

Wittgenstein and His Interpreters

*Essays in Memory of
Gordon Baker*

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Chapter 10

The Uses of Wittgenstein's Beetle: *Philosophical Investigations* §293 and Its Interpreters

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293. If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means – must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?

Well, everyone tells me that *he* knows what pain is only from his own case! — Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle." No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. — Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. — But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? — If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty. — No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.¹

What is Wittgenstein attempting to show by his analogy of the beetle in the box? How successful is his use of the analogy?²

I Introduction: Baker on the Private Language Argument

In a series of three papers on the "private language argument," Gordon Baker raised a number of far-reaching objections to traditional interpretations of *Philosophical Investigations* section 243ff. as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Cartesian dualism. He proposed a very different framework of interpretation, one on which Wittgenstein's primary aim in those sections of the *Investigations* was "the elimination of prejudices that stand in the way of our noticing important aspects of what is perfectly familiar."³

Baker's critique of traditional approaches to Wittgenstein on private language turns on his demonstration that a number of widely shared assumptions about the nature of Wittgenstein's argument are mistaken, assumptions that are clearly stated in the influential early reviews of the *Philosophical Investigations* and are still taken for granted by many leading interpreters today. Two of the leading claims he advances in the course of his wide-ranging discussion are:

- (i) Wittgenstein's aim is not to provide a *reductio* argument against a particular conception of privacy, but rather to get his reader to see that such conceptions are absurd.
- (ii) His principal targets are not the views of leading figures in the history of philosophy, but his own earlier views, and the broader framework within which debates between "Cartesians" and "anti-Cartesians" take place.

This paper aims to critically evaluate and further articulate Baker's interpretive proposals by means of a close examination of the history of the interpretation of one strand in the "private language argument." Wittgenstein's "beetle in a box" argument (*Philosophical Investigations* section 293), usually construed as one of the principal expositions of such a *reductio ad absurdum*, is the focus of this paper, with the aim of casting light on broader concerns in the history of Wittgenstein interpretation.

The story of "Wittgenstein's beetle," like the story of the builders in section 2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, is one of a small group of imaginary scenarios which play a leading role in that book's central argument. It is also one of the most frequently retold, and most frequently cited, passages in the book. Like Plato's cave, it has taken on an afterlife, both as a standard item in the philosophy curriculum, and as a parable

that has been read in a bewildering variety of ways. It has even given its name to a recent collection of such philosophical narratives, Martin Cohen's *Wittgenstein's Beetle and Other Classic Thought Experiments* (2005). In this essay, I provide a brief and selective history of the beetle story's reception.

II Strawson's and Malcolm's Interpretations of the Beetle Story

Peter Strawson's and Norman Malcolm's reviews of the *Philosophical Investigations*, two of the most influential early readings of that book, both give §293 a central role in their interpretations of Wittgenstein on private language. Strawson's leading objection to Wittgenstein's discussion of private language is that he moves back and forth "between a stronger and a weaker thesis, of which the first is false and the second is true." Strawson sums up the "weaker thesis" in words that also serve to summarize the main lines of the standard interpretation of the private language argument in much of the subsequent literature:

The weaker thesis says that certain conditions must be satisfied for the existence of a common language in which sensations are ascribed to those who have them; and that certain confusions about sensations arise from the failure to appreciate this, and consequently to appreciate the way in which the language of sensations functions. (Strawson 1966, 42)

The "weaker thesis," in other words, is Strawson's term for the positive view about the relationship between language and sensation that he believes can be retrieved from the discussion of private language in the *Philosophical Investigations*. However, he regards it as mistakenly interwoven with the "stronger thesis," which "says that no words name sensations (or 'private experiences'); and in particular the word 'pain' does not" (Strawson 1966, 42). Immediately after these words, Strawson adds a parenthetical citation to §293, an indication that he considers §293 to be a particularly clear illustration of this error.

While Strawson does not provide a detailed reading of §293, the discussion of the "stronger thesis" that follows makes it quite clear how such a reading would go. Strawson construes the main line of Wittgenstein's positive argument as a demonstration that a language whose terms referred to the sensations of the language user is impossible, because "the

hypothetical user of the language would have no check on, no criterion of, the *correctness* of his use of it" (Strawson 1966, 42). So far, this is a version of the weaker thesis, on which the notion of a criterion is used to specify a condition that must be satisfied for the existence of a common language. However, Strawson alleges, Wittgenstein mistakenly takes the weaker thesis to be *all* that there is to be said about the meaning of sensation words. In other words, once we have specified "what *criteria* people can use for employing [a word] or for deciding whether or not it is correctly employed," there is nothing more to be said about its meaning (Strawson 1966, 42). This, in turn, "leads [Wittgenstein] to deny that sensations can be recognized and bear names." On this reading, the point of the beetle story is that the criteria for the use of the word "beetle" in the game in §293 exhaust its meaning: "beetle" cannot refer to anything private, for the criteria are entirely public, and quite independent of whatever is in a particular person's box. Applying that point to sensation talk leads Strawson to conclude that Wittgenstein's broader moral is that just as "beetle" does not name whatever is in the box, "pain" does not name a sensation. Strawson replies that it simply does not follow from any of the points that Wittgenstein does make that 'pain' is not the name of a sensation (Strawson 1966, 49). Indeed, he claims that this is an obvious fact that cannot be denied.

Norman Malcolm's review of the *Investigations* offers a very different reading of the beetle story. He puts particular weight on §293c,⁴ the final paragraph of §293. This is an appealing strategy, for it appears to state the point of the preceding story. Crucially, it is a conditional: it tells us that if "we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name'" **then** "the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant."⁵ On Malcolm's reading, then, the aim of the story is "to prove that attending to a private object can have nothing to do with learning words for sensations" (Malcolm 1966, 79). Because we conceive of our talk of pain and other sensations as analogous to the relationship between an ordinary name and the everyday object it stands for, we think of it as a matter of naming an inner, private object, which only the person who has pain can directly experience. The core of Malcolm's reply to Strawson is that Wittgenstein rejects that model, not the fact that we can talk about our sensations.

Malcolm observes that Strawson's approach to sensation leads to the view that each sensation-word "will have both a public and a private meaning" (Malcolm 1966, 98). The public meaning is unproblematic, at least in principle, for both Malcolm and Strawson; they agree that it

consists in the criteria that govern our use of the relevant sensation-words when talking about others' pain. Strawson construes Wittgenstein's denial that there is also a private meaning when one talks about one's own pain as a denial that we can talk about our sensations, and thus is driven to insist that sensations can be recognized and named. Malcolm responds that this insistence arises out of Strawson's attraction to the very model Wittgenstein rejects. On Malcolm's interpretation, my experience of a pain is not a matter of applying inner criteria that enable me to identify the pain as pain, but is simply a matter of my having the pain under the appropriate circumstances:

The fact that there is no *further* process of identifying a particular sensation is a reason why "the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant" when "we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name'" (293) . . . If my use of a sensation-word satisfies the normal outward criteria and if I truthfully declare that I have that sensation, then I *have* it – there is not a further problem of my applying the word right or wrong within myself. (Malcolm 1966, 100)

To sum up: Malcolm agrees with Strawson in reading Wittgenstein as denying that we can refer to "private experience." However, Malcolm construes this denial as purely a matter of rejecting a mistaken philosophical theory about the language of experience. We do have sensations, but the self-ascription of sensation is not a matter of making an identifying reference to an inner object. Strawson, convinced that we do have private experiences, would respond that we must be able to make identifying reference to them. Malcolm, convinced that the notion of private experience is ultimately illegitimate, replies that pain is not a "private experience," and I can talk about my sensations without making identifying reference to them.

Malcolm and Strawson provide a convenient introduction to the question of how to read §293, not only because they were early and influential contributors to the debate over how to understand Wittgenstein on private language, but also because they exemplify the two interpretive poles to which subsequent interpreters are drawn. Strawson reads §293 negatively, as denying what we ordinarily say about pain; Malcolm reads it positively, as a matter of correcting a philosophical misunderstanding of everyday language.

Malcolm is surely right that Strawson misreads §293 by failing to take the closing paragraph seriously. However, Strawson's reading does give voice to some of the leading views about the mind under attack in §293,

and so not only provides a convenient foil for Malcolm, but is also one of the first of many readings of §293 that responds to the passage by vigorously defending those views.

While there is much one might debate about how best to read §293c, it clearly tells us that the author of those words takes the point of the previous paragraph to be a conditional one, and that the last two sentences of §293b are a statement of that conditional's consequent. The story of the beetle-boxes is generally taken in the subsequent literature as drawing an analogy between the rules of the beetle-box game, that is, the rules governing what the beetle-box-owners can say and do with the beetle-boxes, and the rules for the use of sensation words. Just as the thing in the box cancels out in the beetle story, so on a certain conception of sensation the object of sensation "drops out of consideration as irrelevant." In this way, we are supposedly given a compelling reason to reject a certain model, picture, or theory of sensation. However, this general interpretive framework leaves room for a wide variety of detailed interpretations, which disagree about many of the details: not only about the precise nature of the view under attack, but also about the rules of the beetle-box game and the point of the story.

III Pitcher's, Cook's, and Donagan's Interpretations of the Beetle Story

During the second half of the 1960s, Pitcher's (1964), Cook's (1965), and Donagan's (1966) discussions of the beetle-box story acquired a canonical status. Both Cook's and Donagan's papers, reprinted in Pitcher's very widely read anthology of essays on the *Philosophical Investigations*, include a critical response to the provocative interpretation of §293 in the chapter on "Sensations and talk of them" in Pitcher's *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (1964). As a result, they map out a set of options that provided a convenient point of departure for subsequent discussion of §293.

Pitcher, like Strawson, highlights Wittgenstein's attack on the assumption that words such as 'pain' are "the names (in a non-trivial sense) of sensations which people sometimes experience" (1964, 285). This is the first of three assumptions, which Pitcher jointly calls "View V": Pitcher's construal of the theory of sensation under attack. The other two are:

[ii] when I assert truly . . . "I am in pain," I am describing the state of my consciousness (i.e., I am asserting there is included in it a sensation called . . . "pain")

[iii] when I assert of another person . . . "He is in pain," I claim that he is experiencing the same sort of sensation that I do when I . . . am in pain. (1964, 285)

Pitcher takes Wittgenstein to be denying each of these claims, and so to be arguing that "pain" is not the name of a sensation and that "I am in pain" is not a description of my consciousness. However, Pitcher's Wittgenstein is by no means a behaviourist, for he only denies that we can *talk* of sensations, not their existence. This is an odd balancing trick, and his irresolute exposition of this point walks on both sides of that very fine line.⁶ The exposition, which immediately follows his quotation of §293b, reads as follows:

The analogy with pain is perfectly clear. If 'pain' is supposed to denote a somewhat (including a nothing) which each person can observe only in his own case, then the somewhat 'cancels out'; and if the sole function of the word 'pain' is to denote it, the word is at once deprived of any use. (Pitcher 1964, 298)

However, we are then provided with two important qualifications, which make it clear that the analogy is very far indeed from being perfectly clear. First, Wittgenstein is "not denying that when a person is in pain, he very often . . . feels something frightful, nor even that this something is terribly important to the person himself and to others" (Pitcher 1964, 298). Pitcher surely intends these words to indicate the truth about sensation that is left after Wittgenstein's critique of View V. For he goes on to say that all Wittgenstein is denying is "a particular thesis about language," namely that "the word 'pain' names . . . this something that the person feels, in a way which is remotely like the way that the words for publicly observable things name . . . them" (Pitcher 1964, 298). Furthermore, Pitcher counterbalances his denial of View V by maintaining that View V is only a view about what can be said in language; sensations exist, but "do not enter into pain language-games" (Pitcher 1964, 299). For:

Everyone acknowledges that sensations are private, that no one can experience another person's sensations, so that the special felt quality of each person's sensations is known to him alone and no other. (Pitcher 1964, 297)

Thus, another's private sensations "are completely unknown to us; we have no idea what he might be feeling – what the beetle in his box might be like. But this is no epistemological tragedy, no metaphysical stumbling-block to the playing of the language-game, for they are not in the least needed" (Pitcher 1964, 299).

There is a striking parallel here between Pitcher's handling of View V, and the *Tractatus*' treatment of solipsism. In both cases, the overall point is supposedly that "what it *means* is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but shows itself" (TLP 5.62). This is no accident. For Pitcher attributes to Wittgenstein a theory of sensation that divides into two parts, which are supposedly consistent, but form an odd couple: a behaviouristic philosophy of language, on which there can be no talk of sensation, and each person's epiphenomenal inner world, made up of sensations. This is a "semi-solipsistic" theory of sensation.⁷ The semi-solipsist agrees with the solipsist that I only know what pain means from my own case. Unlike the solipsist, the semi-solipsist also maintains that this is true of each of us. The meaning of "pain" is a private object for each of us. This is a view that Wittgenstein explored in some detail in the years immediately after his return to philosophy, in his discussions of phenomenological and physicalistic languages, and provided a point of departure in the development of his discussion of private experience in the mid-1930s.⁸

However, this semi-solipsism, without Pitcher's inexpressibility proviso, is the very view that is advocated in the opening words of the first two paragraphs of §293:

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means – must I not say the same of other people too? . . .

Well, everyone tells me that *he* knows what pain is only from his own case!

But these sentences are an interlocutor's statement of the very view about pain, and my knowledge of it, that the narrator of the beetle story, responds to, models, and 'cancels out' in the words that follow it.⁹ In this way, Pitcher, like Strawson, provided a convenient foil for the next stage of the debate, by defending a semi-solipsistic view of sensation and attributing it to Wittgenstein. Indeed, Pitcher's reading should remind us of Malcolm's observation that the aim of the beetle story is not to convince us that we cannot communicate about what pain is like, but that if we conceive of pain as an inner object, we commit ourselves to its incommunicability.

John Cook replies to Pitcher, as Malcolm does to Strawson, that the beetle analogy is not to “our use of words, but the philosophical use of those words” (Cook 1965, 312). “Rather than showing that sensations cannot have names,” the analogy shows that “we must reject the view that sensations are private” (Cook 1965, 312). Cook’s problem, like Malcolm’s, is to convince us that the view that sensations are not private can do justice to our ordinary ways of talking about own experience. In other words, that he has not thrown out the baby – our ordinary ways of talking about sensation – with the bathwater – the semi-solipsistic view that everyone knows what pain is only from his own case. If we read Wittgenstein as simply discarding the “false grammatical analogy” (Cook 1965, 314) that leads to the semi-solipsist’s inner world of private objects, we may seem forced to accept the other half of semi-solipsism: an outer world and a language which only speaks of that world.

Donagan replies to Pitcher along Strawsonian lines, arguing that Wittgenstein comes very close to accepting View V, once one qualifies it to acknowledge that “the internal character” of experience – whether it “is the same for you as for me is irrelevant to the meaning of the word ‘toothache’” (Donagan 1966, 348). Donagan contends that Wittgenstein’s definition of pain in terms of both “its external circumstances” and their “private and non-dispositional accompaniment” (Donagan 1966, 348) allows him to bring together talk of the inner and outer in a single, unitary theory of sensation. This allows Donagan to resolve the tension between the two halves of Pitcher’s account of sensation by removing the inexpressibility proviso. He thus readmits talk of the existence of one’s own sensations into our common language, but not comparisons or descriptions of them because private experience “plays no part in determining the meanings of the words and phrases that refer to sensations” (Donagan 1966, 345).

One problem with all these responses to the beetle story is that while each of them clearly takes one side or another in the dispute set out in §293, they do little to clarify how the different views under discussion there are related. Indeed, §304, a recapitulation of that dispute, can also be read as a summary of their disagreement. Wittgenstein’s interlocutor defends the position advocated by Strawson, Donagan, and Pitcher’s View V; Wittgenstein’s narrator replies along the lines advocated by Malcolm, Cook, and Pitcher’s reply to View V.

[Interlocutor:] But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?

[Narrator:] Admit it? What greater difference could there be?

[Interlocutor:] And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*.

[Narrator:] Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said.

Furthermore, none of the authors clearly distinguishes the expository work of stating the competing views under discussion in §293 from the interpretive task of evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. Instead, each identifies a strand in the discussion of the beetle-box that he finds most promising, and then supplements it with various assumptions about Wittgenstein’s philosophical commitments.

IV Cohen’s Repudiation of the Beetle Story

Martin Cohen, in his *Wittgenstein’s Beetle and Other Classic Thought Experiments*, observes that

There is a whole literature on Wittgenstein’s so-called Private Language Argument, in which a few cryptic Wittgensteinisms (like the Beetle experiment) are dissected, mulled over and prodded for signs of life. . . . A substantial body of work . . . has built up, all striving to present a definitive interpretation of what Wittgenstein meant. But at the end of the day, each new version relies upon the introduction of extra assumptions and new material, because the original accounts are just too sparse and too ambiguous to lead to any conclusion. (Cohen 2005, 109)

Cohen’s sceptical conclusion has its attractions, and the material we have reviewed so far could easily be deployed in a way that would lend it considerable plausibility. However, like much of the work he criticizes, Cohen pays very little attention to the primary text. In fact, he cites none of the published scholarly work on the topic. The only secondary sources he draws on are a handful of websites that include some discussion of the beetle story, rapidly quoted to convey the impression that no clear conclusions can be drawn from such a confusing and confused discussion, one in which different interpreters come to quite different conclusions. On the other hand, it is remarkable how many contemporary “interpretations” of the beetle story amount to little more than a quick summary, rapidly followed by the claim that one philosophical theory or another has been vanquished.

While Cohen does quote the beetle story in full, there is no mention of 293a and 293c, and very little discussion of how the story works.¹⁰ Instead, he simply asserts, without any further argument, that

Wittgenstein's Beetle is supposed to show that people assume that because they are using the same words, they are talking about the same thing, when in fact they may be discussing different matters, and what's more, doing so in quite different ways . . . And the beetle is supposed to be like words and concepts generally. It is supposed to sever the link between concepts in our heads, and things in the world, by way of words. Today, the beetle is claimed by linguists, doctors and psychologists, artists and aesthetes to radically transform the conventional view of the stability of meaning and language. (Cohen 2005, 87–88)

In other words, Cohen claims that the story works by drawing a parallel between the beetle in the box and sensations such as pain: "Everyone has such sensations. But only they can look at them, and they cannot allow others to 'open the box' " (Cohen 2005, 106). In fairness to Cohen, we have seen that there is a long tradition of reading the beetle story along these lines, going back to Strawson. Moreover, Cohen has no trouble in finding an online passage, taken from Carl Elliott's testimony to the US President's Council on Bioethics, which reads the beetle story in much this way:

Now, what's the point, you're asking yourself. Well, the point is that the words that we use to describe our inner lives, our psychological states, words like "depression" or "anxiety" or "fulfillment," those words get their meanings not by referring and pointing to intermental states, things in our heads. They get their meaning from the rules of the game, the social context in which they're used.

They're like the word "beetle" in Wittgenstein's game. We learn how to use the words not by looking inward and naming what we see there. We learn how to use the words by playing the game. The players don't all need to be experiencing the same thing in order for the words to make sense.

I say I am fulfilled. You say you're fulfilled. We both understand what the other means. Yet that doesn't mean that our inner psychic states are the same. Right?

We can all talk about our beetles, yet still have different things in our boxes.¹¹

Yet we have seen that this is not the point of the beetle story in its original setting. Instead, Elliott polemically invokes Wittgenstein's authority to

bolster his contention that once we appreciate the implications of the fact that the language we use to describe mental disorders is one we learn from others, we will be able to see "why mental disorders are so flexible in their application, and so apt to expand and contract, depending on the language-game in which they are applied."¹² Elliott, it should be noted, does not draw the globally sceptical conclusions about the stability of meaning that Cohen attributes to him; he only applies the argument to terms for mental contents. However, others certainly have explicitly invoked the beetle story as the basis for just such conclusions.

In fairness to Elliott, there is a long tradition of reading the beetle story as a compressed parable from which a whole philosophy of mind and language, with far-reaching consequences for traditional "Cartesian" and "behaviourist" theories of mind, can be rapidly unpacked. For instance, Judith Genova reads the beetle story much more ambitiously, as the culmination of an argument designed to show that

Words do not mean by referring to either objects or ideas. Reference or denotation is irrelevant for determining meaning. Rather, meaning is a function of a) a word's place in the language and b) its use by speakers. Thus, to show that not even sensation words mean by referring is to clinch the more general argument about how words mean. (Genova 1995, 177–8)

Indeed, this style of broad-brushed pedagogy with the beetle-box story was already well established thirty years ago. The second issue of *Teaching Philosophy* included an article by Bruce Russell on "Beetle Boxes: Demonstrating the Logic of P-predicates." It tells instructors how to "facilitate an understanding of the role played by 'inner' and 'outer' data" (Russell 1975, 153) by means of an in-class "demonstration" of the beetle-box scenario, using envelopes, one for each student: most of them are to contain suitable small objects, while some are left empty. He even proposes a pair of sequels: on a second day, one can redistribute the envelopes to their original owners (to consider memory issues), and a new set of transparent envelopes (to consider the case where others can see inside the box). Russell is considerably more careful than the expositors we have just considered, and at one point explicitly states the conditional conclusion that eludes Cohen and Elliott, namely:

An intersubjective language is impossible if mental predicates refer to private "contents" or events from which they derive their meaning. (Russell 1975, 154)

However, like Elliott, and many other readers, he takes the beetle-box scenario to provide the basis for far-reaching conclusions. Yet, in drawing out his further conclusions about the nature of mind and language, Russell actually provides an excellent illustration of Cohen's principal criticism of the misuse of the beetle story. For in doing so, Russell has to introduce extra premises concerning such matters as the nature of criteria and privacy, the reliability of memory and the numerical identity of non-continuously observed particulars, so that the supposedly self-contained "demonstration" becomes nothing more than a convenient pedagogical point of departure for a wide-ranging discussion of the logic of P-predicates, and of a Strawsonian descriptive metaphysics.

V Hacker's and Baker's Interpretations of the Beetle Story

The readings of the beetle story we have met so far make use of Wittgenstein's story in order to advance a variety of different philosophical programs, and do so in a wide variety of ways. The more careful readings identify a strand in the argument that seems promising, and defend it by articulating a sophisticated philosophical theory that is supposedly implicit in Wittgenstein's conversational exposition. The less careful readings simply identify a promising conclusion, and claim that it follows from the passage in question. How should we move beyond this impasse?

A natural response to this diverse assortment of interpretations would be to look more carefully at the text, not only at §293, but also at the *Philosophical Investigations* as a whole and Wittgenstein's writings on private language for further clues as to how best to understand the deceptively simple dialogue we find in §293. Instead of reading our own preconceptions into the gaps we find in Wittgenstein's telling of the beetle story, we might reread the passage in question with an eye to detail, and look to the broader context for further clarification. Even a minimal application of this strategy will certainly suffice to eliminate most of the readings we have considered so far. The interpretations we considered in section 4, while representative of much of what passes for exposition of the beetle story, do not even take into account the paragraphs that immediately precede and follow that story. The readings we considered in sections 2 and 3 are far more painstaking and thorough in their attempts to articulate a coherent train of argumentation. Nevertheless, they all import assumptions and commitments that turn Wittgenstein's story into a

compressed, and potentially question-begging, exposition of a number of systematic commitments, each requiring further defense in turn.

Wittgenstein's writing, composed of dialogues without clearly identified voices, certainly calls for a reconstructive engagement with the text. As the reader works to identify the positions being attacked and defended, he or she inevitably finds his or her own concerns being addressed there. As a result, each generation of readers has discovered a Wittgenstein who seems to have anticipated their own philosophical concerns with remarkable farsightedness.¹³ This is not to deny the value of the pathbreaking interpretations we considered from the 1950s and 1960s. While none of them is entirely successful, they all help us to see interpretive avenues that might well not be apparent otherwise.

However, if we are to make any progress, we need to distinguish the well-established practice of making use of Wittgenstein's writings in pursuit of one's own philosophical goals from the question of how best to understand Wittgenstein's use of the beetle story in the *Philosophical Investigations*. One approach that naturally presents itself at this point would be to focus narrowly on the text of §293, with the aim of making explicit precisely what Wittgenstein is doing there. Another complementary approach would be to place §293 in a broader context, connecting it with one's reading of the "private language argument" as a whole. These approaches are pursued with extraordinary thoroughness by Peter Hacker, both in *Insight and Illusion* and *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Mind*. The former was published in 1972, when Baker was a student of Hacker's, and published in a revised second edition in 1986, toward the end of their collaboration on a series of joint projects. The latter was written after they had ceased writing together; the two books are among the principal targets of Baker's critical discussion of previous work on "the private language argument."

As we have already seen, Hacker identifies the target of the beetle story as a form of semi-solipsism: the view that each of us "knows what 'pain' means only from one's own case, for it seems that it is the sensation one *has* that gives the word its meaning" (Hacker 1990a, 110–111). This then leads to the problem of how I know what others mean by "pain," for on this view, each of us names our own sensations, "as if they were objects in a peep-show into which only he can peer" (Hacker 1990a, 111). The beetle story then provides an analogy for this supposed epistemic predicament, which allows us to see that semi-solipsism, with its construal of the grammar of expression of sensation on the model of name and object, leads to a dilemma:

On the private-linguist's conception of the relation between a name and the object it refers to, then, *if communication is possible*, the private object allegedly referred to is a piece of idle machinery and plays no part in the mechanism of communication, and conversely *if the private object does play a part*, then communication is impossible. (Hacker 1986, 270)

Or, put more concisely, and without invoking the mechanism-of-communication metaphor:

If what is in the box is relevant to the meaning of 'beetle', then no one else can understand what I mean by 'beetle'; and if 'beetle' is understood by others, it cannot signify what is in each person's private box. (Hacker 1990a, 111)

Both formulations may seem too concise to do justice to the full nature of the argument here. Nevertheless, they do elegantly summarize the nub of the narrator's objection in §293 to the interlocutor's idea that we each know what "pain" means on the basis of identifying a private inner object: it cannot connect up with our public talk of pain. On the other hand, the virtue of such a concise summary is that it identifies the principal claim made by the narrator in §293, while leaving open the question of how best to understand how it might be further defended and articulated.

However, this may well seem to call for further elucidation: what is the narrator's reason for maintaining that 'beetle' cannot be used to refer to what is in each person's box, that 'pain' does not refer to a private object? Here, Hacker relies on his previous exposition of the private language argument, and its conclusion there can be no such thing as a private ostensive definition. On Hacker's reading of the preceding argument, in a supposed private ostensive definition "there is no technique of application, there is no *practice* of applying [the supposed word in question], but only the appearance of a practice" (Hacker 1986, 269). In other words, there is no technique of applying words to private objects "*on the model of applying them to public ones*. There is no *method* of comparing a sample with a private object. . . . nothing has been determined to *count as the same*" (Hacker 1990a, 112). This, in turn, is because without the possibility of a public, independent, check on the private use of a term, no distinction can be established between what seems right to me, and what is right. On Hacker's reading, the argument turns on the point that the distinction is only possible in the public world, where others can, at least in principle, provide an independent check on my usage. Hacker draws the moral that

there is no such thing as following 'private' rules, i.e. rules which no one else could in principle understand inasmuch as the rules in question *can have no public expression*. Such putative rules are 'private ostensive definitions', which, since there is no such thing as exhibiting 'private samples', are *essentially* incommunicable. (Hacker 1986, 272)

Furthermore, Hacker claims that idealism and solipsism presuppose the intelligibility of such rule-following, and a further consequence of this train of argument is to cast light on "the deep and ineradicable flaws of these philosophical pictures" (*ibid.*).

In this way, Hacker's elucidation of the beetle story attempts to combine two very different approaches to the idea that each of us only knows what pain is from one's own case. On the one hand, he insists that the point of the beetle story is that the interlocutor's conception of the meaning of pain is nonsensical, more like a delusion, or a misconception, than a straightforward falsehood. While it appears intelligible, it is actually incoherent. On the other hand, he provides a sophisticated and subtle chain of reasoning about the nature of language, concerning the need for public rules and objective standards of application that is designed to underwrite this very conclusion. In so doing, Hacker claims to have identified a condition for the possibility of successful reference, and shown that private inner objects cannot satisfy that condition. However, this elaboration of a detailed argument in order to underwrite the analogy carries with it the almost irresistible suggestion that the interlocutor's conception of sensation *is* intelligible, that we do know what he was talking about.

Baker observes that on Hacker's approach, "Wittgenstein offers the hypothesis of a private language as something subtle and important which is worthy of thorough and detailed investigation. Consequently, he is taken not to think that this hypothesis, once it is made explicit, is *manifestly* absurd (without further argument)" (Baker 1998, 328). Baker's response to Hacker amounts to a spirited defense of the latter strategy, and a resolute rejection of the former approach. Baker argues that the traditional "PLA-interpreter," the reader who attempts to reconstruct the "weaker thesis" supposedly underlying the discussion of a private language in the *Philosophical Investigations*, looking for the definitive "arguments which are parts of a consistent chain of reasoning and which jointly constitute a definitive demonstration of the absurdity of the hypothesis" (*ibid.*), misses the point of the story. Wittgenstein's aim in §293, Baker proposes, is not to provide a subtle proof that it is impossible to answer the question "What does the word 'pain' *name*," but rather, to get us

to see that it is pointless (Baker 1998, 340–341). Elaborating the impossibility claim leads us toward the elaborate anti-Cartesian train of argument that Hacker imputes to Wittgenstein, and away from the bolder, and simpler, construal on which the very idea of referring to a private, inner object is incoherent. In other words, we are to reject the idea that the PLA is a species of transcendental argument, a solution, of sorts, to a traditional problem, and instead approach it as a dissolution, a repudiation of the framework it takes for granted.

In the closing section of his final paper on private language (1998, 346–354; 2004, Ch. 7), Baker provides a wealth of detailed advice designed to help us develop a different framework of interpretation, one that will provide an alternative approach to the “anti-Cartesian” reading that seems almost unavoidable to most readers. He proposes that we take our bearings from the remarks “which open the *Investigations* and set the stage for everything that follows” (1998, 348). Baker reads those opening remarks as a criticism of “Augustine’s picture of language” (1998, 347), a “set of very general ideas that affects almost everyone who reflects on the meaning of words” (1998, 348). This, to my mind, is still too Hackerian a way of reading those opening sections, which I believe are better read as taking on a much less monolithic target.¹⁴ But Baker is right to stress the deep continuities between the discussion of misunderstandings about reference to outer objects, and ostensive definition, in the opening sections, and the discussion of misunderstandings about reference to inner objects, and private ostensive definition in the remarks that follow §243, and to propose that we explore these continuities in seeking new bearings in understanding Wittgenstein on private language. The methods introduced in the opening sections of the book – and especially the “method of §2,” with the associated technique of articulating a language-game that seems to give the interlocutor what he says he wants, are also the methods that Wittgenstein employs in the subsequent discussion of private language.

Baker also suggests that we will find it easier to give up the idea that §243ff. must be addressed toward sophisticated philosophical theories (such as Cartesianism, solipsism, or idealism), positions that supposedly underlie the interlocutor’s naïve and fragmentary contributions, if we think of the discussion in the book as directed toward the audience Wittgenstein actually engaged with while writing and teaching: his students, and his own earlier self. Here Baker suggests we think of the interlocutory voice as Francis Skinner, or another student in Wittgenstein’s classes, not a veteran philosopher who is implacably committed to some quite specific

“Cartesian” theory. He proposes that we approach the dialogue in the *Philosophical Investigations* as much more exploratory and open-ended, and much less like a sustained debate between well-worked out philosophical positions. I agree that much of the material presented in these fragmentary snatches of discussion does have the conversational and piecemeal character of classroom discussion, and no doubt emerged out of Wittgenstein’s engagement with both his students’ ideas, and his own earlier writing. However, in the carefully revised and artfully constructed form that it takes in the finished text of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we should also think of it as akin to Socrates’ relationship to his interlocutors in the Socratic dialogues. While it may well have been composed as a record, or reconstruction, of an informal discussion, its final polished form is that of a distinctly literary achievement that invites the reader to take part in the debate it presents.

With this guidance in mind, let us return to Hacker’s exposition of the beetle story, and reconsider how best to further elucidate Hacker’s construal of its basic point – namely that if “beetle” has a private meaning, it is incommunicable, and if it has a public meaning, it has no connection with what is in the box, and so such an object cannot connect up with our public talk. If we follow Baker’s advice, that further elucidation cannot consist in elaborating the presupposed argument against the possibility of a private language that we find in Hacker’s exposition. Rather, we need to find a way of reading the passage on which nothing is hidden, so that the beetle story’s point is no more than the dissolution of the interlocutor’s conviction that everyone “knows what pain is only from his own case!” (§293b1). Even if we agree with Baker that the overall aim of the passage is to convince us that this conviction is “*manifestly* absurd” (Baker 1998, 328), we ought to be able to say more about how it does this.

First, we should note that the vast majority of §293 is in the narrator’s voice, not the interlocutor’s. The narrator is in charge of the discussion, working to provide an analogy that will come as close as possible to giving the interlocutor what he says he wants. While §293a discusses the interlocutor’s views about the meaning of pain, it is the narrator who speaks, pointing out that the interlocutor must generalize his view about his knowledge of the meaning of ‘pain’ to others. Apart from the first sentence of §293b, where the interlocutor accepts this point, thus provoking the narrator to outline the beetle scenario (§293b2–3), the interlocutor only speaks to reply to the narrator’s suggestion that it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in their box, or for it

to be constantly changing (§293b4–5), namely “– But suppose the word ‘beetle’ had a use in these people’s language? –” (§293b6). The narrator responds that “beetle” couldn’t function as the name of a thing – the language-game has been set up in such a way that the word could make no connection with the thing in the box, so that even if it were empty it would make no difference. In other words, even if we assume for the sake of argument that the word does have a use, it couldn’t do what the interlocutor wants.

In conversation, J. L. Austin claimed Wittgenstein was simply contradicting himself here. “First he says, there definitely is a beetle in the box, and then he says there might be nothing in the box, a plain contradiction” (Searle 2001, 226). But that beautifully concise and pointed objection misses the point of the contradiction. Wittgenstein’s narrator has told us a story in which a term – “beetle” – is supposedly introduced. But the moral of the story is that no introduction has occurred, at least if one conceives of the word as naming its object. The initial ceremony is entirely unconnected with the rest of our language, and *that* is why everyone could have something different in his or her box, or the item in the box could be constantly changing, or it could even be empty.¹⁵ The person who supposedly “has” a beetle is in the same position as those friends of Wittgenstein’s to whom he would “give” trees while out on a walk together – on condition they didn’t do anything with their “gifts,” or prevent the previous owners from doing anything with them (Malcolm 1984, 29).

The contradiction here is comparable to that which arises at the end of §2, when we are told to conceive of the builders’ language-game as “a complete primitive language.” That game is offered to the reader as a way of giving the interlocutor what he says he wants: an example of a use of language in which words do get their meaning by standing for objects. Similarly, the beetle story is a way of giving the interlocutor what he says he wants: a use of language in which words get their meaning by standing for private objects. However, one crucial moral that emerges from the discussion of that example is that we cannot do what the interlocutor wants, that we cannot really conceive of such a language. Instead, we are led to see that the best we can do is to come up with a limited example that serves its purpose when we see just how limited it is. In both §2 and §293, the narrator attempts to provide the interlocutor with an imaginary language-game that best approximates the relationship between language and the world that the interlocutor imagines. Yet in trying to think through how that scenario might be realized, we come to see that

nothing we could do would satisfy the interlocutor’s contradictory demands.

However, perhaps the closest anticipation of the strategy of §293 is not the method of §2, but the story of the grocer which concludes §1. For the ‘beetle’ story provides a physical, “outer” analogy for the interlocutor’s inner peep show, much as the “grocer” story in the opening remark of the *Philosophical Investigations* provides a comparable physical analogy for the mental operations that supposedly go on in our minds when we identify five red apples. As long as we imagine these processes occurring within us, we think of them as animating our ordinary use of words; but once we bring them out into the open, by imagining a comparable public procedure, they seem both lifeless and bizarre.¹⁶ While those processes seemed natural and necessary, as long as they were going on in the mysterious medium of the mind, they lose their magic in the light of day.

Wittgenstein’s beetle has been used by most of his interpreters as an opportunity to articulate the arguments that underlie his theory of the nature of sensation; it would be closer to the truth to say that it is an excellent illustration of his attack on the intuitions that feed such theories. But perhaps, like Gordon Baker, we can only fully appreciate the nature of Wittgenstein’s attack after working our way through the arguments his interpreters have offered on his behalf.

Notes

- 1 I have used Anscombe’s translation, but have incorporated two improvements recommended by Hacker (1990a, 112): “Well, everyone” (293b1) for “Now someone,” and “name” for “designation” (293c).
- 2 From an MA exam paper on Wittgenstein, given at the University of London in May 2000. www.london.ac.uk/fileadmin/documents/students/philosophy/ma_examination_papers/wittgenstein_ma_old2000.pdf.
- 3 Baker (1998, 353); cf. Baker (2004, 139).
- 4 I follow the convention of using letters in alphabetical order to identify specific paragraphs within a numbered remark in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and numbers to identify sentences, when needed. Thus §293c refers to the third and final paragraph of §293.
- 5 While the word “then” does not occur in the English translation, the corresponding German word “dann” does occur in the German text. Following Gordon Baker’s example, I use bold, not italics, to indicate my emphasis in the context of quotations.

- 6 Cf. Conant (2004) on irresolute private language arguments, which discusses a parallel problem concerning the status of the grammatical rules that underwrite such arguments: in both cases, interpreters are driven to hold that what is important to the argument cannot be said, but can only be shown.
- 7 Wittgenstein uses this expression in MS 165, p. 150; Hacker (1990a, 111) uses the term in his discussion of §293's target.
- 8 For further discussion, see Stern (1995, 5.2–5.4).
- 9 Although “the interlocutor” is not a term that is ever used by Wittgenstein, it has become a standard term of art for identifying those passages which express views clearly at odds with the principal voice in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which is usually taken to express Wittgenstein's own views. For further discussion of questions concerning the identification of voices in the *Philosophical Investigations*, see Stern (2004, 3–5, 21–26).
- 10 Cohen quotes *Philosophical Investigations* §293b2–8 on p. 87 of Cohen (2005); his discussion of the beetle story is on pp. 87–89 and pp. 106–110.
- 11 From www.bioethicsprint.bioethics.gov/transcripts/sep02/session4.html, accessed on July 11, 2006. Quoted, in a slightly different form, in Cohen (2005, 107). Elliott gives a somewhat more detailed account of the beetle story, but draws the same conclusions, in Elliott (2003, 188–190).
- 12 Elliott (2003, 189).
- 13 For further discussion of these interpretive issues, see Stern (2004), esp. Ch. 2.
- 14 For an alternative approach to reading the opening of the *Philosophical Investigations* as an attack on the “Augustinian picture”, see Stern (2004, Ch. 4). Oddly, while Baker became such an acute critic of the idea that the remarks following §243 are directed at a single, overarching set of ideas, he continued to read the remarks that open the book along remarkably similar lines.
- 15 Of course, if we change the setup of the beetle scenario so that people are allowed to talk about what is in their boxes, say, by comparing them to what they see around them, as Cohen (2005, 89) suggests, then we would be able to tell each other about what our “beetles” are like.
- 16 For further discussion of the grocer story, see Stern (2004, 83–86).

Chapter 11

Bourgeois, Bolshevik or Anarchist? The Reception of Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mathematics¹

Ray Monk

I Some Personal Prefatory Remarks

It was Wittgenstein's philosophy of mathematics – or, more precisely, its reception among Anglophone philosophers – that got me into biography. And, among the people I discussed it with before I started writing my biography of Wittgenstein, it was Gordon Baker who best understood the connection between the two.

When I was a postgraduate student at Oxford in the early 1980s, all the talk was of Dummett and Davidson, anti-realism and truth-functional semantics. An interest in Wittgenstein was considered slightly old-fashioned. The famous seminars conducted by Baker and Hacker, always challenging, reliably entertaining and fiercely combative, attracted a good audience and inspired fervent and passionately partisan debate, but, in their attacks on the views that were then establishing themselves as orthodoxies at Oxford, they were considered by most postgraduate students to be a rearguard action by exponents – albeit extremely able and even formidable exponents – of an outmoded way of doing philosophy.

Perhaps somewhat perversely, my own philosophical views became increasingly Wittgensteinian during my time at Oxford and, still more perversely, I chose to write my dissertation on that most neglected and maligned aspect of his work: his philosophy of mathematics. I soon discovered what a lonely world it was for a Wittgensteinian philosopher of mathematics. There were, in those days, very few philosophers of