From Anti-Metaphysics to Non-Pyrrhonian Polyphony - remarks on the difficulty of receiving Wittgenstein

Thomas Wallgren, University of Helsinki, Finland

1. Here is one way of looking at the difficulty of receiving Wittgenstein. We ask: Does Wittgenstein argue for the truth of certain philosophical theses and theoretical positions? Should we gather from his work new solutions, whether skeptical or not skeptical, to philosophical problems or does Wittgenstein rather attempt the dissolution of those problems?

I think we can draw the following conclusion from the debate: Exegetically the case for interpretations of Wittgenstein, in particular the later Wittgenstein, that do not see him as searching for solutions, for true theories or theses, through cogent argument, is quite strong. It does not follow that we cannot mine Wittgenstein's work in our search for theoretical solutions to philosophical problems. However, if we do so our guiding interest is different from that of Wittgenstein. (See for instance Bloor 1996, 377 and Pichler 2004, 21.)

When the solution / dissolution issue is the focus of attention the difficulty of receiving Wittgenstein has the form: Should we or should we not share his anti-theoretical orientation? On this perception the two main camps in Wittgenstein scholarship are the non-scholastic, constructive, Wittgensteinians and the anti-theoretical or "true" Wittgensteinians.

Here is another way of looking at the difficulty of receiving Wittgenstein. We ask: Was Wittgenstein an anti-metaphysical philosopher?

This question and the one first mentioned induce different patterns of attention. My suggestion is that the second question can serve us well in bringing forth similarities between some views advocated by "true Wittgensteinian" and those advocated by constructive Wittgensteinians, as well as the importance of certain differences between some main variants of true Wittgensteinianism that have not received as much attention as they deserve.

2. Despite the many important differences there are between P.M.S. Hacker on the one hand and James Conant and Cora Diamond on the other—differences that, so far, may be more distinct in their interpretation of the *Tractatus* than in their interpretation of the later Wittgenstein—I think it is fair to say that Hacker and Diamond share the view that the later Wittgenstein was by and large an anti-metaphysical philosopher.

Anyone who follows Hacker or Diamond in portraying Wittgenstein both as a "no theses" -philosopher and as an anti-metaphysicist can be confronted with the question: Can you have both?

The charge has often enough been brought against Hacker that if we insist that clarification of grammar can define bounds of sense our philosophy will not be as readily distinguishable from a philosophy in search of true theses as one might have hoped for. (E.g. Baker, 2004, 104–105.) Here, we might say, grammar appears to become the new metaphysics, ruling over truth, including over what we can rightly say about "the true make up of reality" or "the scaffolding of the universe" and over what can and what cannot be meaningfully undertaken in empirical science.

The idea that Wittgenstein's philosophical method is designed as a therapy that serves to liberate us from illusions has been suggested as a corrective to the Hackerian interpretation. Differences have been seen between regarding philosophy as laying bare when grammatical rules have been transgressed (Hacker)—this is philosophy as "policing the bounds of sense" (Baker)—and seeing philosophy as elucidating that where we thought there was sense no such thing is to be found.

However, the therapeutic interpreter, too, remains answerable to our questions above. We ask: Whence the philosophers' authority over sense and nonsense? (What is the difference Baker, using Waisman's simile, invites us to see between Hackerians "beating with the stick of grammar" and Bakerians "gently leading someone with his own consent?" Baker 2004, 93, 104.) How, if I claim no access to privileged, perhaps metaphysical, insight, can I know that you are wrong if you share every step of our joint investigation and in the end disagree with me over questions of illusion and sense?

First answer. We read Wittgenstein as speaking on his own behalf and in a "voice of correctness" (Cavell), when he writes this and similar remarks: "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense." (*Philosophical Investigations*, # 464. See also # 500.)

Problems with first answer: We assume that there are cases when disguised nonsense can, objectively perhaps?, be revealed as patent nonsense. But what gives us confidence in saying in any particular case that the result we arrive at, namely that *this* utterance is a case of patent nonsense and not a case of patent sense? Can we have this confidence without running into very much the same problem that haunts Hacker's interpretation: If we say that we can use philosophy to liberate ourselves from illusions of sense it becomes difficult for us to escape the charge that we are, at the end of the day, putting forward controversial theses about where sense can and cannot be found. We can say: We searched for timeless truths about the scaffolding of the universe or about the relation between mind and world. But now we know that the notions of timeless truth and scaffolding of the universe and of normative (structured) mind and non-normative (unstructured) world as distinct but related are confused, that talking about them will be (disguised) nonsense. How is that not a thesis?

The same point can be arrived at from, as it were, the opposite direction by asking: Does Wittgenstein show, prove or elucidate, that there are things we cannot do in philosophy, such as proving metaphysical theses? For instance, when he talks about philosophical theories as "houses of cards", is the message that Plato was confused, that the idea that there is a higher reality is an idea that we cannot entertain without falling into disguised nonsense? Again: If that is Wittgenstein's position, how is that not a philosophical thesis? If that is not his position, what happens with our idea of philosophy as therapy?

What gives us the assurance that we can say with right, even in one case, that here philosophy dispels illusion and achieves its therapeutic goal?

Second answer: There is no voice of correctness. PI # 464 does not inform us that Wittgenstein thought that philosophical investigations will be able provide definite answers to questions about meaning and illusions of meaning. But it does not follow that we must read PI 464 as part of a dialogue that excludes the possibility that philosophy will be able to provide definite answers to such questions. PI 464 has a role in a dialogue where we inform ourselves and others about different aspects of what is involved in saying that there is, in a certain case, a definite truth about sense or illusion as well as of what is involved in saying that there is not such a truth. Seeing these aspects may be exactly what we need in order to attain a clear command of the concepts we investigate.

The second kind of answer may free us from the burden of explaining how we can say that Wittgenstein was against metaphysics while also maintaining that he had no theses. We can now say: the point is not being for or against metaphysics or anti-metaphysics. The point is also not of being for or against policing about sense. And it is not about being for or against elucidations about sense and illusion. The point is gaining an enhanced understanding of what these different options, in any particular case (including, perhaps, the completely general and the absolutely necessary case) involve and what we wish to make of them.

The difference between the first and the second answer is, to put it as a slogan, the difference between interpretations that do, and others that do not, place a particular emphasis on polyphony in Wittgenstein's later work. On the polyphonic interpretation all main lines of interpretation of Wittgenstein, the ones that see him as arguing for distinct theses and theories, the ones that see him as advocating a policing of sense, and the ones that see him as engaged in a therapy against "the bewitchments of our intelligence by means of language" (PI, # 109), including, in particular, the metaphysical cravings espoused in some forms of philosophy, are in the right, but all get only part of his enterprise into view. Wittgenstein is, on the polyphonic interpretation, engaged in an effort to understand what each of these options mean. He studies: *What is it* to support *this* philosophical position? What are the merits, what is the burden, of it?

Work on these topics may or may not bring agreement. If I become clear about the answers I can give to these questions I may find myself holding on to the same views that you find yourself holding onto in the light of the same considerations. Or: I may find that you arrive at what you consider to be a clear view in the light of considerations that I find utterly unsatisfying. And so on.

Polyphonic philosophy can easily be misunderstood if we understand it merely as an intellectual tool that we use to explain why certain philosophical views may seem attractive to others. (See Stern, 2004, 170.) It will then hardly be distinguishable from arguments preparing the way for an explication of our own position. Only if we can explicate polyphony as addressing in moral earnestness ourselves and any other who may care for what we say simultaneously, will it be something distinct.

The explication will need to consider two intertwined issues. One issue is what understanding of the meaning of our concepts, including e.g. "metaphysical philosophy," each one of us is willing to go by in her life. The other is a

search for community. The sense of community that may emerge on the basis of our philosophical enterprise can take many forms. A community may emerge that is shaped by answers to conceptual issues we could go by together for the time being. Or a community may emerge that is shaped by answers that, as we agree, we must, necessarily, as long as we wish to be rational creatures, go by together. Or a community may emerge that is shaped by the recognition that despite our philosophical efforts we have no prospect of answers we could go by together, or even individually.

3. How does the distinction between the perspectives on the difficulty of receiving Wittgenstein that I have proposed make a difference?

Exegetically the distinction has some advantages. It makes it easy to explain why Wittgenstein should have said in 1929 that the *Tractatus* was deeply mistaken and in 1936 that some of his more recent efforts were of no value at all. We can now see the years in-between, the 1929–1936 period as a period when Wittgenstein answers to the descriptions proposed by "grammatical" interpreters. This is Wittgenstein as an anti-metaphysical philosopher seeking to provide definite answers concerning philosophical issues, given either in terms of policing of sense or disclosure of illusion. We can also explain in what sense Wittgenstein's self-understanding undergoes an important shift in the autumn of 1936. The shift consists in an abandonment of the idea of speaking at any time in the voice of the "Olympic narrator" and replacing this project with an engagement in "polyphonic controversy." (Pichler 2004, 147.) Pichler argues well for the exegetical benefits of this idea.

Substantially, the gain is that we can shift our attention from what Wittgenstein was against—e.g. philosophy as theory or philosophy as metaphysics—to what he was in favour of, and why. I shall close with two suggestions about the directions in which I think one can then move.[1]

The first suggestions can be made by announcing a misgiving I have with two important pioneers of the polyphonic interpretation. Stern (2004) and Pichler (2004) both refer to Pyrrhonism in order to explicate their views. This move seems to me rather unhelpful. In the Pyrrhonism Stern and Pichler present Wittgensteins's philosophy serves as a vehicle for moral withdrawal from the world. The Pyrrhonic philosopher suspends judgment and engages in the "distanced work" of a "director" of philosophical polyphony (Pichler, 2004, 147) or he is "a patient anti-philosopher" who is "dismissive of both foundationalism and anti-foundationalism" (Stern, 2004, 37 and 35, see also 170).

Pichler and Stern make less than is called for of the element of spiritual and moral struggle in Wittgenstein's work. Pace Pichler (and Wittgenstein's own "coolness ideal" notwithstanding), Wittgenstein's philosophy does not produce a distance to the vagaries of human life. His philosophical enterprise is rather, as Baker emphasised, an engagement "full of far-reaching consequences" (Baker 2004, 46) in which, as Kierkegaard and Socrates—in method and moral purpose more closely akin to Wittgensteinian polyphony than many other great philosophers—in their different ways emphasised, questions of will and questions of intellect are inseparably intertwined.

---

[1] I have worked on this and related issues more in Wallgren 2006. Cavell 1979 and now, Baker 2004 (a book I could not consider in my 2006 book) are important references for anyone interested in these topics.

Pace Stern Wittgenstein is not dismissive of philosophical effort. On the contrary, for him, lack of clarity about concepts can be a lack of clarity about the most important things in our lives. It may well be, as Socrates would have agreed, that we cannot find our way to an upright life unless we take on the effort of philosophical clarification. (Just one example: Consider the significance for Wittgenstein of getting at a conception of philosophy he could live with.) But whether the result of our effort will be Pyrrhonic or non-Pyrrhonic, metaphysical or not metaphysical, theoretical or therapeutic, is not for the philosopher to judge about before the facts or on the behalf of others—including on behalf of herself as the partly transformed person she may become through the philosophical work.

References

Baker, Gordon, 2004: *Wittgenstein's Method: Neglected Aspects – Essays on Wittgenstein by Gordon Baker*, edited and introduced by Katherine Morris, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Bloor, David, 1996: "Linguistic Idealism Revisited,"pp. 354 – 382 in Hans Sluga and David Stern, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Cavell, Stanley, 1979: *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press.

Pichler, Alois, 2004: *Wittgensteins* Philosophische Untersuchungen*: Vom Buch zum Album*, Rodopi, Amsterdam - New York.

Stern, David, 2004: *Wittgenstein's* Philosophical Investigations: *An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Wallgren, Thomas, 2006: *Transformative Philosophy: Socrates, Wittgenstein, and the Democratic Spirit of Philosophy*, Lexington Books, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1953: *Philosophische Untersuchungen (Philosophical Investigations, PI)*, Blackwell, Oxford.