

*Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy:
Thinking Through His Philosophical
Investigations*
by Rupert Read

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If one has followed Rupert Read's impressive body of work to date, one must have been struck by its considerable amount of co-authored pieces. On the other hand, he is himself a passionate, powerful writer, whose distinctive voice is everywhere evident throughout the pages of his new book, *Wittgenstein's Liberatory Philosophy*. That his writings manifest such a voice as well as a cooperative spirit is far from accidental. For one of Read's central aims, following Wittgenstein, is to overcome the traditional (would-be) first-person and third-person modes of philosophizing: his emphasis is, rather, on the *second person*, i.e., the I or we *in relation with* others. So, instead of remaining

stuck within his own (allegedly) personal quandaries (as has happened to some Wittgensteinians otherwise very close to Read) or magisterially propounding ("metaphysical" or "conceptual") truths as if from nowhere (as mainstream "analytic" philosophers or "orthodox" Wittgensteinians aspire to), he invites us to join him in a journey of self-reflection, very much like Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. He thus addresses us, and he does so as one of us.

Far from being confined to philosophy qua academic discipline, first-person and third-person fantasies are characteristic of what Read diagnoses as two of the severest ailments of our

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times generally: individualism and scientism, respectively, both of which manifest a perverse, self-defeating tendency to turn our backs on our own *humanity*. The proposed remedy (or liberating move), i.e., the emphasis on the second person, in philosophy and beyond, is thus a reminder of this very humanity, of which we, humans, tend to be forgetful somehow. (Perhaps because it is always before our eyes.)

This book, indeed a wonderful book, is structured around central sections of the *Investigations*. It provides a reading of them, but, more importantly, as the subtitle registers, it thinks *through* them. That is, it takes Wittgenstein's text not just as an object but as above all a *means* of interpretation, as Stanley Cavell once put it (see Cavell 1996). That, of course, is what Wittgenstein himself wanted us to do with his book, as he makes clear in the preface. And, as I suggested above, it is also what Read wants us to do with his own. In what follows, I shall highlight some respects in which I found myself particularly helped, indeed liberated, when thinking through it for the first time.

Let me begin, like Read, at the beginning. We are usually told that the *Investigations* open with a criticism of the so-called Augustinian picture of language. Now, my reaction to this had always been: wait a minute, what is it that is supposed to be wrong with Augustine's *words*? They are a bit crude, perhaps, but that was roughly as far as I could go. In fact, when considered in isolation, they struck me as

largely trivial, and hence unobjectionable. So, when I first came across Warren Goldfarb's thought-provoking "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab" (1983), which argues that the target of Wittgenstein's criticism in those opening sections is rather our inclination to look at the ordinary, of which Augustine's humdrum words are an instance, "through philosophically tinted spectacles" (Goldfarb 1983, 281), I thought he had, in essentials, got things right. Later on, I wandered through Cavell's masterful "Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*" (1995), arguably the main reference on these matters, and realized, as I had already begun to suspect, that it was all more complicated than that. But it was only while reading Read's first chapter, aptly entitled "The Philosopher and Temptation", that I would say things became clear to me. Here Read argues that Wittgenstein's main target is indeed an often overlooked step we take "on the way *into* philosophizing" (Goldfarb 1983, 280), not a theory or proto-theory, *and* that Augustine himself falls prey to it in the passage in question. This is made visible by means of Read's careful consideration of the surrounding context of that passage in the *Confessions*, in which a totally mythical conception of pre-linguistic mindedness can be seen to be operative. But, crucially, what matters most for Wittgenstein here is not *that* particular conception, no matter how misguided, but the fact that a philosopher of Augustine's caliber had lapsed into it in a largely unwitting

way. (The author of the *Tractatus* comes to mind.)

This first chapter, which sets us on promising tracks right away, is indeed one of the book's finest, as is the tenth and final one, "The Anti-'Private Language' Considerations as a Fraternal and Freeing Ethic", which I found not only philosophically ingenious but also profoundly moving. In particular, it struck me as ideally complementary to John McDowell's "One Strand in the Private Language Argument" (1989), which anticipates some of his central ideas in *Mind and World*. In the latter, McDowell aims to undermine conceptions of experience which take it to comprise two distinct moments: the reception of "purely" experiential matter by means of the senses and *then* its conceptualization by means of the understanding. His point is that it is unintelligible to separate these alleged two moments out, and so that experience should be thought of as always already conceptual. (I should stress that "conceptual" should be here understood in a flexible, non-intellectualist way.) In the former, he reads Wittgenstein as developing an analogous point in the privacy sections, specifically in connection with cases of "inner" experience, such as that of pain. Now, Read, thinking through those very sections, makes a counterpart *ethical* point: "seeing someone as a person already involves a kind of caring, in the sense that seeing-as-a-person is not a kind of neutral quasi-factive phenomenon but already *involves* a kind of inter-involvement" (p. 310). He thus opposes conceptions which take such

seeing to comprise two distinct moments: "the quasi-factive and *then* the caring (or otherwise)" (ibid.). Rather, such seeing should be thought of as "always-already ethical (or unethical)" (ibid.). And I should add that this point holds not just about seeing someone but also, say, hearing someone's voice, touching someone's body, and so on, as well as not just about people but also non-human animals (or even the environment itself). We may call this *the unboundedness of the ethical* (cf. Crary 2016).

It is indeed one of Read's great merits to bring out the specifically ethical dimension of Wittgenstein's conceptual investigations. But he goes even further, into the (even less explored) *political* one as well. His take on the rule-following considerations is a prime example of the latter. There we see Wittgenstein undermining, mainly by means of reminders of our irreducibly second-personal condition, both dogmatic rationalist ("rails laid to infinity" and its cognates) and skeptical empiricist (radically conventionalist or even nihilist) conceptions of normativity. And in chapters 7, "Logical Existentialism?", and 8, "The *Faux*-Freedom of Nonsense", we see Read making a parallel move, undermining both dogmatic (Hackerian) and skeptical (Kripkean) readings of those considerations. Now, this struggle against both rule-dogmatism (and its associated "language policeman" approach) and rule-skepticism (and its associated "anything goes" mentality) partly mirrors a struggle, at the political level, against, respectively, all forms of authoritarianism, on the one

hand, and all ideologies that rely upon illusory conceptions of freedom, on the other. (In this respect, which would alone deserve book-length treatment, the case of Kripkenstein is particularly illuminating, for it illustrates how both individualist and collectivist fantasies, when thought through, collapse onto each other – how Kripke’s “community” ends up being “merely a sort of bloated self [...] solipsism writ large into a mob” (p. 285).)

Those conceptions of freedom include, for instance, atomistic ones, which Wittgenstein’s general dismantling of traditional empiricism thoroughly undermines. Like the aforementioned unboundedness of the conceptual and the ethical (and their intertwinedness), this is one of the many respects in which his thought comes, I think, strikingly close to Hegel’s. In fact, I believe that one of the main remaining obstacles to a proper reception of Wittgenstein is the still widespread failure to appreciate that he is, as it were, far more Hegelian than Kantian, and that most of the relevant Kantian elements in his thinking are already present in Hegel, though usually transfigured, often in a quite “Wittgensteinian” way. So, I was pleased to find out that Read is sensitive to this, as he acknowledges in an endnote concerning the conception of *autonomy as relationality* (a radical subversion of Kant’s individualistic one) he sees in Wittgenstein: “[i]f this has a Hegelian ring, so be it. My depiction of Wittgenstein as a radically subversive inheritor of—a radical rewriter of—

Kant would fit with that. Eliminating all the dogmatic commitments of Kant in particular and the Enlightenment in general” (p. 325).

But while Hegel, too, sought to overcome dogmatism, notably through his rejection of the Kantian spectatorial stance in favor of a thoroughly situated model of human endeavors (a radicalization of Kant’s conception of apperception as an activity), there arguably remain dogmatic residues in his thinking. I have above all in mind his envisaging of “Absolute Knowing”, i.e., *complete clarity* about what is distinctive of human mindedness, as the culmination of the *Phenomenology’s* progression. Now, some Wittgensteinians have come somewhat close to this (though in a pre-Hegelian, and hence more overtly dogmatic mode), notably Peter Hacker in his nonetheless remarkable recent work, a broadly Strawsonian attempt at articulating a perspicuous presentation of the grammar of “human nature” (see Hacker 2010). But in Wittgenstein we find no such thing. As Read stresses, his talk of “complete clarity” (*PI*, §133) concerns *particular* problems (see chapter 5), and his conception of perspicuity is, as the later Gordon Baker alerted us, arguably very different from the Hackerian bird’s-eye view model (see chapter 4, and Baker 2004). His resistance to dogmatism is thus on another level. And this is perhaps where the most radical and original part of his thinking lies, the one that seems to me the most difficult for *us* to understand and accept. Throughout his book, Read

undertakes a thoroughgoing effort to make it available.

Following Read's methodological reflections (which he sensibly refrains from calling "metaphilosophical") to some extent, let me sketch a picture that attempts to engage sympathetically with someone who might offer resistance to "our method". Philosophy, on *our* conception, is an *activity*, one that is through and through *transitional* (responsive, reorientative), in the sense Cora Diamond has taught us (see chapter 9). Its upshot is *self-understanding*: it does not yield any particular facts (let alone "super-facts") about human nature, but in freeing us from confused conceptions that somehow dehumanize us, it *returns* us, as it were, to our humanness. And, at that stage, the desire for a Hacker-style perspicuous presentation, which may have nonetheless been helpful *along the way*, is likely to have vanished. Crucially, our method is one which fundamentally preserves our *freedom*. It is indeed as we please (*PI*, §16, on which see chapter 2), though not in a licentious way: the greater the freedom, the greater the *responsibility* (for our words). Despite the transitionality of philosophy, one is thus free to hold on to some reminder or object of comparison virtually as strongly (and for as long) as one wishes. One might even *call* it a "theory" (or whatever)! (Perhaps some of us cannot quite do without at least some enduring requirements of style that confer an orderly appearance to their thinking; and this is fine, as long as one is aware of what one is doing.) *But*: the

stronger (and longer) the hold, the greater the need of *vigilance*. (Vigilance against a potential dogmatist menace, against a potential wavering of the meanings of our words, among other risks we, philosophers, constantly run.) There is no place, on our method, for policeman-like decrees such as, say, "You *cannot* put forward doctrines or theses!" or "You *must* throw away that reminder!". Rather, the only "musts" here in play are *ethical* ones: "You must (qua practitioner of our method) be intellectually honest...", "You must scrutinize your potential prejudices...", "You must remain open to alternative possibilities...", and so on. (I grant that, from a liberatory Wittgensteinian, radically post-doctrinal perspective such as Read's, what I have just said in this paragraph may not sound radical enough, but bear in mind that my words are themselves transitional and, as I noted, meant to address a particular kind of interlocutor.)

Richard Rorty famously suggested that followers of Wilfrid Sellars could be divided into two schools: "right-wing Sellarsians", sympathetic with the scientific strand in his thinking, and "left-wing Sellarsians", sympathetic with its non-scientific strand instead (see Brandom 2015). I would now like to suggest that followers of Wittgenstein may be similarly divided: I shall call those who resonate with the kind of vision of language (or "grammar") and counterpart *coercive* methodology present in Hacker's writings "right-wing Wittgensteinians", and those who instead resonate

with the kind of vision of language (or “forms of life”) and counterpart *non-coercive* methodology present in Cavell’s writings “left-wing Wittgensteinians”. Among the latter, Read is certainly one of the boldest, and this book, following his heroes later Baker, Cavell, Diamond, Conant, McDowell, or Winch (as well as earlier Wittgensteinians like Waismann, Rhees, or Bouwsma), in his own idiosyncratic way, a landmark in that tradition.

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