

Preface

This is the first of two books to be devoted to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*TLP*). It deals with the principal semantic doctrines of the early Wittgenstein, whereas the sequel will consider his treatment of metaphysics and its relation to his views on logic. I begin with some remarks about the motivation of the project.

WHY BE AN INTERPRETER?

Why ought we to be interested in the classical texts of our subject? Why should we, as philosophers, give up our time to the pursuit of accurate interpretations of our predecessors? To these questions some would answer that their role is that of an historian, charting a moment in the history of ideas; or that they take an interest in interpretation for its own sake, showing the respect due to past philosophers by understanding them in their own terms. Others would reply that they use classic texts purely for inspiration, taking little interest in issues of interpretation as such, so long as they can get ideas from the text which they find useful for their own purposes. My own motivation is different. I believe that close textual study can subserve our search for truth.

What I want as a philosopher is to know the truth (or at least to achieve reasonable beliefs) on a wide range of subjects. Engagement with the thoughts of other philosophers is one way of pursuing this aim. Perhaps in many cases it is the best way. This is especially likely to be so in connection with those writers, such as Wittgenstein, the interest of whose work has survived the test of scrutiny and debate by successive generations of thinkers. For this gives us reason to believe that their problems will be deep ones, and their arguments powerful. So if our concern is to know the truth on some matter which has been addressed by one of the great philos-

ophers of the past, we can often do no better than begin by trying to understand and assess their treatment of the issue.¹

Looked at in this way, interpretation becomes a self-directed rather than an other-directed activity. For the interest in the thoughts and arguments of the other is instrumental rather than intrinsic, subservient to the desire to discover the truth for oneself. But this does not mean that we may simply plunder the text for our own purposes: abstracting from it doctrines and arguments which we find congenial, and allowing thoughts to be sparked off in us by our reading without concern for whether or not those thoughts are genuinely the author's. For if the tradition is reliable, giving us reason to believe in the greatness of the text, then the author's own position will be more interesting than anything we are likely to glean from it on a cursory reading. In my view this is the main reason why we ought, as philosophers, to concern ourselves with the minutiae of textual interpretation: if the text is rich and many-faceted, as major texts in philosophy so often are, then the author's actual doctrines are likely to differ from, and be more powerful than, any which may be inspired by our initial reading of it.

My idea of philosophical interpretation is thus something of a compromise: positioned midway between those who pursue it as a means to historical or biographical understanding, and those who are unconcerned as to whether or not their reading of the text is actually correct, so long as it is interesting and defensible in its own right. My response to the first group is that my primary concern is to know the truth on the matters dealt with in the classical texts of our subject, not with who said what or when or why. My reply to the second group is that if we have reason to believe in the greatness of some piece of philosophical writing – as plainly we have in the case of *TLP* – then the correct interpretation of it (if it differs from the current one) is likely to prove more interesting and powerful still. But I make no claim to exclusiveness in these remarks. I merely mean to state my own attitude as an interpreter, not to reject the other approaches as illegitimate.

AIMS AND SCOPE

The aims of the present work are two-fold: to argue firstly, that there is a plausible set of semantic doctrines implicit in *TLP* which

can be held separate from Wittgenstein's more dubious metaphysical views and associated programme of analysis; and to argue secondly, that these doctrines are actually correct, deserving at the very least to be treated as a semantic paradigm, providing the same sort of focus for contemporary debate as does the Fregean paradigm.

The more I have made use of *TLP* as a foil in my thinking about the nature of language, thought, reality and the relations between them, the more I have come to feel that it contains a defensible set of ideas on these matters which are independent of Wittgenstein's programme for the analysis of ordinary language; and these have not been sufficiently appreciated. Indeed I think it can be said that hardly anyone working in the philosophy of language reads *TLP* at all seriously now. In this respect the contrast with Frege is striking. For there exists a cluster of ideas in contemporary work in semantics which can appropriately be labelled 'Fregean', and both opponents and defenders of these ideas read Frege's writings with great attention. Yet there appear to be no standpoints within the current debate which can bear the title 'Tractarian', and consequently *TLP* is read by hardly anyone except Wittgenstein scholars. I believe that this state of affairs is unjust. When properly interpreted, *TLP* can be seen to contain a set of doctrines which, where they differ from Frege's, are in almost every respect a decisive advance. This is what I shall argue.

Perhaps the best way of summarising how my reading of *TLP* differs from that of most previous commentators, is to say that I regard it as having been much more heavily influenced by Frege than by Russell.² In particular, I believe that it employs a distinction which is closely related to the one Frege drew between sense and reference, applying to almost all types of expression including proper names. But there is disagreement, both over the nature and semantic significance of the distinction, as well as with Frege's view that senses have necessary existence. It is in these differences that the Tractarian paradigm has, I shall argue, the decisive advantage. It is also the case that Wittgenstein wholeheartedly accepts Frege's belief in the objectivity of logic, meaning and truth. But he thinks that this belief has consequences for metaphysics which Frege himself never considered; in particular, leading to the demand for a programme of analysis which will terminate in a class of logically independent elementary propositions involving reference to necess-

arily existing individuals. This latter set of ideas will be explored in the sequel to the present work, *MT*.

The scope of my investigations here, will be confined to Wittgenstein's views on the nature and content of propositions, the nature of private thinking, and the semantics of proper names and predicative expressions. I shall have little to say about his views on logic. For while some of these are surely semantic in nature, they are in fact either truistic (as is his proposed non-referential semantics for the logical connectives³), demonstrably inadequate (as is his treatment of the predicate calculus⁴) or of merely historical interest (as are his reasons for wanting to employ only a single logical connective⁵). And as for what is still controversial in his views on logic – namely the commitment to the objectivity of logical relations and principles – this will be best discussed in the sequel, since it is intimately connected with his views on metaphysics, and since it is in fact independent of the set of doctrines which I propose to defend here as a semantic paradigm.

STYLISTIC NOTES

Since the present work is concerned not only with interpretation but also truth, both textual discussion and substantive philosophical argument will be found in the chapters which follow. Some chapters are primarily interpretative (this is particularly true of the early ones, which lay the foundation for what follows), whereas some just argue for the correctness of some aspect of the Tractarian paradigm. But the majority contain a mixture of interpretation and independent argument. This is partly because questions of interpretation and assessment cannot in fact be held apart from one another, as I argue in chapter 1.

There are two sorts of understanding available to an interpreter in philosophy: that which arises from seeing the reasons the author has for their views, and that which derives from noticing connections between those views and antecedently understood philosophical standpoints. The former is clearly the more fundamental of the two. It is thus accorded pride of place in the main body of my text, philosophical comparisons being confined to notes. Also confined to notes are my points of agreement and disagreement with other commentators, in order to leave the main text as uncluttered as

(cognitive content); in imperative discourse it will be mutual knowledge of causal equivalence; and in other modes of discourse, and in other contexts, the identity-conditions for semantic content may be different again.

Thus emended, the one respect in which the semantics of *TLP* deviates from the above paradigm concerns its treatment of ordinary proper names. For at the same time as endorsing thesis 5 above, Wittgenstein thinks that the semantic content of ordinary names may be subjected to analysis, holding that they may be replaced by descriptions of the manner in which their bearers are constructed out of their parts. Here he overlooks the distinction between conceptual and metaphysical necessity. For while it may plausibly be claimed in connection with at least some types of physical object that the manner of their construction out of their parts is metaphysically necessary, it certainly is not conceptually or analytically so. This additional doctrine of Wittgenstein's is thus best quietly dropped, the question of why he might have felt himself obliged to maintain it being held over to the sequel. The answer in fact lies deep within the foundations of the *TLP* programme of analysis (see *MT* chapters 7 and 12).

Notes

PREFACE

- 1 I here assume that there are issues and problems which are a-historical, at least in the limited sense of being the common property of philosophers belonging to different philosophical eras. But this is not to say, of course, that all issues are a-historical in this sense. Sometimes coming to understand a past philosopher's treatment of (what one takes to be) a given issue, one will discover that it was not really *that* issue they were addressing, but rather one which is now of merely historical interest.
- 2 It is remarkable how many commentators have undervalued the influence of Frege on *TLP*, as a glance at the comparative frequency with which Frege and Russell are mentioned in their indexes will reveal. In some cases – e.g. Malcolm (1986) – he is not even mentioned at all. Distinguished exceptions to this trend are Anscombe (1959) and Griffin (1964).
- 3 I strongly disagree with McDonough (1986), who believes that all the main features of Wittgenstein's semantic system can be demonstrated from the thesis that the logical connectives do not refer, together with a characterization of the nature of tautologies. One telling point against him, is that the argument he attributes to Wittgenstein simply helps itself to the thesis that all necessary propositions are tautologies; whereas this clearly needs arguing for, and indeed presupposes a whole programme of analysis which must receive its justification from elsewhere (see *MT* chs. 7 and 13). Another point is that even granting McDonough's account of the nature of tautologies (which is in fact only partly accurate – see ch. 6), his attempt to demonstrate all the other features of *TLP* is extremely weak. For example, his argument to show that all genuine propositions are contingent (*ibid.* pp. 77–9) can only succeed by making assumptions about what it is to say something which would need to be independently argued for; and once such an argument is provided, we can in fact derive the thesis that all genuine propositions are contingent without having to appeal to the nature of tautologies (see chs. 5–7).
- 4 Fogelin points out in his (1976) that Wittgenstein's account of the quantifiers is expressively inadequate, there being no way in which the N-operator can be used to construct propositions of mixed multiple generality, such as $\exists x\forall yFxy$; although Geach shows in his (1981) how this defect may easily be remedied. More seriously, Fogelin also shows

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 Simplex, 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*.