

## **Alois Pichler (Bergen): Outline of an argument for a "therapeutic" reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations***

0. Abstract .....	1
1. Text-immanent vs. contextual and theses vs. no-theses approaches.....	2
1.1 Dichotomies .....	2
1.2 Baker's contextual arguments.....	2
1.3 Four principal readings.....	3
2. Elements of an argument for a therapeutic reading of the PI.....	4
2.1 Outline.....	4
2.2 Text-immanent evidence .....	4
2.3 Contextual evidence .....	5
3. Conclusion.....	6
References .....	7

### **0. Abstract**

The paper presents the outline of an argument for what I call a "therapeutic" reading of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I (PI).

First, I describe and assess the principles of two fundamental debates on partly methodological issues in PI interpretation: one debate concerns the question, whether to approach the PI *text-immanently* or *contextually*; the other concerns the question, whether to interpret the PI as developing and defending a system of *theses*, thus yielding a "theses-reading", or, whether to approach the PI rather as a *therapeutic* attempt to counteract philosophy as a discipline, which defends theses and systems of theses.

I then present the outline of an argument (rather than the detailed content), which defends the view that a *therapeutic* reading of the PI is proper. More specifically, I will defend the view that a text-immanent reading of the PI yields a therapeutic reading, and that such a reading is further corroborated by contextual elements. In the argument I seek to avoid certain fallacies and mistakes that often afflict PI interpretation on methodological levels. This concerns in particular the question of how to make legitimate and adequate use of the Nachlass for PI interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Text-immanent vs. contextual and theses vs. no-theses approaches

### 1.1 Dichotomies

Issues in the interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) include the dichotomies between text-immanent and contextual approaches, and theses and no-theses or therapeutic approaches.

Baker and Hacker's *Analytical commentary* on the PI refers continuously to Wittgenstein's Nachlass and thus involves a *contextual approach*, while von Savigny's *Kommentar für Leser* consciously adopts the method of strict *text-immanent interpretation*. While von Savigny's argument for his text-immanent approach is not without fault, the most common defences of contextual approaches cannot be said to be unproblematic either.

The dichotomy between theses- and no-theses or therapeutic approaches concerns PI's relation to theses. While one group of scholars, though on different levels and in varying degrees, sees the PI as a work that advances philosophical *theses* and also theories, another group sees it as a work that rather dissolves philosophical theses and theories through a number of "*therapies*". These therapies need not be systematically [strong concept of "system"] interrelated. Representatives of the first group (those, who think that the PI defend certain "theses") would *also* claim that the PI propose philosophical therapies; however, they would regard them as connected in a system, and even their most minimalist interpretation would understand the PI as developing and defending theses, e.g. about grammar and linguistic rules. In recent years, this position was attacked by the late *Gordon Baker*, who says that in the PI "[n]o fact (even one about 'our grammar') is stated, no thesis advanced" (Baker 2004:45), and thus is a strong proponent of the therapeutic approach.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 Baker's contextual arguments

Interestingly, Baker used earlier to hold the opposite position. The "early" Baker argued that Wittgenstein's collaboration with Waismann on a systematic presentation of his philosophy shows that Wittgenstein, incl. his PI, was positive about systematic philosophizing, and that therefore "it cannot be mistaken in principle to try to fit Wittgenstein's remarks together into a philosophical system" (Baker 1979:245).

Wittgenstein's collaboration over a period of years on a project to give a systematic presentation of this thinking puts it beyond doubt that his polemics against philosophical theorizing cannot be interpreted as opposition to systematic philosophizing. If his view had been (as it is often claimed) that philosophy consists of a miscellany of conceptual therapies with no internal connections with each other, he could not have taken any part in an attempt to mold his philosophical remarks into a systematic framework. Yet he did take part in this project at the very same time that he was writing some of his notorious attacks on philosophical theorizing ("BT," §§86–93). This is conclusive proof that it cannot be mistaken in principle to try to fit Wittgenstein's remarks together into a philosophical system even though it is something that he never succeeded in doing to his own satisfaction. (Baker 1979:S.245)

Now, this reasoning by the "early" Baker's seems to rest on certain false premises. First, the justification for "fitting" an author's work "into a philosophical system" is clearly not dependent on whether this undertaking is in agreement with the author's intention. Second, the fact that Wittgenstein may have been positive about systematic philosophizing at a certain point does not entail that this is also valid for the Wittgenstein of the PI.

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is from "*Philosophical Investigations* §122: Neglected Aspects", which was originally published in Arrington/Glock 1991 and introduced the "later Baker".

Contrary to the "early" Baker, the "late" Baker, as we already have seen, argues for a *therapeutic* reading of the PI. But where he does so on a contextual basis, he tends to make contextual mistakes as the "early" Baker; namely he argues for his view under use of contextual evidence which does not always seem legitimate. Consequently, notwithstanding the crucial importance, which the late Baker's work has for our (and also mine) understanding of the PI's therapeutic nature, his justifications nevertheless contain what I'd call contextual fallacies, and are therefore as problematic as were his earlier justifications for the opposite position.

### 1.3 Four principal readings

What I try to do, is to defend, with the help of Baker, a therapeutic reading of the PI, but not to make certain mistakes which Baker and many others make when they include contextual evidence in order to argue for a certain reading or interpretation of the PI. Therefore, my undertaking includes also the task of finding an adequate solution to the debate between text-immanentist and contextualist approaches.

Contextual fallacies or mistakes deceive both defenders and opponents of the no-theses approach, in particular, when they argue their respective and opposed approaches with reference to earlier or later statements or activities by Wittgenstein. Such mistakes are partly due to the fact that they both, and Wittgenstein scholars in general, often adopt an uncritical attitude to the issue of the special place the PI occupy, or at least, might occupy, in the context of Wittgenstein's work. Views valid for certain parts of Wittgenstein's work, or more specifically, his *Nachlass*, are extended to the whole "later Wittgenstein", including the PI, or views valid for the PI only, are extended to the whole "later work".

When looking at the landscape of PI interpretation, we can find, that the four approaches introduced above – the text-immanent, contextual, "theses", and "no-theses" approach – combine to *four principal readings*:

- (i) a text-immanent "theses" reading;
- (ii) a contextual "theses" reading;
- (iii) a text-immanent therapeutic reading;
- (iv) a contextual therapeutic reading.

From this table we can see that the adoption of a text-immanent vs. a contextual approach is neutral to the choice of a "theses" vs. a "therapeutic" approach. While both von Savigny and Cavell read the PI text-immanently, the former reads it in the "theses" way, while the latter reads it in the therapeutic way. While both the early and the late Baker read the PI contextually, the former reads it in the "theses" way, while the latter reads it therapeutically. While both von Savigny and the early Baker read the PI in the "theses" way, the former reads it text-immanently, the latter contextually. Thus, from this it seems to follow that to read the PI *therapeutically* or as *advancing and defending theses* depends at least as much on text-external factors, such as one's conception of and expectations to philosophy, as on the PI text itself.

## **2. Elements of an argument for a therapeutic reading of the PI**

### **2.1 Outline**

Each of the mentioned four types of PI-readings - text-immanent “theses” reading; contextual “theses” reading; text-immanent therapeutic reading; contextual therapeutic reading - entails a different set of answers to a group of questions about method,

- including the question whether it is sufficient or necessary to rely on the text alone, or whether it is necessary to include contextual elements in order to pick the correct interpretation;
- whether it is necessary for philosophy to advance theses and theories;
- whether text-immanent approaches yield “therapeutic” or theses-readings,
- or, whether contextual approaches yield “therapeutic” or theses-readings.

Consequently, arguing against certain readings will entail arguing against certain of their explicit or implicit answers to these issues. *Arguments against strict text-immanentism or strict contextualism* will in general be able to point out that the questions and answers of both positions partly rest on (in fact, shared) misleading metaphysical assumptions about what a text is and what text-understanding is.

*Arguments against theses-readings* will be able to appeal to the fact that the truth of the position that it is necessary for philosophy and philosophical interpretation to advance theses and theories is not established, but rather debated. Consequently, *text-immanent theses-readings* of the PI seem yielded by this specific position's *premises* rather than by a text-immanent reading as such. (However, I would want to mention at this point that it is not this particular position which is under scrutiny here, but the view, that the PI encourage or defend this position.)

In the following, I want to present the outline of an argument, which defends the view that a therapeutic reading of the PI is proper, and which proceeds *text-immanently* in the first place. The envisaged comprehensive argument cannot be presented here (also, because it has not yet been fully developed), but in my view it is to consist of two main steps. First, evidence is to be put forward for the view that *a text-immanent reading yields a therapeutic reading*. Subsequently, it shall also be established that *contextual data* support the text-immanent therapeutic reading.

### **2.2 Text-immanent evidence**

A crucial issue in PI interpretation and also in the argument concerns the role of certain *obstacles*, *difficulties*, which one meets in the PI - both of a structural nature, and at specific points in the text (we can say, of a “punctual” nature). I like to call these difficulties “*skandaloi*” (Greek for “stumbling blocks”). A close text-immanent reading of the PI cannot ignore frequent ambiguities in phrasing and, more generally, a prevalent lack of precise meaning, and a dominant presence of incoherence and also inconsistency in the text. These obstacles are largely addressed by von Savigny in his commentary. They yield the three questions which he considers crucial from a methodological perspective: “Wer spricht?”, “Worum geht es?”, “Wo gehört das hin?”.

Interpretational responses to these obstacles generally adopt one of the two following approaches:

Approach (A): The obstacles result from Wittgenstein’s “incapability” to produce a linear and systematic text (though he wanted to); this is thought to be supported by the PI Preface, where the author describes his problems in bringing his thoughts together in a linear “whole” (e.g. Hilmy 1987). It is argued that Wittgenstein himself wished to advance theses, and that he wanted to achieve a systematic and linear presentation of these theses. Consequently, it is argued, that it is in the interest of Wittgenstein that we supplement what he himself was unable to achieve, by providing the text of the

PI with an explication of its inherent (but stylistically contaminated) argumentative and linear structure, thus rendering the thesis content visible and systematic.

Approach (B): An alternative approach, however, is to regard these obstacles not as accidental mistakes and deficiencies, which Wittgenstein himself would have wanted to avoid, but to try to go along with the text as it stands, without attempting to unify its contents into a linear argument or improve on the passages where we find these obstacles. This is an approach which was exemplified early on by Cavell 1962.

Approach (B) can be applied and carried out on a purely text-immanent basis. However, defenders of approach (A) often invoke contextual confirmation, and therefore it may be proper to anticipate a bit of contextual evidence and to point out that there actually is strong contextual counterevidence against approach (A). Inasmuch approach (A) rests on an argument which invokes extra-textual sources for the view that Wittgenstein was unable to produce a linear and systematic text, and *therefore* produced the PI in their peculiar form, approach (A) and the theses-reading rest on false premises. Wittgenstein has namely shown in a number of cases that he was indeed quite able to present and develop theses in a systematic, linear and argumentatively well-connected manner.

Now, what is it that speaks in favour of approach (B) and the therapeutic reading?

The therapeutic reading can claim that it is more adequate to the text to proceed on the text's premises, and that it is exactly *this* what it does, and what the theses-reading neglects. The therapeutic reading accepts the text's obstacles-dimension, without excluding in advance the possibility of the obstacles having an important function, while the theses-reading wants to alter this dimension in favour of a smoothed coherent reading which is required by the theses-approach. There are two other features, which are easily underplayed by theses-readings, but can be appreciated more adequately by therapeutic readers who are willing to see the form of the PI as PI internal. These are PI's specific *dialogical structure* and their "bildhafte", figurative *language*. In addition, there are also *certain individual remarks* (e.g. PI §18) or *larger portions of text*, which therapeutic readings clearly are able to better utilize than theses-readings. Such portions of text include the so-called "*philosophy chapter*", and, last but not least, the *paratexts* (which include the motto, the title and the preface).

Since at this point the argument is to be established primarily on a text-immanent basis, in principal only text-immanent data can be admitted. However, there *is* a small exception to this: For, in order to validate the claim that a text-immanent reading yields a therapeutic reading, we need a *contextual corroboration of a special type*. It is namely possible, that our text-immanent PI reading, which we think yields a therapeutic understanding, is based on a text that is not authentic and authoritative. And it has indeed been questioned whether the paratexts, which provide an important part of the argument for the therapeutic reading, belong to Wittgenstein's PI, or whether they rather were put there by the editors without authorisation.

The answer to this issue is, that contextual data clearly show that the PI paratexts *are* authentic parts of the PI, and, more generally, that the PI edition of 1953 and its follow-ups are in fact fairly trustworthy editions. Consequently, if it is true that the elements brought forward here, incl. the paratexts, support a therapeutic reading, then such a reading cannot be weakened or falsified by the claim that it is based on a PI text or edition which is erroneous and not authentic.

## 2.3 Contextual evidence

With regard to the *contextual support*, we must first distinguish two kinds of contextual evidence. One does for example very often refer to PI-external contexts and invoke passages, in order to support the view that Wittgenstein and the PI hold certain views, have certain tasks, etc.. Or, sections of the PI are often interpreted in the light of their earlier versions, as for example in the following way: "The ambiguity of section x disappears if we interpret x in the light of remark y, which is a precursor of x."

This kind of methodology is often used in Wittgenstein scholarship; however, it can be misleading, as I already have tried to point out. Thus, such contextual evidence is *not* the right kind of contextual evidence, which we want to invoke for a defense of the therapeutic reading, in the first place.

The contextual support, which I think is legitimate, is rather of the following kind: We shall study and utilize the specific textual and stylistic developments that occurred at the very moments of composition of the PI, and Wittgenstein's description of such developments, and other documentation which we have of them - rather than refer to precursors, ancestors and relatives of the PI remarks. Consequently, this support is of a kind that is much more internal to the text than the first can ever be, since it is intimately connected with the shaping of the PI and its remarks. Therefore, what we should do is to study the specific text genesis in order to see what new elements were introduced in the making of the PI, and what old elements were kept or thrown out, and what Wittgenstein says about this, rather than to use the context to interpret the meaning of certain remarks in the light of earlier remarks or meanings.

In the remaining time, the relevant contextual data, in sense introduced, can only be sketched (see further Pichler 2004). In short, they include or yield the following points:

(a) In late 1936, Wittgenstein dismissed the form of the *Brown Book* as suitable for his envisaged second (third) book, and consciously adopted for the PI a different form, that of the *album*. The development from Ms115, second part, to Ms142 is the primary witness for this shift from the book-form to the album-form.

(b) This change in form cannot be understood as neutral to content. For the PI, in late 1936, content, method and form were merged to such an extent that they become inseparable. The development that led to this merging and the reasons for it are described by Wittgenstein himself in a series of preface drafts, part of which has also entered the PI *Preface* published in 1953.

(c) The genesis of individual remarks and parts of the PI bears witness to a conscious editing towards a text that discourages a theses-reading and encourages a therapeutic reading. That fits well with the often-expressed experience of PI remarks being much "clearer" in their earlier versions.

### **3. Conclusion**

I think, there is sufficient text-immanent evidence for the view, that the PI - if we want to read and understand them in the way, in which their author wanted to have them read and understood himself - are to be read as a *therapeutic* work which counteracts and dissolves philosophy as defending systems and theses. This view can be defended already on a text-immanent basis. In addition, it is corroborated further through contextual evidence. When studying the contextual evidence, we meet the challenge of how to bring contextual data, and in particular *Nachlass*-data, in a legitimate way into the picture. I have tried to show that the reference to and the invocation of *Nachlass* and other contextual data is often mistaken, and I have tried to introduce a way of including *Nachlass* data, which is legitimate and adequate.

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