original Norwegian, of course) a novel by Knut Hamsun, whom he greatly admired. He said that Hamsun was such a great writer because every single word was exactly right. Immediately after we had arrived at Skibotn, von Wright went into one of the little cabins in which we all lived, and emerged dressed in what were evidently his “Norwegian” clothes: plus fours and a knitted sweater. The clothes had been worn extremely thin, and one had the impression that he had worn them on every stay in Norway since his youth. I was reminded of his remark about his reluctance to part with old familiar clothes.

Fifteen years later von Wright was to take part in another Wittgenstein conference in Norway. This one was held at Bergen, and among those giving talks was his old friend Knut Erik Tranøy. Unfortunately, by this time von Wright was too tired to travel, and he was unable to deliver his talk in person. Nevertheless, he presented his paper by means of a video recording made in his living room in Helsinki. All the same, there was nothing tired about the contents of the talk. It addressed some issues in the understanding of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, one of the most vexing problems in contemporary philosophy.

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von Wright’s ability to think lucidly about some of the most demanding problems of philosophy right to the end was truly impressive. His last philosophical book, *In the Shadow of Descartes*, which deals with the mind-body problem, contains some of his deepest work. In fact, these were texts that he did not originally plan to publish. He told me that they concerned issues that he had been thinking about off and on for a large part of his life, and he was writing about them for his friends.

Nor did his concern with world issues slacken towards the end. I recall the last phone conversation I had with him, two or three months before he died. At this time, he was already rather tired. But he was deeply troubled by the American attack on Iraq which had begun just a few weeks before.

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I am deeply grateful for having known Georg Henrik von Wright and for the role he had in my life. I believe I speak for many others in the philosophical community in Finland if I say that philosophical life in our country would have been a great deal more barren, one-sided and self-enclosed but for the influence of von Wright.

His philosophical personality was a combination of features that may appear surprising. His academic fame was due to inquiries into some of the most abstract questions of philosophy, yet he was to become the most popular philosopher of our country. His political involvement was often radical but in his own life-style and demeanour he was mildly conservative. His outlook on the state of the world was pessimistic – much too pessimistic in the opinion of some – but in private he was gregarious and generous, an inspiring conversationalist with a great sense of humour. He was a sharp critic of current events, but on the personal level he was conciliatory. All the same, it would be wrong to call von Wright's personality contradictory. The different aspects of his personality were not in conflict with one another, rather they gave him breadth and balance. Thus they came to form the foundation of one of the most fertile careers in the intellectual history of our country.

Lars Hertzberg