

## (OVER)INTERPRETING WITTGENSTEIN

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# (OVER)INTERPRETING WITTGENSTEIN

*by*

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In memory of Burton Dreben  
*Friend, Teacher, Interpreter*

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## Preface

When in 1994 I first started worrying about the risks of overinterpretation Burton Dreben pooh-poohed the very idea; and then tried to extract from me exactly what I meant by “overinterpretation.” This book is the result of that extraction, a process that has taken several years to come to fruition but is, alas, still changing, developing and – hopefully – maturing. As such, perhaps it should not have been written, should not ever be written. For with the passing of time the enterprise of interpreting Wittgenstein takes on such volume, such depth, breadth, and width, that the meta-enterprise of surveying, reporting on, discussing, evaluating, *telling the story of* that project stands in peril of missing more than it can encompass. I have succumbed, nevertheless, to putting an arbitrary, and certainly temporary, end to the story.

Certain intellectual explanation must, however, be given concerning what went into the story. A narrative which tries to recount intellectual history must make choices of issues and, subsequently, thinkers. The moves between comprehensive detail, which does justice to every player, and overarching generality, which guides the story, are fraught with tension; that tension has both excited and unnerved the telling. The original intent of the storyteller was to relate a grand story, with mindful emphases taking the place of either-or choices. That is to say, when choices had to be made they were usually on the side of generality (in the service of clarity and conciseness) with justice being relegated to the status of notes. A more amicable way of putting it would describe this meta-project as choosing the forest over the trees precisely because this is a story of thickly crowded woods.

The topics covered in broad strokes included the “standard” interpretations of Wittgenstein as a philosopher of language, which then obviously expanded into the whole gamut of subjects which arise from the language-world relation: logic, nonsense, realism, skepticism, ethics, etc. The less



standard Wittgensteinian motifs, that are seemingly more popular at present, were constituted of mathematics, religion, social sciences, and continental philosophy. The omission of two central subjects – psychology and aesthetics – is a lacuna that must be redeemed with additional research. Such is also the status of *On Certainty*, the latest work done by and on Wittgenstein, which is now in the throes of intensely active interpretation (and not yet overinterpretation). More problematic is the new availability, for popular consumption, of the whole *Nachlass* in its native German. Why problematic rather than invigorating? Because scholarship on Wittgenstein now promises to change drastically, especially if done, as it should be done, on the original texts in their original language. Not only will the issue of editing come to the fore again, but the massive corpus of interpretations now with us stands the chance of becoming misinterpretation. Or perhaps we have been guilty of underinterpretation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many years, so many conversations. It would be impossible to list all those whose words – real, live words – went into this book. It might even seem unfitting that so many of the “heroes” of the story asked me questions and answered mine. In some strange sense this book might then be perceived as an empirical study of the Wittgensteinian community; its practitioners are the objects of my research. But there is great satisfaction in thanking the objects of one’s investigation; without them this could not have been instigated, researched, criticized, questioned, or appreciated.

First and foremost was always Burt Dreben, who opened my eyes to a different Wittgenstein. Afterwards there was a series of exchanges (some of which are still continuing) with people who must know of my thankfulness: Paul Benacerraf, John Canfield, Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, Peter Hacker, Jaakko Hintikka, Peter Hylton, Anat Matar, Kristóf Nyiri, Matt Ostrom, Hilary Putnam, Tom Ricketts, Stuart Shanker, and Morton White.

The last stages of this book were written at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton; my year there, and the support of friends and thinkers there, shows through every word.

On a personal note, deep thanks must be expressed to Yoav Ariel, Shlomo Biderman, Ruth Manor, and Zvi Tauber who never let me forget that I do philosophy; to my best friend, Alex Biletzki, who kept insisting that this story should be told; and to the memory of my father, who always told us, “Take your time!”