

Thomas McNally

Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language

The Legacy of the
Philosophical Investigations

Throughout his philosophical development, Wittgenstein was more concerned with language than with any other topic. No other philosopher has been as influential on our understanding of the deep problems surrounding language, and yet the true significance of his writing on the subject is difficult to assess, since most of the current debates regarding language tend to overlook his work. In this book, Thomas McNally shows that philosophers of language still have much to learn from Wittgenstein's later writings. The book examines the finer details of his arguments while also clarifying their importance for debates outside the field of Wittgenstein studies. Presenting the issues thematically (as they relate to questions of reference, scepticism about meaning and the social dimension of language, among others), the book explores how the arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations* remain relevant, compelling us to reflect in novel and challenging ways on the nature of language.

Thomas McNally is a Research Associate in the Department of Philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin.

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THOMAS MCNALLY is a Research Associate in the Department of Philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin.

For Sinéad

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Abbreviations

ACL	Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–1935 (1979)
BB	The Blue and Brown Books (1969)
BT	The Big Typescript: TS 213 (2005a)
LCL	Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1930–32 (1980a)
OC	On Certainty (1974b)
PG	Philosophical Grammar (1974a)
PI	Philosophical Investigations (2001)
PR	Philosophical Remarks (1975)
RFM	Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics (1978)
RPP	Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology (1980b/1980c)
TLP	Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (2005b)
Z	Zettel (1981)

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Introduction

There are a lot of features of Wittgenstein's philosophy that mark it out as unusual or unorthodox in the broader context of twentieth-century philosophy. For example, one could draw attention to the distinctiveness of his writing styles or his methods of philosophical inquiry. But arguably the most unique feature of his thought is his general antipathy towards philosophy itself, or more specifically philosophy as it has been practiced throughout much of the last two thousand years. It is this antipathy – apparent in both *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) and *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) – that makes it extremely difficult to promote a constructive dialogue between Wittgenstein and other philosophers (and philosophical debates that extend beyond the exegetical field of Wittgenstein studies). The goal of this book is to open the dialogue by focusing on one broad and far-reaching area, viz. the philosophy of language.

Before outlining how this can be done, it is helpful to be reminded of Wittgenstein's hostility towards traditional conceptions of what philosophy is and of what it can aspire to achieve. In *PI*, he famously writes:

For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question. (§133)

According to Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are in a sense pseudo-problems. And since the formulation of the problems and the typical ways of trying to deal with them arise from confusion, the most desirable outcome would not be to perpetuate the same errors but to eradicate or dissolve the philosophical problems themselves (see *PI*, §§119, 254 and 255). On this view, philosophy should not model itself on the sciences by constructing theories to solve the philosophical problems. Instead, it should end in the elimination of the problems, or the recognition that the problems arose in the first place because philosophers were misguided in some distinctive ways (*PI*, §§109, 119, 126 and 128).

Reflecting on Wittgenstein's negative attitude may lead us to conclude that there is only one way of viewing the relation between him and other philosophers, i.e. that since his conception of philosophy is so different to most philosophers' there is simply no way for there to be a fruitful dialogue in which, say, philosophers writing today could learn something from Wittgenstein. The seemingly inevitable scenario is one in which Wittgenstein scholars debate among themselves about what he was trying to say in his writings, while more 'constructive' philosophical discussions and debates continue independently in academic journals and books. Although this looks like where things are headed, it is interesting that in the decades that followed the publication of *PI* in 1953 there *was* significant engagement by philosophers with Wittgenstein's texts. For instance, what came to be known as his 'private language argument' was undoubtedly influential, as was his notion of a 'language-game', his discussion of rule-following, his remarks on the relation between meaning and use and his general emphasis on the practical and social aspects of language. However, in most cases this influence came at a high price, which was to distort Wittgenstein by re-constructing what he wrote and moulding him into a more traditional philosopher. In other words, it was as if Wittgenstein was deemed to be an important philosopher only insofar as he was (contrary to what he explicitly stated in his metaphilosophical remarks) engaged in a roughly similar enterprise to other philosophers that involved defending particular views of the mind, language, knowledge etc. Other philosophers engaged with him by implicitly interpreting him as defending proto-theories – if not fully fledged theories – of the same phenomena that they were interested in.

A major concern in this book is with showing that there is a way for philosophers to learn from Wittgenstein, and to engage in a meaningful way with his writings, without overlooking or distorting his highly unusual metaphilosophy. My approach will be to limit myself for the most part to what he writes about language in his later work and to consider how it connects in substantial and hitherto unexplored ways with contemporary debates in the philosophy of language. Before getting into how I propose to do this, it will be instructive to look in more detail at the field of Wittgenstein studies and how it has become much more isolated in recent years.

Wittgenstein Studies, and the Problem of Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy

Wittgenstein studies appear to be as vibrant now as they have ever been. Every year new edited volumes, monographs and multitudes of journal articles are published that are devoted to the interpretation of his writings. One reason for this is the formation over the last thirty years of different

strands that represent strongly opposing ways of reading Wittgenstein. The ensuing debates have been classified using labels such as 'Pyrrhonian vs. non-Pyrrhonian' readings and 'resolute/new vs. traditional' readings. Each side creates identifiable targets for opponents, which has regularly led to ever new statements from philosophers concerning how we should read Wittgenstein. Essentially, the opposition that has developed is between, on the one hand, philosophers including G.E.M. Anscombe, David Pears and Peter Hacker, who have done the most to shape a comprehensive picture of Wittgenstein's philosophy since his death in 1951, and, on the other hand, philosophers including Cora Diamond and James Conant, who more recently have proposed *new* ways of reading Wittgenstein that explicitly reject the dominant interpretive approaches taken or assumed by the former group. Broadly speaking, the opposition is thus between traditional and new methods of interpretation.

The most divisive issues – and which were the principal causes of the development of the new readings – concern Wittgenstein's distinctive metaphilosophy, in both his early and later writings. The major complaint against the traditional readings is that they are not 'resolute' enough in the sense that they purportedly do not take Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks seriously enough. In other words, the new readings maintain that the traditional readings fail to appreciate the full extent of his Pyrrhonianism, or his opposition to defending philosophical theses or theories. Instead, the traditional readings are supposedly more interested in outlining Wittgenstein's arguments and his substantive doctrines or views concerning topics such as the nature of language and the mind. The new readers tend to place Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy at the centre of their interpretations and thus endeavour to show how his methods manage to highlight the errors that traditional philosophy commits, but without Wittgenstein himself falling into the trap of proposing theories of his own (or for some, it may be that he unwittingly fell into this trap in the early work but not in the later).

Although the new (Pyrrhonian/resolute) readings have the merit of being more sensitive to what is unique about Wittgenstein's method or methods of philosophising, they also have the disadvantage that I have been alluding to of isolating him from debates outside of Wittgenstein studies. We thus seem to be confronted with a dilemma: either offer a truly faithful reading of Wittgenstein's writings along the lines of the Pyrrhonian readings and accept that for better or worse Wittgenstein is a radical outsider, which makes dialogue with other philosophers very difficult; or offer a more traditional reading that downplays his metaphilosophical remarks, which makes dialogue possible at the cost of painting a picture of him that is incomplete or distorted in the sense that it makes it seem that he is more like other philosophers.

The Approach Taken in this Book

There are possible ways out of this dilemma, the most obvious being to either argue that the Pyrrhonian readings do not after all make Wittgenstein uninteresting to philosophers who are more optimistic about constructing philosophical theories, or argue that the traditional readings do not distort Wittgenstein's philosophy. The approach I adopt, though, takes its inspiration in part from a rather controversial source, viz. Saul Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein in his 1982 book, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. To explain how, it must first be highlighted that Kripke's book occupies a position in the history of Wittgenstein scholarship that is difficult to classify. It is obvious that Kripke does not propose a traditional reading since, as he recognises, his depiction of the later Wittgenstein (which is his focus) is at odds with most other interpreters. Traditional readers recognised this too, which is why his book was so vigorously attacked (see, for instance, Baker and Hacker 1984). Furthermore, his book pre-dates and has very little in common with the Pyrrhonian readings. For example, Kripke offers almost no detailed exegesis of *PI* or any other of Wittgenstein's writings, preferring instead to reconstruct a major line of argument in Wittgenstein's *PI* 'as it struck' Kripke (1982, 5); and he attributes to Wittgenstein what appears to be a substantive philosophical theory or proto-theory concerning the nature of language.

What I find most appealing in Kripke's book is that he depicts Wittgenstein as presenting *arguments* (or at least one argument) and sets about trying to provide the clearest possible formulation of them. The role of arguments in *PI* is difficult to assess – as it is also in *TLP* – but I think Kripke is right to base his reading around a sustained attempt to get clear on what argumentative points Wittgenstein was trying to make. For there can be little doubt that there are arguments or fragments of arguments presented in *PI* (although see Chapter 5 on how this can be challenged). However, a mature and sensitive treatment of the passages where they are found would have to go beyond Kripke and account for what they are doing there. It may, for instance, be that these arguments are presented through Wittgenstein's stylistic device of giving expression to different *voices*, so that the arguments are merely his attempts to mimic the kind of theory-driven and argument-heavy philosophy he opposes. And if so, this would imply that the arguments we find in the book do not have the standard or traditional goal of defending particular philosophical theses. Rather, their goal would be therapeutic – designed to illustrate to his interlocutors some confusion or absurdity inherent in the philosophical assumptions they presuppose. Even if the arguments have this peculiar context within *PI*, they would still be worth investigating; and if they are incomplete or suggestive of more elaborate arguments, we should consider whether they can be completed or given additional support. We can always subsequently hold that

Wittgenstein distanced himself from the arguments or the voices he adopts to express them, but wouldn't it be more interesting if the voices that he distanced himself from were actually presenting pretty compelling arguments?

As I will explain in Chapter 5 in particular, I think that the role of arguments in *PI* is broadly along the lines just sketched. This goes against the view of some prominent Wittgenstein scholars, especially those associated with the new readings. For example, a central claim of Gordon Baker's later writings is that Wittgenstein did not present – and did not need to present – arguments of any kind in *PI*. Instead, according to Baker, he employed a multitude of other methods with the aim of loosening the grip of certain philosophical assumptions or misconceptions about language and the mind. I will attempt to show that while Wittgenstein did employ the kinds of methods Baker identifies, it was imperative that he also employed the method of presenting arguments. This is because these other methods can only go so far in convincing a philosophical opponent; in most cases (for example, highlighting the flaws in the referentialist/'Augustinian' picture of language) arguments are indispensable. This, I hold, is what it means for Wittgenstein to mimic other philosophers. It is as if more traditional-minded philosophers will only be swayed by the kind of method – that of constructing arguments – that they habitually employ themselves.

I will thus defend the reading that there are arguments in *PI*, and moreover often quite intricate arguments; and that in these contexts the interlocutor's voice is typically used to articulate the philosophical conception (for example, referentialism or platonism about meaning) that he is using the arguments to attack. The challenges that my kind of reading face include accommodating his remarks that appear to proclaim that he is not proposing arguments (see *PI*, §§126 and 599) and his metaphilosophical opposition to defending theses of his own. Generally, I endeavour to address these issues by arguing that Wittgenstein developed something like *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. That is, he used his interlocutors' voices to articulate or give vivid expression to the philosophical picture or conception he was attacking; and then, by a chain of reasoning, showed that this conception entailed an absurdity, which motivated the result that we should reject the philosophical conception in question. The only way to defend this strategy for interpreting Wittgenstein is to do so in the context of concrete cases within *PI*. This is what I will do in each of the chapters.

My approach to reading *PI* is, to reiterate, to prioritise the search for, and articulation of, arguments within the book. One of the biggest advantages to this approach is that it provides a fruitful way of connecting Wittgenstein's discussion with the views of other philosophers regarding language. An obvious way in which dialogue can be promoted will be to consider whether particular philosophers writing today are committed to the dominant conceptions of

language under attack in *PI*, which would call for a response to Wittgenstein. This has not happened as much as it should because Wittgenstein's arguments have rarely been adequately and clearly presented – perhaps this is partly due to the worry that to present the arguments in a fairly standard way would be to somehow distort Wittgenstein's purpose. A major task of this book is to improve on previous attempts to articulate his arguments, and to explain why the kind of worry that may attach to doing so is misguided.

The book is structured around a set of central topics in the philosophy of language: reference; normativity of meaning; scepticism about meaning; the social dimension of language; and the relation between meaning and use. Most textbooks and handbooks in the philosophy of language contain chapters devoted to most or all of these topics. My strategy will be to follow this approach, but to devote each chapter to what the later Wittgenstein has to say on the topics. This will prove to be illuminating for several reasons. For example, by focussing on the issue of reference in the first chapter and the issue of the normativity of meaning in the second, I will be able to chart the major shift in his middle and later writings away from referentialism and towards the interest in the rules governing the use of words. Furthermore, the discussion of the normativity of meaning will lead naturally into the topic of scepticism about meaning in the third chapter because the main sceptical argument under consideration (as reconstructed by Kripke from Wittgenstein's *PI*) actually contains as a major premise the thesis that meaning is normative; and I will also argue in the fourth chapter that Wittgenstein's so-called private language argument is an extension of his argument against this thesis that meaning is normative. Finally, all of this will prepare the way for the interpretation of Wittgenstein's correlation of meaning and use in the sixth and final chapter.

Overall, my approach will be to devote Chapters 1–4 and 6 to formulating the major arguments in *PI* that bear directly on these five fundamental topics in the philosophy of language. In the process, I will include sections in each chapter on how his arguments impact on debates outside of Wittgenstein studies. Chapter 5 is the exception in this regard; its purpose will be to directly address the major metaphilosophical questions that arise in my reading of Wittgenstein, especially concerning what the arguments I will outline in the rest of the book are doing in *PI*. Most of all, I will attempt to show that there is no internal conflict or inconsistency between Wittgenstein presenting complex arguments throughout much of *PI*, on the one hand, and his metaphilosophical remarks, on the other. The history of scholarship on *PI* is full of claims concerning such a conflict. But I will argue that although Wittgenstein presented numerous arguments throughout the book (and thus brought himself into close alignment with traditional philosophising, despite the stylistic differences), he did so for the sake of the highly unorthodox goal of attacking the presumption in favour of theorising in philosophy. That is, the traditional