

The *Philosophical Investigations* and Its Seventieth Anniversary

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Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (*Philosophische Untersuchungen* in German) were published by Basil Blackwell on 1 May 1953, just over two years after their author's death in Cambridge on 29 April 1951. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, who was in Oxford at the time, has left us a vivid account of the climate of excitement with which, at least among philosophers and aspiring philosophers at Oxford and Cambridge, the publication of the *Philosophical Investigations* was greeted when it appeared in a bilingual edition edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, with the original German text and the English translation facing it, thanks to G. E. M. Anscombe, one of Wittgenstein's favourite pupils and, together with Rhees himself and G. H. von Wright, one of the three literary executors appointed by Wittgenstein before his death. Thus, Rossi-Landi recalls: "On 1 May 1953, along with many hundreds of other people in Oxford, I awoke with a particular feeling of anticipation, ate my breakfast in a hurry and ran to Basil Blackwell's in Broad Street to be there when it opened. As had been announced, the first copies of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* lay shining in the windows. They were bound in dark blue cloth, as befitted the austerity of their contents; but, almost as if to encourage our hopes, they were wrapped in a pale green dust jacket bearing only the title of the facing English translation, *Philosophical Investigations*" (Rossi-Landi 2002, 185).

The history of the interpretations of the *Philosophical Investigations* began on that same day, as Rossi-Landi again reminds us. In fact, on the afternoon of that same 1 May, Anscombe gave a packed lecture in which, in addition to talking about his tradition and the various errors it contained, she also pointed out that one of the merits of the of the *Philosophical Investigations* was “the extremely punctilious, individualising, never generalisable nature of every single observation of the book”. “Even now”, writes Rossi-Landi, “I can almost hear her tone of voice as she said emphatically, ‘what Wittgenstein says in one point should never be connected with what he says in another point’, or words to that effect” (Rossi-Land 2002, 186; first published in Italian in Rossi-Landi 1968).

From that 1 May 1953 and over the following decades, the fame and influence of the *Philosophical Investigations* and of their author, hitherto known only as the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1922) and for the lectures, courses and seminars held at Cambridge from 1930 to 1949, gradually grew to the point that, at the end of the last century, a survey of North American philosophers declared them, perhaps not without some exaggeration, to be the most important philosophical text of the twentieth century (see D. Lackey 1999, 331-2).

This is not the place to reconstruct the history of the *Philosophical Investigations* and their interpretations. Here we can limit ourselves to recalling, first of all, the two questions that have always accompanied the *Philosophical Investigations* and on which an impressive number of essays and books have been written. The first concerns the relationship between the *Philosophical Investigations* and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, an issue that Wittgenstein himself brought to the fore when he wrote in the *Preface* that at a certain point he had come to the conclusion that it would be better to publish ‘his “old ideas” (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) together with the new ones (the *Philosophical Investigations*), believing that “the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my older way of thinking”. And this was all the more true because, ever since he had returned to philosophy sixteen years earlier (in 1929), he could not fail to recognise that he had made “grave mistakes” (PI, 4) in his first book. For a long time, these remarks of Wittgenstein’s were read in a one-sided way, mainly by insisting that he had spoken of “grave mistakes” and “contrast”. Later on, things changed not only because the path that led Wittgenstein from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the *Philosophical Investigations* was better and more thoroughly known, but also because several interpreters (especially the so-called “neo-Wittgensteinians”), perhaps just as one-sidedly, emphasised what seemed to them to be strong elements of continuity between the first and second book (see Diamond 1991 and Crary, Rupert 2000).

The second question also has its origin in the *Preface*, particularly where Wittgenstein observes that his book “is really just an album”, collecting “a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of [...] long and meandering journeys” through “a wide field of thought” (PI, 2-4). Now, on the one hand, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that this album character depends on the “very nature” of his investigation; on the other, he seems to acknowledge that it is also a consequence of his inability to write a book in which thoughts pass “from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence” (PI, 2). In this case, too, the scholars are divided between those who think that Wittgenstein was unable to write the book (in the traditional sense of the term) that he hoped to write (see Hilmy 1989) and those – beginning with Anscombe, as we have seen – who believe that the form of the *Philosophical Investigations* corresponds to Wittgenstein’s way of practising philosophy (see, p. e., Pichler 2004). This question, moreover, is closely linked to another and even more crucial one, namely whether the *Philosophical Investigations* should be read in the light of the indications given by their author in the many observations that he devotes to philosophy and its aims and methods (see, in particular PI, §§89-133), or whether it would be better, as many analytic philosophers believe, to set aside these indications and the anti-theoretical and anti-systematic attitude that they express, and to start looking in the *Philosophical Investigations* for theses to discuss, theories (or sketches of theories) to verify and arguments (or sketches of arguments) to evaluate.

As can easily be seen, these two issues are part of (and embedded in) the complex history of the interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which has been marked by many phases and turning points that deserve careful and close investigation. For example, after an initial phase dominated by interpretations, mainly by Wittgenstein’s students, in which the *Philosophical Investigations* was read as the source and inspiration of the so-called “ordinary language philosophy” and as the clearest example of an anti-metaphysical and therapeutic conception of philosophy, there was a long period (roughly coinciding with the last three decades of the last century) in which many Wittgenstein scholars (and others) engaged with the interpretation that Saul Kripke had given to the *Philosophical Investigations* in his 1982 book (Kripke 1982), and in particular of the sections on rule-following and the so-called “private language argument”, to the point where it sometimes seemed that Kripke’s interpretation was more important than Wittgenstein’s text itself. It should be noted that this Kripkean season, which had at its centre a Wittgenstein engaged in posing problems, producing arguments and seeking solutions, marked the closest proximity between the author of the *Philosophical Investigations* and analytic philosophy.

At the end of the last century, a new and different phase (we are not saying “better” or “worse” here) of Wittgensteinian criticism opened up, in which the stage was largely occupied by Cora Diamond, James Conant and, following in their footsteps, by an increasingly numerous (and fierce) group of neo-Wittgensteinians. This phase also saw the rediscovery of interpretations that had been on the fringes of the history of the *Philosophical Investigations*, notably Stanley Cavell’s reading (1979), or the new readings of the late G. P. Baker (2006). The most striking novelty of the neo-Wittgensteinians is that they have decidedly opted for a “therapeutic” and “anti-metaphysical” Wittgenstein, without any distinction between *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, albeit in a different sense from that which was present in the readings of the 1950s and 1960s. As Alice Crary points out from the very first page of her *Introduction to The New Wittgenstein*, all neo-Wittgensteinians agree that “Wittgenstein’s primary aim in philosophy is [...] a *therapeutic* one” (Crary/Rupert 2000, 1).

Obviously, the above is a very partial sketch or outline of the history of the *Philosophical Investigations*. It would be easy to point to many readings and approaches that do not fit in with those just mentioned, and to recall the many debates that have plumbed this or that aspect, this or that passage. To take just one example, consider how much space has been devoted in the literature to the meaning of the reference to Augustine with which §1 opens, or to the many controversial readings that have been made of that “language [...] meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B” (PI, §2) that Wittgenstein introduces in §2, together with what he will continue to call “the method of §2”. But, if we want to broaden our view, we could also recall how the *Philosophical Investigations* have been read and used outside the Wittgensteinian or analytic environment, by thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard (1979) or Jürgen Habermas (1985). In short, the seventy years of the *Philosophical Investigations* have been rich, intense and complex and Wittgenstein’s book has often proved capable, as he hoped, of stimulating many to think for themselves (see PI, 4).

The purpose of this special issue of JoLMA is not to make an (impossible) evaluation of seventy years of philosophical engagement with the *Philosophical Investigations*. What we have set out to do is to give space to a number of scholars, from different backgrounds and with different perspectives, who, over the decades, have addressed the philosophy and philosophical method of the *Philosophical Investigations* in different ways. We have tried, as far as possible, to privilege the diversity of voices, not favouring any particular line of interpretation and not worrying about being faithful to unlikely “orthodoxies”. The result, we believe, is an issue that can make a significant contribution to a better understanding of the *Philosophical*

Investigations, but also to the state of contemporary philosophising, or at least of that philosophising that finds in Wittgenstein an important point of reference. Even with regard to the topics to be dealt with, the authors were given complete freedom to choose the subject that best corresponded to their research interests and that they felt could shed some light on the *Philosophical Investigations* and, in some cases, on its influence and presence in later philosophy. The result is an issue that is not merely a container for different essays, but has, as we hoped, has a character that we would like to call “polyphonic”.

During the long gestation of this issue, Marjorie Perloff passed away. We would like to recall here the kindness with which she agreed to contribute to this issue, and the beautiful and intense email exchanges we had about Wittgenstein and the many projects she still had in mind. This issue is dedicated to her.

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