

Chapter 1

INTERPRETATION AND OVERINTERPRETATION

May it soon – this is what I wish for it – be completely forgotten by the philosophical journalists, and so be preserved perhaps for a better sort of reader. (*Culture and Value* 66)

LEGITIMATE INTERPRETATIONS

So this is not an interpretation; it is a story of interpretations.¹ Interpretation is a current buzzword of the humanities and the social sciences, providing issues of discussion and confrontation mainly in literary and historical studies.² But our interest is in philosophical interpretation and to that end we need to clearly define the parameters of philosophical interpretations versus all other interpretations. Not only will sociological and psychological factors going into Wittgenstein interpretation be deemed sidelines of this project, but also a huge group of other “interpretations,” such as, for example, literary analyses (of the *Tractatus*, or the *Philosophical Investigations*). These, then, become unimportant, except in the aftermath of the philosophical interpretation. In other words, we must first agree on the need for identifying an interpretation as a philosophical interpretation and, closely on the heels of that being done, we ask: what makes a philosophical interpretation “legitimate”? The thought instigating this project had to do with a theory of interpretation that supplies criteria for legitimate interpretation. The idea behind legitimacy is that interpretation is to be constrained by what one may or may not do while interpreting – and still be deemed interpreting. That problematic word (‘legitimate’) is used with some trepidation, in lieu of terms like ‘good’, ‘correct’, ‘satisfactory’, our point being to draw a line be-

tween the do's and don'ts of interpreting philosophical works. Trepidation – since such single-minded insistence is nowadays branded as intolerant. The labels 'good', 'correct', or 'satisfactory', which belong on the side of legitimate interpretations, are a step above the ground-level of legitimacy. Once an interpretation is deemed a legitimate philosophical interpretation, we can go on to evaluate it as good, better, best, according to academic, scholarly, or even intuitive criteria – quite different from the ones deciding legitimacy. It is obvious, however, from all of this, that we may be entangled in normative, or conventional, issues, simply because the term 'legitimate' appears to turn to questions concerning the authority to legitimize, the power of members of philosophical communities, the play within institutions – all questions from which we intentionally shirk. All questions which seem to turn away from philosophy. How, then, to ensure the philosophical legitimacy of interpretation?

Interpretations are classified, categorized, and evaluated. But if there is a point in evaluating them, i.e., in judging their validity, correctness, or fruitfulness, one must take one of two paths: either one *argues* with a given interpretation from the perspective of another interpretation, or one criticizes a given interpretation using (external) criteria of (legitimate) interpretation. The first option implicates the evaluator in an interpretation of her own since quite immediately, and most naturally, argument with an interpretation automatically induces a rival interpretation of the type "Wittgenstein could not have said (meant, thought, intended) that; he really said (meant, thought, intended) this." Thus, evaluating interpretations in this way means interpreting – differently. The second option is the one we prefer in our storytelling, for it posits a doing external to all interpretations in that it does not – or tries not to – adhere to any given interpretation. Rather, it purports to supply parameters for judging all interpretations. But what may such parameters be? Is there, for example, something to be learned from literary criticism and the ongoing discussion of the interpretation of texts in that discipline? We are speaking here of the prevalent issues concerning the author-text-reader trilogy and the question of the entity to be interpreted. (Some paradigm questions: Is the text an independent entity? Are the author's intentions to be taken into account? What of the (historical, social, biographical) context? How pertinent is the reader?) These discussions seem to be, and have, in some quarters, become relevant to *our* story for the following (somewhat convoluted) reason: Wittgenstein's uniqueness has led to Wittgenstein interpretation being rife with "evidence" mobilized to support various readings, such evidence including the context of his writing, speaking, note-making and the concomitant responses of his contemporaries. Furthermore, the technical and concrete questions of the dates of writing, rewriting, editing and publishing (or more often not publishing) play a significant role in (some of)

the interpretive Wittgenstein projects abounding, such projects becoming more numerous during the last decade. So adoption of an interpretive norm, i.e., a position on the issues involved in textual interpretation, would seem to be a requisite for a first appraisal of the interpretations up for evaluation.

Since our aim is to tell an interesting tale about philosophical interpretation, not to get mired in the bogs of postmodernism, deconstruction, or literary criticism (with no flippancy intended), we opt, not unequivocally, and definitely not dogmatically, but rather in the interests of storytelling, for abstract criteria having to do with texts, rather than with authors or readers. Put concretely, a legitimate philosophical interpretation of Wittgenstein must, first (and only?), interpret a Wittgensteinian *text*, not the Wittgensteinian persona, or Wittgenstein the man, the male, the neurotic, the patronizing teacher, the intolerant conservative, and so on. We tread gingerly here, for some interpretations of Wittgenstein do succeed in making a relevant connection between his temperament and his philosophy. Thus, his “impatience” can be tied in with a method of philosophical argument³ or his “conservative” bent can be made pertinent to his philosophical (rather than political) stance.⁴ Let us say, then, that it is only “philosophical” temperament that is germane to philosophical interpretation.

Similarly, the question of the author’s intention is a constant stumbling block in the way of determining philosophical interpretation as such. It seems obvious that, when attempting an interpretation that makes sense of a text, i.e., makes us understand a text, the interpreter will almost invariably point to Wittgenstein’s intention – to what Wittgenstein meant to say. Involving the author in the exposition of the meaning of the text in this manner is, once more, a delicate endeavor wavering between psychology and philosophy.⁵ Again, we choose to proceed by making “philosophical” intent relevant to our enterprise, while other intentions (like competing with Russell, or seducing Ramsey) fall by the wayside. And, analogously to the author, the reader’s part in our theory of philosophical interpretation merits a minimal position. The audience of Wittgenstein’s works (whether comprised of readers, participants in seminars, or awe-struck students) does not function as any sort of explication in the interpretation of his writings.

In other words, we try to adopt a “theory” of philosophical interpretation, which takes seriously the idea of such interpretation being a reading rather than a translation, a speech act, or a socially instituted game. One may say that this type of constraint on a legitimate reading is of an analytic bent. And though, again, this might seem anachronistic in this heyday of relativism, contextualism and historicism, we dare to presume that it supplies us with a “pure” idea of doing philosophical interpretation. Further enumeration of specific characteristics of legitimate Wittgenstein interpretations that arise



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