

# Maps vs. Aspects: Notes on a Radical Interpretation

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Even though Rom Harré had declared “the issue between the Bakerians and Hackerites [...] already a tad out of date” (Harré 2008) the debate between elucidatory and therapeutic interpretations of Wittgenstein’s later thought continues to demand attention. One of the central venues of this discussion is what is sometimes referred to as the ‘Theory vs. Therapy debate’. In the radical wing of the ‘therapy’ side one mostly finds interpreters belonging to the group of so-called ‘Resolute Readers’ or ‘New Wittgensteinians’ although there are some notable exceptions (Schroeder 2006). Resolute readers argue that if we take seriously Wittgenstein’s remarks, instructions etc. on philosophy we will see that it makes little sense to speak of a “decisive break in his mode of philosophizing between the *Tractatus* and his later writings” (Crary and Read 2000, p.2). More specifically we will discover an underlying continuity in the entire *oeuvre* constituted largely by Wittgenstein’s ‘main aim’ which is “to get us to see that the point of view on language we aspire to or think we need to assume when philosophizing – a point of view on language as if outside from which we imagine we can get a clear view of the relation between language and the world – is no more than the *illusion* of a point of view.” (*Ibid.* p.6)

In a recent paper ‘A Perspicuous Presentation of “Perspicuous Presentation”’ two prominent authors from the resolute camp Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read argue that the so-called ‘elucidatory’ reading of *Philosophical Investigations* “ignores Wittgenstein’s phrasing (i.e. it ignores Wittgenstein’s words) and commits Wittgenstein to some (deeply problematic) philosophical views” (Hutchinson and Read, p.152). Their argument consists of two complementary lines of thought: the first one attempts to show how the elucidatory reading fails to do justice to Wittgenstein’s real intentions mainly by questioning the adequacy of the comparison drawn between ‘perspicuous representations’ and maps, while the second line introduces Gordon Baker’s interpretation of the term, relying heavily on the analogy with aspects<sup>1</sup>. In what follows I will present my reasons for thinking that neither the arguments given by Hutchinson and Read against one analogy nor their arguments for the other are convincing.

Hutchinson and Read begin their paper by distinguishing, on the basis of the amount of attention paid to Wittgenstein’s modal terms, between three strategies of interpretation: doctrinal, elucidatory, and therapeutic. Despite the nominal distinction however, doctrinal and elucidatory interpretations share the basic assumption that “one can take up a position ‘outside of language’ so as to view that language” (Hutchinson and Read, p.144) and indeed this seems to go against most of what Wittgenstein appears to say in the *Investigations*. The authors remind us of Wittgenstein’s warning at the beginning of the Blue Book against thinking that a substantive must refer to a thing,

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that Hutchinson and Read do not (in fact, by their own lights admittedly *cannot*) suggest that we replace the elucidatory conception with the one proposed by Baker: they merely attempt “literally to place the two pictures of the grammar of perspicuous presentation side-by-side, in hope that our readers will no longer be held in thrall by the standard – elucidatory – picture” (Hutchinson and Read, p.150). That is to say, correctness and adequacy clearly do not come into the picture as criteria for choosing one over the other.

and ask what a “thing” such as language could possibly look like. Now, it is fairly simple to see why a doctrinal reader, attributing to Wittgenstein a ‘use-theory of meaning’ for instance, would have to accept this implication but I don’t see why elucidation of a *particular* region of grammar would presuppose the above mentioned extra-linguistic vantage point. As a matter of fact, even the passage Hutchinson and Read quote from P.M.S. Hacker claims nothing more than that Wittgenstein “gives us numerous overviews of the logical grammar of *problematic* concepts” (Hacker 2001, p.37, italics mine) the obvious reason for this being that in the great majority of cases our language functions perfectly well. This misconception on the authors’ part, that elucidation *has to be* universal is, as I will try to show, what underlies most of Hutchinson and Read’s objections to elucidatory interpretations.

The next point where the cartography analogy fails to hold up to full scrutiny, according to Hutchinson and Read, is the insight that, as opposed to terrains, language has some sort of ‘flexibility’ and ‘open-texturedness’ resulting from the fact that “our language is *our* language, and not separable from our open-ended lives with it” (Hutchinson and Read 2008, p.147). If I understand this observation correctly it, first, reinforces the point made in the previous section and, second, attributes to language the above mentioned special properties (never mind for the moment whether language is a thing that can have properties etc.). But it seems to me that ‘flexibility’ and ‘open-texturedness’ are not at all specific to language: as a matter of fact, they characterise *all* our social practices. But surely, it would be quite unwarranted to infer from this that all systematic attempts at surveying (that is, mapping) such practices (e.g. sociology, cultural anthropology etc.) are stillborn enterprises. It is closely connected to this point that, according to Hutchinson and Read, language possesses a sort of ‘reflexivity’ and a ‘possibility for creative change’ which are simply missing from landscapes. Again, we may remind ourselves that it is not ‘language’ *per se* that possesses these features but, rather, *our* social-linguistic practices. However, this does not fully restore the analogy which is why it may prove useful to ask whether maps, on the other end of the analogy, really represent “objective” states of affairs in an “objective” way. I think that if we take a closer look at actual maps we find that – even beyond the obvious fact that all maps are *simplified* representations – the way they represent the ‘external world’ is in fact tailored to our manifold political, economic, infrastructural, touristic etc. needs.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the dehumanizing tendency apparently present in the wish to survey particular areas of grammar points in the same direction. Again, I can only repeat that once we have given up the absurd idea of an “objective” map (drawn, as it were, from the point of view of nowhere) and recognize cartography as a *human* practice, this worry disappears.

Hutchinson and Read’s final attack against the analogy with maps concerns the question of background knowledge apparently required for drawing maps. The

<sup>2</sup> Note that this is equally valid for *what* is represented by a particular map: even a ‘map of the world’ is, in most cases, merely a map of our planet.

claim is that “geographers know which sections of coastline are more prone to erosion than others, and which rivers more likely to change course – for instance, a porous limestone riverbed is liable to relatively rapid erosion (or ‘sinkage’), while a basalt riverbed is much less so; and shale coastlines can retreat or move on a relatively regular basis” (Hutchinson and Read 2008, p.147). The alleged asymmetry in this case results from the fact that, according to the authors, there is no way of telling which parts of language are liable to rapid erosion and which aren’t. Apart from the fact that such background knowledge is obviously not necessary for *all* maps (consider maps of towns or public transport, for example), this claim, once again, makes clear that Hutchinson and Read are in the grip of a picture of language (and maps) they intend to criticize, as it seems obvious that if we conceive of language as a set of social-linguistic practices, i.e. hooked into particular forms of life, than it becomes perfectly possible to observe as well as forecast the probability or unlikelihood of rapid change.<sup>3</sup>

In the constructive part of their argument Hutchinson and Read recapitulate Gordon Baker’s ‘radically therapeutic’ interpretation of Wittgenstein’s method. It is not the task of the present paper to investigate the details of that interpretation which is why I’m going to concentrate exclusively on one crucial point of Baker’s conception, namely the emphasis on aspect-perception. According to Hutchinson and Read “Baker suggests that when Wittgenstein writes in *PI* §122 that a perspicuous presentation of fundamental significance for us, what he means by perspicuous presentation is a presentation which effects in us an aspect change, or dawn” (Hutchinson and Read 2008, p.150). They illustrate this by the help of the famous example of the duck-rabbit and claim that the work done by a perspicuous presentation is similar to the affect of making someone recognize the picture-rabbit in the picture-duck.<sup>4</sup> According to Baker then, the only criterion for something to qualify as a perspicuous presentation is the capacity to achieve this aspect-switch in a particular person at a particular time, and he bases this interpretation on textual evidence from TS 220, §99: “We then change the aspect by placing side-by-side with one system of expression other systems of expression. – The bondage in which one analogy holds us can be broken by placing another alongside which we acknowledge to be equally well justified.”

It might be important to note that in this passage Wittgenstein uses the verb ‘*ändern*’ (which is closer to the English ‘modify’ or ‘alter’) as opposed to ‘*wechseln*’. Without wanting to make too much of a difference in words, I

believe there are significant dissimilarities between the kind of aspect-perception mentioned in TS 220 and the one discussed in the relevant sections of Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*. If we accept the duck-rabbit scenario as a paradigm case of aspect change (and Hutchinson and Read clearly do), then it is plain to see that there is a fundamental difference between the phenomenal character of this experience and the one described in TS 220, namely the fact that while in the case of the duck-rabbit we have a genuine switch of aspects (i.e. we see either this one or that) this would make little sense in the case of philosophical pictures. That is to say, in the scenario introduced in TS 220 Wittgenstein is talking about *widening* our perspective by *juxtaposing* alternative pictures, while in cases like that of the duck-rabbit we *replace* an aspect with another. Furthermore, the asymmetry can be grasped in the subject’s reaction as well: while widening my perspective by juxtaposing alternative philosophical pictures, if successful, removes my disquietude, it seems difficult to make sense of anything similar going on upon being told that a picture has a further aspect so far unknown to me. If anything, in the latter case I am likely to feel puzzled by being presented with a source of new problems.

Hutchinson and Read conclude their paper by observing how unfortunate and ironic it is that elucidatory readers fail to see how “*their rendering of perspicuous presentation renders philosophy as (closely akin to) science*” (Hutchinson and Read, p.158). If what I have said is correct then I may have convinced you that, on the one hand, an elucidatory interpretation need not do any such thing and, on the other, a therapeutic reading – construed along Hutchinson and Read’s lines – would relocate philosophy to the realm of magic.

## Literature

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<sup>3</sup> Compare for example religious language-games with slang.

<sup>4</sup> One possible objection to assigning such a central methodological role to aspect perception, not to be discussed here, would argue that while the issue of aspect-perception occupied Wittgenstein’s attention mainly during the late 1940s, the meta-philosophical remark in TS 220 (similarly to most meta-philosophical sections in the *Investigations*) dates back to the early 1930s.