

The publication of Rush Rhees's *Nachlass*

Kim Solin (Uppsala, Sweden)

Abstract

Rush Rhees is mostly known as the first trustee Wittgenstein appointed in his will. He was a controversial figure, it seems, as some found him to be a generous philosopher with a deep understanding of Wittgenstein's thought, others again an arrogant and almost incompetent philosopher, jealously guarding Wittgenstein's manuscripts and making a mess of the volumes he produced. Not surprisingly, this division of appreciation continued well after his death, and becomes visible if one considers the reception of Rhees's own *Nachlass*. Leaving some 16.000 pages behind, hand-written notes as well as typed-up manuscripts and letters, it was something of an Augean Stable that his student D.Z. Phillips was left to clean up.

In this paper, I shall account for some of the challenges that Phillips faced when publishing the *Nachlass*, and discuss what this tells us about Rhees's philosophy and its reception, and its relation to Wittgenstein's philosophy. The paper builds on archival research at Swansea University, more precisely on material from the Rush Rhees Collection and the D.Z. Phillips Collection. I shall focus on the following books by Rhees (compiled and edited by Phillips): *Religion and Philosophy*, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, and *There - Like Our Life*.

Introduction

Rush Rhees is mostly known as the first trustee Wittgenstein appointed in his will. He was controversial figure, it seems, as some found him to be a generous philosopher with a deep understanding of Wittgenstein's thought, others again an arrogant and almost incompetent philosopher, jealously guarding Wittgenstein's manuscripts and making a mess of the volumes he produced. Not surprisingly, this division of appreciation continued well after his death, and becomes visible if one considers the reception of Rhees's own *Nachlass*. Leaving some 16.000 pages behind, hand-written notes as well as typed-up manuscripts and letters, it was something of an Augean Stable that his student D.Z. Phillips was left to clean up.

Phillips saw to it that Rhees's papers ended up in Swansea in 1990 (they were almost sold to Rochester instead, to the university where Rush Rhees Sr. had been President). After having secured the papers, Phillips embarked on the task of making selections, compiling, editing and finding publishers, aided mainly by his secretary Helen Baldwin and by his colleague Mario von der Ruhr. Phillips was well-prepared for the task: he was Rhees's student and friend for many years, and had earlier seen to that Rhees had published *Without Answers* (1969) and *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (1970). Indeed, the

idea to publish these volumes was Phillips's and he was also responsible for the initial arrangement of the papers included in the books. The books were first supposed to be one volume, consisting of two parts: what became *Without Answers* and what became *Discussions of Wittgenstein*. Phillips had first dubbed *Without Answers* to *On Living in a Scientific Age*, but this was changed by Rhees himself. Rhees's excellent preface to the *Blue and the Brown books* was considered for inclusion in *Discussions*, but did not make it (Rhees also cut down the preface to the German edition of the *Blue and the Brown Books*, for unclear reasons; it has been pointed out, that if such a preface had been written for the RFM, if only for the revised edition, we would have had a different understanding of that book to begin with (Solin 2023:128).) The volumes were not exactly well received. And after these two volumes, there were no more books by Rhees himself. Judging from a dictation made by Rush Rhees's wife when he was close to death, he had hoped that something like *Without Answers* would not happen again. But it did, postmortem.

In this paper, I shall account for some of the challenges that Phillips faced when publishing the *Nachlass*, and discuss what this tells us about Rhees's philosophy and its reception. The paper builds on archival research at Swansea University, more precisely on material from the Rush Rhees Collection and the D.Z. Phillips Collection. I shall focus the following books by Rhees (compiled and edited by Phillips): *Religion and Philosophy*, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, and *There - Like Our Life*.

The first books: Religion and Philosophy and Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse

The first volume that Phillips produced was called *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*. Phillips preface to the first edition is a biographical sketch of Rhees, which has become a standard reference. It was published by Cambridge University Press in 1997, so seven years after the acquisition of Rhees's *Nachlass*. Two enthusiastic reviewers strongly recommended publication and their reports can be found in the Swansea archive. Both readers found the work unusual in style. It was not a typical academic monograph, but "more of a series of meditations than what publishers have come to think of as 'a book on the philosophy of religion'".

Connected to this was Rhees tendency to unhurriedly discuss “indigestible texts”, text that are simultaneously “suggestive of something deep and true” and “suggestive of something from which we [...] on either intellectual or moral grounds [...] are prone to recoil”. What Rhees does is to attempt to precisely characterise the “incomprehensible and the unacceptable” as well as the “admirable and profound” in these texts, leaving us with no other option than to think for ourselves, as we cannot easily decide either for or against them.

Anyway, the book was not only aimed at an academic audience. Indeed, it could not really have been aimed at any audience at all, as it consisted to a large part of letters written to various persons Rhees had discussed with and of excerpts of diverse manuscripts. Indeed, Rhees is often at his very best when he is addressing a particular person. Yet, “Rhees is a writer who is accessible to a wide spectrum of people willing to think seriously and without prejudice about last things”, one of the reviewers wrote. The book was well received by those who read it, and Phillips himself considered it unparalleled since Kierkegaard, no less. One reviewer said it had it “a genuine chance of becoming a latter-day classic of religious thought”.

Fuelled by this success, I suppose, Phillips swiftly moved on to prepare and work to publish a volume he had called *Saying and the Possibility of Discourse*, again with Cambridge. This is the volume that would later become known as *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, and it is probably the most known of all the Rhees volumes. But this time around, things did not go as smoothly as with *Religion and Philosophy*.

The anonymous reviews cannot be found in the archives (the reasons for this are unclear). But from correspondence from the end of the year 1996, it is clear that Phillips was not happy with one of the reviews. He had had “Cavellian objections” to his introduction and felt that the critique of Rhees’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s builders was “clutching at straws”. There seems to have been a conflict with the editor at Cambridge regarding Phillips response, which they had found “ungracious”. Phillips emphasised that he was making philosophical points and that it would not have been gracious to withhold them. On the whole, he wrote, he had appreciated the review, apart from what he had found to be a misunderstanding of Rhees’s critique of the builders. But,

certainly, from the tone of the letters, one can tell that the relationship to CUP had now gone slightly sour.

Unlike the reviewers for *Religion and Philosophy*, of whom at least one had seen Rhees's *Nachlass* themselves and both of whom had praised Phillips's editing, this reviewer wanted to know more about the editorial process before saying yes or no. Phillips had also sent the Press the manuscript for *There – Like Our Life*, which they had immediately rejected. The reason for this was that already *Saying and the Possibility of Discourse* was an unusual project for them, and they seem worried the book simply wouldn't sell. They had not even taken the first book to Press Syndicate when Phillips received this news, and a second reviewer was still at work assessing Phillips's introduction. There is no correspondence regarding the book from 1997 in the Archives, but considering that in the course the title changed to *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, and the book appeared as late as March 1998, it was probably not a completely smooth process.

Wittgenstein's On Certainty: There – Like Our Life

Even rockier for Phillips was publishing Rhees's thoughts on *On Certainty*. As I mentioned, Cambridge had immediately declined the manuscript, worried books of this kind wouldn't sell. Phillips then offered it to Harvard University Press in January 1997, only to wait 10 months for a short decline with the comment that the contents of the manuscript looked miscellaneous. Phillips then sent the manuscript to Blackwell Publishing in October 1997. It seems to have had no high priority at Blackwell, since Phillips had to send them reminders about the manuscript in February as well as in May 1998. Nothing seems to have happened, despite suggestions of reviewers, and in August, Phillips calls them on the phone and notes "they're going to chase". In October 1998, one year after submission, there is finally an anonymous review of the book sent by telefax to Phillips.

Already the style of the review reveals that the reviewer would have a hard time understanding Rhees's work. It is something of an analysis of the manuscript into "claims and arguments", which the reviewer seems to think is the point of philosophy. He or she is far from appreciating Rhees's way of discussing philosophy. Consider this:

Unfortunately, most of the time one gets the impression that Rhees is simply talking to himself. Possible interpretations are mentioned and countered merely by juxtaposition with other passages from W.'s work. Even when Rhees is addressing someone else, he often fails to spell out his points. [...] For example, he admonishes Malcolm for speaking about 'something that underlies all language games': 'the "something" is vague, and I think two different things are confused in it'. And there the section stops. I am afraid that this is fairly typical. One gets a clear sense that Rhees is predisposed to contradict any claims about W. made by anybody else, but only glimpses at what his objections are, let alone what his own interpretation is.

This is, I hasten to say, a fairly typical reaction to Rhees. It is in stark contrast to understanding shown by the reviewers of *Religion and Philosophy*. "The bulk of the material is simply too cursory and disjointed", the reviewer says, and adds that this is not Phillips's fault as an editor, but something in Rhees himself. The reviewer concludes by saying that if these were Wittgenstein's ruminations on certainty, they would be worth publishing, but that s/he is "far from certain" that this holds for Rhees's.

The archive collections are then silent until April 2000, but Phillips had not given up. He had "completely re-cast" the manuscript. Since he hadn't gotten an answer from Blackwell, he had sent it to Cambridge University Press that had somehow gotten to know of his recasting. There was one good review, saying among other things that the text would "constitute a decisive intervention in the lively yet rather chaotic and unstructured disagreement presently prevailing amongst Wittgenstein commentators about how best to understand the text". Cambridge nevertheless declined, giving the reason that the text was too short. Blackwell sends it to yet a reviewer, and relays the review to Phillips 20 June 2000.

The review is, again, negative, this time because Rhees's work is claimed to be "essentially out of date". "By now there is a substantial literature on O.C. some of which is quite sophisticated. [...] [T]hey provide an understanding of Wittgenstein that is lacking in Rhees." The reader thinks Phillips should have done a better job of situating Rhees in the debate, and show what, if anything, goes beyond current scholarship on *On Certainty*. In philosophical attitude, as I

shall elaborate later, this scholarly reviewer couldn't be further away from Rhees.

Phillips is frustrated and calls editing Rhees a roller-coaster. Some are strongly for, some are strongly against. Some editors decide after one review, others ask for more to get a broader picture. He has two reports, which he calls Old and New, opposing each other:

O: The content of the MS is most interesting.

N: The content of the MS is not interesting.

O: Makes an original contribution to contemporary readings of OC.

N: Contemporary works provide an understanding lacking in Rhees.

O: The originality counts in the claim that OC is essentially a work in logic.

N: OC contains issues much wider than logic.

Phillips also notes that already in 1970, Rhees had been discussing misunderstandings that “were in the air” and that they are precisely the ones expressed in the writings around year 2000. This is why it would've made an interesting contribution to the debate.

Moreover, there was a misunderstanding of what Rhees did say in the report: Rhees's main interest was in showing that certainties are best understood as cases where questions do not arise, and that, further, this was what Wittgenstein was concerned with. It was not about making things explicit, it is about the questions not arising, about trusting and taking for granted.

After this passionate defence, the editor of Blackwell suggests – as had indeed the last reviewer – that they get yet another reviewer, since it was difficult to agree on the merits of the manuscript. Phillips replies that he would be delighted with this, and also sends the editor the names of five possible reviewers. It is unclear if Blackwell opted for one of these or found someone on their own, but the last reviewer is nevertheless “better news”. Blackwell is willing to publish if Phillips makes changes according to the reviewer's suggestions, the most important being smoothing out the prose (“Rhees's style of writing is crabbed and obscure at points”) and lengthening the introduction to deepen the discussion of current, contrary interpretations. On 20 September 2000, Phillips replies that he will take all that has been said into account, possibly just revising the intro, possibly make it a “joint book” by turning it

into a more orthodox book. He is finished with this job in June 2001, and it is received by the editor 20 July. By the end of September, the board of directors have approved the book for publication. One of the reviewers has sent yet a few more comments to the final manuscript. Phillips agrees to take also them into account. The editorial board had also agreed that title and subtitle should be switched, to make it easier to find it in electronic searchers (this, I speculate, could also have been one reason behind the title change of *Saying and the Possibility of Discourse*). The final title is: *Wittgenstein's On Certainty: There – Like Our Life*. By January 2002, Phillips has done all the minor revisions, which he had found very helpful. There is regular-mail trouble with the proofs and misunderstandings about a paperback. But in January 2003 the book is finally out, and appears in paperback in 2005.

Second editions of the Cambridge books

The books with Cambridge University Press did not sell well, and Phillips had been very unsatisfied with the marketing. He wanted to publish them as paperbacks with Ashgate in the new series Wittgensteinian Studies which he would be editing. Phillips contacted Cambridge and they, without any resistance and to serve the greater good, reverted all the rights to Phillips in October 2002 for free, apart from the right to use their typography for which they wanted an offset fee. Phillips was so keen that he personally bought the remaining copies of the books, in order for the deal to come through. But, Ashgate could not find financial sense in publishing only paperback versions, nor could Blackwell, since the main income from a book like this was hardback library sales, which had already been done by Cambridge. In June 2003, Phillips suggests that incomes from the journal *Philosophical Investigations*, also published by Blackwell, be used in order to get the book out in paperback. It is unclear from the archives whether it was this that did the trick to get the second edition of *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* published, or if it was augmenting it with Rhees's essay 'The fundamental problems of philosophy' and his reflections on Wittgenstein as a teacher, but however that may have been, the second edition appears with Blackwell in 2006, only a few months before Phillips's death.

The book *Religion and Philosophy* was supposed to appear in hardback and paperback with Ashgate, but again the paperback made no financial sense, and after what seems to have been a misunderstanding regarding a new

hardback, Phillips must have dropped this around August 2004. Instead, in January 2005, he offers it to Blackwell, with a new introduction by himself. Nothing seems to have come of this, and in November 2005, he offers it to SCM Press. They are positive to the project, but as far as I can tell Phillips passed away before anything materialised.

Conclusion: What this tells us about Wittgenstein and about Rhees

When Phillips described the series he would be editing for Ashgate, he wrote that it would include “not only books on Wittgenstein, but also books written under his influence”. Wittgenstein certainly influenced many different kinds of thinkers and Rhees was one of them. What one can see from the reception of the manuscripts is that the direction in which Wittgenstein influenced Rhees had not, by the time of Rhees’s death or in the decades that followed, become a major current in Wittgenstein-influenced thought, and still has not.

One main aspect of Rhees’s way of following Wittgenstein is the non-scholarly attitude. His manuscripts were not scholarly treatises on Wittgenstein, arranging him into the current Anglo-American analytic debate or into the history of philosophy, but rather his own grappling with the questions he had been thinking of (and discussing with Wittgenstein). He thinks *with*, not *about*, Wittgenstein. And he wrote, and rewrote, and then rewrote again, constantly approaching the same questions from a slightly different angle, or with a new insight. Iterating and iterating. Just like he had seen done also in Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass*. What is plain from the reviewers’ comments is that they wanted final *arguments*, not returning and hovering. This is clear in the comments on *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* and on *There – Like Our Life*. It is even clearer in the anonymous reviewer reports on Rhees lectures on ancient philosophy, published in two volumes with the title *In Dialogue with the Greeks* (I shall return to these in a longer version of this paper). The tension between Rhees’s non-scholarly and personal attitude to philosophical problems, and the scholarly, academic and professional attitude was also evident in the tensions between the editors of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* (Wallgren 2023). Sadly, it becomes clear from the archive material that in order to get the volumes published, Phillips had to streamline Rhees’s circling into something like straight arguments. But this does not quite do justice to Rhees’s way of doing

philosophy. That said, Phillips certainly did all he could to guard and display Rhees's unique way of philosophising, just like Rhees himself had done with Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*.

Another aspect of Rhees's writing is its incomplete, elliptical style. He often gestures and leaves quite a lot of things unsaid. He does not always make things explicit, and as the books are often compiled of letters and notes, he is not seldom addressing some particular person or himself. He is "talking to himself", as one annoyed reviewer put it. But again, this way of doing philosophy is part of the contemplative method, if we can call it that. Rhees himself had noted, after discussions with Wittgenstein, that philosophy is contemplative (Citron 2015: 38). Unlike scientists, who are concerned with results, perhaps breaking records, moving the research frontier forward according to some given measure, etc., the philosopher is instead constantly concerned with finding other, and different, perspectives, asking also whether a given perspective is even important. This is not a question a scientist qua scientist asks. And probably not a scholarly, professional philosopher either. And it is this, I think, that we see in some of the anonymous reviews of the Rhees volumes. What Rhees is doing, rocking us towards a contemplative state, is simply foreign to them. The elliptical style is part of this, as it aids us to reconsider our doing and thinking, not by a coherent argument, but simply by showing and questioning. In this sense, perhaps, not unlike the PI. But like one reviewer notes, while it was alright for Wittgenstein himself to do this, Rhees is not of the same caliber, so to speak. I think one could argue that, actually, he is. However that may be, I think it is this view on Rhees that is the main reason that his work has not gone down well amongst Wittgenstein scholars, even amongst those of the more semi-scholarly kind. These are usually also blind to this aspect of Wittgenstein's thought, as their focus is on scholarship and progress, not contemplative thought.

The contemplative method and style of writing might be foreign to scholars and career-driven professionals, but it is not, cannot be, to those who have a serious interest in religion. Perhaps this is why there is such a contrast between the praising reviews of *Religion and Philosophy* and the reviews of other books I've mentioned in this paper. It would have been interesting to see anonymous reviews of Rhees's *Discussions of Simone Weil* (2000), since the reviewers of that manuscript might have appreciated Rhees's style and

method, but I have not found them in the archive. *Religion and Philosophy*, the book Phillips considered to be “the finest writing of its kind since Kierkegaard” and “a twentieth century classic” still has no paperback and no updated second edition. It would certainly deserve this.

References

All letters and anonymous reviews quoted and referred to in this paper can be found in the D.Z. Phillips Collection (UNI/SU/PC/14) of the Richard Burton Archives at Swansea University. Reasonable effort has been made to find the copyright holders.

The dictation by Rush Rhees’s widow referred to in this paper can be found in The von Wright and Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Helsinki (WWA Witt-500-012).

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