

# The Interlocutor Equivocation

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The *Investigations*' interlocutor<sup>1</sup> has been portrayed in later Wittgensteinian commentary in a wide number of roles, each resulting in a different account of just what kind of device it represents. To give three examples, it has been seen as: a nascent tendency that, unless addressed, leads into more developed and troublesome philosophical quandaries (Goldfarb, 1-2) the average member of the audience of Wittgenstein's seminars at Cambridge (Baker, 113); or a dialogical, insistent, almost naïve sparring partner, whose essentialist objections and remarks provide the dispensable comments upon which the author can demonstrate his therapeutic methods (Floyd, 143 & 145). I will suggest that these three readings all share a common emphasis upon what it is that the interlocutor represents, methodologically speaking, in Wittgenstein's later work. This emphasis will be critiqued, and an alternate reading suggested. Finally, I will argue that if one accepts this alternate reading, it follows that the use of the term "interlocutor" in secondary literature often equivocates between two discrete meanings – a textual device and a real life subject involved in therapy – to dubious effect.

The starting three examples, despite their different emphases, share a common conception of the interlocutor's role in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. They read Wittgenstein as seeking to bring to life a series of tendencies, confusions or arguments that the reader is likely to encounter when practicing therapeutic philosophy, either on herself or with her own "interlocutor", say, a fellow member of her faculty. Wittgenstein, then, is often taken to be demonstrating a method that might potentially be adopted and used by those who read his work. If the interlocutor does indeed represent an actual dialogist of some form (that differs according to alternate interpretations), as it seems to in our given examples, it is then sensible for his reader to perceive such a voice as the expression of a set of predictions as to the quandaries that Wittgenstein considered us most likely to succumb to.

Adopting any of these readings has an effect upon our conception of what Wittgenstein's later project hoped to achieve, and the methods it employed in pursuit of its goals. Each reading places a different stress upon what problems Wittgenstein was trying to help us resolve, and in so doing, also places a different accent on what therapeutic philosophy – the continuation of his methods, but practiced by other philosophers – might look like.<sup>2</sup> If by our familiarity with the interlocutorial positions and responses we are able to recognise such quandaries in ourselves or others, then we might hope to roughly 'do as Wittgenstein did' and apply dialogical therapy in a way similar to that found in the *Investigations*. We would essentially employ the interlocutorial voice as a malleable set of templates or guidelines for this undertaking, variegated according to the particular exegetical emphasis one places upon the inter-

locutor's nature; nascent, educated, naïve, essentialist, etc.

There seems to be a common problem with such hopes. That is, by casting the interlocutor in any of these roles, we assign to Wittgenstein a series of interconnected hypotheses by which philosophical quandaries and disquiets can be predicted, diagnosed and relieved. While considering the purpose of the interlocutor as demonstrative does chime well with references to method such as that found in *Investigations* §133, any reading that treats the interlocutor as a demonstration of how to proceed in the therapy of others or oneself seems to lead to a position where it is read as Wittgenstein's uncanny attempt to depict for the would-be therapist the imagined likely responses of those who suffer from philosophical confusion. Imagine – the interlocutor could be a layman with nascent tendencies, a philosopher of science or the therapist herself, and the interlocutorial demonstration might have been authored twenty, forty, or sixty years previous to the event of a particular disquiet or assertion, with the author of course having never met this particular interlocutor, perhaps never even been party to their language or culture. If we really wish to conceive of the interlocutor in this way we are left with the ill-tasting assertion that Wittgenstein's representations of the typical/possible respondents to philosophical quandaries display a kind of timeless, stable quality independent of a particular conceptual confusion's owner.<sup>3</sup> For example, Gordon Baker's persuasive account of Wittgenstein's notion of the person-relative nature of philosophical problems does not seem to accord with any assertion of the interlocutor in a predictive or diagnostic way.

From such a position it begins to look as if the success of the *Investigations*, in a rather ironic turn, hangs upon the degree of universality that can be accredited to the remarks and portrayals of such 'predictive' dialogues, thus potentially resulting in the project of conceptual investigation being dependent upon census for its claims of efficacy. It should be quite uncontroversial for us to note at this point that one should strive to avoid unnecessarily asserting any state of affairs of the highest generality in regards to Wittgenstein's later methods. To do so could be seen as incongruous with many of his methodological remarks.

We should perhaps go a little further in this manner, laying against what has been said so far a brief account of some other remarks that also do not sit well alongside this portrayal of the interlocutor. From the frequency of remarks made in writing and conversation by Wittgenstein, we can be fairly certain that his brand of philosophy was not intended as being replicable, but stimulative and heteronomous in effect (Eg PI preface, MS 134 143: 13). Further, the manner of stimulation his writing offered was not intended to be a stable system upon which a school could be founded (*ibid*) but rather to be judged by its varying effects upon those who used it (PI preface). It was sensitive to the time in which it was written, and might indeed

<sup>1</sup> I will, for the sake of simplicity, refer to the interlocutor in the singular. This does not reflect any exegetical assumption on my part.

<sup>2</sup> A full account of such emphases and their effects upon relevant commentaries would take us too far off track. It is only necessary for my argument for us to acknowledge that how one thinks of the interlocutor will have a strong effect upon one's subsequent interpretation of such texts as the *Philosophical Investigations*.

<sup>3</sup> This condition does not seem much of a problem for PMS Hacker, and for this reason, this critique is not directed against his work.

appear to be banal or gibberish to people of a later time (CV 43), or even to those of his own time who did not suffer from the same problems as he (BB 58-9). It was expressly intended to have only the most indirect of influences (MS 134 143: 13), and was diametrically opposed to imitation, of thoughts learnt, not discovered for oneself (Gasking & Jackson, 53 & Heller, 91). Above all, we can say that Wittgenstein's philosophy was intended to exemplify (and incite) a kind of working on one's own conceptions, and what one expects from those conceptions (P §86). In this light, it seems more sensible to understand the interlocutor as a method of expressing such a working on oneself, of making it speak clearly and forcefully (cf. Rhees, 153) of the tendencies and shortcomings that the author found in his own thought, depicted in order to bring about a heteronomous kind of work in its readers; that is, to inspire, not inculcate.

Therefore, when we read his later work it seems entirely possible that we might not be reading Wittgenstein's philosophy, contingently packaged in easily-digested, follow-my-lead dialogues, but rather witnessing Wittgenstein's best attempt at giving voice to the wide scope of grammatical confusions and anxieties that *he himself* struggled to emancipate himself from, using dialogue analogously to give a developing, interactive voice to the character of such problems. From the point of view of this reading we therefore do not witness so much a performance of many characters, some confused, others clear-sighted, but rather a mind diagnosing and confronting its own temptations, generalisations, anxieties, conceptions and unsubstantiated assertions. (Hagberg, 499) It is helpful when considering the worth of this position to remember that Wittgenstein commented that "[n]early all my writings are private conversations with myself. Things that I say to myself *tête-à-tête*." (CV 77) While it is equally true that Wittgenstein also commented of his work that one should not busy oneself with what presumably only applies to oneself (*ibid*, 63), it seems sensible to suppose that the wide-scale applicability/replicability envisaged by many of his interpreters, and thus the accompanying need for positing a method which entails the possibility of such application, is an exegetical theme not native such later works as the *Investigations*. In this way, a self-interrogative reading of the *Investigations'* interlocutor has an effect on how we perceive what it is that Wittgenstein is doing and advocating, bringing it more into line with his many comments regarding his methods' unsuitability for wide-scale replication. If we do choose to perceive the interlocutor as a textual technique, used to play out a series of interlocking thoughts, as a way of recording and developing the 'life' of the tendencies and anxieties Wittgenstein experienced over a sixteen-year period of philosophical investigation, then consequently we find ourselves abruptly limited in regards to the ways we might feel comfortable using the word "interlocutor".

For example, a sense in which the term "interlocutor" is used in some commentaries is to refer to a participant in therapy, a method by which a person is brought to acknowledge and accept new aspects or comparisons which compromise the previous pictures that captivated their way of thinking. Here the word is used to describe an ideal or actual individual, engaged in therapeutic dialogue with the Wittgensteinian philosopher. For example, Hutchinson and Read remark that "perspicuity is accorded to the presentation that achieves the bringing to light of new aspects which are freely accepted by one's philosophical

interlocutor."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the interlocutor is defined as just that person upon whom therapy is practiced. From here the potential for equivocation becomes clear; namely a bifurcation between a series of specific textual techniques used to sketch out the author's personal disquiets, and the living, breathing philosopher whom one is addressing from the adopted role of philosophical therapist. For if the interlocutor makes sense as a textual technique used by Wittgenstein to record his own temptations and problematic philosophical habits, there is little reason remaining for us to comprehend and interpret a different person through the lens of these records. Why would it be useful to hold up Wittgenstein's "album", and try to discern the manner in which the sketches contained therein allow us to diagnose and treat other philosophers? Even granting that it might well work in *some* cases, (in other words, a method far from universal in effect), this practice still raises a number of concerns.

I would like to suggest that this equivocation is unjust to both Wittgenstein's textual technique and the philosopher who sits before us. As already noted, if one treats Wittgenstein's voice as constituting the author's pre-empting, or characterisation, of the kinds of confusions one is likely to run into in philosophy, his method starts to look suspiciously universal in intent and disrespectful of a person's contingent disquiet – or equally, their lack thereof – that it may be used to try to diagnose and treat. Pre-emption also runs counter to the notion that Wittgenstein sought indirect effects from his work, sought to create no followers or teachers of his work, and intended only the stimulation of his reader's heteronomous thoughts, rather than the imposition of his own, for it suggests a stable mode of resolution for a stable type of problem. The painful struggle to square Wittgenstein's work with his self-professed non-theoretical method runs through a great deal of exegesis in the field, and in the light cast here seems to stem from a particular consideration of the method on display in the *Investigations* as being directly intended for the establishment and training of a cadre of philosophers who practice philosophy upon others as Wittgenstein apparently does, namely 'therapeutically', with the interlocutor acting as the crucial demonstrative element in this practice. When of course, Wittgenstein often recorded his discomfort at the idea of being imitated in any way by those that would come after him.

This equivocation equally seems to usher the "interlocutor" one engages with in discourse into a pre-configured characterisation of a mistake or tendency (one that Wittgenstein experienced and investigated); the therapist apparently exercises her acquired ability to perceive her "interlocutor's" orchestrating picture of language beneath their complex and substantiated arguments, thus allowing the detail, research, explanative force and robustness of their argument to be potentially accounted for as the signature symptoms of a mind in the grip of a picture. The therapist who would employ such a technique is in danger of perceiving their partner in dialogue in a pre-determined way, seeking to map onto their problems a treatment to which they must either willingly undergo, or face a potential diagnosis of captivation, denial or even worse, should the therapy prove ineffective, of lacking philosophical problems<sup>5</sup>. It is telling that this kind of activity would appear to be in direct opposition to a number of

<sup>4</sup> Hutchinson & Read 2005, 436. See also Hutchinson & Read 2008, 149, for a discussion of "our" interlocutor as "a diverse and dialectically structured range of philosophical impulses."

<sup>5</sup> Z §456; see Morris 2006, 6 for her strong equation between a philosopher for whom therapy has no benefit and a suffering from a loss of philosophical problems.

frank and direct caveats left by the author. When introducing his work, Wittgenstein often reiterated that the effects of his work were conditional upon a very specific type of reader (TLP preface), in that his philosophy might only prove useful for those already in possession of a similar style or spirit of thought (PR foreword), rare in number (PI preface), who demonstrate a kind of rebellious or dissatisfied relationship to their language (P §90). If this notion of philosophy's condition of suitability is related to its reader's already established instinct for rebellion, and is only likely to be present in a few of his readers, then how can we square Wittgenstein's interlocutorial technique as being predictive or demonstrative of a wide range of stable behaviour?

I have already suggested that the unchartable nature of the effect that taking the *Investigations* seriously might have upon its reader appears to be an active dimension of its author's aims. If we treat this reading of the *Investigations*' style seriously we are obliged to go beyond observing Wittgenstein's self-interrogation and to actively take part in our own non-contiguous work. We do not seem likewise obliged to map a record of the anxieties and struggles of one man onto our dealings with countless of our fellow philosophers. As just one example of where such a method might lead us; it is often asserted (E.g. Morris, 6 and Baker, 146) that, because Wittgenstein suffered acute anxiety in his struggles with philosophical problems, it is a fundamental characteristic of philosophical problems that they are all a form of anxiousness. Yet is not the anxiety on display in the *Investigations* the author's? Why should this necessitate a universal characterisation of philosophical problems as *intrinsically* anxious? And if they must be rooted in such a feeling, why might they not rather intrinsically resemble, say, being unable to scratch an itch in the middle of one's back? Or serially misquoting the punchlines of one's favourite jokes? Do we wish to appeal to or explain this anxiety as being hardwired into thought or language? How could positing anxiety as a fundamental characteristic of all philosophical problems *not* constitute a decisive movement towards a philosophical hypothesis? And how could philosophical disquiets be particular to an individual if they have such universal characteristics? (cf. MS 115.35) In short, at just what point is the reader informed that Wittgenstein wishes to speak universally, of what characteristics philosophical problems must possess?

By adopting a position in which Wittgenstein is not positing unsubstantiated universal characteristics of philosophical problems, it looks likely that we cannot see his interlocutorial dialogues as intended to directly causally trigger a shift in his reader's concepts or notions – the most we should want to say is that they are intended to incite the reader into being able to shift for themselves when they encounter conceptual difficulties (LWPP-I §686), perhaps in a manner unforeseen by their author. It seems even more pressing that we perhaps should not see it as our duty to seek to causally trigger such a shift in *others*, acting as a kind of proxy for Wittgenstein, by employing an equivocation in which a textual technique is taken as a stable divination of what problem will occur and what technique will resolve it. It follows from this that any role of “therapist” (if we feel we must retain this reference to *Investigations* §133) could only be enacted by the reader herself, having been successfully prompted into undertaking the iterative questioning-tasks implied by the *Investigations*' peculiar, unresolved, interlocutorial style.

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