

INTRODUCTION

This is how philosophers should salute each other: "Take your time!"
(*Culture and Value* 80)

WHAT THIS IS NOT

Rarely has a philosopher received so much attention; rarely has a philosopher received such variegated attention. Rarely has a philosopher been so highly revered and so mightily condemned. Rarely has a philosopher been so acclaimed, both within the philosophical community and outside, in the intellectual community at large. And rarely has a philosopher been so widely interpreted.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was born in 1889 and died in 1951. In his lifetime he published only one book (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and had, to the best of his hesitant production proclivities, finished a second (*Philosophical Investigations*) at the time of his death. This does not imply that he wrote scantily; on the contrary, he wrote (tens of) thousands of notes, incorporating them into typescripts and manuscripts that have been occupying archivists, diarists, editors, commentators, interpreters and translators for the large part of the past five decades. He corresponded with several colleagues, friends, and philosophers and, from 1930 onwards, conducted a long series of meetings (variously called and described as classes or seminars) at Cambridge University, all of which have been minutely recorded and reported on. We are, therefore, faced with thousands of pages of philosophical writings – grist for the interpreter's mill.

This is not to say that the interpretive "project" – or, to be precise, the project of interpreting Wittgenstein – began vis à vis this cumulative *Nach-*

lass. We mark the starting point of the project in 1922 when Bertrand Russell appended his Introduction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which was published that year in English (having been published in the original German in 1921). This introduction did not function merely as an introduction; it purported to *explain* to the reader what it was that Wittgenstein was up to in what seemed to Russell to be a potentially enigmatic book. Such explaining was the first step taken publicly in *interpreting* Wittgenstein. Yet not only was this step not a definitive, unequivocally accepted, summary step, it was rather the first step in what can be seen today as a thousand step trek in pursuit of *the* interpretation of Wittgenstein. The story of this trek, the lay of the land, is what I will try to tell.

Mine is not an *account* of the immense volume of writings on Wittgenstein; nor is it a summing up. If accounting or sums are the reader's interest he or she will do well to turn to other sources. First, there are some excellent *bibliographies* listing in orderly, chronological or categorical form the thousands of articles and books written on Wittgenstein in the past eighty years.¹ One can then carry out a "statistical" inquiry and be able to report on interesting phenomena having to do with the number and type of texts which play a part in the quantitative game. Thus, for instance, one can summarize this research with the following exemplary points: in the 1920s there were a number of tracts written on Wittgenstein,² in the 1930s some more, in the 1940s a little less, the 1950s saw the beginning of a real flow, and then the deluge. Or – the distribution of texts in different languages is almost equally split down the middle between English and non-English texts. Or – of the hundreds of *books* (as opposed to articles) listed in the Harvard University library in 2001, ascertained under the subject heading "Wittgenstein," so-and-so deal with the early Wittgenstein, such-and-such have to do with the later, and the rest are not partial to either. This sort of quantitative analysis is not to be shrugged off or laughed at for it can afford the serious historian of ideas basic generalizations that can then be analyzed further for the purpose of understanding the interpretive project. Indeed, I will be using such generalizations in order to step up on them, as the first rung in the ladder we are climbing, on the way to hopefully deeper insights into the project. I do, however, attempt to distinguish between the accounting per se – including its sums – and the use to which I will put it. Shortly I will try to make that use explicit.

Secondly, playing the game of generalization, one can peruse several anthologies of articles on Wittgenstein which range from the very ambitious and quite instrumental many-volume sets³ to the focused, one-topic one-volume texts bringing together a number of usually influential, oft-times familial, articles.⁴ In the middle, between over-all surveillance and specific expertise, we find one-volume anthologies that aspire to closure while es-

chewing the mass volume of many volumes.⁵ I call the former ambitious for good reason: theirs is no smaller a task than to provide the reader with a comprehensive bird's eye view of what has been done on Wittgenstein in all of the subjects on which something has indeed been done. The question of comprehensiveness, i.e., of covering all pertinent areas of Wittgensteinian interest, is obviously related to the anthologizer's own interpretation of Wittgenstein or, at the least, his or her idea of what interpretations and which interpreters are legitimately to be included.⁶ The problem of "who to include" in anthologies does not, however, become any smaller at the other extreme, that of anthologies dedicated to one Wittgensteinian issue, one Wittgensteinian question, one Wittgensteinian subject. Here it is again the editor's prerogative to anthologize those articles that seem germane to the issue at hand; such prerogative is itself a factor in making the editor an interpreter. Still, the accountant of Wittgensteinian interpretation may take these points into consideration while generalizing on these anthologies and, at any rate, these generalizations are not quantitative or statistical ones. They are more to the tune of a gathering – a brave attempt to see what everyone or anyone has said about Wittgenstein.

WHAT THIS IS

In what follows I do not want to anthologize, summarize, or do accounts. I want to tell the story of Wittgenstein interpretation.⁷ Like all stories this one has a plot, heroes, and a time element. (It might even have a moral.) Admittedly, the story cannot be told without amassing a huge amount of data. But if we were to stop at data we would not be telling a story, we would be accounting or doing sums. We might even be reporting – reportage involving two of the above threesome, heroes and time. In order for reportage to attain the storytelling level plot must be brought in. By "plot" I refer to that construct which gives meaning to the whole – the crux that moves us from data and reportage to a story that makes sense. This is not to say that the crux is one-dimensional, i.e., that it can be formulated as one point of explanation, which might provide the reader (of this book, or of Wittgenstein, or of the many others on Wittgenstein) with an over-riding or instantaneous understanding of the interpretive project. Neither is it two-dimensional in the sense of a series of interpretations each following in the steps of the other and supplying us with a line – perhaps a chronological line which can be traced as beginning with one interpretation and ending with another, with all others in-between – making sense of the way from the first to the last. Plots need not be simplistic. On the contrary, a good story is one which can take into account (now in a different sense of accounting) various

directions being taken by its heroes; it can take into consideration various levels of motivations leading its heroes on their paths; it can peruse various branches, with their separate leaves and fruits, growing out of common roots; and finally, it can tolerate side-issues and sub-texts which have to do with the main plot, though this toleration is a tension that I will be concerned to highlight and perhaps dismiss. In other words, the story I want to tell is meant to provide an overview of Wittgenstein interpretation in the last eighty years without succumbing either to a merely chronological listing of all that has been done or to a haphazard choice of some of what has been done. It is, therefore, a story about interpretation, with a plot, desiring to make sense of what has been done by interpreters who are the story's heroes, great or small.

Why has this story not been told? Let us suppose, for a moment, that we are philosophers and that we do philosophy. I will, in the sequel, be intensely involved in addressing that supposition – the question of what philosophy is or what it means to do philosophy – via Wittgenstein, or, more precisely, via Wittgenstein interpretation. It is a question of no small import, and it is, indeed, sometimes considered the question of greatest import in Wittgenstein interpretation: what did Wittgenstein tell us about doing philosophy? But, for the moment, I treat this question as a disciplinarian question and I surmise that those interested in Wittgenstein are philosophers who are a part of the official, academic, socially and institutionally recognized discipline of philosophy. And I go on to ask why it is that philosophers, in that very banal sense of ‘philosophers’, have not told this story. There have been some tangentially germane accounts – of Wittgenstein’s influence on and connection to practitioners in this or that subject area or disciplinary partition, such as logic, or phenomenology, or ethics, or aesthetics, but these fall far short of any satisfactory (historical or developmental) narrative. Closest in aspiration and mood to such a project is P.M.S. Hacker’s recent *Wittgenstein’s Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, in that it tries “to paint a picture of the evolution of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century” and “to tell the tale of Wittgenstein’s influence upon that history.”⁸ But Hacker’s enterprise is oriented to one – albeit astonishingly varied – wave in the oceans of Wittgenstein interpretation, the analytic one. What about other streams, rivers, ponds, lakes of readings? And if we also add to philosophers some sub-groups such as historians of philosophy, we could ask about them as well: why is it that historians of philosophy, be it even contemporary philosophy, have not told the story of Wittgenstein interpretation?⁹

A very specific example can make the question all the more perspicuous. There is, in Wittgenstein folklore, the matter of the “private language argument,” sometimes called the PLA. Interpreting the private language argument of the *Philosophical Investigations* has taken the time, effort, energy, ink and space of almost every philosopher who has written on

Wittgenstein, or at least, if we wish to be very exact, every philosopher who has worked on the later Wittgenstein. No matter where one posits the first, original exposition of the PLA by a Wittgenstein interpreter¹⁰ one can then go on to survey tens of articles and chapters in books, not to mention passing mention in notes and texts, where the PLA is broached and discussed. The PLA is pinpointed as beginning at section 243 of the *Investigations* (or earlier, or later), as ending at section 315 (or earlier, or later), as connecting to other sections (222, or 202, or others), as being in the context of Wittgenstein's discussion of language as social (or communitarian or rule-dependent or behavioral). It is analyzed, variously, as premising certain propositions and leading to a conclusion, or, alternatively, premising other propositions and leading to other conclusions, or even as not doing any of the above, as not even being an argument. These are just a few of the (more common) *interpretations* of Wittgenstein's PLA. While engaging in such interpretation the interpreter is wont to address other interpretations, argue with them, expose their misunderstandings. Some interpreters will go to the trouble of comparing some other interpreters, with the specific aim in mind of unearthing their weaknesses and shortcomings, all in order to buttress a "new" interpretation. Some will even provide a (partial) history of what has gone before in the interpretation of the PLA, again with the express purpose of providing a background to newer dealings in PLA interpretation. This last venue is the nearest that philosophers, that is to say interpretive philosophers, get to something akin to what I will be trying to perform *grosso modo* in this book. For these philosophers and interpreters are engaged in the philosophical project of interpreting a great philosopher; their object is to decipher what it was that Wittgenstein was saying or meaning (about PLA). Some, who style themselves philosophers more than interpreters, will go on to ask whether what he was saying was right or wrong; in other words, they may perhaps dare to evaluate his argument, agree with it, disagree with it, raise it to pedestal-status, demean it as unworthy. Whatever their interpretive or philosophical enterprise, these philosophers are not concerned to tell a story, but rather to do philosophy. Even those who tell a partial story, that last bunch that may at times engage in some looking-back account of what has been done before they came on the interpretive scene, do so for the purpose of providing a foil for their own interpretation. That looking-back account is harnessed not in the service of story telling but rather as a staircase leading to the top landing expressed in a new interpretation. The *story* of the PLA has not yet been told.¹¹

Put differently I would venture that telling the story of Wittgenstein interpretation is *not* considered doing philosophy. Why then is it relevant, or interesting, or important for the doing of philosophy? It is, in its way, a meta-story, a story *about* several other stories, but one that does not amal-



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(Over)Interpreting Wittgenstein

Biletzki, A.

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