

Wittgenstein as unreliable narrator / unreliable author

By Rupert Read.

“I ought to be no more than a mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right.” (Wittgenstein C&V, pp. 17-18. Source: MS 112, p. 225. 1931)

Summary

In Wittgenstein, philosophy comes to know itself. Throughout his career, and especially in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein was profoundly concerned with what we can loosely term ¹ the ‘conditions of possibility’ of what philosophers sought to do - and (thus) of his own writing.

Examining in particular the famous section 133 of the *Investigations*, I will seek to elucidate Wittgenstein’s extraordinary writing-stratagem. His writing has often been criticised as ‘obscure’ - this evinces a fundamental failure to understand the way Wittgenstein writes, especially in those works where he laboured for years over how to present them. In his two masterworks, Wittgenstein operates as, in broadly Modernist terms, an unreliable narrator or rather perhaps what William Golding (in *The Hot Gates*) calls an “unreliable author”. (I will briefly offer some cases from the cinema, to illustrate

¹ Only loosely, because too literal an understanding of this phrase would be likely to pitch us into thinking that Wittgenstein was some kind of Kantian transcendental philosopher, which on my reading (as we shall see) he definitely is not.

further the potentially 'therapeutic' (or, better 'liberatory') nature of such unreliability:

Memento, Persona, and Fight Club.)

Wittgenstein seems to offer a theory to end all philosophical theories, in his early work. In his later work, he seems to offer a discovery to end all philosophical discoveries. Both appearances are subtly, deliberately, seriously delusive. And necessarily so: any strategem that does not involve such 'indirection' will tend to fall back into the very thing it criticises. If one wants to make it possible for philosophy to be written at all, after Kant and Frege, one needs to avoid hoisting oneself on one's own petard: but "...to end all..." -style thinking endlessly self-hoists (as is patent in the fate of the Logical Positivists, for instance, who failed to understand Wittgenstein's stratagem).

I examine the well-known invocation of therapies and the discussion of 'the real discovery' - the one that allegedly enables one to stop philosophising - in 133. The translation of 133 is pondered, and a reading proposed wherein this passage certainly does not amount to any crude 'end of philosophy' thesis, and is rather profoundly manifestative of the kind of aspect to Wittgenstein's writing that Cavell has taught: i.e. 133 too turns out not to be a 'statement' of Wittgenstein's 'position', but a set of temptations that need careful work by one for one to avoid entrapment by.

Wittgenstein writes as he does not out of a faddish desire to make it new, but out of a profound need to plough over the field of language. His aim is to get the reader to do the kind of work that he himself was painfully doing: to seek to free oneself from the endless pull of philosophical delusion and premature self-satisfaction.

Introduction: A philosophy of self-reflection and literary experimentation

There is no philosopher more *self-aware* than Wittgenstein. He takes inspiration from the Delphic-Socratic injunction, "Know thyself", and his philosophy can be well understood

as an endeavour to see philosophy as self-knowledge, and as knowledge of one's philosophical interlocutor.² His *Philosophical Investigations* opens by paying homage to Augustine, whose work Wittgenstein greatly admired, and the book can be well read as a 'confession' of long engagements with what turns out to be a latent desire to speak nonsense, on Wittgenstein's part. Wittgenstein was always first and foremost concerned to think the *method(s)* of what he was doing (and to ponder how to enable others to understand it).

In this way, we might see Wittgenstein as a Modernist thinker.

Now, in other ways, Wittgenstein was profoundly anti-Modernist. Most notably, perhaps, in his abyssal critique of the narrative of 'progress'. (I have addressed this crucial and brilliant aspect of Wittgenstein's thought elsewhere,³ and will not dwell on it here.) But in his conception of philosophy itself, and in his highly innovative literary mode(s), a genuine affinity can be discerned with the Modernism that was going on around Wittgenstein in his lifetime. It is this that is my primary concern in the present essay.

Wittgenstein's writing strategem is highly unusual. In one way it is incredibly simple and direct; in another, 'indirect' and peculiar. He seeks truthfully to tell of his own struggles to attain clarity. He expresses this by way principally of dialogues with others and with himself: "Nearly all of my writings are private conversations with myself. Things that I say to myself *tête-à-tête*.", he said, in 1948 (C&V, p. 77. Source: MS 137, p. 134. 26 December, 1948). By means of doing so, he hopes to engage the reader in the undertaking of a similar set of self-reflective and dialogical processes.

² See James Conant's work on Kierkegaard on Wittgenstein, and his and Diamond's writings on the task laid down by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* - that of understanding him, not his book (for: there is no such thing as literally understanding his book; for, 'understood' aright, it is *einfach Unsinn*). See also the later Baker's book *Wittgenstein's method: neglected aspects* (henceforth *BWM*).

³ See my paper on Wittgenstein and progress, here: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/royal-institute-of-philosophy-supplements/article/wittgenstein-and-the-illusion-of-progress-on-real-politics-and-real-philosophy-in-a-world-of-technocracy/9FE76934F2B0A5071E7AA7D65CB3D614> .

Wittgenstein's writing, because of its highly unusual forms and organisation, is often claimed to be obscure. Many philosophers, including many of Wittgenstein's supposed followers, 'improve' it, extract 'theses' from it, and so forth.

This seems to me a failure. A failure to appreciate the reasons why Wittgenstein wrote as he did. A failure to follow him. Or at least: if these philosophers are right, then *Wittgenstein* was a failure. He wrote obscurely and ineffaciously. I prefer to take seriously the possibility that there were (good) *reasons* that Wittgenstein wrote as he did. The reasons already indicated above: that it was honest; that it could help a reader to avoid being taken in by the sometime-appearance of philosophy as the production of generalisations as if it were a sort of 'super-science' or of essentialisations as if it were 'meta-physics'; that, in short, it guarded against insufficiently reflective philosophy.

In what follows, I will home in on one moment in Wittgenstein's writing, *Philosophical Investigations* section 133. A famous moment, in which he appears to entertain the drastic idea of ending philosophy altogether. I shall maintain instead that *the wording of 133 deliberately embodied a 'final' temptation: the fantasy of the ending of philosophy via one discovery*. And that it helps one to work through that temptation, to a sounder idea of the nature of philosophy, as Wittgenstein practiced it.

An 'object of comparison': namely, *objects of comparison*

Let us look very briefly at the remarks that precede *PI* 133, which introduce a new concept in philosophical method: that of 'objects of comparison':

130. Our clear and simple language-games are not preliminary studies for a future regimentation of language -- as it were, first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance. Rather, the language-games

stand there as *objects of comparison* which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language.

131. For we can avoid unfairness or vacuity in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, as an object of comparison -- as a sort of yardstick; not as a preconception to which reality *must* correspond.

With an object of comparison, one gains from the dialectic back and forth between the object and what one is comparing with it, what one is seeing via it, both in terms of dissimilarities and similarities. (I have shown *how* this works at length elsewhere, for instance in the Wittgensteinian work on the film *Memento* that Phil Hutchinson and I published in Film as philosophy: essays on cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell. Protagonists / characters in philosophical films often function precisely as something like objects of comparison; one's journey of identification and disidentification with them is frequently a crucial part of the transformative work that such films undertake or facilitatively make available to the (serious) viewer.⁴ We will recur to the example of films-as-philosophic 'objects of comparison' at greater length, including *Memento*, later in this chapter.)

In thinking *through* the object of comparison before one, one is, for Wittgenstein, encouraged constantly to be aware that one will likely exaggerate similarities at the expense of differences. Thus, as a corrective, one ought if anything to emphasize the differences over the similarities. This is a key way in which the 'object of comparison' object of comparison focuses *our* activity more healthily and effectively than the 'model' object of comparison (or certainly than the 'model' *model*); it underscores the profound difference between the scientific sensibility and 'our' (Wittgensteinian) philosophical sensibility. For

⁴ See for instance my analysis of this process in Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia*: <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/sequence/files/2012/12/SEQUENCE-1.2-2014-SEQUENCE-One.pdf> .

modelling is focused primarily on the similarities, typically ignoring the dissimilarities (just in the way that Wittgenstein draws attention to in 130).

As Wittgenstein says in 131, we will be “unfair” if we fall away from the seeking after ‘objects of comparison’ into a seeking after ‘models’ in the usual sense of that word.⁵ One will fail to be fair – to the phenomena; and in particular (more literally) to those who one might be disagreeing with – one will fail to have integrity, fail to be doing the right thing, if one does not give dissimilarities their due just as much as similarities. And one will almost invariably incline – this is at the root of the deep attraction of scientism – toward over-estimating the power of the similarities that inclined one in the first place toward the object of comparison one picked. As outlined in the *Blue Book*, pp.18-19, where Wittgenstein suggests that a main source for... “our craving for generality [is] our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using a generalization. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness...” This is why we have above all to teach/learn/realise *differences*.⁶ Philosophy essentially involves seeking to be just to what it is that one is oneself wanting to say and succeeding in saying, when one successfully says things - and to be just to others in just the same way.

This objects of comparison of which Wittgenstein speaks are introduced with the purpose of seeking to make (particular? all?) philosophical problems (completely!) disappear. Or so, at least, Wittgenstein now goes on to (seem to?) suggest:

⁵ A kind of seeking which, incidentally, is in my view widespread – for instance, one finds it in Ricoeur’s influential hermeneutic ‘model’, (as) in his epochal article “The model of the text”.

Note that Wittgenstein has already prepared the ground for the questioning of this ‘model’ model, in 120: “In giving explanations I already have to use the language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one)...”.

⁶ There are many instances of the centrality of this teaching in *PI*: consider, as a couple of prime examples, 339 and 571.

Wittgenstein and the End of Philosophy?

In *PI* 133, Wittgenstein famously introduces ⁷ an object of comparison for philosophy itself: that of therapy. (Or rather: that of therapies. This is important: it reminds us that if we speak, as (following later Baker) I do, of “Wittgenstein’s method” or of “our method”, we must avoid being deluded into thinking that we are talking about one thing.)

Kelly Dean Jolley, a very acute reader of Wittgenstein, wrote an article some years ago offering a ‘close reading’ of section 133 of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*).⁸ His article performed some useful services. For instance, it highlighted the connection of para. 109 with para. 133, and the precise ambiguity of the former (Is (ordinary) language what bewitches us or what enables us to escape bewitchment? Surely both). It also made a provocative and fairly compelling connection between Wittgenstein’s remark in 133 that “...series of examples can be broken off...” and his methodology particularly as declared in the Preface to *PI* (*viz.*: that his thoughts had to proceed from one to another *with* some breaks). Jolley’s reading amounts to an accenting in some detail of how to respond to the widespread, problematic claim that Wittgenstein is an ‘end-of-philosophy philosopher’ by means of re-interpreting the passage in the *Investigations* that most plausibly may be read so as to make that claim.

Nevertheless, I wish to contend that Jolley missed one part of the heart (‘the spirit’) of section 133, on what desire or hope we may reasonably have for philosophy, and thus that he missed a signal element of Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy *throughout* his life’s work, and failed to touch the heart of how 133 is not an end-of-philosophy proclamation.

⁷ I mean: it is the first time that this analogy is introduced in *PI*.

⁸<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/wo11/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9205.1993.tb00471.x/abstract>

In explaining this, I want to follow upon the ground-breaking work of Cora Diamond and James Conant,⁹ writers who have most efficaciously shown how the *Tractatus* is best read as not as stating or exposing or even gesturing at profound, unutterable truths, but rather as *engaging our temptation(s)* to utter nonsense. But then what are we to make of the idea in 133 of “the discovery”, and apparently of an end to philosophy. Does this idea suggest that this discovery at least is not itself a temptation to nonsense, but a sensical revealing of such temptations?:

...[T]he clarity that we are aiming at is certainly a *complete clarity*. But this just means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of breaking off philosophising when I want to.--The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.--But now we demonstrate a method by examples, and the series of examples can be broken off.--Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* Problem.

Now, Jolley claims that “Wittgenstein ...seems to have had an idea of what it would be like to have reached philosophy’s end. Wittgenstein thought he could accomplish this feat simply by making what he called ‘the *real* philosophical discovery.’” However, surprisingly, he leaves entirely open what “the real philosophical discovery” is or could possibly be, only claiming that “...Wittgenstein did not think he had made the real philosophical discovery.” (Jolley, pp.327-8) But, not having been given an idea of what the *content* of such a discovery would be (as opposed to merely considering in the abstract its *role* in ‘ending philosophy’), why ought we think that (according to

⁹ See e.g. their articles in [The New Wittgenstein](#).

Wittgenstein) there is or could be any such thing, any more than there is one singular philosophical problem?

The possibility opened up for us by Diamond, Cavell *et al* is that even here, at what others have called the close of the 'chapter' of *PI* on Philosophy, Wittgenstein is still dealing with a logical temptation. That is: is it at all clear that the implied author of *PI* is counselling us unreservedly to aim at complete clarity (and so forth)? Might it not be rather that one's right aim can best -- or even only -- be realized by means of appreciating that a third way is possible, one that does not simply buy into the 'correct', 'conceptual clarificatory' mode of proceeding; even as it sees clearly the mythicalistic errors of interlocutorial voices that would counsel scientism (or even counsel deliberate unclarity)? For, after all, most of the preceding 50 sections or more clearly engage critically such *temptations* both away from *and toward* clarity, logic. Why not here too? That is to say, if we can agree that the "sublimity" and non-vagueness of logic, the "hidden essence" of language, the ideal of "crystalline purity"; ...if we can agree that these conceptions are not allowed to masquerade as well-formed by the implied author of *PI*, even when they seem absolutely to *press* themselves upon one, should we not be similarly willing to entertain the thought that the conceptions of "complete clarity", of the complete disappearance of philosophical problems, of "the real discovery", even of "[giving] philosophy peace", may well themselves be similarly - thoroughly - problematic? As it were, the best that one can say for the content of *Jolley's* 133 is then that "we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the *application* of the picture goes" (*PI* para.374; and cf. para.424).

To argue thus is not to be committed to a totalistically dialogical/dialectical model of *PI* in the sense of holding that there are no moments that we can provisionally identify as being closer to Wittgenstein's implied 'view' than any others. But this is *only* because, roughly speaking, the 'correct' voice *would* as it were be correct, would in all probability

be Wittgenstein's view, were that all there is to it, were we still able simply to engage in old-fashioned philosophical debate with more or less substantively and definitively misguided interlocutors (We might, riffing on a well-known turn of phrase of Cavell's, call this the "conditional correctness of the later Wittgenstein's philosophical position").

The problem of course is, that once we have perhaps 'grasped' the nature of highly unconventional 'Modernist' method that Wittgenstein can best be read as essaying, then we go beyond this 'correct' view, too, and stop seeking for a philosophical position, *of whatever kind*. We must seek to understand 'where we already are': Cf. Wittgenstein, at p.10 of the revised edition of *C&V*: "I might say: if the place I want to get to could be only reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now. // Anything I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me." We seek to understand what is "in plain view" — while appreciating that even terms such as these (can easily) exert a problematic *hold* on us, and at best serve, ultimately, to point up *their own* perniciousness along with that of the philosophical pictures they were seemingly designed directly to combat, or to help us overcome.

"The *real* [philosophical?] discovery"

Let us back up a little. For it might be objected that there are conceivable candidates for the content of "the real philosophical discovery", which Jolley could have considered had he been so minded. And surely there are: there are the kinds of discoveries made by Russell, Gödel, 'the author of the *Tractatus*'. But these, Wittgenstein repudiated; according to the Diamondian reading (and it is mine too), the possibility of making fundamental philosophic discoveries was actually repudiated by Wittgenstein already *in the Tractatus itself*, by 6.53.

Perhaps “the real philosophical discovery” for Wittgenstein might be something like how everyday language actually is? No. Something like that might be one idea animating classical ‘Ordinary Language Philosophy’. But Wittgenstein steers carefully clear of such semi-sociolinguistics, throughout *PI* 1-133.

And even if somehow one *could* be usefully said to discover something like this, in philosophy, this would still not amount to there being such a thing as “the [singular] real philosophical discovery”, only lots of little such ‘discoveries’. And, in this connection, we should note that it is the dissolution of various particular confusions and problems that Wittgenstein mentions with approval toward the close of para.133.¹⁰

Though even this, we should be very careful not to over-read. One of these little discoveries may work, for some people (at least one person),¹¹ for a while. We shouldn’t bank on any more than that.¹²

Are there any candidates for “*the* real philosophical discovery” that Wittgenstein did *not* repudiate? Here is my central contention in a nutshell: that there is *no* indication in Wittgenstein’s *oeuvre* that he thought the notion of *the* “real discovery” mentioned in 133 to be even sensical.

An objection?

¹⁰ Cf. here Z 447, which helps dissolve any remaining element of perplexity about *PI* 133, in this regard: “Disquiet in philosophy might be said to arise from looking at philosophy wrongly, seeing it wrong, namely as if it were divided into (infinite) longitudinal strips instead of into (finite) cross strips. ...So we try as it were to grasp the unlimited strips and complain that it cannot be done piecemeal. To be sure it cannot, if by a piece one means an infinite longitudinal strip. But it may well be done, if one means a cross-strip. –But in that case we never get to the end of our work! –Of course not, for it has no end.”

¹¹ Cf. p.37 of *BWM*: “Both the claim that the order [emphasised in 132] is purpose-specific and the acknowledgement of the possibility of different orders indicate that [Wittgenstein’s] aim was to produce for each problem an order which would make *it* completely disappear, not to establish a single order which would make every problem disappear.”

¹² Compare p.213 of *BWM*: “[Wittgenstein] targets ‘philosophical problems, i.e. the particular disquiets of individuals which we call “philosophical problems” (von Wright 1982, Band XI, p.35). ‘Our method’ is aimed at getting philosophical problems to disappear completely — *in this sense of ‘problem’.*”

An objection might be made at this point: that a reading of *PI* after the fashion of Diamond *et al* has not with completeness been given. This may be true. The work of Cavell, Diamond, Conant, Winch, Putnam, Minar, Guetti, Lugg, Hutchinson and my own work (and that of the later Baker; and of many more authors on *PI* who take these thinkers as their inspiration, in turn) is still in this sense ‘incomplete’. That is, an interpretation (of) the *Investigations* in earnest, *in toto*, from such an angle, has still not yet been accomplished (Whereas e.g. (Baker-and-)Hacker have at least given a very complete reading of the ‘correct voice’ beating down its interlocutor(s) throughout *PI*. They take about as far as one can the project of demonstrating the philosophical correctness and virtuosity of ‘Wittgenstein’s position’; only, in the process, they necessarily make Wittgenstein sound sometimes much like any other philosopher with theses to support and an over-arching position to argue for. Thus, as Hutchinson and I have set out in some detail elsewhere,¹³ they fail to follow Wittgenstein.). The objection would then continue that, until such a reading has been given, we cannot know that the real philosophical discovery is not lurking somewhere in Wittgenstein’s text.

But such an objection is unreasonable, by Wittgensteinian lights. I have in mind the repeated reminder (in *PI* and *On Certainty*) that the theoretical possibility of a doubt is not a doubt. The same goes for a hope — or for a problem with a reading. (Compare also Wittgenstein’s thinking on the theoretical possibility of a hidden contradiction, in maths.) Just because there might conceivably be some way of reading 133, when a ‘complete’ reading of *PI* is allegedly available, which would amount to identifying ‘the real philosophical discovery’, is no reason to assume that such a discovery is in the offing. (This reply is especially so, given that a ‘complete’ ‘reading’ probably isn’t available even in principle... For Wittgenstein *has* no ‘*position*’.)

¹³ See e.g. www.jstor.org/stable/4619665 & https://www.academia.edu/207731/Toward_a_perspicuous_presentation_of_perspicuous_presentation

Sure; there is more work to be done to form such an interpretation of ('the later') Wittgenstein; I am contributing a tiny piece of it here, even, and this book on Wittgenstein and modernism constitutes a little more of it. But what I hope *already* to have shown is this: that one of the passages in Wittgenstein's work that might appear most strongly to resist the Diamond/Cavell manner of availing oneself of Wittgenstein's philosophy can be read without difficulty as explicating or, better, exemplifying it. 133, I have suggested, *continues dramatically the dialectic of temptation and correctness* that characterises so much of the text of *PI*. There is nothing dogmatic about 133; it does not violate Wittgenstein's cautions against a would-be philosophical finality, on my reading of it.

Philosophy bringing itself into question

One problem that may remain is this. Consider this moment in 133 again: "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy ... [t]he one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question." If "the real discovery" is something we desire but that we should not assume that we *should* (simply) desire, then, despite the importance of Wittgenstein's remarks on the not-necessarily-problematic character of philosophising about philosophy (there being no need for a "second-order philosophy" (121)), there remains a sense in which Wittgenstein's later work must run the same risks as the *Tractatus* evidently ran: philosophy will always periodically be bringing itself in question.

But perhaps that is unavoidable. For note a key way in which Jolley's interpretation of 133 is dogmatic. Jolley speaks of "the real philosophical discovery". But the word "philosophical" here is a leap, an unnecessary - unwarranted - insertion into Wittgenstein's prose. Wittgenstein in fact speaks only of "the real discovery". (And a moment's reflection suggests a possible reason why: for if this discovery were

philosophical, then, by virtue of itself, it arguably wouldn't quite amount to an ending of philosophy! Philosophy would be continued, by virtue of the very 'end of philosophy' move...)

"The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to." This is palpably an image of liberation. One that takes one out of the sphere of philosophy. But we should be careful. We should be careful not to assume that such liberation is available in the way that we want it to be.¹⁴ (Remember what we teach children that "I want!" doesn't get...)

Philosophy may be the subject that from time to time can't help bringing itself into question. And a discovery that isn't philosophical that could enable one to break off philosophizing sounds desirable, and may well be possible sometimes. I think it is (Such a discovery might be something like: being struck by the beauty of a person or a place, and finding peace in contemplation of them). But the (/our) method(s), its series of examples, don't get broken off voluntaristically. Problems are solved/overcome when they are, if they are — and likely not forever. The price of philosophical freedom, on my understanding of Wittgenstein's authorship, is vigilance whenever needful, including at times when one thinks one is no longer in need. Sometimes, *especially* at those times...

A healing philosophy, a philosophy of healing

Let us return to where 133 then *leaves* us. The new Hacker-and-Schulte translation of the final sentence of 133 is helpful here:¹⁵ "There is not a single philosophical method, though

¹⁴ Contrast J. Genova's reading of 133 (see <http://philpapers.org/rec/JUDAMO>), which involves the almost-sophomoric exegesis of that paragraph as philosophically licensing one to stop philosophizing when(ever) one pleases.

¹⁵ Especially helpful, in that these two scholars are no friends of the 'therapeutic' interpretation of Wittgenstein. Thus their translating this totemic passage of PI thus is perhaps doubly-significant.

there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were.” This makes it clear that the comparison with therapies is non-accidental. These different methods of philosophy ARE — *as it were* — different therapies. That is what is being said here. In its full directness — and qualifiedness. The therapy/medicine¹⁶ object of comparison is worth taking seriously.

Wittgenstein *might* have said: ‘there are [different] methods [of philosophy], like different kinds of sport, or different ways of gardening’. Wittgenstein described himself as a disciple of Freud; I think it hard to imagine himself describing himself as (say) a disciple of Donald Bradman, or of some famous gardener.¹⁷ ... Evidently, the therapy analogy is chosen because of the deep parallels that can be drawn, for our purposes, between philosophy and therapy/ies. That is why Wittgenstein described himself as “a disciple of Freud” (see the Introduction to *Lectures and Conversations of Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*); and in that connection we might find another way in which it is intelligible to regard Wittgenstein as a Modernist thinker.¹⁸

Wittgenstein as unreliable author

We have seen above an instance of how Wittgenstein’s writing works on one, and how one needs to find one’s own way through it. I would generalise, roughly, in the following manner, from this: In his two masterworks, Wittgenstein operates as, in broadly Modernist terms, an unreliable narrator — or rather perhaps what William Golding (in *The Hot Gates*) calls an “unreliable author”. Or even, in fact, both: for, as I shall briefly explain,

¹⁶ See PI 254-5.

¹⁷ Perhaps “different martial arts” (suggested by Oskari Kuusela (personal communication)) would have been better; but, if so, then because it might actually have meant something significant for Wittgenstein to have compared his activity positively with that of Muhammed Ali, or Bruce Lee (though it is still hard to imagine him calling himself their ‘disciple’).

¹⁸ For more on this point, see my joint piece with Hutchinson on “Grammar”, in Matar (ed.) Understanding Wittgenstein, understanding modernism.

Wittgenstein is an 'unreliable' author who writes 'unreliable' voices, including even - specifically - an 'unreliable' narrator.

For Wittgenstein authorial strategy, as I have already indicated, is no accident, no 'obscurity'; it is a deliberate effort to seek to ensure that whatever the reader can do, one leaves to the reader.¹⁹ It has sometimes been called 'therapeutic' (including by me),²⁰ and this is a useful object of comparison for it, as *PI* 130-3 indicate; better still, I now believe is the object of comparison of *liberation*: Wittgenstein fundamentally *freed* the reader (and himself) to find their own way, in philosophy. Wittgenstein 'forces' one to be free by imposing upon one a great discipline (this is no freedom of mere license of 'anything goes, no post-modern relativism): the discipline of having to *place* oneself in (relation to) his dialogues. Having to work through the manifold of temptations that are set before one, including 'ultimate' temptations such as the fantasy of an outright end to philosophy.

If Wittgenstein were a 'reliable' author, then all this would be short-circuited. The reader would seek to operate with *Philosophical Investigations* as if it were a textbook;²¹ only a very poorly written one. And that is of course how, from Pole and Strawson to Hacker and Horwich, *PI* is most often treated; an absurd fate for the masterwork of a world-historical philosopher.

Thus a useful object of comparison for Wittgenstein that we can draw from Modernism is precisely that of the unreliable author. One who creates further voices, that themselves are not reliable: even the 'voice of correctness', as I discuss above, should not be mistaken for Wittgenstein's own. And even the 'narratorial' voice that Wittgenstein sometimes adds to that, especially in his 'meta-philosophising' (as in much of 133).²²

¹⁹ "Whatever the reader can do too, leave to the reader." (*C&V*, p. 77. Source: MS 137, p. 134. 27 December, 1948)

²⁰ See "Therapy", co-authored with Phil Hutchinson, in Jolley (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Key concepts*. See also "A healing philosophy", immediately above.

²¹ See the Preface to the *Tractatus*.

²² For a more general justification of the claim that even Wittgenstein's 'narrator' is 'unreliable', and is not to be mistaken for Wittgenstein *simpliciter*, in *propria persona*, see my and Hutchinson's discussion of David Stern's interpretation, in our "Whose Wittgenstein?"

Rather, he is the totality of the voices; but simply to combine all the voices in which he speaks produces a hopeless mishmash, a tissue of contradictions. The only way that totality can be properly *realized* is *in you*. Wittgenstein's 'unreliability' is the necessary condition for the reader's autonomy. And such autonomy, that freedom, in a thoroughly social, *post-transcendental*, true sense of it, is precisely what Wittgenstein's philosophising is *for*.

Some filmic objects of comparison

I now briefly offer some cases from the cinema, to illustrate further the potentially 'therapeutic' (or, better 'liberatory') nature of such unreliability as outlined above: *Persona*, *Fight Club*, and *Memento*.

For Wittgenstein's concept of 'object of comparison' is, as I have already implied, a thoroughly promiscuous one, hardly a technical term (This is itself part of Wittgenstein's deliberately non-scientific practice). One can think of 'language-games' as being objects of comparison; but equally, of 'pictures', of 'perspicuous presentations'; or of Wittgenstein's book as a whole. One can think of (various) characters in films as being objects of comparison ('for example': for oneself); or the films as a whole.

Here are three cases, three films which offer some fruitful objects of comparison at various levels - for shedding light on Wittgenstein's own practice.

Bergman's *Persona* is crucially changed, in one's understanding of it, by thinking its final portion, in which one has to put into question what had seemed reliably narrated to one: that this was the story of two women and their encounter. By the end of the film, another possible reading is demanding attention: that, rather than being a story of the therapy of an actress at the hands of a nurse, this might instead be a story of the therapy of a nurse who

has projected a persona of an actress. In other words, *Persona* can be viewed as a drama of integration, of coming to terms with one's own tendency to alienate from oneself a part of oneself, and, in bad faith, to treat that part of oneself as another.

Such a take on *Persona* might be supported by a close look at another film of unreliable narration, *Fight Club*. The two films superficially have little in common, but *Fight Club* serves as an extraordinarily revealing object of comparison for *Persona*; it *reveals* the possible reading of it that I just sketched; it *develops* that possibility. *Fight Club* is, it turns out, a drama of integration. The violence at its centre, like the violence at the centre of *Persona*, may well be a blind, or at most merely a route to the coming to terms with the violence one has been doing to oneself. It turns out in *Fight Club* that the narrator has created another persona which is a projection of all he wishes to be. We see that projection ((as if) on a screen...); evoking the power of the (bad-faith) experience here. Thus the therapeutic journey to acknowledgement of reality, to *self*-knowledge, is as deep as it is dramatic.²³ The protagonist's re-integration into one self is the denouement of the film.

Finally, consider the Nolans' remarkable philosophical work, *Memento*.²⁴ Here, there is a still more direct comparison with Wittgenstein available. The narrator of *Memento*, Leonard Shelby, whose memory has been damaged by a traumatic physical injury inflicted on him in an emotionally-traumatic event in which his wife was murdered, is a kind of philosophical detective into his own life. He confesses a kind of anti-Empiricist philosophy as he goes along, arguing that memory is unreliable. We experience reality with and through him - and come gradually to see that he is radically confused about his own life. I would argue that we also come to realise that this confusion might even be wilful on his part; for his own knowledge of his own memory-loss condition suggests a contradiction within that

²³ Perhaps the culminating scene of it is quoted here: <http://www.quotes.net/mquote/31796>

²⁴ For a full-length reading, see my and Hutchinson's "*Memento*: A philosophical investigation".

condition, and suggests that it must be a condition that in some sense he is imposing on himself. Perhaps because he doesn't want to remember. (Like in Wittgenstein: the deepest problems tend to be problems of will and willpower, not narrowly intellectual problems.)

Our desire to compare ourselves with Leonard, both in terms of similarities and in terms of differences, is thus a desire that the film increasingly interrogates as well as stimulates.

These films (and others like them: I'd make similar cases about *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Last year in Marienbad*, and other major Modernist film-texts²⁵) could be viewed as forming a quasi-Wittgensteinian 'argument' against modelling and in favour of objects of comparison, with regard to cases in which modelling will crudify, reduce, and offer a false, cheap illusion of knowledge.

These three (very different but all fundamentally Modernist in style, in narration) films offer various kinds of possible objects of comparison with Wittgenstein: with his narratorial style and voices, with his authorship, with his method(s), with his critiques of Cognitivism and Empiricism, with his work as a whole. And there are various elements of these films which work in this way: one can compare the films with each other, with *Philosophical Investigations*; one can compare characters in them with oneself, with Wittgenstein; and so forth. There is a rich vein to mine here, through which to think the benefits (as well as the burdens) of Modernistic 'unreliable narration' objects of comparison in a distinctively Wittgensteinian vein.

Conclusion: Beyond Modernism

²⁵ And I do make such a case, in my *A film-philosophy of ecology and enlightenment*, forthcoming with Routledge.

Wittgenstein seems to offer a theory to end all philosophical theories, in his early work. In his later work, he seems to offer — to hold out, tantalisingly, in 133; to seem to place a claim to — a discovery to end all philosophical discoveries. Both appearances are subtly, deliberately, seriously delusive. And necessarily so: any strategem that does not involve such ‘indirection’ as Wittgenstein does, working *through* one’s temptations to ‘end it all’, will tend to fall back into or indeed to be consumed by the very thing it actually seeks to criticise (including: the dangerous, essentialising tendency to make philosophy itself into one simple unified thing). If one wants to make it possible for philosophy to be written at all, after Kant and Nietzsche and Frege, one needs to avoid hoisting oneself on one’s own petard: and “...to end all...” -style thinking endlessly so self-hoists (as is patent in the self-consuming fate of the Logical Positivists, for instance, who patently failed to understand Wittgenstein’s strategem, and were thus destroyed by their own Verification criterion).

Thus I have suggested that 133 involves at its heart a deliberate unreliability, a logical temptation.

It’s notable that Wittgenstein in 91 warns against the tempting picture of a complete analysis of language. I think the ‘real discovery’, insofar as there is might be said to be any such thing at all as something more than a logical temptation, would include realizing that one can sometimes successfully address philosophical problems through the family of methods and approaches demonstrated in the *Investigations*. This vote of confidence might be called the ‘real discovery’ because it liberates us from the false ideal of (dependence upon) a ‘complete analysis’.

133 is itself putting forward a kind of object of comparison with which to reflect on philosophical practice. I want to allow that Wittgenstein’s development of his later approach is a real breakthrough that can take us past the see-sawing between dogmatic positions so characteristic of traditional philosophy - while not presenting it as self-satisfiedly leaving behind or allegedly-definitively-overcoming the kinds of questions

concerning our practice that we always need to leave room for, if we are not to end up producing a new jargon or a new beam in our eye.

Wittgenstein writes as he does *not* out of a faddish desire to make it new, but out of a profound *need* to plough over the field of language. His aim is to get the reader to do the kind of work that he himself was painfully doing: to seek to free himself from the endless pull of philosophical delusion and of premature self-satisfaction. Including, about philosophy itself and what we can hope for from it.

Thus Wittgenstein might helpfully be said to be in some respects a Modernist author. And in other respects beyond Modernism (or also, as I have noted, in certain respects anti-Modernist). But, thus understood, what lies beyond Modernism is nothing like Post-Modernism. It is, rather, a call to freedom (from prejudice, from dogmas) and to the intellectual virtues.

It is a much harder call to heed. And a much more weighty one.

Envoi: beyond thought?

A last thought. If you are in agreement with my critique of the standard ways of taking *PI* 133, but unconvinced by my own reading of 133, my own way of casting of it as this radical move into and beyond modernism, then there is, it seems to me, one move still left open to you. And it may yet be a productive one.

If we think that there is anything left of the idea in 133 that there is a 'therapeutic' real discovery to be made that would put an end to the tormenting questions that philosophy catches itself in, then perhaps it is this: perhaps there is a sense in which Wittgenstein is inviting us to undertake a liberatory quest with some similarities to Buddhism (and, contemporarily, to that of Eckhart Tolle). Perhaps, that is, he is inviting us

to wake up from the dream of thought. Perhaps no longer compulsively having to think at all is what it might yet mean, to be able to stop doing philosophy when one wants to.

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Filmography

Hiroshima mon amour, dir. Alain Resnais, 1959

Memento, dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000

Persona, dir. Ingmar Bergman, 1966

Fight Club, dir. David Fincher, 1999