

# Wittgensteinian Philosophy and the Culture of the Commentary<sup>1</sup>

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## *Preamble*

The object of the present paper is the *philosophical commentary*, a form of literature that once predominated in all major philosophical cultures from classical Greece to Renaissance Italy, but which has more recently fallen into comparative disuse. Commentaries on the writings of German thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx and Heidegger have, certainly, kept the form alive to some extent in recent centuries; in the tradition of philosophy that was initiated by Descartes and Locke, however, and which constitutes the contemporary mainstream, the commentary genre has been utilized in systematic ways hardly at all, almost always by those concerned with other traditions, most especially with the philosophy of classical Greece.

Why, then, should what has earlier proved so vital a plant in the literature of philosophy be so conspicuously absent from the philosophy of today? And why, uniquely among the canonical texts of contemporary analytic philosophy, should it be the writings of Wittgenstein that have spawned the growth of a commentary literature?

## *What is a commentary?*

It has been taken for granted in the above that there is a sharp distinction between 'commentary' on the one hand, and works of 'secondary literature' on the other. Roughly speaking we can say that where examples of the former – which typically feature the word 'commentary' in their title – are oriented around the very words of the relevant object-text, this textual orientation gives way in the latter to a concern for *ideas* and *arguments*. Clearly matters here are rather complicated, and one can easily come up with examples of intervening forms whose classification is on this basis difficult to decide. It is possible, though, by examining the focal instances of the commentary genre – for example the "long" Aristotle-commentaries of Averroes ("the Commentator") – to specify certain marks of the commentary which suffice to distinguish it strictly from works of secondary literature as nowadays standardly conceived. Above all commentaries – not only philosophical commentaries but also legal, religious, and other commentary forms – are set apart by the fact that

- (1) they deal with their respective object-texts line-for-line or paragraph-for-paragraph; they are built out of actual segments of the object-text itself (or out of stylized reminders, where the author of the commentary can presuppose that his readers know the object-text by heart);
- (2) their order and structure is determined by the order and structure of this object-text;
- (3) they deal with the ideas conveyed by this text exclusively *in loco citato*.

Interpretative works, in contrast, deal with texts primarily for the sake of the ideas which they contain; they will take these ideas in the order that is dictated by the needs of the interpretation; and they will avail themselves of the freedom to discuss the ideas without concerning themselves with the precise original formulation.

## *Why do commentaries arise?*

Commentaries grow up around a philosophical work, crudely and trivially speaking, because it has become necessary to make this work more easily accessible. This is normally for a plurality of reasons, not all of them strictly philosophical. The first real commentary to a philosophical author seems to have been Antisthenes' explanation of Heraclitus, a philosopher who already in antiquity was referred to as "the dark one" in reflection of the obscurity of his style.<sup>2</sup>

Commentaries will arise, however, not only because of the density or impenetrability of a given work, but also because a text is too short, or too aphoristic, or too fragmentarily preserved for immediate understanding. Thus English philosophical texts have been spared the hand of commentary not least because they are normally available in complete and uncorrupted forms and employ a language still in common use.

The fact that commentaries are defined precisely by the fact that they are built out of actual segments of the object-text will imply that commentaries as such will arise where the very words of a text enjoy their own intrinsic importance (as in the case of an age-old esoteric ritual or legal process). We might refer to this as the hagiographic dimension of the commentary literature, the term "hagiography" being understood in a sense wide enough to include all the different sorts of veneration or respect for an author which are able to justify the expenditure of exceptional efforts in grappling with the difficulties of his text.

It is understandable in this light why commentaries should have been produced especially in relation to works that have enjoyed a certain national or religious significance – works that are seen as contributing to the cultural integrity or exclusivity and to the moral training of a given society and which may have come to enjoy official recognition as such. Such master texts are distinguished not only by the fact that they are in some sense objects of veneration in the given society. They are often marked further by special mnemotechnical powers, reflecting the fact that many of them arose at a time when the only available verbal technology for the preservation of ideas and values in transmission was that of the rhythmic word.<sup>3</sup> And they are distinguished also by their breadth or universality. Consider, for example, the case of Virgil, or Dante, or Shakespeare. Or consider the case of Homer ("from whom all men have learned since the beginning"), who was responsible for establishing that common Greek language which allowed the whole Greek people for the first time to feel its unity, in spite of all differences of race and class:

the poets in general and Homer in particular were not only considered as the source of instruction in ethics and administrative skills but also enjoyed a sort of institutional status in Greek society. This status received, as it were, state support, because they supplied a training which the social and political mechanism relied on for its efficient working.<sup>4</sup>

So intimate was the connection between master text and commentary that the poet Gower, when setting out to produce, in his *Confessio Amantis*, "a bok for Engelondes sake", was careful to supply the work with its own apparatus of glosses and summaries and with an opening passage designed to resemble the prologue to a Scriptural commentary.<sup>5</sup>

Philosophers, too, have sought repeatedly in the course of history to usurp in their writings the role of the Homeric encyclopedia. It is this which accounts for the desire, still alive today – though not in all philosophical cultures – to extend one's philosophizing across the entire available breadth of philosophy in the way that this was done for example

by Aristotle or Kant or Hegel. And it is more than anything else the fact that works of philosophy themselves may enjoy to some degree the role of master texts in certain cultures that accounts for the fact that philosophy itself is taken seriously in those cultures, both by its practitioners and also by a wider public.

A prime text may however enjoy not merely a cultural but also an evidential status, so that commentaries may arise also in reflection of the fact that given texts come to be awarded a role in the evaluation and accreditation of philosophical or scientific (or legal or religious) doctrines. Thus the medieval term *auctor* “denoted someone who was at once a writer and an authority, someone not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed.”<sup>6</sup>

In much of Marxist philosophy, too, one writes commentaries because the agreement of an author with the very word of Marx or Engels or Lenin counts as evidence for the correctness of what one has to say. It is especially with scholastic philosophy, however, that the phenomenon in question is most apparent. The frequent incidence of acknowledged or unacknowledged quotations from other writings in medieval works is an external sign of the evidence-giving role of ‘tradition’ or ‘authority’ in the science of the day, a role nowadays played by empirical methods of scientific validation. The opinion of the individual scientist acquires validity, in the Middle Ages, only to the extent that it can be shown to be supported by the prevailing opinion among the *auctores*. Thus the scientist’s job is to assemble a representative selection of experts or authorities in a way which will establish the compatibility with tradition of the view he favours.<sup>7</sup>

Of course not all commentaries reflect either hagiography or slavish adherence to tradition. In every age commentaries have been written in a spirit of sometimes pugilistic criticism. When Aquinas comments on Augustine he is most disrespectful. Some commentators treat texts merely as decorative vehicles for the transmission of their own ideas. When Gilbert of Poitiers comments on Boethius’ *De Trinitate*, he transforms the whole philosophical basis in so doing. Some commentaries are written in order to demonstrate the importance of a work hitherto dismissed on all sides as unimportant. Yet each of these genres is, I would submit, capable of arising and surviving only against the background of an entrenched commentary tradition of a hagiographical or exegetical sort. For the given authors achieve their effects precisely by employing the schemes and devices of a commentary literature of the more standard sort.

Note, too, that even the writing of hagiographic commentaries can be compatible with the expounding of new and critical ideas. Already in Jewish, Eastern Christian and Indian commentary much criticism is allowed, though only if the code is superficially adhered to. Thus for example one may never say of an authority that he is wrong or inconsistent, but only for example that he is “difficult to understand”. In this way there may be effected an infiltration of new and original ideas, though these must never be announced as such.

### *Six conditions*

We can accordingly list the following conditions for the appearance of commentaries around a given text in a given culture. First we have three necessary conditions:

i. The text must enjoy a certain density or inaccessibility or seeming incompleteness or foreignness, so that it is not readily understandable to all (not even to the intellectual elite).

ii. The language and style of the text must serve in this culture as the object of a quite special (for example literary) fascination.

iii. The exact words of the author must be of importance as such (it must for some reason be seen as worthwhile to grapple with the difficulties posed by these very words).

In addition, we can formulate three dispositional laws to the effect that commentaries will be especially forthcoming where:

iv. Tradition or authority is treated in the given culture as a principal court of appeal in the evaluation of scientific or other sorts of assertions.

v. The text is conceived and produced as part of a universal or encyclopedic philosophy.

vi. The text enjoys a certain cultural or national or religious significance in its own right. (This is sometimes at one remove, where a minor text inherits significance from the independently established notoriety of its author, or is granted retrospectively a special historical significance, for example because its language is no longer used.)

These six conditions are of course not independent. On the contrary, they map interconnecting aspects of a single underlying structure. This is seen for example in the fact that, where the texts characteristic of English-language philosophy since Locke satisfy none of the listed conditions, many texts of German philosophy satisfy them all. And in relation to other cultures, too, the six conditions can be seen to be closely linked. Consider the results of applying them to the case of, say, the Talmud, or the American Constitution.

### *The case of Wittgenstein*

Commentaries have been made, now, to Wittgenstein's writings not because Wittgenstein employs in his philosophy a difficult language. Rather, such commentaries are made first of all in reflection of the special difficulties created by the peculiar forms in which these writings have come down to us – something which holds true, albeit for different reasons, just as much for the *Tractatus* as for Wittgenstein's later writings. Secondly, however, commentaries are made to Wittgenstein's writings because it has become necessary to fill the gaps, and to create the context and interconnections of the thoughts expressed therein. Wittgenstein's writings accordingly enjoy just that density, inaccessibility and seeming incompleteness that we referred to above as the first condition for the generation of a commentary literature. Moreover, it is undeniable that the language and style of his writings makes them the object of a special intrinsic fascination. At least to many of his followers, Wittgenstein's exact words are of importance as such. And to a much greater extent than is the case in relation to the other principal figures of the analytic tradition, Wittgenstein's writings can justifiably be seen as part of a universal or encyclopedic philosophy.

Wittgenstein, then, uniquely among the authors standardly associated with this tradition and almost certainly against his own desires, has succeeded in creating philosophical *texts* in the classical sense, objects which are worthy of commentary and which enjoy a certain literary merit. Other analytic authors have normally not been interested in producing texts in this sense (for example because they shun aesthetic or literary concerns as unscientific). Or where they have displayed such an interest (as for example in the case of Robert Nozick's "unreadable book"<sup>8</sup>), they have markedly failed in their attempts.

### *School philosophy*

It was the duty of the rhapsodes in Ancient Greece not only to recite, but also to explain Homer. The first commentaries were in this sense quite literally inextricable from the text (song) which served as their object. Thus the roots of the commentary tradition reach far back into the times of oral culture, and the persistence of this legacy is seen in the conventions still in force in the Renaissance era, for example in respect of the stock forms

of the prologue or *ingressus* in which the commentary introduces itself to its readers.<sup>9</sup> What is ruled out in the case of a sung text, for example the presence of a title page, is missing also in most medieval commentaries. Such commentaries reveal also, in comparison with what is current today, a quite different understanding of literary property, of plagiarism, and of citation. The concept of an author as the creator of a text as some sort of enduring, transportable object (a concept of the sort that is laid down in our present laws of copyright) can gain no hold in an oral culture, and aspects of it came to development in the manuscript-culture only slowly, so that as late as the 14th century many commentaries are still constructed via a simple and unashamed paraphrasing or condensing or gluing together of earlier works.

Philosophy (science), in an oral culture, is perforce not a body of fixed doctrine which can be treated as it were impersonally and from without. Rather it is a serious discipline of mnemotechnics, designed to bring about the training of the minds who will serve as the carriers of the discipline into the future. It is this which explains why the new-fangled chicanery of “writing” was initially seen by some to be a positive danger. As the possibly spurious 7th Letter of Plato has it: “no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public”. And:

when anyone sees anywhere the written work of anyone, whether that of a lawgiver in his laws or whatever it may be in some other form, the subject treated cannot have been his most serious concern (344 c).

Again and again Plato criticizes the Sophists for the exaggerated respect which they demonstrated for the written word. Such an attitude, as Plato conceived matters,

was bound to weaken or even to destroy physical memory, on which the whole oral tradition of the past was based, and in the end would be a threat to true philosophy, which needs the personal intercourse of the dialectician to plant the living word in the soul of the listener.<sup>10</sup>

Thus true and serious philosophy can take place only within the compass of a school; it is constituted not as a fixed body of ‘propositions’ but as an oral tradition. And a school is initially defined precisely by the fact that its members accept a common authority (Plato, Aristotle, Thomas, Scotus). Indeed, a philosopher in the Middle Ages inscribes himself as member of a school because he wishes to grasp the meaning of just *these* texts, so that the work of the school consists in nothing other than the making of commentaries. The schools will tend, moreover, to be marked by an opposition between two kinds of writing, the esoteric and exclusive “inner writings”, which will contain the properly important doctrines and formulations directed to initiates, and more popular writings directed to the “outside”. While the surviving writings of Plato seem in many cases to bear all the marks of such popular outer writings, those of Aristotle are rather internal *logoi* of a school. As Owens puts it in relation to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “In general, the style and technique of the Books have not the character of writings ever intended to be ‘published’, in the sense of being directed to an undetermined public.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, they must be interpreted in relation to definite school activity.

Where they are negative in their attitude towards a particular Aristotelian doctrine, they presume ignorance of that doctrine *only* in the “hearers”. They reveal nothing of Aristotle’s own knowledge or ignorance, at the time, of that particular doctrine.<sup>12</sup>

For this reason, too, students of philosophy will require the assistance of commentaries as their distance increases from the prime sources of their school, and it is above all from this point of view that we are to understand the practice of compiling the ‘long’ or ‘major’

or 'literal' commentaries to the corpus of Aristotle's writings by Averroes or Thomas, which stick firmly to the order and content of the given object-work, reproducing each successive text-passage in its entirety and seeking to establish its 'correct' interpretation. With the growth in size of the accredited master literature there come to be required also compendia of the sort illustrated by the *libri sententiarum* of Isidore of Seville or Peter of Lombardy, which are systematically organized compilations of quotations from the Church Fathers and other *auctores*, in some ways designed to achieve for theology what codification had achieved in the fields of civil and canon law. Question-commentaries such as the *Sic et Non* of Abelard extend this model by citing conflicting pairs of sentences drawn from authoritative sources, accompanying these with attempts at systematic resolution of the contradictions. All these forms are a direct expression of teaching-practices current in colleges and seminaries in the Middle Ages. Thomas and Scotus had to write commentaries, simply because they were university professors endowed with the task of conveying and explaining from day to day successive portions of the relevant master texts.

And now it seems that Wittgenstein, too – for all that it is difficult to imagine him actually saying this out loud – understood the true and serious business of philosophy as something that could properly take place only within the compass of a school. Philosophy is for him after all not a body of doctrine but an *activity*. Moreover, his treatment of Waismann and others not only makes clear that Wittgenstein was concerned to preserve a certain exclusivity of his following; it also reveals traces of just that opposition between esoteric "inner writings" and more popular writings for the 'outside' which was characteristic of school philosophy in its earlier manifestations. Wittgensteinian philosophy has been marked also by the gradual spreading of the phenomena of glossing and compilation. For where Wittgenstein himself is no longer available to explain the meaning and connection of his gnomic sayings, then it became necessary to produce commentaries on and epitomes of his thought. Compilations are made even of the very scraps and shavings of his writings, in accordance with the venerable doctrine put forward by Albert the Great in his commentary on the Book of Baruch to the effect that one must "collect the scraps" (John vi.12), for everything that "proceeds from the mouth of a blessed man must be well said".<sup>13</sup>

### *A conclusion*

The commentary belongs essentially to the sphere of preserved communication, as contrasted with the "casual and ephemeral converse of daily transaction".<sup>14</sup> And we nowadays tend naturally to assume – not least as a result of the influence of Wittgenstein himself – that this area of common speech is fundamental, where the area of ethos and experience that is preserved in the prime texts of universal or encyclopedic philosophy is somehow supernumerary and derivative. Something like this seems to underlie the assumption common among Anglo-Saxon philosophers to the effect that the activity of logical and philosophical puzzle-solving ought properly to precede the (sometimes optional) business of coping with the old-established master texts of the discipline of philosophy. From the non-Anglo-Saxon perspective, in contrast, which is to say from the perspective of a philosophical commentary culture, it is the preserved word that is fundamental. As Hugutio of Pisa expressed it around 1200, the *auctoritas* that is possessed by the master texts of such a culture is a matter of *sententia digna imitatione*, of wise sayings worthy of imitation.<sup>15</sup> For it was once recognized by all philosophical cultures that certain individuals enjoy a peculiar facility, or *tacit knowledge*, in the business of philosophy. And as Oakeshott points out, tacit or practical knowledge "can

neither be taught nor learned, but only imparted and acquired. It exists only in practice".<sup>16</sup> Hence, just as it was recognized in all earlier cultures that apprentice painters need to learn the tacit skills of their art by copying the paintings of the masters, so also it was recognized that students of philosophy need to imitate the activity and style of thinking of the philosophical masters by commenting on their works. From this perspective, at least, the activities of contemporary Wittgenstein-commentators are only to be welcomed – though for reasons which are not in all respects compatible either with Wittgenstein's own image of himself or with the content of his philosophy.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Johannes Brandl for perceptive comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX, 15 and Geffcken, p. 399.
- <sup>3</sup> As Havelock points out: "This is the historical genesis, the *fons et origo*, the moving cause of that phenomenon we still call 'poetry'." (p. 43)
- <sup>4</sup> Havelock, p. 29. Cf. also Pfeiffer, p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Minnis, pp. 177ff.
- <sup>6</sup> Minnis, p. 10. See also Specht.
- <sup>7</sup> The rule of coherence with general scientific opinion has not, of course, lost its hold entirely as a method of validation. (Citation indexes, such as have been constructed with great effort for the major texts of medieval philosophy, continue to have their uses even today.) No longer is this rule taken to imply, however, that the scientist must cast what he has to say in the form of interpretations of theses already formulated by earlier masters; and no longer is it the case that the reputation of a scientist is a function of the number and breadth of the *auctores* he himself is in a position to cite.
- <sup>8</sup> See Nozick, p. 1.
- <sup>9</sup> See Minnis, pp. 18ff., 28f.; Sandkühler, pp. 24ff.
- <sup>10</sup> Pfeiffer, pp. 31f.
- <sup>11</sup> 1963, p. 75. See also Jaeger, pp. 136f.
- <sup>12</sup> Owens, p. 77. Thus:  
Where they use an aporetic technique, they presuppose only that the question at issue is not yet decided *in the minds of the 'hearers.'* ... The 'esoteric and quasi-personal' character of the treatises reflects only the actual concrete conditions which Aristotle acknowledges in a definite and very limited group of 'hearers.' (*loc. cit.*)
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Minnis, pp. 99, 204f. On the more general importance of the idea of orality in the understanding of Wittgenstein see the paper by J.C. Nyiri "On Esperanto" in this volume.
- <sup>14</sup> Havelock, p. 134.
- <sup>15</sup> Minnis, pp. 177ff.
- <sup>16</sup> 1962, p. 11. Recall the passage from Plato's 7th Letter quoted above.

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