

possible. References to Wittgenstein's own writings, however, are included in brackets, so as to prevent the numbers of notes from spiralling out of all control.

No one can read *TLP* without being struck by its extraordinary resonance and beauty. But my own view is that art and philosophy ought not to be mixed. This is the one respect in which I am profoundly out of sympathy with my subject. Since my concern is with 'the truth and nothing but the truth' I try to write as clearly and plainly as I can, making explicit the reasoning behind my views. Fine language can serve only as a distraction, and oracular statement as a shield behind which confusion can shelter.

Throughout this work I opt to use the colloquial plural pronouns 'they' and 'their' in impersonal contexts, in place of the pernicious masculine singular required by strict grammar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My greatest debts are to Michael Dummett, without whose pioneering work on Frege this book would not have been possible, and to Roger White, who first initiated me into the mysteries of *TLP*. I also owe a great deal to Crispin Wright for his advice and encouragement over many years.

I am grateful to the following for their helpful comments on earlier drafts: David Bell, Gregory Currie, Laurence Goldstein, Jane Heal, Hide Ishiguro, Susan Levi, Christopher McKnight, Howard Mounce and Tim Williamson. Thanks also go to the following for their comments on specific chapters or groups of chapters: Anthony Grayling, A. D. Smith and Rachel Vaughan.

Some of the ideas published here are based upon previous papers of mine, in particular my (1983a), (1983b), (1984b) and (1984c). Although this material has been substantially revised and corrected, I am grateful to the Editors of the *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Theoria* and *Mind* for permission to make use of it.

I am grateful to Wittgenstein's trustees for permission to quote from posthumously published sources, and to Routledge for permission to quote from *TLP* and *PTLP*.

Peter Carruthers

1

Principles of Interpretation

Although this work is generally truth-oriented, the foundations of the enterprise are interpretative. The task of this chapter is to discuss the main principles to be employed, both in this book and in its sequel *MT*.

1.1 FIDELITY TO THE TEXT

The most obvious and important principle to be used in seeking an accurate interpretation of *TLP*, or indeed of any piece of philosophical writing, is that of fidelity to the text itself. In general we should refuse to accept an interpretation which conflicts with a claim made in, or with some clear implication of, the text under study. (However this rule is not absolute, as we shall see in the next section.) Here our task is one of careful reading and weighing of words; and, in the case of *TLP*, of choosing between alternative translations. It also means, especially in the case of *TLP*, paying close attention to the textual context of the passage being considered, since this can often throw valuable light upon its significance.

It might be suggested that an additional way of remaining faithful to the text of *TLP* is to respect its numbering system. For Wittgenstein himself tells us, in a footnote to the very first remark of the book, that the decimal expansions of a given number should be regarded as comments upon the remark which bears that number. If taken at face value, this may place fairly severe constraints upon an interpreter. But in fact Wittgenstein's explanation is only partially accurate. Often, it is true, 'long-numbered' remarks share their subject matter with the 'short-numbered' remarks which precede them – but not always. For sometimes they have to be seen as building up to, and sharing their subject matter

with, the 'short-numbered' remarks which come *after* them. The numbering system is much more intuitive – and the structure of *TLP* much closer to that of a piece of music, with its crescendos and diminuendos and themes and variations – than Wittgenstein's official explanation would allow.¹ Nevertheless it remains true that the relationships between the numbers of different remarks can be an important ingredient in their interpretation, even if this constraint is a great deal weaker than we might have been led to expect.

Of course the role of an interpreter in philosophy cannot be confined merely to establishing what it is that the author does and does not claim to be the case. For the goal of interpretation, no matter how narrowly conceived of, must be to achieve an *understanding* of the author's thoughts. And understanding, in philosophy, means knowing what reasons the writer has for making their claims. So at the very least, interpretation must involve stringing together claims made in the text (perhaps in quite disparate parts of it) into plausible arguments, and also inserting premises which have obviously been suppressed. This is the main reason why *TLP* is so difficult to understand, since it contains little that gives even the appearance of explicit argumentation, and since it would seem that the vast majority of its premises – if premises there are – are suppressed. The would-be interpreter of *TLP* is thus constantly thrown back on invention in attempting to make sense of its various explicit doctrines. We are left with no alternative but to construct arguments on Wittgenstein's behalf, if we are to stand any chance of understanding him. But note that many would wish to draw a sharp distinction here between actual interpretation on the one hand, and understanding on the other; allowing perhaps that invention may have a role to play in connection with the latter, but insisting on strict fidelity to the text in connection with the former. I disagree, for reasons which will become apparent shortly.

What has now emerged is that there are at least two distinct reasons why this book (and its sequel) will be filled with arguments. Firstly because, as was explained in the preface, my overall goal is truth. The doctrines of *TLP* must therefore be assessed, which means arguing for and against them. And now secondly, because my subsidiary goal is to achieve an understanding of *TLP*; which means seeing what arguments Wittgenstein had (or might have had) for his views. But as we shall see in the next section,

there is yet a third role for argument to play, this time an interpretative one.

1.2 THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

Suppose that we have reason to believe in the greatness of a particular text, for which we can provide two competing interpretations. One appears to be consistent with most, but not all, of the author's claims, yet involves attributing to the author a set of doctrines which are both powerful and interesting. The other is consistent with all of the author's claims, but ascribes a set of doctrines which are weak and anodyne by comparison. We may then reasonably prefer the former interpretation, either writing off the conflicting statements as some sort of slip or aberration, or perhaps rendering those statements consistent with it by interpreting some of the terms involved in a non-standard manner. This will be especially plausible if we can provide some independent explanation of how the author could have come to have made such an error, or to have selected those terms in order to express what they wish to say.

This is an instance of what I call 'The Principle of Charity of Interpretation', which enjoins us to maximize the *interest* of the text under study.² Its application will often pull against the principle of Textual Fidelity, which tells us to select the interpretation which most naturally fits the details of the text. When they do conflict, some sort of balance must be struck. It will be a matter of weighing up our respect for the intelligence of the author and our reasons for supposing the text to contain a powerful set of doctrines on the one hand, against the plausibility of supposing such a writer to have expressed their views so unfavorably on the other. Indeed the task of interpretation is best seen as a search for a kind of reflective equilibrium, moving backwards and forwards between detailed study of the text and independent assessment of the power and plausibility of the doctrines which can – again with more or less plausibility – be read into it.

In connection with many texts, where the author is explicit in stating their position, and is careful to detail their arguments, the principles of Charity and of Fidelity may rarely come into disagreement. But with a text such as *TLP*, on the other hand, the role of

some of the theses which it does. But note that I only say 'suggest'. The main burden of proof still falls on fidelity to the text of *TLP*, together with the principle of Charity.

The case of *PTLP* is rather different, in that it may have been composed immediately prior to *TLP* itself, during the same two month leave from the army in the summer of 1918.⁶ However the evidence which it provides is by no means unambiguous. For there may be any number of possible explanations of the differences which exist between the two texts, ranging from the entirely trivial, through the stylistic, to substantial changes of mind. Nevertheless, if handled carefully, *PTLP* can be a valuable aid to the interpreter.

1.4 POST-TRACTARIAN SOURCES

There are four different types of post-*TLP* source which might be thought to bear on the interpretation of that text. These are: (a) Wittgenstein's remarks in letters to Russell and others in the years immediately following the completion of *TLP*; (b) Wittgenstein's reported comments on *TLP*, amongst those recorded by Waismann between 1929 and 1932 and in published lecture-notes;⁷ (c) written references to *TLP* in *PR*, *PI* and elsewhere; and (d) comments on doctrines which at least bear a family resemblance to those of *TLP*, but where the latter work is not explicitly mentioned. (Many of the remarks in the early part of *PI* – on names, simples and analysis – fall into this last category.)

Material falling under (a) should obviously be given very considerable weight, since it is so close in time to the composition of the text itself. However we must remember that these letters did not purport to give a polished exposition of Wittgenstein's ideas, and were apparently written with much impatience. Material under (d), on the other hand, should be given no independent weight by the would-be interpreter of *TLP*, for there is nothing to indicate that their target is (the later Wittgenstein's view of) *TLP* itself, rather than Russell, or Frege, or just a general tendency of thought which he felt to be widespread.⁸

But what of material under (b) and (c)? How much weight should be given to the later Wittgenstein's explicit pronouncements on the doctrines of *TLP*? In my view, very little; but this will require some defence. Notice to begin with that there is a gap of

eleven years between the completion of *TLP* in 1918, and the first of the conversations recorded by Waismann, and the first of the later writings, in 1929. During this time he did virtually no philosophy, and by all accounts found thinking about his own work extremely slow and painful.⁹ Note also that, so far as we can gather, *TLP* was written with extraordinary compression and intensity during a two month period of leave in the summer of 1918.¹⁰ He had been at the Italian front, and was due to return there, so he must have felt that he had to work with desperate urgency.¹¹ This was not a frame of mind in which to distinguish carefully between ideas, and in which to set out and assess the strengths of competing arguments – even had he normally been disposed to such modes of working. Small wonder, then, if after a gap of eleven years he were to find it impossible to think himself back into the full richness and complexity of his finished text.

Moreover, Wittgenstein's return to philosophy in 1929 was apparently occasioned by contacts with philosophers working in areas which were new for him – Brouwer on Intuitionism, and the Vienna Circle on Phenomenalism – and he immediately began to turn his thinking in new directions.¹² This, coupled with the restless and forward-looking nature of his intellect,¹³ suggests that he would have viewed his earlier writing very much through the medium of his new interests, rather than from the standpoint of dispassionate memory and self-interpretation.

Consider also the style in which *TLP* itself is written. It is impossible to believe that it represents the obscure, if highly polished, tip of an iceberg of clearly articulated ideas and arguments, which Wittgenstein chose to present in that form for purely aesthetic or pedagogical reasons (especially when we consider the almost equally opaque writing in *NB*, which was intended purely for his own use). *TLP* is undoubtedly a work of genius. But like so many works of genius, it gives every appearance of having been produced intuitively, with the author himself perhaps having only a tenuous grasp on the nature of his own product, even at the time of writing. It is sometimes said of works of literature that their authors are the last people to understand them, or to be trusted to interpret them. I suspect that this may be more true of *TLP* than of any other work in philosophy.

Putting these points together suggests that would-be interpreters of *TLP* should approach comments made by the later Wittgenstein

Charity becomes maximal. For *TLP* is extremely sparing in explanations of its own doctrines, and rarely takes the trouble to spell out supporting arguments. This leaves room for many alternative readings. We therefore have no option but actively to seek, and attribute to Wittgenstein, those views which have the greatest philosophical interest, and in support of which the strongest arguments can be given.

This is not to say that in interpreting *TLP* there is no place for close study of the details of the text. On the contrary, this is a necessary prerequisite to thinking up interpretations, and can sometimes be used decisively to refute a suggested reading. But the value of such textual study is strictly limited, since there are just too many variables to control. For example, one critical factor will be the extent to which we take Wittgenstein's use of his terminology to be consistent. In some instances it is clearly not (on pain of attributing to him inconsistency in his beliefs³), and the possibility of further divergences leaves open an indefinite range of possible interpretations. So the ultimate proof of an interpretation, of any text of *TLP*'s obscurity and manifest genius, must lie in its explanatory power: both in throwing light on some of the darker sayings, and more importantly in providing arguments which enable us to make sense of – to see the point and power of – some of the doctrines. Though given the open-ended nature of philosophy and philosophical argument, it is no doubt inappropriate to speak of 'proof' here. In so far as an interpretation is governed by the principle of Charity, it will be subject to the same constant revisability as any other piece of philosophy.

It is an interesting question – and one not entirely without philosophical significance – why Wittgenstein should have come to express his thoughts in the form which he did. No doubt his reasons were partly aesthetic.⁴ (He is said to have responded to Russell's admonition to provide more arguments, by remarking that they spoiled the beauty of his conclusions, like dirtying a flower with muddy hands.⁵) And there is no question but that the result was a piece of writing of extraordinary resonance and elegance. I am also sure that he had great difficulty in organizing and expressing his thoughts at all. For when we read his own early notebooks we do not find a man articulating clear positions and presenting very explicit arguments, which are later to be honed down for purely aesthetic effect. On the contrary, we find obscurity and confusion

and constant struggle. But perhaps the most interesting reason behind the form of *TLP* may be found in the remark in its preface, that the book would only be understood by someone who had had similar thoughts (a remark echoed in the preface to *PI*, where Wittgenstein says that he should not want his writing to save anyone the trouble of thinking). I suspect that it was always Wittgenstein's aim in writing to produce a book to think with, which would stimulate readers to thoughts of their own. His idea was to force readers, through the application of the principle of Charity, to struggle towards a correct perception of the issues for themselves.

1.3 PRE-TRACTARIAN WRITINGS

Besides the principles of Textual Fidelity and of Charity, are we also constrained to be faithful to the pre-*TLP* writings, namely *NB* and *PTLP*? In the case of the former, clearly not; though it can be an extremely valuable source. For its contents were written between two and six years earlier, during which time Wittgenstein may have changed his mind. So we cannot simply assume that any doctrine or argument enunciated in *NB* will (in the absence of textual evidence to the contrary) survive into *TLP*. And even where a remark from the early writings is reproduced verbatim in *TLP*, we cannot always take for granted that it will have retained its earlier significance. It may have been employed because of its phrasing or the image used, but turned to quite another purpose. For a self-conscious stylist like Wittgenstein, the process of compiling a text from remarks in earlier notebooks would almost certainly not have been simply a matter of selecting those with which (as originally intended) he still agreed.

Having sounded this cautionary note, however, I believe the writings in *NB* can be useful aids to the interpretation of *TLP*. At the very least they can give an indication of the issues with which Wittgenstein was wrestling in the years leading up to the composition of the latter work. We should expect that, even if these issues do not survive into *TLP* in quite their original form, they would at least have descendants which do. Moreover they can often suggest ways of reading some of the more obscure remarks in *TLP*, and can provide arguments which might explain why the latter contains

with extreme caution. A similar conclusion can also be reached from a different direction. For on general methodological grounds, if we wish to understand and assess the contrasts between Wittgenstein's early and late philosophies, then we certainly ought not to assume at the outset that he later both understood and had the measure of all aspects of his earlier way of thinking. On the contrary, we ought at least to hold open the possibility that the later philosophy might have passed the earlier uncomprehendingly by, and perhaps also that the quality of Wittgenstein's thought might have gone steadily downhill (as Russell believed). Our preferred interpretation of the early writings should therefore be established before we begin to consider the later work.

1.5 FREGE AND RUSSELL

The last – but not the least – of aids to the interpreter is Wittgenstein's acknowledgement of the influence of 'the great works of Frege' and 'the writings of my friend Mr Bertrand Russell' in the preface to *TLP*. We may presume that he took many of his problems and ideas from them. It is also reasonable to assume, at least as a working hypothesis, that the different tones in which the acknowledgements were expressed reflect the degree of significance of their influence.¹⁴ We may therefore take the work of Frege, and to a lesser extent that of Russell, as providing the background against which the doctrines of *TLP* can be set. But obviously we need to be cautious. Ideas taken over from them may have been put to quite a new use, his readings of other philosophers having been more inspirational than interpretative. And he may, for the same reason, have badly misunderstood their views.

SUMMARY

Our interpretation of *TLP* will be founded on a balanced application of the twin principles of Textual Fidelity and Charity. We shall also make considerable, if cautious, use of *NB*, *PTLP* and letters written soon after 1918, as well as the known views of Frege and Russell. But we shall ignore almost wholly the evidence of Wittgenstein's later writings and reported remarks.

Background: Frege and Russell

My task in this chapter is to explain the main outlines of the semantic theories of Frege and Russell, in so far as they may be presumed to constitute the background for Wittgenstein's own investigations.

2.1 PRELIMINARIES

Frege and Russell are the only known influences on the philosophy of *TLP*. Each is acknowledged in the preface, and is mentioned many times in the body of the text. The only other philosophers mentioned in *TLP* are Moore (once), Whitehead (twice) – each in conjunction with Russell – Kant (once) and Hertz (twice).¹ Indeed, Frege and Russell are the only significant philosophers whose writings we know Wittgenstein to have studied with any seriousness. (There is evidence that he once read – and hated – Moore's (1903).² There is anecdotal evidence that he had read Schopenhauer as a boy.³ And there is some reason to think that he may have been influenced by the form, if not the detailed content, of Hertz's (1899).⁴)

As for what exactly of Frege and Russell Wittgenstein would have read, I think it is reasonable to assume an acquaintance with all their major publications prior to the outbreak of the war in 1914.⁵ We also know that he saw at least a part of Russell's manuscript 'Theory of Knowledge' (now published in Russell, (1984)⁶), and that he wrote to Keynes in 1915 asking to be sent a copy of Russell's (1914), though we do not know whether or not Keynes ever complied.⁷ Clearly, however, our account of Frege's and Russell's views should not commit the anachronism of relying upon their later writings, particularly Russell's 1918 'Lectures on Logical Atomism' and Frege's 1918 papers 'Thoughts' and 'Negation'.

that some of Wittgenstein's doctrines concerning the N-operator commit him the existence of a decision-procedure for predicate logic; whereas there is demonstrably no such thing.

- 5 Wittgenstein clearly thinks that we are required to employ just a single logical connective in order to avoid the illegitimate procedure of piecemeal definition (5.451, 5.46, 5.47). He thinks that if we had to employ a plurality of connectives, then there would be insuperable problems over the order in which they should be introduced. For if we introduce one connective in advance of another, then we should not be able to take the latter for granted in giving the former's definition. Yet any adequate explanation of a connective must get across the significance, not just of attaching it to elementary propositions (or, in the case of the quantifiers, to elementary propositional functions), but also to propositions (and propositional functions), which themselves contain logical connectives. It seems that we should first have to explain the negation-sign as it applies to elementary propositions, for example, and then later redefine it as applying to general propositions once the quantifiers have been introduced; which is precisely piecemeal definition.

There is a perfectly real problem here, which had barely been recognized at the time when *TLP* was written. But it is simply false that we need a single ubiquitous connective in order to overcome it. For as has now long been recognized, we can achieve the same effect through the use of definitions which are *recursive*. (This was pointed out to me by Jack Copeland.)

CHAPTER 1 PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

- 1 Here I am in agreement with Stenius (1960), ch. 1. See also the appendix in Favrholt (1964).
- 2 I do not necessarily mean here *our* interests. For it may be that the author is not addressing issues with which we ourselves are concerned. I intend Charity to be a principle of historical interpretation rather than of rational reconstruction (a distinction I get from Janaway, 1988). Sometimes maximizing the interest of a text from the point of view of the author's contemporaries may mean minimizing its interest to us. But not, I think, in the case of *TLP*.
- 3 See ch. 4 for some examples.
- 4 In a letter to the publisher Ficker, Wittgenstein describes *TLP* as 'strictly philosophical and at the same time literary'. Quoted in McGuinness (1988), p. 288.
- 5 See the letter from Russell quoted by Blackwell (1981), p. 8.
- 6 See von Wright's 'Historical Introduction' in *PTLP*. McGuinness (1988, p. 265), however, conjectures the *PTLP* may have been written in the autumn of 1917.
- 7 For the conversations with Waismann, see Waismann (1979). For notes

taken at Wittgenstein's Cambridge lectures, see Lee (1980), as well as Ambrose (1979) and Diamond (1976).

- 8 Wittgenstein's remark in the preface to *PI* explaining his desire to see *PI* and *TLP* published together in a single volume is certainly insufficient to establish that *TLP* can be identified with the 'Augustinian picture' which forms the target of attack throughout the early sections of *PI*. That *PI* can only be understood in contrast with *TLP* (with which I agree) does not mean that all its early remarks about Simples, names and so on necessarily refer to *TLP* doctrines. On the contrary, Wittgenstein may have used the 'Augustinian picture' as a convenient focus to bring out points both of agreement and disagreement with *TLP*. For further discussion see my (1984a).
- 9 See the Editor's preface to Wittgenstein (1979), pp. 12 and 15, and Wittgenstein (1974), pp. 114–18.
- 10 See von Wright's 'Historical Introduction' *PTLP*.
- 11 McGuinness (1988) argues that at the beginning of the summer Wittgenstein had been bent on suicide, only being dissuaded from it by a chance meeting with his uncle Paul, who took an interest in his philosophy, and who offered him a home at Hallein in which to work (*ibid.* p. 264). This is consistent both with my claim of urgency, and with the corollary that Wittgenstein was not writing in a relaxed and leisurely frame of mind.
- 12 See von Wright's 'Biographical Sketch' in Malcolm (1958), pp. 12–13. See also the topics covered in *PR*, written between 1929 and 1930. Of course it is controversial to claim that Phenomenalism was a new interest, since some interpret the simple objects of *TLP* to be sense-data. Arguments against this reading will be given in *MT* ch. 8.
- 13 The assessment is von Wright's, and is clearly correct. See Malcolm (1958), p. 20.
- 14 My impression is that Wittgenstein was always partly contemptuous of Russell as a philosopher; whereas Frege he revered from the beginning to the very end of his career.

CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND: FREGE AND RUSSELL

- 1 Moore is mentioned at 5.541, Whitehead at 5.252 and 5.452, Kant at 6.36111 and Hertz at 4.04 and 6.361.
- 2 See his 1912 letter to Russell, Wittgenstein (1974), p. 9.
- 3 See von Wright's 'Biographical Sketch', in Malcolm (1958), p. 5. However Pears (1987) makes a convincing case for a direct influence – at least in point of phraseology – of Schopenhauer on a number of the remarks in *TLP* and *NB*.
- 4 See Griffin (1964), ch. VIII. But it is possible that Wittgenstein only knew of Hertz's work via the account provided by Russell in ch. LIX of *The Principles of Mathematics*.