Introduction

In the half century since the *Philosophical Investigations* was published, and the eighty years since the first review of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's writing not only inspired two of the principal philosophical movements of the twentieth century – the Vienna Circle and Oxford ordinary language philosophy – but also had a far-reaching influence on an extraordinarily wide range of philosophers and researchers in almost every field of the humanities and social sciences. While the other leading figures of logical empiricism and ordinary language philosophy have receded into the historical background, Wittgenstein is one of a small group of twentieth-century philosophers who have become canonical figures, both within and beyond the world of professional philosophy. In an end-of-the-century poll, professional philosophers in the USA and Canada were asked to name the five most important books in philosophy in the twentieth century. The *Philosophical Investigations* came first, and the *Tractatus* fourth. The *Philosophical Investigations* was 'cited far more frequently than any other book and was listed first on more ballots . . . the one crossover masterpiece in twentieth-century philosophy, appealing across diverse specializations and philosophical orientations'.[1] Wittgenstein has also become an iconic figure: he is the only philosopher to appear on *Time's* turn-of-the-millennium list of the 100 'most important people of the century'[2] and has been the subject of biographies, novels, poetry, films, and artworks.

[1] Lackey 1999, 331–2.
[2] http://www.time.com/time/time100/scientist/ Several others on the *Time* list, such as Einstein, Freud, Gödel, and Turing, have certainly had an impact on twentieth-century philosophy, but in each case, their principal contribution was to other fields.

However, there is almost no agreement on even the most basic questions about how to understand Wittgenstein's contribution to philosophy. Books have been written connecting him with almost every field of thought. Frequently, these different currents of interpretation have taken on a life of their own, with the result that readers have been confronted with a bewildering variety of introductions, each claiming to offer authoritative advice.

One reason for this is the fact that Wittgenstein published so little during his lifetime: apart from the *Tractatus*, first published in 1922, the only other book he saw to the press was a spelling dictionary for schoolchildren, produced while he was a village schoolteacher not far from Vienna during the first half of the 1920s. While he worked on the *Philosophical Investigations* for most of the 1930s and 1940s, and on several occasions came close to publishing earlier versions of what we now know as Part I, it remained unpublished when he died. As a result, the *Philosophical Investigations*, like all of the other books published under Wittgenstein's name after his death, is the product of an editorial decision by a committee of literary trustees which he set up in his will. After the final typescript of Part I was produced in the mid-1940s, Wittgenstein continued to work on related topics, and it is likely that if his life had not been cut short in 1951 by prostate cancer he would have worked some of that material into the end of that typescript. As a result, his trustees decided to include a rearrangement of the most polished work from the second half of the 1940s in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and to call it 'Part II'. However, what we now have as 'Part I' is the final version of the book that Wittgenstein worked on during the second half of his philosophical career. For that reason, this introduction to the *Philosophical Investigations* is about Part I, which has a very different status from the rest of his posthumous publications.[3]

For the last twenty years, the most influential and widely discussed interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations* has been Saul Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Kripke identifies the central argument of the book as a far-reaching and novel scepticism concerning rules. On Kripke's reading, Wittgenstein's principal philosophical contribution in the *Philosophical Investigations* was

[3] For further discussion of Wittgenstein's writing and its publication see pp. xi–xv and my 1996a; for an introduction to the relationship between Wittgenstein's life and work, see Hans Sluga's introduction to Sluga and Stern 1996, and the biographical books listed on pp. 189–90.

to make a powerful case for a new, and radical, scepticism about following a rule. Specifically, Kripke reads Wittgenstein as arguing that when we apply any rule, even one as familiar and seemingly unproblematic as addition, in a new circumstance, such as adding two numbers one has not added before, it is impossible to prove that one has followed the rule correctly. The focal point of Kripke's discussion can be summed up in the following paradox: we take it for granted that we are justified in following the everyday rules of our language, or arithmetic, as we do, yet we are unable to give a satisfactory reply to the sceptical problem that Kripke's Wittgenstein poses. While Kripke was not the first person to read Wittgenstein in this way, his short, provocative, and clearly written book marked a decisive step forward in the literature on the *Philosophical Investigations*. While very few people accepted the particular interpretation of Wittgenstein that Kripke advocated, he did succeed in redirecting attention to the central role of Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following and sceptical doubts about rule-following.

One leading theme of this book, then, is the issue that Kripke placed in the philosophical spotlight: the place of scepticism about rule-following in the overall argument of the *Philosophical Investigations*. However, like much previous (and subsequent) writing on the *Philosophical Investigations*, Kripke's interpretation and the discussion of the specific views he attributed to Wittgenstein remained, for the most part, at a considerable distance from the text under discussion. As Kripke put it, his method was to 'present the argument as it struck me, as it presented a problem for me, rather than to concentrate on the exegesis of specific passages . . . almost like an attorney presenting a major philosophical argument'.[4]

Like Kripke, Wittgenstein's interpreters rarely pay much attention to the character of the dialogues in which the particular position and arguments they extract from the text are debated. It is commonly taken for granted that the conversational exchanges that make up the *Philosophical Investigations* take the form of a debate between two voices. One of them, usually identified as 'Wittgenstein', supposedly sets out the author's views, while the other voice, usually identified as 'the interlocutor', plays the role of the naive stooge or fall guy. On this approach, the debate between the two voices is 'simply

[4] Kripke 1982, viii–ix; see also 5 and 69–70.

a stylistic and literary preference',[5] a superficial feature of the text. One of Wittgenstein's characteristic strategies is to present us with what appears to be a dilemma, a choice between two unattractive but apparently exclusive alternatives. Many of the dialogues between the narrator and the interlocutor in the *Philosophical Investigations* are exchanges between proponents of such opposing views. How are we to understand Wittgenstein's use of such dialogical argumentation? Like Kripke, most readers identify the author's own views with the ones they attribute to his narrator. Certainly, the narrator almost always gets the better of the other voice, or voices, in those exchanges. For these readers, the principal task of the interpreter is to extract 'Wittgenstein's' train of argument and his solutions to familiar philosophical problems from his unusual way of writing, and present them in an accessible and clear-cut way.

However, if one reads the *Philosophical Investigations* in this way, it then becomes very hard to explain why 'Wittgenstein' is also so dismissive of philosophical problems, and why he proposes a way of doing philosophy that is very different from the problem-solving approach Kripke takes for granted. For the book also insists, in a voice that is clearly not the interlocutor's, that traditional philosophical problems are more like a disease than a question in need of an answer, and that the author's own approach to philosophy aims, not to solve those problems, but to dissolve or undo them – to get us to see that they are nonsense:

Philosophical problems arise when language *idles*. (§38*)

A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about.' (§123)

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense. (§119)

What we are destroying are nothing but cloud-castles, and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand. (§118*)

There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies. (§133)

The philosopher treats a question; like an illness. (§255*)

[5] Kripke 1982, 5.

Interpreters who share Kripke's argument-centred approach, and who read the *Philosophical Investigations* as providing answers to philosophical problems, have usually done their best to steer around the pitfall that these passages about Wittgenstein's methods present for their reading. They first draw a sharp distinction between Wittgenstein's philosophical practice, on the one hand – which, they insist, is full of argumentative solutions to philosophical problems – and his statements about the nature of philosophy, on the other. Having drawn such a distinction, they then go on to praise the arguments they attribute to Wittgenstein, while playing down the significance of his way of writing and his remarks about method. For instance, Kripke proposes that Wittgenstein's 'inability to write a work with conventionally organized arguments and conclusions' was not simply stylistic, but at least in part due to the need to avoid the contradiction between his insistence that he was not formulating philosophical theses and the sceptical theses Kripke's interpretation attributes to Wittgenstein.[6]

Rather than attributing such a fundamental inconsistency to the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*, this book proposes that we distinguish between two different voices, voices that are usually lumped together as 'Wittgenstein's'. On the one hand we have the voice of Wittgenstein's narrator – who does argue for positive philosophical theses – and on the other hand we have Wittgenstein's commentator, the speaker of the lines quoted above, who dismisses philosophical problems and compares his way of doing philosophy to therapy. Readers who focus only on what Wittgenstein's narrator has to say usually give a Kripke-style reconstruction of the *Philosophical Investigations* in terms of traditional philosophical argumentation, as consisting of reasoned argument that aims to solve philosophical problems. Readers who focus only on what Wittgenstein's commentator has to say often regard the argument as no more than a means to an end: the dissolution of philosophical problems and the end of traditional philosophy. One aim of this book is to do justice to both sides of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and so help the reader see how its argumentative aspect and its therapeutic aspect are actually complementary and interwoven.

[6] See Kripke 1982, 69.

This, then, is the other leading theme of this introduction to the *Philosophical Investigations*: the problems raised by the multiplicity of voices and perspectives it contains, the question of how best to understand the relationship between those voices and the author's intentions, and the related question of what conclusions the reader should draw from his or her examination of this tangle of trains of thought. In other words: where does Wittgenstein's argument lead us? What, ultimately, are we are to make of the trains of argument that we find in the *Philosophical Investigations*?

These two leading themes – the argumentative structure of the book, and the significance of the place of dialogue in the book – are set out in more detail in chapter 1. The first two sections provide an elementary exposition of the argumentative structure of the *Philosophical Investigations*. That structure is both small-scale – here the whole argument is usually begun and concluded within a remark, or a short series of remarks at most – and large-scale – for these smaller units also form part of larger trains of argument. In particular, I identify two small-scale patterns of argument that are repeatedly used throughout the book, the 'method of §2' and the 'method of paradox', and discuss how they are interwoven in the argument of the book as a whole. As a result, the book has considerably more structure than one might expect from its 693 numbered sections, without any chapter headings or a table of contents. The final section of chapter 1 proposes that the point of those argumentative strategies only emerges once we see that the *Philosophical Investigations* has more in common with a Socratic dialogue, or an Augustinian confession, than a conventional philosophical treatise.

While the first chapter discusses the argument and style of the book as a whole, chapters 2 to 7 take successive parts of the book as their point of departure. Each chapter focuses on a limited number of issues raised by that part of the primary text, and draws connections between the central themes in key passages within that text and the rest of the book. In other words, I do not aim to provide another summary of the *Philosophical Investigations* that might substitute for actually reading the book, but rather aim to provide advice and guidance that will help readers arrive at their own judgements. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 each take as their text different ways of beginning to read the *Philosophical Investigations*: chapter 2 discusses the preface to the

Philosophical Investigations, and its relationship to the preface to the *Tractatus*; chapter 3 discusses the motto, and what guidance it provides the reader; and chapter 4 concerns the opening sections of the text of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Chapters 4 to 7 provide guidance to reading the main units of the book, units that are introduced in chapter 1.[7] Chapter 4 covers §§1–64; chapter 5 is about §§65–133, and draws connections with §§428–36; chapter 6 discusses §§134–242; chapter 7 concerns §§243–68. They are followed by a brief conclusion and suggestions about further reading, including scholarly resources as well as some of the best books about the *Philosophical Investigations*.

The second chapter turns to a discussion of the issues raised by the advice to the reader in the prefaces to the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*. This leads to a brief review of the principal approaches to Wittgenstein interpretation in the secondary literature. One aim of the brief outline of the main currents of Wittgenstein interpretation in the second chapter is to orient first-time readers, so that they will be able to make better sense of the kaleidoscopically different approaches to be found in the list of recommended further reading. However, this overview of the secondary literature also amounts to a preliminary presentation of my approach to reading the *Philosophical Investigations*. To understand the particular attraction of that book, and the fact that philosophers and theorists of almost every stripe have found support for their own views there, we need to see that the way the book is written invites each of us to find what one might call 'my Wittgenstein' there.[8] Because the book takes the form of a dialogue, a dialogue without clearly identified voices or boundaries, each reader has to work out for him- or herself what positions are being attacked and defended, and in so doing, will inevitably find his or her concerns addressed there.

The third chapter concerns the motto of the *Philosophical Investigations*, 'Anyway, the thing about progress is that it looks much

[7] See 1.2, esp. pp. 16–19.

[8] Terry Eagleton's 'My Wittgenstein' (1994), the title of his piece on writing the screenplay for Jarman's film, *Wittgenstein*, is my source for this expression. Eagleton's Wittgenstein tried to prove the primacy of the everyday over the philosophical, but did so in such an inaccessible way that hardly anyone understood him. Eagleton's Wittgenstein is an odd, but recognizable, reading of the narrator of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but does not begin to do justice to the voice of the commentator – or the fact that the narrator is as plainspoken and conversational as Socrates.

greater than it really is.'[9] Few of Wittgenstein's readers have paid any attention to the motto. Most of those who do have taken its significance to be unambiguous and straightforward. Reviewing the previous interpretations of the motto, I argue that while there is some truth to each of them, the very fact that each of them has something to offer is an indication that none of them can be the whole truth, and that even the motto is ambiguous and far from straightforward. Indeed, my positive proposal is that the principal point of the motto lies in the fact that it opens up a number of very different ways of understanding those words, and in so doing provides an exemplary model of the importance of context, perspective, and background for a full appreciation of the argument of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

My exposition of the central arguments of the *Philosophical Investigations* often turns on a detailed discussion of others' interpretations of specific passages in the primary text, as examples of some of the leading ways in which readers, both experts and beginners, have understood – and misunderstood – these arguments. Readers who pick up this introduction to the *Philosophical Investigations* expecting a summary of Stern's interpretation of that book may think this an unnecessarily roundabout approach to the primary text. I take this approach for two related reasons. First, the alternate interpretations I discuss and criticize from the secondary literature are ones that are often taken for granted, by both students and teachers. The very 'facts' about the *Philosophical Investigations* that are routinely repeated in reference works and popular expositions of Wittgenstein's work – for instance, that the *Philosophical Investigations* and *Tractatus* are diametrically opposed, or that the *Philosophical Investigations* and *Tractatus* are in fundamental agreement[10] – are actually one of the main obstacles standing in the way of new readers of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Second, the interpretations I discuss are chosen not only as examples of common misreadings, but also because they serve as exemplary statements of just the sort of views that we must confront if we are to understand the *Philosophical Investigations*. For the *Philosophical Investigations* takes the form, not of a treatise, but of a dialogue, an informal discussion among a number of different voices, voices that

[9] My translation, based on Wittgenstein 2001, 741. See 3.1 on the translation, 3.2 on its interpretation.

[10] For further discussion of the relationship between the two books, see chapter 2.

are rarely clearly identified. Instead of simply stating the author's reasoned defence of his conclusions, the book leaves its readers with the task of working out what conclusions to draw from the philosophical exchanges it contains. The views that it criticizes are not treated as worthless errors, but rather as an integral part of the process of searching for the truth. Wittgenstein's philosophy arises out of an extended interrogation of the views he rejects: 'In a certain sense one cannot take too much care in handling philosophical mistakes, they contain so much truth.'[11] As a result, one of the best ways of appreciating what the *Philosophical Investigations* has to offer is to critically examine competing interpretations.

However, my principal aim in this book is to help readers interpret the dialogues of the *Philosophical Investigations* for themselves. Whether or not readers agree with my particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's intentions, once they are aware of the range of possible approaches to these questions about the author's intentions they will be much better equipped to make up their own minds as they read the *Philosophical Investigations* for themselves. Wittgenstein says in the preface that he would not like his writing 'to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.' The aim of this introduction to that book is not to spare other people the trouble of thinking about the *Philosophical Investigations*, but rather to provide readers with an orientation that will enable them to read that book in ways that will stimulate thoughts of their own.

[11] *Zettel*, §460.

CHAPTER 1

Philosophical Investigations *§§1–693: an elementary exposition*

1.1 THE 'METHOD OF §2'

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, topics are repeatedly introduced in the following way.

Stage 1. A brief statement of a philosophical position that Wittgenstein opposes, which usually emerges out of an exchange with another voice. Thus, in §1, we are presented with a conception of meaning that arises out of Wittgenstein's reading of a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*:

> Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. (§1b)

Stage 2. The description of a quite specific set of circumstances in which that position is appropriate:

> That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours.
>
> Let us imagine a language for which the description given by Augustine is right. (§2)

In §2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the passage just quoted leads in to the famous story of 'Wittgenstein's builders', a tribe who only have four words, each of which is used by a builder to instruct his assistant to bring one of four kinds of building blocks.

Stage 3. The deflationary observation that the circumstances in question are quite limited, and that once we move beyond them, the position becomes inappropriate: