How to write like Socrates spoke?: Wittgenstein and Plato on mutual understanding in philosophy

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How to Write Like Socrates Spoke?

Wittgenstein and Plato on Mutual Understanding

in Philosophy

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The work here presented and submitted as a thesis is the author's own.

Abstract

The central questions of this essay all arise from reflections on one particular aspect of philosophy, specifically as it presents itself in the philosophical practice of Socrates, Plato and Wittgenstein: namely, understanding *each other* in philosophy.

The essay is roughly divided into two main parts of equal length. In the first half of the essay, I compare certain characteristics of the philosophical methods of Socrates and Plato on the one hand with those of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the other. In the second half of the essay, I continue my comparison with special regard to questions concerning the teaching, and especially the writing, of a Socratic kind of philosophy that arise from several systematic as well as exegetical considerations.

The 'turning point' of the text is arrived at in the form of a problem, or paradox, concerning the writing of the kind of Socratic philosophy that is central to the discussion. It follows a brief survey of different possible and historical attempts to overcome this dilemma. The remainder of the essay then proceeds from a comparison of Plato's and Wittgenstein's respective dialogical writings to a more detailed analysis of the various techniques employed by Wittgenstein in composing the text of *Philosophical Investigations*, resulting in a new interpretation of the stretch of remarks on 'private language' (§§243 ff.). Finally, in a postscript I offer some concluding remarks and also comment on related issues and the current state of philosophical writing in academia.

Contents

Motto

The topics of the modern, of the philosophy of philosophy, and of the form of philosophical writing, come together in the question: What is the audience of philosophy? For the answer to this question will contribute to the answer to the questions: What is philosophy? How is it to be written? In case a philosopher pretends indifference to this question, or not recognize that he has an answer to it, I should note that this question intersects the question: What is the teaching of philosophy? Not, of course, that *this* question is likely to seem more attractive to those responsible for teaching it.

(Stanley Cavell: Must we mean what we say?
A Book of Essays, 1969, xxiii)

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Various parts of Sections 1, 2 and 3 of the present essay reappear in an article from 2015, published in *Philosophy* 90 (2), entitled 'The Importance of Understanding Each Other in Philosophy'.

Abbreviations of works by Ludwig Wittgenstein, and edited collections from his *Nachlass* or from lecture notes by others

BT   *The Big Typescript. TS 213* [1930s], edited and translated by C.G. Luckhardt and M.A.E. Aue. Blackwell, 2005.

CV   *Vermischte Bemerkungen. Eine Auswahl aus dem Nachlaß / Culture and Value. A Selection from the Posthumous Remains* [1914–51], edited by Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, revised edition of the text by Alois Pichler, translated by Peter Winch. Blackwell, 1977/1998.

MS   Manuscript in *Wittgenstein's Nachlass. The Bergen Electronic Edition*, edited by The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen. Oxford University Press, 2000 (references following the von Wright catalogue in Georg Henrik von Wright, *Wittgenstein*. Blackwell, 1982).

PGL   *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946–1947*, edited by P.T. Geach. Harvester, 1988.

PI   *Philosophical Investigations*, edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, revised fourth edition by P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Wiley-Blackwell, 1953/2009.

PIF   "Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment." In *Philosophical Investigations* (2009).

RPP I *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. Vol. I [1945–47], edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. Blackwell, 1980.

TLP   *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* [1922], translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.

TS   Typescript in *Wittgenstein's Nachlass. The Bergen Electronic Edition*, edited by The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen. Oxford University Press, 2000 (references following the von Wright catalogue in Georg Henrik von Wright, *Wittgenstein*. Blackwell, 1982).

Introduction

The title of this essay is likely to make it sound as though the following is going to be another one of those self-help 'how to' books that we are nowadays bombarded with in bookshops. And in a way that's what it is – only worse, since the author obviously doesn't know what he is talking about. For isn't this supposed to be philosophy? Yet surely the body of this essay couldn't even be close to whatever the author is going to tell us would be the written equivalent to Socratic philosophising (I don't see any dialogues)? Or, if that *is* what he intends to make us believe, then how boring it looks; just another useless theory. However, if this is not what he is going to say, then again it seems that the author doesn't know what he is talking (or writing) about.—Or could there be a difference between kinds of philosophy, or different ways of writing philosophy?

I am not sure how to answer these questions. Partly because I quite simply do not know the answers; I have been asking myself these very questions, and I keep on disagreeing with myself. Partly because I wouldn't know which specific person I would be answering (whoever it is that might have made the mistake of picking up this essay and reading these lines). I am, of course, aware that this essay raises many questions about itself that it can hardly be said to answer or even to indicate a clear path towards answering them. But then again, charitably, perhaps *this* will be regarded as a virtue: not to have tried to formulate an answer to a question whose sense one hasn't yet been able to grasp clearly enough. As R. G. Collingwood wrote, 'If you cannot tell what a proposition means unless you know what question it is meant to answer, you will mistake its meaning if you make a mistake about that question' (R. G. Collingwood: An Autobiography, 1939, 33). ———

The formal structure of the present essay, the reader might be glad to hear, is much less chaotic than these introductory words are likely to suggest. A brief synopsis of each of its main sections follows:

In Section 1, I describe certain features of the Socratic method as I find it in Plato's Socratic dialogues. These features, I argue, all stem from the importance of an aspect of Socrates' philosophical practice which 'standard accounts' tend to neglect. This is the fact that Socrates (seems to have) had philosophical reasons for taking his interlocutors seriously as persons. By discussing several examples, I try to illustrate some of the consequences this has for our understanding of the Socratic method in general and Plato's (Socratic) dialogues in particular.

In Section 2, I first describe similar features in (later) Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical practice. In addition to this, I emphasise a related aspect of his philosophising, and also argue that the same can be observed in the case of Socrates. The point of bringing together these two

aspects is to show that despite the fact that both Socrates and Wittgenstein understand their philosophical approaches as being essentially directed at the particular problems and modes of understanding that are unique to single individuals—with the consequence that the understanding of a person is central to their methods—they nevertheless aspire to philosophical understanding of the more 'mundane' kind that is directed at truth and the world.

In Section 3, then, against the background of the foregoing sections, I interpret several parts of Plato's dialogues *Phaedrus* and *Laches*, the former of which contains an explicit discussion of the practice and the teaching of (Socratic) philosophy with regard to the possible media in which it can be conducted, while the latter contains an implicit one. In addition, I further develop my case for seeing the role of mutual understanding in philosophy as fundamentally two-fold, being directed both at the individual and what they say (the word), and at things that are 'external' to this human relation at any particular moment of philosophical understanding (the world).

In Section 4, I develop the problem as described by Plato's Socrates in the *Phaedrus* concerning writing as a medium for (Socratic) philosophy, and I discuss some of its more general outlines as well as potential consequences. Subsequently, I compare Plato's dialogues and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* from the point of view of their respective potential for success in developing writing techniques which could overcome the problem of writing Socratic philosophy. I argue that, in this respect, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* are a far more elaborate attempt at this task. Section 4.1, finally, is intended to illustrate some of the resulting features of this latter text, discussing an exemplary collection of its remarks which at the same time might appear to be about the root topic of the present essay, viz. understanding (one) another.

1 One aspect of the Socratic method

What is justice? What is friendship? What is good? What is knowledge? What is philosophy? Socrates typically elicits from his interlocutor an attempt to express their understanding of whatever is at issue in the form of a definition, and proceeds to demonstrate how this definition would yield a series of misunderstandings (or contradictions, according to the standard definition of the *elenchus*). In the following description of Socrates' methods I focus on a particular aspect of it which, it seems to me, is usually not considered to be of any real importance for its understanding.[1]

A standard account of the Socratic method would usually focus on what we have learnt to understand by the *elenchus* (not that Socrates would ever have used this particular word in describing his own method). Gregory Vlastos' account has become standard in many ways: 'Socratic elenchus is a search for moral truth by question-and-answer adversary argument in which a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted

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[1] I do not claim the Socrates presented in this essay to be closer to the historical Socrates than any other presentation of 'Socrates' (concerning the problem of the historical Socrates see (Dorion 2011)). However, saving myself (and you) the hassle of using some sort of index to mark the textual conditions of *my* Socrates—even though I like the sound of 'Moc(k)rates'—and equally—given the sheer number of such pretensions on offer in the literature—not seeing a good reason to make those who do not read this footnote not believe that the following is supposed to give a true account of the historical Socrates' methods, I shall continue to call my Socrates simply 'Socrates'.

For reasons of accuracy, I should note that the examples of Socrates' philosophical practice that I discuss will almost all be drawn from Plato's 'Socratic dialogues' (following John Cooper's classification according to which 'the term is understood to make no chronological claims, but rather simply to indicate certain broad thematic affinities . . . characteristic of the historical Socrates' own philosophical conversations' (Cooper 1997a, xv)) where there is general agreement concerning Plato's authorship (cf. (Cooper 1997a, v–vi)), viz. *Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Ion, Laches, Lesser Hippias, Lysis, Menexenus, Protagoras*; significantly fewer examples will be drawn from those dialogues where there is no general agreement by scholars concerning Plato's authorship, viz. *Alcibiades, Clitophon, Greater Hippias*, while no examples will be drawn from those dialogues where there is general agreement by scholars that Plato is not the author, viz. *Hipparchus, Minos, Rival Lovers, Second Alcibiades, Theages*.

By contrast, compare e.g. Hugh Benson (Benson 2011, 179 (n.1)) who, in application of broadly the same parameters as Cooper, classifies the following as Socratic dialogues (with no explicit regard to scholars' agreement): *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Greater Hippias*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lesser Hippias, Lysis*, portions of the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Republic* I. Like in Gregory Vlastos' classification of Plato's 'early dialogues' (cf. Vlastos 1994a, 135), Benson allows for the *Greater Hippias* to be counted among Plato's Socratic dialogues. And, curiously, besides adding parts of the 'transitional' *Meno* to his Socratic dialogues, the only difference between Vlastos' 'early' and Benson's 'Socratic' dialogues is that Benson leaves out the *Menexenus* without further argument, which is also the only dialogue from Cooper's 'Socratic' list that does not appear on Benson's. Benson probably leaves it out because it does not contain an instance of the Socratic *elenchus*. But this just shows how one-sided a criterion 'use of the *elenchus*' would be. One further difference between Cooper's list on the one hand and those of Vlastos and Benson on the other consists in the former's omission of *Republic I* which appears on both Vlastos' and Benson's lists. Presumably, Cooper's reason for omitting *Republic I* is that he views it as essentially a part of a larger work by Plato – which would make perfectly good sense.

only if its negation is deduced from his own beliefs' (Vlastos 1994b, 4).[2] It is important, as Socrates repeatedly points out, that the answerer gives short answers (e.g. *Gorgias* 449c). This is in order, it is often stressed, that the questioner can stay in control and lead the direction of the search and examination.[3]

The aspect of Socrates' method that I want to focus on instead has to do with a certain tendency of Socrates to focus his philosophical efforts on particular individuals' concerns, as echoed in the second half of Vlastos' short description, 'a thesis is debated only if asserted as the answerer's own belief and is regarded as refuted only if its negation is deduced from his own beliefs'. The way in which Socrates leads his interlocutors to a better understanding and richer appreciation of the complex realities of the thing in question usually involves directly addressing their individual, personal knowledge, beliefs, preconceptions, etc. (so that, in this sense, the one who leads the conversation is actually the answerer, not the questioner).[4] As Plato has Nicias say to Lysimachus in the *Laches*:

> You don't appear to me to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail. . . . I realized some time ago that the conversation would [be] about ourselves, if Socrates were present. (*Laches* 187e–188c)[5]

In most of Plato's Socratic dialogues, Socrates leisurely walks up to a person or a group of people, then something catches his interest and philosophical discourse unfolds. Socrates does not discriminate according to any supposed intellectual expertise, but welcomes conversation with 'anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger' (*Apology* 30a; see also *Apology* 29d); as e.g. in the *Charmides* when Critias draws Socrates' attention to the beauty and apparent virtuousness of his young cousin, Charmides, who then goes on to examine with Socrates what 'temperance' is;[6] or in the *Lysis* when, having been greeted by young boys in the street, their reports of issues concerning love and friendship initiates Socrates' demonstration of some of the

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[2] See (Benson 2011), for instance.

[3] Cf. the following remark by Vlastos on the translation of '*elenchus*': 'First and foremost elenchus is *search*. . . . its object is always that positive outreach for truth which is expressed by words for searching . . . , inquiring . . . , investigating' (Vlastos 1994b, 4).

[4] See also (Vlastos 1994b, 7 ff.).

[5] All translations of Platonic dialogues are cited after *Plato. Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (associate editor D. S. Hutchinson), Hackett, 1997.

[6] The Greek '*sophrosune*' cannot readily be translated literally. Cooper describes it as meaning 'a well-developed consciousness of oneself and one's legitimate duties in relation to others (where it will involve self-restraint and showing due respect) and in relation to one's own ambitions, social standing, and the relevant expectations as regards one's own behavior' (Cooper 1997b, 639).

difficulties involved in understanding 'friendship' in conversation with Lysis and Menexenus;[7] or in the *Menexenus* ('SOCRATES: You at the Council Chamber? Why?' (234a)) when, on the occasion of the council's postponed election of an orator to speak about Athen's war dead, Socrates criticises, by way of performance, the art of speech-making and speech-giving. Socrates is moved by the daily, mundane themes of his fellow citizens. And he digs into philosophical mud which his interlocutors had not realised they were already half-sunk into, discovering together with them the intricate depths of their unexamined beliefs and related prejudices (namely – in some cases, significantly – *both* those of his interlocutors and those of Socrates himself (cf. e.g. the ending of the *Laches*; see also *Apology* 28a)).[8]

For example, it can be argued that Socrates' primary interest in his discussion with Euthyphro, whom Socrates happens to meet on his way to court, is not the general concept 'piety' (contra (Geach 1966), for example), nor to prove or disprove the Delphic oracle (contra (Benson 2011)), but Euthyphro's legal case against his own father and how Euthyphro ought to act under such extraordinary circumstances. As the conversation develops, it appears to Socrates that Euthyphro is suffering from serious misconceptions concerning notions such as 'piety' and 'justice', and that these misconceptions stand in the way of Euthyphro's seeing clearly relevant implications of his legal case. Hence, Socrates challenges Euthyphro to re-examine some of his preconceived ideas – successfully, until Euthyphro escapes the continued self-examination ('like Proteus'?), excusing himself ('I am in a hurry now') just when Socrates summarises, 'So we must investigate again from the beginning what piety is'. And it is certainly possible, or this might be Plato's suggestion, that Euthyphro has just had enough of Socrates' midwifery, and *thus* hurries back into court to retract the charges which he had brought against his own father just before he met Socrates, finding truth in Socrates' concluding words: 'If you had no clear knowledge of piety and impiety you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant. For fear of the gods you would have been afraid to take the risk lest you should not be acting rightly, and would have been ashamed before men' (15d–e). — When read in this way, the dialogue can actually be seen not to end abruptly (as is often said), nor simply in *aporia*, but as marking the appropriate end as achieved by Socrates in successfully moving Euthyphro's practical reason.[9]

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[7] As Cooper notes, 'The Greek word . . . *philia* . . . in this discussion includes the love of parents and children and other relatives, as well as the close elective attachments of what we understand as personal friendship. It also covers impassioned, erotic fixations' (Cooper 1997b, 687).

[8] On the question of whether it is necessary (or sufficient, or both) for Socrates' interlocutors to have a conscious and determinate belief in the examined contents for the method to work, see the well-argued negative reply in (Benson 2011, 187–193).

[9] However cf., by way of contrast, Cooper, who presents the standard, not so happy reading of the *Euthyphro*'s ending: 'just when he is ready to press further to help Euthyphro express his knowledge, if indeed he does possess it, Euthyphro begs off on the excuse of business elsewhere' (Cooper 1997a, 1). The standard reading has never paid due attention to the possible range of interpretations here. As will hopefully become clearer in the course of this essay – although it will not be argued explicitly –, one

In the following I briefly describe a number of additional moments in the Socratic dialogues which are apt to further reveal Socrates' striking concern with his individual interlocutors.

a. As already mentioned, there is Socrates' honest interest in the current topic of discussion or whatever is occupying the minds of his respective interlocutors when they meet Socrates. Socrates does not force onto them whatever might be on his mind. He is not a dogmatist.[10]

b. Socrates takes each of his interlocutors seriously as a person. He makes this explicit in the *Gorgias*, when he distinguishes his philosophy from oratorical practice, like that of Polus for instance (Socrates' interlocutor in the relevant part of the *Gorgias*). While Polus, like in court, seeks to convert a large number of anonymous witnesses to testify to the truth or falsity of one claim or another, Socrates is exclusively concerned with his actual interlocutor and only them during their conversation. As Socrates points out to Polus:

> SOCRATES: . . . I'm only one person, I don't agree with you. You don't compel me; instead you produce many false witnesses against me and try to banish me from my property, the truth. For my part, if I don't produce you as a single witness to agree with what I'm saying, then I suppose I've achieved nothing worth mentioning concerning the things we've been discussing. And I suppose you haven't either, if I don't testify on your side, though I'm just one person, and you disregard all these other people. (*Gorgias* 472b–c)

This further illustrates that Socrates is not a common sense philosopher. He does not base his proceedings on 'what everyone believes' and is not, at least not primarily, interested in that. Compare also the following passage:

> [SOCRATES:] "Do the cowardly go forward to things which inspire confidence, and the courageous toward things to be feared?"
> [PROTAGORAS:] "So it is said by most people."
> [SOCRATES:] "Right, but I am not asking that. Rather, what do *you* say the courageous go boldly toward: toward things to be feared, believing them to be fearsome, or toward things not to be feared?" (*Protagoras* 359c–d)

c. Socrates focuses exclusively on the statements, beliefs and commitments of his interlocutors, which is perhaps made most explicit by Socrates in the following exchange with Protagoras:

> [PROTAGORAS:] "It's not so absolutely clear a case to me, Socrates, as to make me grant that justice is pious, and piety just. It seems a distinction is in

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underlying problem of this standard account of Plato's Socratic dialogues lies in commentators' one-sided focus on philosophical knowledge (as opposed to philosophical understanding).

[10] See for example *Euthyphro* 3d–4c; *Crito* 43c–d, 44c, 45a; *Laches* 181d; *Lesser Hippias* 363a–b.

> order here. But what's the difference? If you want, we'll let justice be pious and piety just."
>
> [SOCRATES:] "Don't do that to me! It's not this 'if you want' or 'if you agree' business I want to test. It's you and me I want to put on the line, and I think the argument will be tested best if we take the 'if' out." (*Protagoras* 331c)

In the same manner Socrates issues the following warning in the *Crito*:

> SOCRATES: . . . And Crito, see that you do not agree to this, contrary to your belief. For I know that only a few people hold this view or will hold it . . . . So then consider very carefully whether we have this view in common, and whether you agree, and let this be the basis of our deliberation. (*Crito* 49d)

However interested Socrates may be in discovering the truth, he clearly holds that it is of at least equally great importance that his interlocutor be honest and that he understand what they are inclined to think and believe.[11]

d. Socrates himself avoids expressing personal opinions or advancing controversial theses. He tends, rather, to appeal to accepted truisms when he is not directly asking a question. Note, however, that this is not to say that Socrates does not occasionally express his own opinions and beliefs. Nevertheless, it seems clear that it is his intention to avoid this as much as he can. But given that his dialogues partly (and inevitably) also serve as the examination of his own thinking, this should really not be too surprising.[12]

e. Besides his notorious asking of question after question, it is noteworthy that Socrates constantly asks his interlocutors whether they can follow or whether they agree. Socrates is by no means a gnomic teacher.

f. Socrates exhibits an extreme eagerness to give more detailed expression to his points or re-express one of his points whenever his interlocutors do not agree or have difficulties understanding him. Thus, Socrates is not only eager to ensure that he fully understands his interlocutors, but equally pays attention to their understanding of him so as to ensure that they understand *each other*. This gets illustrated in numerous passages in which

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[11] Socrates himself, on the other hand, cannot be said to be honest in every case. There are too many cases in which he does not speak literally. The term 'Socratic irony' bears strong (and truthful) witness to this fact. These features of Socrates' method will become clearer in the course of Sections 3, 4 and 5 of this essay. They largely follow from his role as philosophical mediator ('midwife'). See also the next point in the main text, (d).

[12] The (intended) appeal to truisms must not be confused with appeals to authority, especially not with appeals to authority by majority ('what everyone believes'), *à la* Aristotle. Considering some of the aforementioned, it seems much more plausible that in these cases Socrates simply voices what he believes can be agreed upon between himself and his interlocutor.

Socrates elaborates on a point or question prompted by the expressed or perceived lack of understanding of his words on the part of his interlocutor.[13]

g. Socrates himself also constantly asks for the meaning of what his interlocutors say in the course of a conversation. He does so in numerous instances.[14] Remarkably, in the *Laches* Socrates actually instructs his interlocutors, Laches and Nicias, to do just this in their philosophical conversation, rather than to simply argue for the truth of their own opinions as they both prove to be more naturally inclined to.[15]

h. Socrates, as is more widely acknowledged, seeks to uncover incoherent presumptions and related difficulties on the part of his conversational partners. I have already described one wonderful instance of this practice above with regard to the *Euthyphro*. Another classic example can be found in the *elenctic* beginnings of the *Laches* (190d ff.), which I discuss in some detail in Section 3 below.

All of these practices illustrate a characteristic aspect of the Socratic method which does not usually receive much attention. Thus far, its importance has only been vaguely alluded to but it will become clearer as we proceed towards the more central questions of my essay. In the following section, I shall then attempt to show that certain more or less similar practices can be said to feature in later Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. In anticipation of an objection (old hat, really), which has enjoyed some considerable popularity with regard to certain accounts of both Socrates' and Wittgenstein's methods, some brief remarks might be in place before embarking on any comparative lines of my argument between Socrates and Wittgenstein.

For example, it might be objected, with no particular reference to any comparison with Wittgenstein, that the way I have presented Socrates, i.e. leaving out the overarching epistemological and metaphysical concerns he is standardly assumed to have, makes him into some sort of linguistic idealist; but that, even if he wasn't a strictly metaphysical Platonist, he was at least a sceptical one (as in early sceptical readings of Plato); at any rate, Socrates wasn't interested in words or what we say but in the world; he wasn't a linguist but a philosopher with a driving interest in metaphysical ontology.[16]

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[13] See for example *Charmides* 167c–d, 170a–d, 173a, 174c–d; *Laches* 185b, 190d–191e, 191e–192c; *Lysis* 216c–d, 218d–e; *Euthydemus* 279d, 293d–e; *Gorgias* 447c–d, 461d–462a, 463e, 463e–465a, 466c–d, 491d–e.

[14] See for example *Euthyphro* 13a–d; *Charmides* 173d–174a; *Laches* 195a, 195c, 195d, 196a–d; *Lysis* 208a, 212b; *Protagoras* 333d, 334a; *Gorgias* 450b–451a, 466a–b, 488b–d, 489d, 499d; *Lesser Hippias* 364c–d, 369d; *Ion* 540b–c, 540e–541a.

[15] See also (Vlastos 1994b, 8–9) and my discussion in Section 3 below.

[16] See for example (Benson 2011, 194) for this kind of argument: 'It is nearly certain that in pursuing his "What is piety?" question, for example, Socrates is not asking for the meaning of the word "piety" . . . . He is certainly not asking a question that could be answered by using a dictionary. He is asking the same sort of question that scientists ask when they ask "What is water?" and discover that the answer [sic] "Water is H_2O".'

Now, the main problem with this kind of objection, it appears to me, is this: it is wrongly presupposed, as so often in the related kind of argument against so-called 'linguistic philosophy', that it is easily distinguishable whether in any given instance in our philosophical enquiry we are interested in the word or in the world. But, as Stanley Cavell has put it so beautifully:

> If you feel that finding out what something is must entail investigation of the world rather than of language, perhaps you are imagining a situation like finding out what somebody's name and address are, or what the contents of a will or a bottle are, or whether frogs eat butterflies. But now imagine that you are in your armchair reading a book of reminiscences and come across the word "umiak." You reach for your dictionary and look it up. Now what did you do? Find out what "umiak" means, or find out what an umiak is? But how could we have discovered something about the world by hunting in the dictionary? If this seems surprising, perhaps it is because we forget that we learn language and learn the world *together,* that they become elaborated and distorted together, and in the same places.' (Cavell 1969b, 19)

I therefore also find myself in agreement with Cavell when he notes that, 'Euthyphro does not need to learn any new facts, yet he needs to learn something: you can say either that in the *Euthyphro* Socrates was finding out what "piety" means or finding out what piety is' (Cavell 1969b, 21).

(Perissinotto 2013), in an attempt to explain Wittgenstein's 'anti-Platonism', commits the same mistake. The only difference is that he tries to turn the fabricated dichotomy of word and world against Socrates, riding on the cliché of Socrates the silly old essentialist.

2 Two aspects of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy

Contrary to a still common belief, Wittgenstein was no philosopher of language. Or, if he was, then he was equally a metaphysician. Like Socrates, he was not interested in *either* the word or the world, but rather in both.[17] But what, if anything, can be said to have been the subject matter of his philosophising? Besides language, alternative candidates that one often finds in categorisations of Wittgenstein's *oeuvre* are philosophical psychology (or philosophy of mind), which he became more and more interested in after 1938, and philosophy of mathematics, which he once wanted to be recorded as his primary area of research in an encyclopaedia entry, and also of course logic.[18] However I believe that we should be suspicious of such categorisations in any substantial sense.[19] For, arguably, in an important sense Wittgenstein's interest in all of these areas of philosophical research has been essentially the same.

I do not see any good reason to try to decide this matter definitively, once and for all. Clearly, having had a background in applied and pure mathematics and furthermore having made several contributions, however systematic or unsystematic, to the philosophical study of mathematics, Wittgenstein can be said to have been a philosopher of mathematics, amongst other things, or to have had a specific interest in the subject matter of mathematics from a philosophical point of view. On the other hand, perhaps with special regard to Wittgenstein's methodological innovations, it constitutes an, at least, equally important aspect of his work that there appears to be some sort of unifying principle which makes whatever traditional subject matter his philosophising has look to be of merely secondary importance. It does seem to me important, though, not to let these two ways of looking at Wittgenstein's philosophy come too far apart from each other in explicating it. Hence, in the present section I am going to, firstly, describe one aspect of Wittgenstein's later methods that is significantly related to the concern about the philosophising individual that we have already noted to be a striking feature of the Socratic method in the preceding section. However, secondly, I am going to try to indicate how the practice of the resulting kind of philosophy – despite its focus on the philosophising individual –

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[17] G. E. Moore's note in 'Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930–33' (1954) thus remains true of Wittgenstein also in later years: '[Wittgenstein] did discuss at very great length . . . certain very general questions about language; but he said, more than once, that he did not discuss these questions because he thought that language was the subject-matter of philosophy. He did not think that it was. He discussed it only because he thought that particular philosophical errors or "troubles in our thought" were due to false analogies suggested by our actual use of expressions; and he emphasized that it was only necessary for him to discuss those points about language which, as he thought, led to these particular errors or "troubles"' (Moore 1954, 5–6).

[18] Cf., for example, the table of contents in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein* (Kuusela and McGinn 2011).

[19] Felix Mühlhölzer makes a convincing case against such attempted substantial categorising in (Mühlhölzer forthcoming).

can still be genuinely concerned with the truth with respect to a particular subject matter or question.[20]

Wittgenstein, by now perhaps notoriously, often compares his (later) methods of philosophy to a kind of therapy, especially on occasion to psychotherapy and more specifically to Freud's psychoanalysis; e.g. in the following passage from *The Big Typescript*:

> [in philosophy] we can only convict somebody else of a mistake if he acknowledges that this really is the expression of his thinking. For only if he acknowledges it as such, is it the correct expression. (Psychoanalysis.) What the other person acknowledges is the analogy I am proposing to him as the source of his thought. (BT 410)[21]

In recent years there has been increasing controversy about the extent to which this analogy holds or can even be helpful.[22] It is a remarkable fact that readers as different as Peter Hacker and the later Gordon Baker have both made use of this analogy, while their major disagreements also appear importantly related to the differences in their respective interpretations of it.[23] I do not want to comment on what is in itself a very intricate relationship between the exegetical works of these two great minds. For my purposes it will be sufficient to note the perceived centrality of a notion of therapy (or several such notions) for the understanding of Wittgenstein's (later) work. Insofar as Baker and Hacker's joint early work, and to a similar extent Hacker's ongoing work, neglects many of the positive, potentially helpful, aspects of an analogy with therapy, the later Baker, in criticising this neglect, might have developed a tendency to overemphasise its potentially positive effects on reading (later) Wittgenstein, while not devoting much attention to the potentially less positive effects the analogy might have on readers of (later) Wittgenstein.[24]

For example, as Anthony Kenny has also noted, emphasising the supposed therapeutic aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy can easily produce the appearance of some sort of anti-philosophy,[25] whose sole purpose is the negative one of ridding ourselves of misunderstandings that are engendered by some sort of linguistic misconceptions: 'If philosophy is therapeutic . . . then must not the role of philosophy be a negative one? Philosophy, it seems, is only useful to people who are sick in some way; a healthy person . . . has no need of philosophy' (Kenny 1982,

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[20] This point will also be discussed, at somewhat greater length, in the next section (Section 3).

[21] Cf. also (b) and (c) from the characteristics of the Socratic method listed above.

[22] However, relevant secondary literature dates back as far as to (Waismann 1956) and (Wisdom 1936).

[23] See (Hacker 2007) for one presentation of their disagreements. See (Baker 1997, [152 ff.]) for a more or less systematic presentation of the way he believes the analogy should be understood. (Notably, in earlier papers, Baker used to be more cautious in using the analogy with therapy; see for example (Baker 1997, [146]).)

[24] This becomes perhaps more or less understandable when seen from the historical perspective of that particular situation in place and time of Wittgenstein scholarship.

[25] The most striking recent example of this tendency is Alain Badiou's *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy* (2011).

4–5). Kenny then goes on to point out that, even though philosophy's role (under this conception) is indeed a wholly negative one, it is still relevant for human beings *per se*, insofar as it is part of our human condition that we speak natural languages which have the same traps for everyone who engages in any sort of abstract or theoretical thinking.[26] Wittgenstein once expressed this idea in the following way:

> As long as there still is a verb 'to be' that looks as though it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to drink', as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible', as long as we continue to talk of a river of time & an expanse of space, etc., etc., people will keep stumbling over the same <u>cryptic difficulties</u> & staring at something that no explanation seems capable of clearing up. (CV 22e)

And while Kenny does mention a positive aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy – namely, the creation of '*Übersichten*' (overviews, surveys) or '*übersichtliche Darstellungen*' (perspicuous (re)presentations) – he goes on to subordinate this aim under the negative aim of dissolving difficulties.[27] I do not quite agree with this. Whatever Wittgenstein's own characterisation of (his) philosophy may have been at one point or another,[28] I believe there is a clear and important case to be made for a genuinely positive effect of his philosophy. For example, besides certain methods and techniques (finding new analogies, drawing comparisons, inventing language-games, etc.) of 'grammatical enquiry' as well as associated skills (creativity, imagination, etc.), the teaching of methods by way of examples (PI §133) will also help us – apart from peripheral factual knowledge that comes with it as a by-product – to better understand whatever the subject of our (exemplary) inquiries is, in ways that are truly philosophical insofar as they might be roughly circumscribed as 'knowing our way about with these things', viz. having successfully reversed the philosophically problematic state of 'I don't know my way about' (PI §123). As a look at some of Wittgenstein's manuscripts as well as his lectures reveals, apart from the form of teaching in *Philosophical Investigations*, the conception of philosophy taught in this manner also provided space for more exploratory work, e.g. the space of psychological concepts.[29] It is helpful to see how in this regard Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy resembles that of Socrates. When we think about friendship, for instance, and perhaps at first get rather confused about what it could be, after some time we will hopefully—if we conduct our enquiries in the right way— know better what it is (even though we might be more inclined than ever to say that we don't[30]): it is only after having conducted such philosophical reflection on the question

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[26] See (Kenny 1982, 17–19). Kenny almost exclusively focuses on scientific endeavours, but I believe it should be quite clear that we can easily run into philosophical difficulties when thinking about human relationships of friendship or love, for instance (of which Socrates, of course, gives impressive evidence).

[27] Cf. also (Strawson 1956) for the same kind of move.

[28] See for example the famous PI §118.

[29] The student notes in *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946–1947* (PGL) give good evidence of this, as do the various *Nachlass* items documenting Wittgenstein's intense work on questions concerning mathematics throughout the 1930s.

'What is love?', say, that I will be able to give a halfway decent answer to my children when they ask me this question repeatedly. Arguably, the same holds for the question 'What is a private language?' (see my discussion in Section 4.1).[31]

Anthony Kenny mentions one more aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy, or rather his conception of it, which seems to me to be true regardless of the aforementioned disagreement I may have with Kenny and which is of great relevance to the argument of this essay. Kenny writes: 'Philosophy is something which everybody must do for himself; . . . In the case of curing an individual sickness or in the case of mental discipline one cannot say that once done it need not be done again. It must be done for each person afresh' (Kenny 1982, 25). Unfortunately, Kenny does not give any indication of why he thinks this is. Rather, he seems to understand this as being a matter of course. However, I think that Kenny's thought must be different from the one that I want to bring into view here, since he then goes on to say the following: 'This insight of Wittgenstein's seems to me correct; but I do not think it means in any way that his thought is as discontinuous with the great tradition of Western philosophy as he sometimes seems to have believed it was' (Kenny 1982, 25). In the following sections of the present essay, I shall try to present my case for one significant difference between most of the great tradition of Western philosophy and what I take to be an essential feature of Wittgenstein's later philosophy that follows from exactly the insight Kenny mentions so very casually, which may also be called *the individuality of philosophical understanding*.[32]

Wittgenstein's declared aim (or at least one of them) was to 'show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' (PI §309). But achieving this entails that the fly actually understands what we are

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[30] Cf. the end of the *Lysis*: '[SOCRATES:] "Now we've done it, Lysis and Menexenus—made fools of ourselves, I, an old man, and you as well. These people here will go away saying that we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a friend is we have not yet been able to find out"' (*Lysis* 223b).

[31] Again, in this respect, the same is true of Wittgenstein's methods as of Socrates'. As Gregory Vlastos says about perhaps the most central of Socrates' techniques: 'elenchus has a double objective: to discover how every human being ought to live *and* to test that single human being who is doing the answering — to find out if *he* is living as one ought to live. This is a two-in-one operation. Socrates does not provide for two types of elenchus – a philosophical one, searching for truth about the good life, and a therapeutic one, searching out the answerer's own in the hope of bringing him to the truth. There is one elenchus and it must do both jobs, though one or the other will be to the fore in different phases of it' (Vlastos 1994b, 10).

[32] Dale Jacquette has recently argued against the consistence of this last mentioned aspect of Wittgenstein's methodology, hence rejecting the 'psychological' component and embracing the 'semantic' component instead, viz. that the real problems for Wittgenstein lay in our common language ('language itself') rather than the 'language-using subject' (see (Jacquette 2014, 264 ff.)). However, as I shall argue in the following, it is in fact essential *not* to let these two vital components come apart (as in Jacquette's account) in order to see the *positive* effects of this method that it has in both 'objective' and 'subjective' matters, viz. how Wittgenstein's (later) philosophy, *pace* Jacquette, is not some kind of 'anti-philosophy'. Cf., for example, the following reflection of Wittgenstein's in this connection: 'What is it that is repulsive in the idea that we study the use of a word, point to mistakes in the description of this use and so on? First and foremost one asks oneself: How could that be so important to us? It depends on whether what one calls a "wrong description" is a description that does not accord with established usage – or one which does not accord with the practice of the person giving the description. Only in the second case does a philosophical conflict arise' (RPP I §548).

trying to show it. Yet some flies aren't exactly smart and most others can be expected to be at least as hard a case as the recalcitrant student in PI §185. And what is a helpful hint for one fly might only create more confusion for another. I think that something similar is true of *homo philosophandus*. As Wittgenstein writes, 'Any explanation can be misunderstood' (PI §28). And I believe this holds true of philosophical matters in particular. The following story about Wittgenstein, as retold by Warren Goldfarb, might be apt to illustrate this:

> Imagine a child, learning that the earth is round, asking why then people in Australia don't fall off. I suppose one natural response would be to start to explain about gravity. Wittgenstein, instead, [presumably being somewhere in Europe] would draw a circle with a stick figure atop it, turn it upside down, and say "Now *we* fall into space." (Goldfarb 1992, 111)

Wittgenstein addresses the child's question not as a mere call for information that the child was lacking, but as unclarity on the part of the child about certain pieces of information which they already possess. Thus, as was the case with Socrates and Euthyphro, Wittgenstein does not tell the child anything they did not know before but helps the child to a better understanding of (the implications of) what they already know, trying to offer a representation that will be perspicuous to the child. Goldfarb puts it thus:

> [Wittgenstein] is examining the source of the child's question, in the concepts with which the child is operating. Given those concepts, an appeal to gravity can do nothing but mislead: the child will take it that the antipodal people are upside down, but they have gravity shoes, or glue, or something similar, that keeps them attached to the surface of the earth; as for us, we are right side up, so the problem does not arise. What Wittgenstein's trick does is precisely to expose the conceptual confusion in the way the child is thinking of up and down. (Goldfarb 1992, 111)

While being interested primarily in explaining the difference between Wittgenstein's philosophical explanation and a standard scientific explanation, Goldfarb does not mention that, in principle, there is no reason why the child should not also misunderstand Wittgenstein's trick. The story, as it is told, seems to imply that the child did indeed actually stop asking the question because Wittgenstein successfully illustrated how their question was confused. However, it seems to me that this could only mean that Wittgenstein *fortuitously* (or perhaps in virtue of his wise experience) hit the right button and thus 'exposed the conceptual confusion', as Goldfarb has it, only *somewhat* luckily. For example, in a manner not too dissimilar from the recalcitrant student of PI §185 (while of course still much less of a lost case), the child could have pointed to the upper figure in the inverted drawing and replied, 'well, no; we don't fall into space now, because we're up there, stupid!'

Therefore, as a closer look at this little story brings out: one and the same expression – here in the form of the question 'Why don't people in Australia fall off the earth?' – can be the result of any number of misunderstandings. When dealing with this type of problem, as Wittgenstein remarked, we will only be able to make progress if 'the other person acknowledges . . . the

analogy I am proposing to him as the source of his thought' (BT 410). This is why for Wittgenstein, as for Socrates, it is so important to pay close attention to one's interlocutor, their words, their reactions and their responses. If one particular attempt to find the right analogy fails, this need not therefore be seen to pose a serious problem for our respective philosophical method. Like any of us, presumably, Wittgenstein would have had a number of alternative responses at his disposal. Of course, for example, he could have tried to bring out the point of the reversed picture by addressing the child with a series of questions, like Socrates would have done.

A random example

It will be useful at this stage to discuss at some length several related features of some of Wittgenstein's famous remarks on meaning and use in *Philosophical Investigations*. I want to remark on a difficulty which can hardly be remarked upon often enough. The difficulty concerns what Wittgenstein writes in Section 43 of *Philosophical Investigations*, namely that '. . . the meaning of a word is its use in the language . . .' (PI §43), as it is often quoted. It may serve as a useful first approximation to the problem to note what O. K. Bouwsma noted as early as 1961, as it appears to have lost none of its relevance:

> The meaning of a word is its use. . . . Nearly everyone these days speaks and writes in this new fashion. And yet nothing has been changed. If before we were puzzled with: What is the meaning of a word? now we are puzzled with: What is the use of a word? (Bouwsma 1961, 158–9)[33]

The difficulty is not merely taking Wittgenstein to not be expounding a fully-fledged use-*theory* of meaning. For instance, with particular respect to Wittgenstein's declared abstinence from (controversial) theses in philosophy, it appears equally problematic to think that for Wittgenstein the idea of meaning as use had any global importance or methodologically superior status in his philosophical practice.[34]

Besides the countless ways in which this passage can be misunderstood (and has been), Alois Pichler (2004) points out that it would be particularly mistaken to comment on the preceding Sections 40–42 as though they represented anything like an argument by Wittgenstein to the conclusion that meaning somehow, if only for 'a *large* class of cases' (PI §43), must be use.[35] In his exposition, Pichler lays particular stress on the polyphonic structure of Wittgenstein's

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[33] Cf. also James Conant for whom it was still appropriate in 1998 to make the following cynical remark: 'Wittgenstein has become famous in recent years for putting forward something that gets called a "use-theory of meaning"' (Conant 1998, 238). Notably, even Anthony Kenny ran into these problems (see (Kenny 2006, chap. 9)).

[34] See for example (Giesewetter 2014).

[35] For instance Peter Hacker, in his revised commentary, shows a tendency to present the sections in such a way; see (Hacker 2005, 117 ff.).

Philosophical Investigations. [36] Hence, for example, according to Pichler's dialogical (or plurilogical) reading, it is not Wittgenstein who speaks in Section 40. Rather, it is the voice of a fictional character with a tendency towards some sort of 'linguistic dogmatism' who begins in Section 40; Pichler calls this character '*Hans*'. Hans thinks that he could easily refute a second character, whom Pichler chooses to call '*Franz*' (note the wide scope of possible individual identification that is expressed in Pichler's choice of this proverbial conjunction of German names – '*jeder Hans und Franz*'; also note that, given what we know about the composition process of the text of the *Investigations*, these voices are likely to have evolved from past *alter egos* of Wittgenstein himself or from conversations with friends, colleagues or students). Pichler assigns one further voice, that of the '*Moderator*', which according to Pichler comes closest to what Wittgenstein himself would be likely to say in certain exchanges but should nevertheless not be identified with him.[37] Franz is inclined to hold that the meaning of a word is 'the object for which the word stands' (PI §1)). Hans believes himself to be able to prove Franz wrong by means of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

Thus, in Section 40 Wittgenstein has Hans say the following:

> [Hans]: It is important to note that it is a solecism to use the word "meaning" to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to a word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the bearer of the name. When Mr N.N. dies, one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say this, for if the name ceased to have meaning, it would make no sense to say "Mr N.N. is dead". (PI §40)

So Hans argues that Franz's reliance on the picture that the meaning of a word is the object for which the word stands leads to a paradox because it mixes up the *meaning* of a word with its *bearer*. It can be seen from the fact that Wittgenstein would have been well aware that this argument is not going to be (or, at any rate: need not be) the last word between Hans and Franz that it would be exegetically inaccurate to think that this argument was straightforwardly asserted by Wittgenstein in this passage. It is indeed easy to think of a way in which someone might want to escape Hans' alleged *reductio ad absurdum*, and, given everything that has been said about later Wittgenstein's philosophical practice in this essay up to this point, Wittgenstein can be reasonably expected to take such possibilities into account. Pichler agrees: 'The problem is not so much a theoretical one. It is not the case that one promoting an "object theoretical"

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[36] Cf. also: 'Wittgenstein's individual remarks are fully intelligible only when understood as components of a dialogue, an interaction with a person to be understood as endowed with preferences, prejudices, pictures, cravings, anxieties, etc. Hence what is to be counted as descriptions of the grammar of his language is a matter for specific investigation, negotiation and acknowledgement. This cannot in principle be ascertained independently of a discussion of each specific issue with him' (Baker 1997, [164]).

[37] This set-up is thus, in principle, very similar to the one in Plato's *Laches*, for large parts of which Socrates instructs and moderates a philosophical dialogue between Nicias and Laches. Compare my discussion of this dialogue in the following Section 3 (see also Section 4, however, concerning significant differences between Plato's dialogues and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*).

account of meaning would simply contradict themselves when confronted with sentences like "Mr N.N. is dead"' (Pichler 2004, 172, my translation). And Pichler adds: 'After all, as the *Tractatus* masterfully demonstrates, the only thing he needs to do is to put the level of objects further back and the "meaning" will be rescued' (Pichler 2004, 172, my translation).[38]

Now, when we are further reminded in PI §42 that we sometimes say that a word has a meaning even if by definition there is no object that it stands for (we might react to such a word 'with a shake of the head'), it can easily appear as though Wittgenstein suggested inferring from this that meaning therefore must be *use*, as he then goes on to 'conclude' in the following Section 43. — But this would be mistaken.

The final sentence of Section 43 gives us a useful hint. After having written that for 'a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word "meaning" – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (PI §43), Wittgenstein adds: 'And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*' (PI §43); as when I'm being asked, 'what does the word "bottle" mean?', and I simply hold one up.[39] This final sentence is intended by Wittgenstein to make sure that no one thinks he would want to deny such an obvious fact. Next consider that we did not take such care to distinguish the various voices from Wittgenstein's own, especially that of Hans which is definitely the most likely to be confused with Wittgenstein's;[40] viz. if we took Wittgenstein to be arguing towards some sort of conclusion in Section 43, would this last sentence ('the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*' (PI §43)) not contradict what, on such an understanding, Wittgenstein would be held to have claimed before in Section 40, namely that 'it is a solecism to use the word "meaning" to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to a word' (PI §40)?

We now see how what is going on in Section 43 and the surrounding sections is not too different from the story about the child and the earth. In neither of these cases is Wittgenstein attempting to persuade us by means of argumentation. I have already indicated one reason why I think this is, namely what I proposed calling the 'individuality of philosophical understanding'. And perhaps, at this point in the discussion, it will be acceptable to extrapolate from Wittgenstein's discussion of ostensive explanation as follows. For it seems to me that we are dealing with essentially the same difficulty here that he introduces in the early sections of the book. In PI §29, we read:

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[38] Hacker makes the same point: 'Those sublimated names and the correlative metaphysics [of the *Tractatus*] were expressly designed to ensure that every genuine name on analysis stands for an object that cannot cease to exist' (Hacker 2005, 117).

[39] Of course, 'bottle' is not a name, but my example is based upon the logical confusion of names with meaningful words that the relevant passages in the PI are playing with.

[40] One typical example of this confusion of Hans and Wittgenstein, which can be found in a majority of interpretative accounts, concerns §246. See my discussion in Section 4.1, below.

> Perhaps someone will say, "two" can be ostensively defined only in *this* way: "This *number* is called 'two'." For the word "number" here shows what *place* in language, in grammar, we assign to the word. But this means that the word "number" must be explained before that ostensive definition can be understood. (PI §29)

The sort of response which follows, I believe, holds (at least) as true of any philosophical explanation as of the 'ostensive definition of "two"':

> Whether the word "number" is necessary in an ostensive definition of "two" depends on whether without this word the other person takes the definition otherwise than I wish. And that will depend on the circumstances under which it is given, and on the person I give it to.' (PI §29)

Wittgenstein's awareness of such variance in the understanding of different individuals with regard to Section 43—i.e. his awareness of the two sides of the coin that is the difficulty of dispelling one kind of misunderstanding without engendering a new one—gets even more evident when we take a look at a related section such as Section 138:[41]

> But can't the meaning of a word that I understand fit the sense of a sentence that I understand? Or the meaning of one word fit the meaning of another? —— Of course, if the meaning is the *use* we make of the word, it makes no sense to speak of such fitting. But we *understand* the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp the meaning at a stroke, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time! (PI §138)

This particular misunderstanding of what Wittgenstein is trying to teach us about meaning and use—a lesson of which Section 43 is generally assumed to form a salient part—leads up to the entire discussion of rules and rule-following, which extends over the subsequent series of more than a hundred sections starting from Section 139, and which (hopefully) corrects any such misunderstandings.[42]

Hence, as all these considerations are supposed to demonstrate, it would be a mistake to think that Wittgenstein in PI §43 intended to present us with anything like the golden truth

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[41] Brian McGuinness has also summarised matters aptly: 'So Wittgenstein wants to avoid the mythologies implicit in our first reflections on language. He wants to substitute a form of reflection that avoids it – though perhaps at the risk of introducing a new mythology of its own, that of 'use' as something present all at once, for example' (McGuinness 1982, 42–43).

See also my discussion of Wittgenstein's chess analogy in Section 4, below.

[42] Other related sections from *Philosophical Investigations* include §117, and also §1 where 'meaning' and 'use' actually get contrasted in the following way: '– But what is the meaning of the word "five"? – No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used' (PI §1).

The secondary literature is of course full of possible misunderstandings of Wittgenstein's point about meaning and use. Another interesting possible misunderstanding, however, may be this: if instead of 'the meaning of words' we speak of 'the use of words' does this not make it look as though there were some kind of problem concerning any given instance of 'language use' to which we apply this locution? For, if one 'uses' a word, sentence or expression, does this not indicate some form of alienation, or: does this not entail that our relation to language is not natural, that our speaking does not simply flow but is somehow defective and requires special caution (as though we first had to calculate the rules of the signs we intend to use)? (Thanks to Hannes Nykänen, in conversation with whom this possibility first occurred to me.)

about meaning, or indeed even with a claim concerning meaning and use.[43] Analogously, the preceding three sections should not be read as an argument by him that leads up to it. Instead, as I have also tried to argue, we should read these sections as a dialogue between certain characters, none of which can be singly and directly identified with the author of the book.[44]

But what is left then of Wittgenstein's pointing out *something* about meaning and use? If he is not constructing theories, not asserting arguments, nor even making a claim, what then is he doing with 'meaning' and 'use'? — O. K. Bouwsma has expressed this point with admirable sharpness, touching upon several of the themes discussed in the course of this section:

> It is intended . . . as an analogy . . . . it comes to something like this: If you will say 'use' and write 'use' instead of 'meaning' in writing and speaking of words, and can manage to think accordingly, that will help. Help what? It will help you to rid yourself of the temptation to think of the meaning as something in the dark which you cannot see very well. The idea is that if your thinking is dominated in this case by one misleading analogy then you may be led right by another leading analogy. If, of course, that second analogy also misleads one, not much may be gained. . . . So we may understand that sentence as one which is intended to help us to a change in perspective. Once that change has come about, the sentence . . . is of no further use. (Bouwsma 1961, 159)

I believe more needs to be said, however. For, to some, this might sound all too negative again. One might also wonder, for example: if there are no doctrines to be learnt, are there only things to be unlearnt? – And, importantly, here the answer should be: No. But, just like with any Socratic dialogue, there is no one single determinate point to take home either. There are, amongst others, the following things to be learnt: a certain feeling (or taste?) for philosophical problems, a way of dealing with them, methods, techniques,[45] a way of dealing with people, a way of understanding them, a way of understanding ourselves, and finally a way of seeing the world, a way of life.[46] — And we will surely not fail to learn more about language and whatever our favourite subjects are either. In the end, all these go together, hand in hand, word and world. Or, as Cavell puts it: 'For what Wittgenstein means when he says that philosophy really is descriptive is that it is descriptive of "our grammar," of "the criteria we have" in understanding one another, knowing the world, and possessing ourselves' (Cavell 1969b, [56]).

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[43] See also my discussion of 'golden' or 'literal' truths in Section 4, below.

[44] Here a comparison with Plato may seem to suggest itself. But more interestingly, there is actually a parallel to Socrates. As pointed out under (c) and (d) of the foregoing section, Socrates often acts as a mediator (or moderator) which is why he does not always speak in his own voice, as it were. Thus, contrary to what many commentators have thought, the fact that Socrates says apparently contradictory things about 'courage', in the *Laches* (194c–d) on the one hand and in the *Protagoras* (360b–e) on the other, need not indicate any change of mind on his side.

[45] These 'methods and techniques' can now also be seen to comprise the equivalents of the Socratic ones listed in Section 1, in particular those listed under (b)–(g).

[46] Note how, except perhaps for the last two items here (a way of seeing the world, a way of life), Socrates can be said in the *Euthyphro* to have brought it about that all of the others dawned on his interlocutor in some form or other.

3 Plato on mutual understanding

In Section 1, I pointed out Socrates' philosophical concern for his various interlocutors as persons, including both their intellectual and practical lives, and certain connected features of his philosophical method. In Section 2, I introduced some basic features of (later) Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy and discussed, in particular, the role of the individual in dealing with philosophical problems and in achieving philosophical understanding. In the present section, I shall try to elaborate further on questions concerning the practice and, especially, the teaching of the kind of philosophy that both Wittgenstein and Socrates appear to have advocated.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates discourses with his friend Phaedrus on the qualities of three kinds of communication: oratory/speech-giving, personal dialogue/conversation (dialectic) and writing. Before coming to the interpretation of those parts of this discourse that are most relevant for the questions of the present essay, it should be noted that Socrates is concerned especially with a philosophical kind of understanding in the *Phaedrus*. He introduces this focus to Phaedrus, for example, in the following way:

SOCRATES: Now isn't this much absolutely clear: We are in accord with one another about some of the things we discourse about and in discord about others?

PHAEDRUS: I think I understand what you are saying; but, please, can you make it a little clearer?

SOCRATES: When someone utters the word 'iron' or 'silver,' don't we all think of the same thing?

PHAEDRUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But what happens when we say 'just' or 'good'? Doesn't each one of us go in a different direction? Don't we differ with one another and even with ourselves? (*Phaedrus* 263a)[47] [48]

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[47] It is remarkable that although the *Phaedrus* is not counted among the Socratic dialogues, neither in methodological nor in chronological classifications, the character of Socrates does exhibit in this passage several of the methodological features that I described in Section 1 above. (Perhaps this is because this dialogue is intended in many ways to demonstrate Socrates' superior, oral practice of philosophy.) Firstly, we note that Socrates is exclusively asking questions of Phaedrus ((e)). Secondly, Socrates is not saying anything controversial, but rather proceeds with what appear to be commonplaces ((f)). Next, it is remarkable that Socrates waits for Phaedrus to answer – after all, what has been said is really so obvious, isn't it? – and that, following Phaedrus' asking for clarification of what it is that Socrates meant, Socrates is happy to illustrate his point by giving an example, thus re-expressing his point in a way he hopes will help his interlocutor to understand him better ((h)). Socrates' second attempt is phrased as a question again, or rather as a series of questions. For not only does he try to put his point in different terms, he also decides to divide his presentation into smaller steps. Hence, he first illustrates one side of the distinction he wishes Phaedrus to acknowledge. He awaits the latter's response, and only then does he move on to illustrate the other side of the distinction. And reading further, we see that after having Phaedrus express his understanding and agreement with both these points, Socrates reintroduces the general point, and asks whether they now agree about it ('PHAEDRUS: We certainly do. / SOCRATES: Therefore, we agree about the former and disagree about the latter. / PHAEDRUS: Right. / SOCRATES: Now . . .' (263a–b)).

[48] It may be obvious from reading the dialogue, quite independently of this particular passage, that Socrates' interest is primarily in understanding of the philosophical kind. Cf. also the following two

Like Wittgenstein, Plato compares 'the art of the *true* rhetorician', i.e. philosophy, with that of the medical doctor:

> SOCRATES: Well, isn't the method of medicine in a way the same as the method of rhetoric?
> PHAEDRUS: How so?
> SOCRATES: In both cases we need to determine the nature of something—of the body in medicine, of the soul in rhetoric. Otherwise, all we'll have will be an empirical and artless practice. We won't be able to supply, on the basis of an art, a body with the medicines and diet that will make it healthy and strong, or a soul with the reasons and customary rules for conduct that will impart to it the convictions and virtues we want. (*Phaedrus* 270b)[49]

A medical doctor's efforts are usually directed at other people's health. Like philosophers, Plato implies, they get trained to understand others, which is a necessary element of both arts. The analogy with a kind of therapy, in its most general sense, emphasises the role of the individual in philosophical understanding. However, note that neither in Plato nor in Wittgenstein need this mean that all philosophical work is the mere exorcism of one sort of misunderstanding or another.

Then, again discussing the art of rhetoric while really expounding the ideal of philosophical conversation (dialectic[50]), Plato has Socrates and Phaedrus agree on the following:

> SOCRATES: Since the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul, whoever intends to be a rhetorician must know how many kinds of soul there are. Their number is so-and-so many; each is of such-and-such a sort; hence some people have such-and-such a character and others have such-and-such. Those distinctions established, there are, in turn, so-and-so many kinds of speech, each of such-and-such a sort. People of such-and-such a character are easy to persuade by speeches of such-and-such a sort in connection with such-and-such an issue for this particular reason, while people of such-and-such another sort are difficult to persuade for those particular reasons.
> The orator must learn all this well, then put his theory into practice and develop the ability to discern each kind clearly as it occurs in the actions of real life. (*Phaedrus* 271d–e; see also 277b–c)

This passage is likely to strike one as expressing a rather peculiar way of thinking about an entity such as the soul, as though souls were as easily categorised as different kinds of dog. But, focusing on what is effectively being said in this passage, it seems we would do well to distinguish what is being said from how it is being said (insofar as this is possible, anyway). The

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passages. Announcing the final (dialectical) third of the dialogue, Socrates exclaims: 'Come to us, then, noble creatures; convince Phaedrus . . . that unless he pursues philosophy properly he will never be able to make a proper speech on any subject' (261a). Towards the end of the dialogue Socrates suggests calling those who have mastered his ideal of the art of conversation 'philosophers': 'PHAEDRUS: What name, then, would you give such a man? / SOCRATES: To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover—a philosopher—or something similar would fit him better and be more seemly' (278d).

[49] See also 268a–269d.

[50] 'God knows whether this is the right name for those who can do this correctly or not, but so far I have always called them "dialecticians"' (266b–c).

schematic character of Socrates' presentation of the importance and difficulty of knowing one's interlocutor's (type of) soul may only be due to Socrates' awareness of *his* interlocutor's, i.e. Phaedrus' characteristic ways of understanding.[51]

It seems to me that in the *Phaedrus*, we find Plato theorising about just what I presented in Section 1 of this essay as a much-neglected aspect of the Socratic method. All of the characteristics of Socrates' philosophical dialogues listed in Section 1 can now be seen to flow from the same conviction expressed in the *Phaedrus*; namely the conviction that, in order to teach any philosophical insight to anyone, let alone philosophy as an art (as a method), it is essential to know whom you are teaching it to, to know your interlocutor's background knowledge, as well as their temptations and desires (or, in other words: their soul). This is what I earlier proposed to call the 'individuality of philosophical understanding', which as we saw in the previous section plays an important role in Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy.

Considering the inclusive presentation of oratory and dialectic (philosophy) in the *Phaedrus*, the question may reasonably occur of why this is in any way unique to philosophy and not, rather, true of almost any act of communication. In other words, it could be objected that Socrates would actually say the same thing about any spoken discourse, that it is no special characteristic of philosophy that one must know one's interlocutor's soul, and that I am reading something into the text that isn't really there. — But let us consider the following. I said that Socrates chooses to introduce his focus on understanding of the philosophical kind by pointing to those notions about whose nature we are most likely to disagree, 'with one another and even with ourselves'. Why is that? I think that Socrates chooses to do so because for him, this is the touchstone of a philosophical subject: insofar as the philosopher in us wants to know more or better in cases where we would normally take ourselves to know enough already (at least tacitly), it is fundamental for any serious philosophical dialogue that there be (or that room be made for) disagreement between the dialogue partners (even though this 'disagreement' might (and, in a way: should) at any moment turn out to be a disagreement about the meaning of the words that are used by the dialogue partners and indeed typically does turn out to be just that, viz. a misunderstanding of what one of the dialogue partners was trying to say, either by the other or by themselves)[52]. This is different from science, say, where our interest is driven by

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[51] That Socrates merely presents a model in these words which need not correspond to reality in all its respects is also made clear by his acknowledgement that no human could achieve this 'complete' knowledge ('Yet surely whatever one must go through on the way to an honorable goal is itself honorable' (274a); cf. 274a–b and 278d).

[52] Some might argue that philosophical disagreement is always only disagreement concerning the meaning of words. However, it seems rather obvious to me that sometimes a relevant disagreement does actually turn on a disagreement about certain states of affairs, for example concerning people's intuitions (as is much debated in and around experimental philosophy nowadays). Again, in such a case, it might of course be said that this only showed the 'disagreement' not to be a 'philosophical' one. But I do not believe that our concept of philosophy entails such a distinction, nor that it is particularly useful to introduce one.

ignorance (the opposite of 'knowledge') rather than disagreement or misunderstanding (the opposite of 'understanding'). Philosophical matters are those where opinions commonly lie further from each other than in any other kind of human endeavour. Is there any philosophical question where both the position that the thing in question exists and the position that it does not exist haven't been defended in all seriousness? From a historical perspective, philosophical questions can be said to be the ones with regard to which 'experts' have tended to disagree for decades, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of years. Almost no philosophical question can be said to have been answered once and for all (unless we stipulate an extremely narrow notion of 'philosophical question'). The point to be made, therefore, with respect to the relative significance of knowing one's interlocutor in philosophy, as compared to just any act of communication, is that no other kind of discourse has more potential for disagreement and hence misunderstanding between its respective participants – which is why it is in philosophy that it is most important to know one's interlocutor's soul well and hence to seek, and pay attention to, understanding *each other*.

It has often been said that in Plato's Socratic dialogues we do not find Socrates reflecting on his own methods.[53] And with respect to what has come to be thought of, standardly, as *the* Socratic method, viz. the *elenchus*, this is certainly true. Socrates does indeed never use the word '*elenchus*', nor does he describe this technique anywhere.[54] The *Laches*, however, introduces many of those fundamental aspects of the Socratic art of philosophising which I have described in this essay. In this dialogue, Socrates is shown discussing 'courage (*andreia*)' with the two accomplished generals Nicias and Laches, who have been asked to teach this virtue to the sons of two of their friends.[55] The two generals soon find that they do not seem to have quite such a clear understanding of what courage is as, both being experienced military men, they had assumed they did.[56] And it forms a unique moment in Plato's Socratic dialogues when Socrates attempts to begin his examination and Laches does not understand what it is that Socrates is asking from him when posing his infamous 'What is the F?' question. At first Laches intuitively presents Socrates with a paradigmatic example of courage, rather than an answer in the form of a general definition. And surely, this is what many of us would do most naturally, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that in principle. Socrates then spends considerable time explaining to Laches what form the latter's answer should take and how Socrates intends his question.[57]

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[53] See for example (Vlastos 1994b, 1).

[54] As I argued in Section 1, the *elenchus* is better understood as merely one prominent technique of his.

[55] Cf. (a) from the list in Section 1, above.

[56] Compare for instance Laches' self-assuredness in the following part of the introductory exchange: 'SOCRATES: We say then, Laches, that we know what [virtue] is. / LACHES: Yes, we do say so. / SOCRATES: And what we know, we must, I suppose, be able to state? / LACHES: Of course' (190c); also: 'LACHES: . . . I still think I know what courage is, but I can't understand how it has escaped me just now so that I can't pin it down in words and say what it is' (194b).

[57] Cf. (f) from the list in Section 1.

It is remarkable how, from this point in the dialogue onwards, Socrates, now knowing about Laches' unfamiliarity with this kind of philosophical discourse, continues to instruct him and Nicias in how to conduct a philosophical conversation with one another. In the great majority of cases of his instruction, Socrates urges Nicias and Laches to try to understand what the other is attempting to say, rather than – as has been much more common in philosophical discourse until today – simply dismissing the other's words as nonsense or arguing against a distorted version of the other's expressed view.[58] Take as an example the following passage in which Nicias offers his definition of courage:

> SOCRATES: Let him state what kind of knowledge it is.
> NICIAS: What I say, Laches, is that it is the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation.
> LACHES: How strangely he talks, Socrates.
> SOCRATES: What do you have in mind when you say this, Laches?
> LACHES: What do I have in mind? Why, I take wisdom to be quite a different thing from courage.
> SOCRATES: Well, Nicias, at any rate, says it isn't.
> LACHES: He certainly does—that's the nonsense he talks.
> SOCRATES: Well, let's instruct him instead of making fun of him. (*Laches* 194e–195a)

By 'instruct' Socrates here clearly means, not 'teaching what courage really is', but rather 'helping someone express themselves more clearly, in a way that will be more readily intelligible to us, by putting in front of them the problems we have in understanding what they say'. – Compare also, for a second example, the first exchange between Laches and Nicias:

> LACHES: It isn't clear to me from this, Socrates, what he is trying to say. Because he doesn't select either the seer or the doctor or anyone else as the man he calls courageous, unless some god is the person he means. Nicias appears to me unwilling to make a gentlemanly admission that he is talking nonsense, but he twists this way and that in an attempt to cover up his difficulty. Even you and I could have executed a similar twist just now if we had wanted to avoid the appearance of contradicting ourselves. If we were making speeches in a court of law, there might be some point in doing this, but as things are, why should anyone adorn himself senselessly with empty words in a gathering like this?
> SOCRATES: I see no reason why he should, Laches. But let us see if Nicias thinks he is saying something and is not just talking for the sake of talking. Let us find out from him more clearly what it is he means, and if he is really saying something, we will agree with him, but if not, we will instruct him.[59] (*Laches* 196a–c)

Equally there are a significant number of passages in which, although Socrates is not explicitly giving advice, one of the three men who are participating in the conversation expresses unclarity about what has been said by another or directly asks for the meaning of their interlocutor's

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[58] Cf. esp. (c) and (g) from the list in Section 1.

[59] Here 'instruct' should be read as 'help him understand better' (and here 'understand' should be read as comprising both possibilities: that Nicias be helped to understand courage (or some other thing) better or that he be helped to understand himself (or someone else) better, depending on whatever kind of understanding turns out to be most relevant).

words. In fact, most of the dialogue is framed as a quest for understanding what the other is trying to say that courage is.[60] First Laches (190d–194b), and then Nicias (194c–199e) attempt to say what they respectively think it is. And – as we saw was the case with the *Euthyphro* (Section 1) – it would be careless to say that the *Laches* ended, 'as usual', in *aporia*. For, more importantly, the dialogue ends at a point where Nicias finally feels understood by Laches and Socrates (see esp. 198b–199a).[61]

Hence, that which Plato has Socrates say in the above-quoted passage from the *Phaedrus* gets demonstrated, as an example, in (or, better: by) the *Laches*: namely, the fundamental importance for philosophical dialogue – and hence, understanding – that each dialogue partner sincerely aspires to understand the other, what they mean by their words, their respective ways of thinking and understanding, etc. so that, as a speaker, they can put their points in a way that ensures the best understanding on the part of their listener, and, as a listener, they can present their questions in a way that ensures the best understanding on the part of the speaker.[62]

Having said this, it should then be noted how in a Socratic dialogue it is usually at least three, and not just two, things that go hand in hand. That the conversational partners understand one another is (in most cases) only a necessary condition for a successful understanding of a philosophical kind, albeit a very significant one. Besides the minimum number of two partici- pants – 'the subjects' of the conversation – who each usually play the roles of both the speaker and the listener, there is 'the object' of the conversation (i.e. that which we would more colloquially call its 'subject'). This is where the analogy between philosophy and (most kinds of) therapy ends – unless we imagine two doctors examining each other for the sake of learning about a certain illness or organ. Philosophy (Socratic philosophy, anyway), despite its emphasis on mutual understanding between its practising subjects, is not exclusively an attempt to under- stand someone else, their feelings and opinions. But it is directed – in principle, approximately as much as at the other and ourselves – at the truth of things. This means, as I have stressed before, that it is important to appreciate the twofold function that is fulfilled by mutual understanding in philosophical discourse. Insofar as coming to understand (one) another brings about, hopefully (that is, if we don't find in the end that we meant the same thing all along[63]), the acknowledgment of alternative perspectives on the world that were previously unknown to

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[60] Remember also that the conversation of this dialogue is initiated by the question concerning the teaching of virtues.

[61] As with the suggested interpretation of the ending of the *Euthyphro* in Section 1, I believe that the ending of the *Laches* suggested here is not only less generic than the standard '*aporia*' hypothesis but actually helps explain one of the more abstract themes of the dialogue, viz. the way it might have been intended as an exemplar of 'how to teach virtues (or, philosophy)'. (On this latter point see also (Cooper 2007, 24) and (Vlastos 1994b, 6–7).

[62] Ideally, this process would resemble the hermeneutic circle (or spiral?). If this structure gets thoroughly appreciated as part of Socrates' method, then, against the received view, the *elenchus* will be seen to be of only subordinate importance to the underlying conception of philosophy.

[63] This, it should be said, is itself a beautiful moment.

us, it brings about a new and philosophically different world (or a world with new things in it that we did not know before). In the most astonishing instances, it often means coming to see something most familiar to us—something 'that we know too well' and that is thus almost invisible to us—as though with a pair of new, different eyes: seeing connections we did not see before, making new, happy associations or appreciating differences where before everything used to appear as the same monotonous thing to us – much like when a good friend visits us and we guide them through our hometown.

In the *Laches*, the twofold function of mutual understanding in philosophical discourse can be seen from the fact that, although they do not come very far in their understanding of the immediate object of their conversation ('courage')—and this is of course partly due to the considerable efforts they spend on reaching an understanding of each other, as argued in the foregoing—they nevertheless do also get somewhere in this respect; they can be said to have reached (the start of) a better understanding of what courage is. In fact, Plato makes this double function explicit in Nicias' expressed anticipation before the actual examination starts (as quoted in Section 2, above). For not only does he mention the subjective examination of oneself and one's beliefs, prejudices, etc. and those of one's interlocutors, which the method involves, but equally, towards the end, the objective kind of learning that it involves, concerning one's life and the world:

> NICIAS: You don't appear to me to know that whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. And when he does submit to this questioning, you don't realize that Socrates will not let him go before he has well and truly tested every last detail. … I think that a man who does not run away from such treatment but is willing, according to the saying of Solon, to value learning as long as he lives, not supposing that old age brings him wisdom of itself, will necessarily pay more attention to the rest of his life. (*Laches* 187e–188b)

In the *Phaedrus*, the interplay in philosophical understanding between mutual understanding on the one hand and understanding of the world on the other is clearly marked by Plato having Socrates not only remark on the importance of the former ('you must understand the nature of the soul' (277b)), but equally on the importance of the latter ('you must know the truth concerning everything' (277b)), in order to reach genuine philosophical understanding of anything in philosophical discourse. But there is one more, perhaps at this stage also more interesting, way in which the *Phaedrus* brings out the twofold function of mutual understanding, which I want to mention before closing this section. In the *Phaedrus* Plato has Socrates theorise about one of his most famous (or infamous) practices: 'the ("unsuccessful") search for

essences'.[64] As everyone knows, Socrates typically proceeds by (eliciting) attempts to formulate what something is in the form of a general definition, which, once formulated, he goes on to criticise and dismiss. Commentators like to point out that Socrates' alleged ignorance, whether ironical or not, and also his 'knowing that he does not know anything', are illustrated by this practice. Now, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates describe these two moments, i.e. the formulation of a definition and its subsequent criticism, in the following way:

> SOCRATES: The first consists in seeing together things that are scattered about everywhere and collecting them into one kind, so that by defining each thing we can make clear the subject of any instruction we wish to give. Just so with our discussion of love: Whether its definition was or was not correct, at least it allowed the speech to proceed clearly and consistently with itself.
>
> PHAEDRUS: And what is the other thing you are talking about, Socrates?
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> SOCRATES: This, in turn, is to be able to cut up each kind according to its species along its natural joints, and to try not to splinter any part, as a bad butcher might do. In just this way, our two speeches placed all mental derangements into one common kind. Then, just as each single body has parts that naturally come in pairs of the same name (one of them being called the right-hand and the other the left-hand one), so the speeches, having considered unsoundness of mind to be by nature one single kind within us, proceeded to cut it up—the first speech cut its left-hand part, and continued to cut until it discovered among these parts a sort of love that can be called 'left-handed,' which it correctly denounced; the second speech, in turn, led us to the right-hand part of madness; discovered a love that shares its name with the other but is actually divine; set it out before us, and praised it as the cause of our greatest goods.
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> PHAEDRUS: You are absolutely right.
>
> SOCRATES: Well, Phaedrus, I am myself a lover of these divisions and collections, so that I may be able to think and to speak; . . . God knows whether this is the right name for those who can do this correctly or not, but so far I have always called them 'dialecticians'. (*Laches* 265d–266c)[65]

Let me try to paraphrase this presentation of a central aspect of the Socratic method(s). Socrates' (elicitations of) attempts to define something can be understood as a purely heuristic method. Contrary to a common picture, Socrates need not actually be committed to believing that such essences can ever be formulated. Rather, from what we have seen in the preceding discussion, it appears that he uses this device mainly so that his interlocutors respond in the way he wishes them to and in order to lay a foundation for mutual understanding between the respective conversational partners by way of agreement as to the meaning of central terms of their subsequent discourse. It would be wrong, however, to think that on such an interpretation Socrates (or

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[64] This is probably the most widely misunderstood (or abused) aspect of both the Socratic method and Plato's philosophy. Wittgensteinians especially tend to think of this practice in the pejorative mode and it is frequently contrasted with Wittgenstein's ideas about 'family resemblance', for instance. However, as I am arguing in the main text, this is quite clearly a mistake.

[65] Commentators, wrongly, have often not believed the *Phaedrus'* Socrates when he says that he himself is a 'lover of these divisions', but tend to ascribe the so-called 'method of divisions' exclusively to the mature Plato instead (esp. in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*).

Plato) turned out to be some sort of sceptic or nominalist.[66] For, as Socrates points out, the criticism of formulated definitions, which follows every definition, is what really enables us to approach the thing we are interested in as it is ('along its natural joints').

The Socratic use of definitions, thus understood, is not only much less naïvely (or, metaphysically) realistic than usually portrayed, but actually quite close to the way analytic philosophers have always wanted to work. And arguably Wittgenstein's later method of language-games, understood as the stipulation of (and subsequent reflection on) objects of comparison (centres of variation) 'which, through similarities and dissimiliarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language' (PI §130), bears a strikingly close resemblance to this Socratic technique.[67] However, the key to appreciating these similarities between the Socratic method and Wittgenstein's lies in the acknowledgement of the oft-neglected role which the mutual understanding between the participants of a Socratic conversation plays in (the more general kind of) philosophical understanding of the world.

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[66] Note that in denying this I do not mean to argue in favour of a 'realist' interpretation of Plato or Socrates either.

[67] Cf. my related discussions in Sections 4 and 4.1. On Wittgenstein's method of language-games see the lucid presentation in (Kuusela 2008), as well as the discussion in (Kuusela forthcoming).

4 Plato's problem of writing Socratic philosophy and Wittgenstein's 'feat of writing'

As I mentioned at the beginning of the preceding section, Plato discusses not just philosophy as such in the *Phaedrus* but also the various forms it can take, in particular: oratory/speech-giving, personal dialogue/conversation (dialectic) and writing. After having looked mainly at the first two of these – but especially at the second – in the previous section, I now want to turn my attention towards the third: writing. Being familiar with what is widely thought of as Plato's disregard for the fine arts, one might think, however, that Socrates' verdict about philosophical writing in the *Phaedrus* is really not too surprising:

> SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support. (*Phaedrus* 275d–e)

Perhaps we can find here the philosophical reason why Socrates left no written legacy. In any case, the consequences of this critique, I believe, are highly interesting and complex. As this passage continues, we further read Socrates saying that anyone with only the slightest understanding of philosophy will have to dismiss any attempt at writing serious philosophy. A philosopher could only write down philosophical thoughts for their own amusement, or perhaps as an aid to memory. But teaching the art of philosophy in the form of written words and without the live and direct support of their author is strictly impossible, or so Socrates argues:

> SOCRATES: Therefore, he won't be serious about writing them in ink, sowing them, through a pen, with words that are as incapable of speaking in their own defense as they are of teaching the truth adequately.' (*Phaedrus* 276c)[68]

Hence, the only legitimate kind of serious philosophical communication, according to Plato's Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, is 'the living, breathing discourse' (276a). (Obviously, speech-writing, or lecturing for that matter, is ultimately no better than writing as such.) As the discussion in previous sections showed, according to a Socratic conception of philosophy it is only in direct personal dialogue that philosophical questions can be met with appropriate responses. Only in

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[68] See *Phaedrus* 276a–d. See also my discussion of 'golden truths' in Section 2, above; and the related discussion of 'literal truths' in the present section, below.

direct personal conversation can we reasonably expect to achieve genuine mutual understanding between our conversational partners and ourselves with regard to any philosophical subject. But this kind of mutual understanding, as we saw in the foregoing section, is a necessary means, when following the Socratic method, of establishing any shared philosophical understanding of the world. Plato's Socrates in the *Phaedrus* contends that writing, however, has no realistic hopes whatsoever of achieving this.

Socrates, one would assume, was a happy and serious philosopher. If he really believed what Plato has him say in the *Phaedrus*, then we would now understand better why he might have practised philosophy exclusively via the spoken word and in spontaneous conversation. Concerning Plato, however, as the author of this dialogue, the situation seems less straightforward. Could he seriously be using Socrates as a mouthpiece here?[69] It would seem not, for otherwise he would appear to be effectively contradicting himself by writing that philosophical writing is impossible. Or is the *Phaedrus* perhaps not intended as 'serious' philosophy? Is it merely an entertaining piece, or written for private purposes only? None of these questions seem likely to receive a positive answer from any serious scholar. But what, then, are we to say? – I shall come back to this question. First, I want to dwell a little more on the underlying problem of writing Socratic philosophy.

As we have seen from the examples of Socrates, Plato and Wittgenstein in the course of the first three sections of this essay, there is arguably a notion of a philosophical problem according to which (at least some)[70] philosophical problems are essentially person-relative. According to this notion of a philosophical problem, the problem persists for as long as it is manifest in the expressions or behaviour of the individual for whom it is a problem.[71] Such a notion of a philosophical problem may have the most intuitive appeal when the respective problems take the Socratic form of 'What is courage?', 'What is justice?', 'What is meaning?', 'What is the meaning of a word?', 'What is philosophy?' or 'What is a philosophical problem?'.[72] Moreover, person-relative problems require solutions that are equally person-relative. One way of

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[69] This position has most notably been defended by Gregory Vlastos. More recently Christopher Rowe has suggested a new version of it in his *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (2007).

[70] The notion need by no means be dogmatic but can allow for other compatible notions; e.g. a historically oriented one according to which we could say, for instance, that the problems of early analytic philosophy, for instance of logicism and logical atomism, have for the most part been 'solved' by the present generation of academic philosophers (which might be false but is not therefore senseless); political philosophers, it further seems to me, also work on many questions, and thus on problems, that are philosophical but that are not essentially the problems of an individual.

[71] This leaves it open whether the individual acknowledges that they have the respective problem, as in the case of Laches in the *Laches*, or whether the person professes not to have it, as with Euthyphro in the *Euthyphro*.

[72] Cf. also the kind of questions Wittgenstein introduces at the beginning of *The Blue Book*: 'The questions "What is length?", "What is meaning?", "What is the number one?" etc., produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something' (BlB 1).

conceiving of the person-relativity of a problem is to let 'solutions' wear the trousers for once, rather than 'the problem'. The thought could go something like this: you only really know what the problem is when you have found its solution.[73] (This, it seems to me, actually describes a common experience of philosophical understanding.)

For example, we could also regard the problem of other minds as belonging to this set of problems. Many solutions have been suggested, advocated – and thus accepted – by at least a small number of individuals. Some people notably think that there is no such problem as the problem of other minds at all, and take this to be its solution (or dissolution). – Now, it might be objected that this is only to suggest something like the claim that e.g. the term 'the problem of other minds' denotes a class of problems rather than one singular problem and hence a really rather trivial and unoriginal thing to come up with. But then one only has to point out that if such a class can be individuated essentially by reference to individual persons then that is exactly what the relevant notion of philosophical problems is about. In other words, applying the general thought above to this potential instance: you only really know what someone's problem about other minds is, or was, when you have found its solution, that is, when that someone ceases to have the problem (either because they now know how to answer the question which plagued them satisfactorily, or because the problem just goes away, does not play a role in their life any more).

Along the same lines as Plato's *Phaedrus*, it can be said that it is this kind of notion of a philosophical problem which can make it difficult to see how anyone could write anything useful concerning its solution(s) – because, consequently, there are about as many solutions as there are individuals trying to find one. — Now, it should be stressed that the problem of writing Socratic philosophy does not solely arise from a notion of philosophical 'problems' but equally from a notion of philosophical 'understanding'. As argued before: whether the questions we are dealing with take the form of an open-ended enquiry into some aspect of human life or other without prejudice or presumption ('what is the F?')[74] or whether they take the form instead of an intellectual anxiety ('do philosophical zombies have consciousness?'), systematic perplexity ('how can I prove physicalism?') or traumatic confusion ('how do I know that I can trust this person or anyone else?'), a philosophical enquiry – conducted in a Socratic spirit as described in the present essay – will usually have, besides the negative effect of ridding one of a problem, the positive effect of yielding some objective insight or understanding. But the form such an understanding takes will in each case depend on the kinds of misunderstanding or prejudice

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[73] See also my discussion of §43 and the story about Wittgenstein and the child in Section 2, above.

[74] Of course, such a question can be asked in all sorts of ways, as the *Laches* vividly demonstrates (see my discussion in Section 3, above). Ultimately there is no right *form* of expression to guide such an enquiry. Whether an enquiry is led in an open-minded manner in this sense depends on the many factors which characterise the respective enquiry, not on the (surface-) grammatical form of the question. But the same holds, of course, for the other examples in the text. That's the point. – And something very similar also holds in the case of potential answers.

which stand in its way. However, these are likely to be different between different individuals or even for the same person at different times. For example, someone's understanding of the role that 'reference' plays in human communication might be enhanced by means of pointing out that when N.N. dies it still makes sense to say 'N.N. has died'.[75] But someone else might find this trivial. Or someone might think, 'this is a complicated case of reference, but not a puzzle that cannot be solved somehow!', and start trying to solve the puzzle. Similarly, when I say 'don't think, but look!' or 'meaning is use', or tell you a story about a shopkeeper selling five red apples, I might just be trying to tell you the very same thing over and over again. And you might understand me, and hence understand whatever it is that I have been trying to tell you. Or you might not understand me to be saying the same thing in each case – and you would be right – and might nevertheless understand whatever it is that I was trying to tell you. But whether, and how, you understand is entirely dependent on you. — In this manner, for example, it is not only philosophical problems but equally philosophical understanding that can involve essential parameters that are dependent on a particular individual, and hence can lead to the problem of writing Socratic philosophy. Every speaker of English who has mastered the language well[76] can use the same recipe to bake a cake (at least, in principle), but it seems there are no such universal recipes for gaining philosophical insights. And it would be rather surprising, to say the least, to find out that this was a mere deficiency of the English language.[77]

So the problem of writing Socratic philosophy could be expressed, then, in the following way: *the degree of the diversity of person-relative methods for solving what still appears to be one philosophical problem is proportional to the difficulty of conveying the solution(s) to a philosophical problem in writing to one's readers.* And if we have any hope at all, then this could give expression to our challenge of writing Socratic philosophy: *How to write philosophy in the way Socrates practised it in speech?*

Or we could look at it this way. On the one hand, personal conversation grants one all the flexibility that the particular character of another person's understanding might require in order to achieve any (mutual or objective) philosophical understanding regarding a given question. Writing, on the other hand, constrains one in a number of ways, so that it becomes difficult to deal with person-relative characteristics of understanding. Following this line of thought, the problem could also be said to consist in the following: *the person-relative character of (at least some) philosophical problems stands in opposition to philosophy's aspirations to abstraction and generality, in particular in its desire to reach a large, perhaps indefinite, and hence*

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[75] See my discussion of PI §§40–42 in Section 2, above.

[76] What I mean is, roughly, to the extent that they can get on with their daily lives at the approximate level of a native speaker.

[77] Is this a paradox: 'Philosophical truths cannot be carved in stone'?

anonymous audience or readership.[78] The challenge of writing Socratic philosophy may, then, be expressed in the following question: *how can one write philosophy in a way that is equivalent to talking to a potentially infinite number of conversational partners, one by one (as in a series of actual personal conversations) and yet all at the same time (as in a text written, literally once and for all)?*

Having thus more fully identified the problem of writing Socratic philosophy as presented in Plato's *Phaedrus,* it will now be useful to broaden the picture just a little bit, and briefly look at a few related instances of reflective authorship in the history of western philosophy.

Here, for example, is a passage from R. G. Collingwood's *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933), whose relevance for – and indeed striking similarity to – our present concerns should already be quite obvious at this stage:

> Every piece of philosophical writing is primarily addressed by the author to himself. Its purpose is not to select from among his thoughts those of which he is certain and to express those, but the very opposite: to fasten upon the difficulties and obscurities in which he finds himself involved, and try, if not to solve or remove them, at least to understand them better. The philosopher is forced to work in this way by the inextricable unity of the object which he studies . . . in thinking of it, therefore, he must always be probing into the darkest parts, as a guide trying to keep his party together must always be hastening the hindmost. The philosopher therefore, in the course of his business, must always be confessing his difficulties. . . . [P]hilosophical writing [is] essentially a confession, a search by the mind for its own failings and an attempt to remedy them by recognizing them.
> In reading the philosophers, we 'follow' them: that is, we understand what they think, and reconstruct in ourselves, so far as we can, the processes by which they have come to think it. . . . The reader of a philosophical work is committing himself to the enterprise of living through the same experience that his author lived through; if for lack of sympathy, patience, or any other quality he cannot do this, his reading is worthless.
> In this respect philosophy resembles poetry. (Collingwood 1933, 209 ff.)

Wittgenstein, too, thought that in an important sense philosophy should resemble poetry ('*Dichtung*' (CV, 28)). But contrary to what Collingwood appears to have thought, Wittgenstein took this to be a challenge primarily for the author rather than for the reader (as we will soon see more clearly). My discussion in the following will focus, however, on practical attempts to solve these problems, i.e. resolutions which result in alternative forms of writing as opposed to theoretical attempts which result in alternative forms of reading (at most). There is no shortage of examples of practical reflective authorship of this kind in the history of western philosophy. Besides Plato and Wittgenstein, Friedrich Nietzsche[79] and Søren Kierkegaard[80] spring to mind. Also worth mentioning, perhaps, are Michel De Montaigne, Johann Georg Hamann and his

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[78] These 'aspirations', it seems to me, are also shared by most philosophers currently working in the analytic tradition. Cf. my brief discussion in the postscript of this essay, below.

[79] See e.g. (Conant 2014, II.4)

[80] See e.g. (Conant 1996) and (Phillips 1992).

pupil Johann Gottfried Herder; Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, but also George Berkeley and David Hume, or René Descartes. A more recent example is Stanley Cavell.[81]

We can distinguish at least the following three kinds of practical resolution for one's writing that one may choose between in the face of the problem of writing Socratic philosophy. First, we can choose not to write (or can we?), like Socrates did. Second, we can decide to retreat and write merely for ourselves, privately (or, 'confessionally', as Collingwood calls it). This manner of writing would correspond to what Plato's Socrates in the *Phaedrus* describes as for one's own memory or that of those who know as well as we do what we are writing about. Montaigne's *Essais* (1588), for instance, are consciously written in such a confessional style.[82] In the preface, Montaigne warns us somewhat paradoxically: 'So, reader, I am myself the substance of my book, and there is no reason why you should waste your leisure on so frivolous and unrewarding a subject' (Montaigne 1588, [23]). Montaigne's 'confessional' approach found expression not only in the explicitly personal character of his work, disclosing some of his most private opinions, but equally in the ways he made revisions to his published work. For, in revised editions, instead of deleting or correcting 'mistakes', Montaigne simply added more material, thus increasing the degree to which the document could testify to his life and biography.

Third, we can resolve to compromise, and try to find ways of overcoming the obstacles to writing serious Socratic philosophy that can be of genuinely instructive value for others. This is the route Plato seems to have embarked upon, and Wittgenstein, I believe, can equally be said to have done so. And for much of the remainder of this essay, I shall be trying to make the case that this is an interesting and worthwhile way of looking at Wittgenstein's second masterwork, a.k.a. *Philosophical Investigations*, and to indicate why I think that Cavell is right in responding to it essentially 'as a feat of writing' (Cavell 1979, xvii).

In approaching the kind of 'active' attempts at resolving the problem of writing Socratic philosophy, i.e. attempts of the third (or, Platonic) type, it will be instructive to look for a moment at an example from Descartes. As something of a mix of a confessional style and something that aspires to more, this seems apt to lead us in the right direction with respect to action. There have been a handful of commentators who argue for an essentially first-person-perspective usage of Descartes' *Cogito* argument in his *Meditations* (1641). Most recently,

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[81] In many cases the literary quality (or, better: the philosophical significance of the literariness) of philosophers' writing has been shamefully neglected. This is of course the case with Plato's dialogues. Generally, and not at all surprisingly it seems to me, commentators from the analytic tradition have been most negligent in this respect. Most adaptations of Nietzsche's work are gross mistreatments of his rather explicit remarks on how to read him. Somewhat ironically, the analytic tradition that continues to thrive can be said to have sprung from one particular instance of such a misreading: the misreading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922) (see also Footnote 88, below).

[82] This is in contrast with Augustine's *Confessiones* (398AD), for example, whose literary form is due to religious considerations rather than strictly philosophical ones.

perhaps, Raymond Tallis has argued that the first-person pronoun, 'I', in Descartes' argument plays a special role which is overlooked by objections such as Russell's (but also Lichtenberg's), according to which all one could infer from Descartes' argument was that 'it thinks', 'there is thinking' or 'there are thoughts' but not that a soul, subject, or person was thinking. And I agree with Tallis that it is a common mistake of such accounts to ignore the fundamentally person-relative dimension of the argument. As he puts it,

> it is necessary to see the *Cogito* argument from the first-person point of view – imagining it from within – and as something that exists not as a type, but as an indefinite number of token proofs actually being undertaken . . . by an individual and as providing grounds for resistance to particular doubts experienced by particular individuals at particular moments, rather than as an objective proof or the proof of some objective fact. (Tallis 2005, 28)

Hence, contrary to common belief, Tallis argues, Descartes does not simply invite the reader to learn about his (Descartes') astonishing discoveries in the *Meditations*. Rather, the reader is invited to actively perform some of the lines of thought described in the book. In the case of the *Cogito* argument, this means that, as Tallis puts it, 'the argument as it is usually set out on the page – as an argument type – is best seen as a *recipe* for philosophers to demonstrate something to themselves. Something, in short, that indicates work to be done off the page' (Tallis 2005, 28).

In addition to the point about this particular argument, we find that in the specially written *Preface to the Reader*, Descartes in fact expresses significant concerns about person-relative parameters that may play a role in understanding him. Descartes writes, 'as I do not presume so much on my own powers as to believe myself capable of foreseeing all that can cause difficulty to anyone, I shall first of all set forth in these Meditations the very considerations by which I persuade myself' (Descartes 1641, Preface to the Reader).[83] But Descartes not only explicitly acknowledges his personal commitment to the text of the *Meditations* (their 'confessional' character), what is more, as the passage continues he describes his decision to publish alongside this first part of the book the *Objections and Replies* as being motivated by the same reasons. It is his explicit intention to enrich his personal mode of understanding, as set out in the first part, with the perspectives of others, hence his asking the likes of Thomas Hobbes and the theologian Antoine Arnauld to share their thoughts. Thus, in addition to the more implicit point about the *Cogito*, here we have Descartes' explicit reflection on his elaborate attempt to actively address his readers' individual modes of understanding, which he acknowledges to be importantly different from his own.

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[83] See also Anthony Kenny: 'Wittgenstein's insistence that philosophy is something that each man must do for himself, and which is a matter of the will, not of the intellect, resembles most of all the philosopher with whom he is most frequently contrasted, René Descartes. Descartes's philosophical masterpiece was not a textbook but a series of meditations which each person must go through for himself; the doubt and the cogito was a discipline which each person must administer to himself' (Kenny 1982, 26).

Descartes' *Meditations* can therefore be regarded as perhaps one of the most prominent examples of a philosophical text which attempts to actively address its readers in their various individual, personal modes of understanding. At the same time, however, considering the large group of albeit very intelligent readers who could not be reached in this way (e.g. Russell, but perhaps even more surprisingly Lichtenberg), Descartes' example also reveals its own limitations. In this respect, Descartes' *Meditations* are rather like Montaigne's *Essais*. Both works are essentially historical records. In Descartes' case, however, it is the historical record not only of the author's coming to understand something but including, furthermore, the author's attempts to explain what it is that he has understood to a group of selected individuals who in turn explain their difficulties in understanding the original account of the author.[84] Given the extent to which Descartes failed in this authorial enterprise, it has to be noted, once again, that a mere *recipe* form of philosophical instruction, as Tallis also describes it, will not be enough to overcome the kind of problem we are presently concerned with – or will do so only in particular cases and only for very few and ever fewer of us – and therefore will not suffice for the purposes of a genuinely Socratic way of writing philosophy either.

Plato's dialogues are different in this respect from Descartes' *Objections and Replies* in the *Meditations*. Regardless of whether scholars will ever agree about the relation between the voice of Socrates[85] and that of Plato in each of the various dialogues,[86] the simple fact that the author's voice does not explicitly appear in the text makes all the difference. It is again the *Phaedrus* which constitutes a salient example for our understanding of Plato's authorship in this respect. Imagine, if Plato had indeed assigned his own name to the voice of Socrates in this dialogue: would this not have made it even more, and to a regrettable extent, the historical record of the author's contradiction or self-doubt at a particular point in time? But how much more there is, given that we do not have any such explicit identification – that is, more for us readers to do, more for us to think about, and thus more for us to learn! – John Cooper aptly summarises the situation towards the end of the dialogue as follows:

> Writings cannot contain or constitute knowledge of any important matter. Knowledge can only be lodged in a mind, and its essential feature there is an endless capacity to express, interpret, and reinterpret itself suitably, in response to every challenge—something a written text once let go by its author plainly lacks: it can only keep on repeating the same words to whoever picks it up. But does not a Platonic dialogue, in engaging its reader in a creative, multilayered intellectual encounter, have a similar capacity for ever-deeper reading, for the discovery of underlying meaning beyond the simple presentation of its

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[84] When one considers the particular historicity of the *Objections and Replies*, it becomes *almost* understandable that there are many editions on the market today which simply leave them out.

[85] It should be noted that in some dialogues the prime candidate for being designated Plato's 'spokesperson' is not Socrates, e.g. in the *Parmenides*.

[86] However, I do agree with Cooper, once more, on this question: 'Plato as author of the dialogue stands back from the words of his spokesmen and withholds his full commitment; . . . it is through the writing as a whole that Plato speaks to the reader, not through any single character's words' (Cooper 1999, 29 ff.).

surface ideas? Knowledge is only in souls, but, despite the *Phaedrus'* own critique of writing, reading such a dialogue may be a good way of working to attain it. (Cooper 1997b, 507)

I agree with Cooper, entirely, that it is 'a good way'. It is a good attempt by Plato at writing the kind of philosophy he had learnt from his teacher Socrates in spoken discourse. It is much better than Descartes' *Objections and Replies*, in particular; not merely because of Plato's use of fictional characters but furthermore due to his respecting all or most of the characteristics of Socratic philosophising listed in Section 1 above, and more. Thus Plato manages, as was noted earlier, not only to instruct us with regard to some particular phenomenon (like piety, justice, friendship) but also to instruct us with regard to a method, and does so, moreover, in a way that does not try to make us believe something but that actually makes us do something (like an example, or series of examples, that breaks off only so as to let us – or make us – continue for ourselves).

Hence, it could be said, the reason why Plato's dialogues come ever so much closer to resembling the live Socratic practice of direct personal conversation resides in the fact that, as reception history impressively demonstrates, Plato does not just let his readers think but actually makes them do so – and has done so successfully, in uncountably many individual cases and to an extent that stands, almost incredibly, unrivalled for more than two thousand years in the western tradition of writing philosophical texts.

Now here along comes Wittgenstein, being critical of it all:

> Imagine you are taking a walk together with another person, and you are deep in conversation. In the course of this conversation you would sometimes slow down and sometimes accelerate your pace, again and again coming to a halt at various points. As these interruptions of your walk are immediate outcomes of the life of the conversation, a listener will find them quite natural. Now let's suppose that only the substance of the conversation is reproduced by someone (who may be translating it into another language), and in order to do so it would be necessary to walk the same path, marking the spots where the first time round pauses were made. These enforced interruptions of your walk, though originally they helped the flow of the conversation, will now be perceived as extremely disruptive. Similarly with the translation of the Platonic dialogues into dialogue form. Only once, in the original course of the conversation, the affirmative and negative responses were natural and helpful resting points. In the translation they are agonizing, irritating slowdowns. (MS 153a, 117v–199r; MS 111, 192 ff., translation by Joachim Schulte)[87]

Wittgenstein here seems to criticise Plato for reasons very similar to the ones that I just cited against Descartes and in favour of Plato. Wittgenstein effectively says that Plato's dialogues are in an important respect still a mere historical record which, in particular, results in disruptions of the flow of reading that are unnatural to most readers and hence counterproductive to their

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[87] Wittgenstein had many conflicting things to say about Plato and Socrates, and many half-baked criticisms that seem to me to be unfair. However, this one does seem fair. (See (Biesenbach 2014) for the most comprehensive collection of Wittgenstein's references and allusions to Plato and Socrates.)

understanding. And in principle, it must be said, Wittgenstein is surely right. This is, fundamentally, a problem of Plato's dialogues that is widely acknowledged. Still, Wittgenstein's criticism reads a bit like an out-of-proportion 'Must do better.' But the obvious question is: how? — In the following, then, I shall try to answer this question.

I shall argue that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* can be characterised as a special form of writing in which one leading principle of composition is that it should enable as many readers as possible to have something like a live Socratic dialogue with the resulting text, and hence prompt them to address their individual philosophical problems and modes of understanding, in accordance with their individual philosophical problems and modes of understanding; furthermore, I shall argue that in this respect Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* transcend Plato's best dialogues.

'So that . . . the *spirit* should receive its due.'

In 1929, after ten years away from philosophy, Wittgenstein had grown more and more discontent with his early work, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922), upon the completion of which he had believed himself 'to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems' (TLP, Preface). One reason for his growing discontent might have been, not just that he came to see minor mistakes such as the original neglect of the colour exclusion problem but that he felt the need to improve the expression of some of the central thoughts that it contained concerning, e.g. the nature of philosophical problems, 'the correct method in philosophy' (6.53), the role of logic and the limits of sense. For one thing, no one seemed to have understood it (not even Russell, as Wittgenstein complained on numerous occasions). Another reason might have been that *he* didn't quite understand his earlier self any more.[88]

In the *Tractatus* itself, Wittgenstein had already mentioned that in terms of clarity of expression, he was 'conscious of having fallen a long way short of what is possible' (TLP, Preface). Now, in the 1930s, after his return to academic philosophy, he made several attempts at an improved linear style of presentation of his new approach. About six years later, however,

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[88] Hence, insofar as from the perspective of the present essay, it does not seem unlikely that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* had mainly failed with regard to his '—enormous—difficulty of expression' (MS 102, 68r [8 March 1915], my translation), it can still be the case that he had in fact 'found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems', namely in the sense that for him at the time the expression seemed right and it enabled him 'to break off philosophizing' (PI §133). It is as though the historicity of the *Tractatus'* form of writing, its limitedness in only really being the '*erlösende Wort'* for one particular person at one particular time, started to dawn on Wittgenstein only once it had ceased to work for himself. (But it did not dawn on him quite so immediately. First people such as Frank P. Ramsey, Moritz Schlick and other members of the Vienna Circle made him believe, once more – if only for a relatively short while, viz. approximately until the end of 1931 – that the project he had formerly come to see for himself as ultimately nonsensical (i.e., roughly, the 'picture-theory') might perhaps be made to work after all (hence his initial work on several 'picture-theory'-related questions upon his return to Cambridge).)

he finally rejected a linear style of presentation and settled instead on the non-linear, criss-cross style of interrelated remarks and aphorisms which led to the text which has been posthumously published as *Philosophical Investigations*.[89] In the draft of a preface, which has been – fittingly – published alongside it, Wittgenstein writes, 'my thoughts soon grew feeble if I tried to force them along a single track against their natural inclination. ––– And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought. . . . So this book is really just an album' (PI, Preface). Furthermore, towards the end of this preface Wittgenstein adds, 'I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own' (PI, Preface). This remark towards the end of the preface, importantly, does not seem to me to be a mere cliché. Essentially the same point, as I understand it, was at an earlier time once put by Wittgenstein in the following way: 'I must be nothing more than the mirror in which my reader sees his own thinking with all its deformities & with this assistance can set it in order' (CV, 25e [22.11.1931]). However, it was only later (after the autumn of 1936) that he came to understand the implications of this latter simile more fully. For, as we are now in a position to say, this meant not only that he had to be 'nothing more than a mirror' but equally that he had to be nothing less either. The real difficulty, then, does not consist in becoming a mirror, but in becoming a mirror and then making your readers look into that mirror. In other words, it means that he had to be nothing more or less than a *speaking mirror*.

At around the time when Wittgenstein came to realise that he therefore had to abandon all attempts at a linear text for the teaching of his new philosophical approach in written form, i.e. at about the time he composed the first version of *Philosophical Investigations* ('part I') up until Section 188 as we know them today, we find Wittgenstein – perhaps not wholly coincidentally – reflecting on Kierkegaard's writing and also on the Bible:

> Kierkegaard writes: If Christianity were so easy and cosy, why would God have moved Heaven & Earth in his Scripture, threatened *eternal* punishments –. – Question: But why is this Scripture so unclear then? If we want to warn someone of a terrible danger, do we do it by giving him a riddle to solve, whose solution is perhaps the warning? – But who is to say that the Scripture really is unclear: isn't it possible that it was essential in this case to tell a riddle? That a more direct warning, on the other hand, would necessarily have had the *wrong* effect? (CV 36e [22.10.1937])

Wittgenstein's reflections can be transferred, quite directly, onto his own writing of the *Investigations* at the time. For instance, at their very beginning: did he not equally have reasons to caution against asking certain questions in the following, rather indirect way? After introducing the famous language-game of the shopkeeper who manages to sell five red apples using a shopping list which says 'five red apples', Wittgenstein has this short dialogue follow:

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[89] See also Pichler's detailed account of Wittgenstein's rejection of the linear style of the *Brown Book* complex in (Pichler 2004); cf. also (Pichler 2007).

> "But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" —— Well, I assume that he *acts* as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. – But what is the meaning of the word "five"? – No such thing was in question here, only how the word "five" is used. (PI §1)

Surely, he could have written: 'don't ask this question'? Or, 'don't ask this question in a way as to suggest there must be more to the meaning of the word than its mere use in this language-game'? But it seems that apparently he could not have done so: any more direct warning, Wittgenstein appears to have thought, would likely have had 'the *wrong* effect' in this case too.[90]

> Wittgenstein's reflections on the Bible continue as follows:

> > God has *four* people recount the life of the incarnate God [i.e. the Four Christian Evangelists' stories of Jesus, viz. Matthew's, Mark's, Luke's and John's], each one differently, & contradicting each other – but can't we say: It is important that this narrative should not have more than quite middling historical plausibility, *just* so that this should not be taken as the essential, decisive thing. So that the *letter* should not be believed more strongly than is proper & the *spirit* should receive its due. (CV 36e [22.10.1937])

Similarly, it could be said, in the present case, it is a particular *spirit* in which one might be tempted to ask the question 'what is the meaning of the word "five"?' which might be problematic, but not the question as such, not 'the letter' (i.e. not this series of words). For, in principle, the same question could also be posed by someone who wishes to ask 'how (else) is the word "five" used in the world of the shopkeeper, as compared with the way we normally use numerals?', for instance (which of course would be quite close to what Wittgenstein would actually like us to think about in this passage). Thus, Wittgenstein's indirect form of expression in this example allows someone who doesn't feel a need for the problematic kind of question to simply go on reading, as it were with no 'enforced interruptions of their walk'.[91] Only someone who does feel the problematic need to ask for the 'real' meaning of the word 'five' would be prompted to pause and think, or thus appears to be Wittgenstein's intention. It is as though with the language-game of the shopkeeper, Wittgenstein has found one form of expression which allows him to bend 'the letter' in such a way that 'the spirit' could receive its due.

But the passage quoted above might give us another hint in this direction. Namely, insofar as Wittgenstein speaks here of the potential effects of a text whose structure he conceives of as essentially dialogical, the passage can be seen in close connection with his above-mentioned criticism of Plato's dialogues. Just as we saw was the problem with Descartes' *Meditations*, so it

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[90] As we saw in Section 2, the apparently most 'explicit' expression in PI §43 can indeed be said to have had the wrong effect in many instances. See also the discussion of such wrong effects in (Conant 1998). (Had Wittgenstein lived to witness the tragic story of this one remark, Section 43 would have been among the first to be cut out again.)

[91] A reader like this might, for example, go on reading thinking that 'this must be in preparation for some "deeper" questions to be introduced at a later stage' (and for this particular reader, in fact, it might be), or simply thinking nothing in particular while skimming over this short interlude.

can now equally be said of Plato that his dialogues, when measured against the possible ideal of 'Socratic writing', remain too much the historical record of a dialogue as it once (could have) happened. In other words, there is still too much of an attempt at a literal philosophical truth in Plato's dialogues, which both Socrates and Wittgenstein considered to be a mere chimaera created by an illusion of meaning, '[a]s if the meaning were an aura the word brings along with it' (PI §117), 'as if they are alive, . . . as if they had some understanding (*Phaedrus* 275d); or, conversely, there is still too little attempt at bending the letter in such a way that the spirit (and hence each individual reader) receives its due.

In this respect, the following differences require emphasis. For instance, unlike Plato's dialogues, Wittgenstein's dialogical passages do not allow for the identification of voices.[92] As remarked earlier, on close inspection, it is often anything but clear which voice, if any, might be Wittgenstein's own. We are instead confronted with a hermetic structure of various unidentifiable voices.[93] Not only are there no assigned names, but at times the artful juxtaposition of exclamations, questions and arguments does not even allow one to distinguish the limits between one anonymous voice and another.[94] Furthermore, what has often been criticised as Wittgenstein's apparently inconsistent use of quotation marks and scare quotes, could thus be seen as a systematic strategy to prevent readers from attempting to identify consistent voices in the text. Hence, readers are forced to ask themselves who is speaking, who might actually want to say such a thing, and why? They will be disinclined to believe whatever they read, be more critical, and may eventually change their reading attitude altogether, more frequently stop reading and actually start thinking; furthermore, readers are thus made to identify different lines of thought and develop their own, personal focus.[95] Thus, we have here one technique by which Wittgenstein can be seen to improve on Plato's dialogues in terms of a truly Socratic form of writing, namely through an even higher degree to which readers are not merely allowed but actually *made* to think independently when engaging with his text.

But now it might be objected that, even if all this were correct, still none of the examples discussed in this essay up to this point have met the challenge of writing Socratic philosophy,

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[92] I should mention, however, that Plato at least does not always specify the respective speaker's name before their speech. See e.g. the *Protagoras*. Yet I could not point to any one passage in Plato where there is any doubt as to who (i.e. which character) is speaking.

[93] When looked at in this way, Cavell's model comprising only two types of voices reaches its limits (cf. 'The voice of temptation and the voice of correctness are the antagonists in Wittgenstein's dialogues' (Cavell 1962, [71])). For example, it is not clear whether the central statement of §43 should be assigned the voice of the moderator (M) or that of Hans (the 'linguistic dogmatist').

[94] On the difficulty of identifying voices in the PI see also (Schulte 2013, 18).

[95] In order to see the effect of this, imagine Wittgenstein had made it unmistakably clear who he thought was saying what in a dialogue, for example by assigning his own name to certain remarks, e.g. 'The sentence "Sensations are private" is comparable to "One plays patience by oneself"' or 'I follow the rule *blindly*' (cf. also the end of §217, for instance). Perhaps this would help us determine what this great man might have thought with respect to a wonderful-sounding phrase at one time or other. But would it help us with the philosophy? It would quite certainly help us less.

since Plato's Socrates in the *Phaedrus* does not deny the possibility of a serious philosophical text that makes its readers think for themselves; the problem, rather, was that every text would seem to, firstly, reach 'indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it' (*Phaedrus* 275e), and, secondly, 'when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support' (*Phaedrus* 275e). — However, as indicated by my discussion of the forms of expression in PI §1 above, the *Investigations* appear at least quite capable of fulfilling the first of these two requirements, viz. reaching those (and only those) who *do* have business with a particular problem or question. In the following, then, I want to also briefly discuss an instance of the *Investigations* fulfilling the second requirement, viz. the book's coming 'to its own support'.

When it is first introduced in *Philosophical Investigations*, the primary function of Wittgenstein's prominent chess analogy could be said to consist in helping to bring out the systematic character of language, the importance of the intra-linguistic (roughly, comprising the subject of the discipline of linguistics) entirely as the context of a meaningful word, i.e. that which has to already be in place in order for an explanation of the meaning of a word to be intelligible (see e.g. PI §31).[96] Here the analogy is a means to dispel the temptation to think of linguistic meaning as essentially composed of the meanings of words which in turn are thought of as 'what the word stands for' (as though every word that comes out of our mouths were somehow, invisibly but rigidly, attached to one definite object in the world, or as though our language were constituted by an infinite multitude of implicit acts of tagging names to objects). In the course of the subsequent sections, further elements are added to the analogy, e.g. the importance of the extra-linguistic context, the surrounding circumstances and related actions (see PI §33). Ultimately, the analogy connects (more or less explicitly) with such notions as 'language-game' and 'rule-following'. It is in this connection that the analogy between chess and language turns out to be potentially problematic. For as much as the analogy with chess can help one to rid oneself of those confusions that arise when one is in the grip of a reference-theoretical picture of the functioning of language, this very same analogy can easily make it seem to one as though language were, 'like chess', an activity of infinitely many possibilities while at the same time being rigidly rule-governed, very much like an axiomatic mathematical calculus. Arguably, this latter comparison results in a conception of language which Wittgenstein thought was terribly misguided, and many of his remarks in the *Investigations* are designed to combat this conception. Hence, someone who is inclined to take the chess analogy too far in this way (viz. 'attacks the text unfairly') will find that the text actually contains an appropriate response to their misunderstanding. (And the way such potential confusions that stem, for example, from the chess analogy get cleared up does not consist in explicit discussion,

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[96] In connection with the following discussion see also my discussion of §§43 and 138 in Section 2, above.

but is finely woven into the surrounding structure of analogies, pictures, metaphors and related discussions and dialogues, and of the following, foregoing and otherwise related remarks, so subtle indeed that only one who has reason to look close enough might see it.[97])

In analogies such as the one with chess, Wittgenstein found forms of expression which do not pretend to say everything at once and which therefore can (only) be understood gradually, better and better, step by step. It is by way of building complex structures with and around these analogies, for instance, that Wittgenstein appears to have found a way of crafting a text that once let go *can* come to its own support when 'attacked unfairly'. And thus, in these respects, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, it appears that Wittgenstein can be said to have faced up to the challenge of writing Socratic philosophy, and that he has turned himself, successfully, into a speaking mirror.

In order to avoid the false impression that this was such an easy thing to do, here is a short, incomplete, unordered and unsystematic list of techniques by which Wittgenstein can be said to have achieved his 'feat of writing':

a. Dialogical passages. One important feature, which was not remarked upon as such earlier, is that the balance between Wittgenstein's voices is much more equal than in, for example, Plato's dialogues. Hence, again, there is no easy way to identify an authority in Wittgenstein's dialogical passages like Plato's Socrates, for instance.

b. Hermetic dialogues. There are no assigned names and no other consistently employed markers of voice identity (e.g. no consistent use of quotation marks, no use of recurring linguistic registers). As noted above, in general there are no obvious boundaries between different voices. It is equally difficult on any close study of the text to identify consistent voices that would frequently reappear.

c. Introductory phrases. e.g. 'I want to say…', 'I am tempted to say…' or 'One is inclined to say…'. Such expressions of personal commitment or expression of criteria are intended to provoke a reaction from readers.

d. Concealed problems. Sometimes, readers complain about that it can be difficult to even understand what the problem is in many sections of the *Investigations*. As has been argued above, this is because it was not Wittgenstein's intention to teach us philosophical problems but only to help solve (or dissolve) them in the case that someone has a particular problem. Or as Cavell puts it: 'his writing . . . wishes to prevent

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[97] For instance, if one reads carefully enough, one can actually see that Wittgenstein already cautions against the danger of the related analogy with rules and rule-following when first introducing the chess analogy ('However, one can also imagine someone's having learnt the game without ever learning or formulating rules' (PI §31)). Most people, however, do not notice his cautioning here, or do not think it significant. (But would Wittgenstein therefore have done better to put up a larger warning sign in this place? It seems to me that this could only have failed in its purpose.)

understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change' (Cavell 1962, [72]). On the other hand, it is of course true that almost no reader fails to 'find' their problem eventually.[98]

e. Open questions. e.g. 'The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a 'Weltanschauung'?)' (§122).[99]

f. Missing explanations. e.g. 'If someone were to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them' (§128).

g. Interspersed psychological observations on philosophising. e.g. 'Indeed, when we look into ourselves as we do philosophy, we often get to see just such a picture. Virtually a pictorial representation of our grammar. Not facts; but, as it were, illustrated turns of speech' (§295).

h. Metaphors. e.g. language as 'an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses' (§18).

i. Comparisons. e.g. 'The sentence "Sensations are private" is comparable to "One plays patience by oneself"' (§248).

j. Analogies. e.g. between games and language (§7) or, specifically, chess and language (§31; §108).

k. Nested analogies. e.g. between meaning and use (§§1, 43, 138), or between speaking a language and following rules (§§185 ff.).[100]

l. Ambiguous judgements (e.g. §§1, 2, 32), ambiguous definitions (e.g. §7), and ambiguous imperatives (e.g. §2).

m. Punctuation. Wittgenstein's punctuation can sometimes seem all over the place. But there is a reason to assume that he knew exactly what he was doing (cf. 'Really I want to slow down the speed of reading with continual (my copious) punctuation marks. For I should like to be read slowly. (As I myself read.)' (CV 77e)).

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[98] Somewhat paradoxically, in order to write in a way such that one's readers never get the feeling that they actually understand the author (already), one therefore occasionally has to write in such a way that one's readers do not understand. In this connection, cf. also the discussion of Wittgenstein's remarks on Kierkegaard and the Bible above.

[99] See also my discussion of §280 and §295 in Section 4.1 below.

[100] It is Saul Kripke's most fundamental mistake not to have understood the limits of Wittgenstein's analogical thinking between linguistic activities and the following of rules.

n. 'Criss-crossing'. Not only does reading the *Investigations* linearly feel like being led 'criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought' (PI, Preface)[101], but the fact that one is thus being led, together with the formal ordering of 'all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, sometimes in longer chains about the same subject, sometimes jumping, in a sudden change, from one area to another' (PI, Preface), motivates us to read in a non-linear way, hence jumping between remarks according to our own orientation. Thus we are made to jump from one section to another section, e.g. from §138 to §43, to §1, to §117 and so on,[102] as soon as we have gotten to know the landscape fairly well (after, say, one or two linear readings).[103]

o. (Apparent) textual contradiction. e.g. between §§258, 289, 290, as discussed in Section 4.1 below; or, again, between §1 and §43.

p. Language-games. By using the method of constructing language-games as objects of comparison (or centres of variation), Wittgenstein manages, for example, to massively reduce the dogmatic force by which he 'imposes' onto the reader his own opinion about 'ordinary language'. In Section 3, above, I briefly discussed how this method resembles the Socratic technique of 'definitions', in that both are used, undogmatically, in order to formulate a rigorous ground on which interlocutors can agree in order to, then, proceed in their joint search and see whether they might not agree on the larger, 'deeper' questions that their search is primarily directed at.[104] (Cf. also next item on the list.)

q. 'Examples' (as in §133, the teaching 'by examples'). Wittgenstein imposes on us a certain particular form of example, namely the kind of examples whose series 'can be broken off' (§133).[105] In this respect, they resemble Plato's dialogues, insofar as we saw that the latter as a whole can also function like examples that are meant to instruct us on how to continue a certain kind of activity (as opposed to the kind of example that Descartes' *Meditations* might be said to intend to be, which only seems to allow for its imitation). – The German word, '*Beispiel*', does not have a literal equivalent in the English language. But in a way, what Wittgenstein does is like understanding it as '*Bei-Spiel*', viz. 'something which is played around/close to (something or somebody else)';

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[101] See also (Diamond 2004) and (Pichler manuscript).

[102] See also my discussion of these remarks in Section 2, above.

[103] Wittgenstein once actually planned to insert references for such 'criss-crossing' into every remark, viz. indicating the section numbers of other, related remarks in the book next to the section number of each remark. Perhaps he did not do so in order not to impose his own way of seeing connections onto the reader too strongly. (However, just a few references of this sort might have helped a number of additional readers to get into the groove of criss-cross reading.)

[104] See (Kuusela forthcoming) for an exemplary discussion of both similarities and dissimilarities between this method of later Wittgenstein's and those of early, as well as contemporary, analytic philosophy.

[105] On Wittgenstein's special use of examples see also (Hertzberg 2006).

something which goes side by side with something else, as though playfully seducing but never actually touching it.

——— However philosophically sophisticated Wittgenstein's writing techniques might have been, many people have taken what they tend to describe as his 'style' in *Philosophical Investigations* as obscure or at the very least unnecessarily enigmatic. Ernest Gellner, for example, as is well-known, took no great liking to this sort of writing; and he complained: 'it was very hard to tell from that collection of Delphic utterances what the devil Wittgenstein was trying to say' (1974, 20). Bertrand Russell could not help thinking that Wittgenstein had 'given up serious philosophy'. And arguably the majority of attempts—especially written ones (and perhaps also the present essay)—to 'explain' Wittgenstein's text always seem to me to carry at least a light smell of betrayal. Now, in this essay, I have tried *inter alia* to present a picture such that, if we follow it, one reason behind the peculiar-looking composition of the text of *Philosophical Investigations* may become more understandable. I have argued, for instance, that Wittgenstein's philosophical approach shares an important feature with that of Socrates, viz. that it is best practised in direct personal conversation. Both these philosophers believed that real philosophical understanding is not something which could be written down in the form of a (doctrinal) book, if it could be written (about) in any useful way at all. Similarly, according to this approach, what someone's problem is cannot be sufficiently specified by a phrase like 'the problem of other minds' or even by a lengthy argument for 'its' conclusion, and hence neither can its solution – or for that matter 'objective' philosophical understanding – be 'mass-produced'. Rather, it has to be tailor-made to the specific needs, issues, confusions, ways of thinking and modes of understanding of the respective individual who is asking a particular philosophical question in each particular case. All this, as I have tried to show, is fundamentally related to the role which is played by the philosophical understanding of (one) another in the more general kind of philosophical understanding. Socrates, it appears, as a consequence, decided to conduct his philosophical teaching exclusively in the form of direct personal conversations. Wittgenstein, however, worked on the preparation of his book for publication for more than ten years (even though he did not publish it himself in the end). During these many years, he developed writing techniques such as the ones mentioned in this section which allowed him to remain true, as far as he could, to the Socratic ideal of philosophy. As such, Wittgenstein's book is unique. And even though we are surely still a long way from really grasping the uniqueness of it, or even catching a glimpse, I believe I have reached a moment here (or I once reached such a moment) where I could name one phenomenon which partakes in the book's uniqueness and which the book might be said to be the first and only materialisation of. What I mean is expressed in the fact that the book actively enables different individuals (or, equally: the same individual at different times) to have different conversations with the text in

accordance with their specific philosophical concerns, interests and modes of understanding, almost like one particular Socratic dialogue for each individual reader at each particular time.[106]

This is also another reason why it is so difficult to write about this book. It seems to me, however, that I am young and inexperienced enough to make one more attempt, in the subsequent and final section of this essay.

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[106] The overall technique of the book's composition could therefore perhaps be called 'multi-conversational writing'.

4.1 Private language games, PI §§243 ff.

One particular section from the famous stretch of remarks starting from Section 243 in *Philosophical Investigations*, nowadays still commonly referred to as 'the private language argument (or, arguments)', reads as follows:

> 299. Being unable – when we indulge in philosophical thought – to help saying something or other, being irresistibly inclined to say it, does not mean being forced into an *assumption*, or having an immediate insight into, or knowledge of, a state of affairs. (PI §299)

This remark relates in two important ways to what I shall have to say in this section of the present essay.[107] First, it indicates that Wittgenstein did not take the expression of a philosophical idea to always be either true or false, or else strictly nonsensical. Rather, as illustrated by this passage, he was aware of the possibility that the meaning of what is being said might also simply be *unclear*, both in the sense that the hearer might not understand what has been said, as well as in the sense that the speaker who utters the words might not be clear about what exactly they mean either. (Again, I think that, phenomenologically speaking, this is probably an experience from doing philosophy which most of us will know only too well. It takes some time to work out an idea in all its clarity, and sometimes what at first seemed to be a promising line of thought turns out to be not so great after all.) Secondly, the quotation reminds us that, as has been stressed repeatedly in this essay, when reading Wittgenstein, we need to be on our guard as to who is speaking; and to ask ourselves, among other things: who could possibly want to say such a thing? Could I want to say such a thing? What is it that Wittgenstein might be trying to convey through this particular composition of differing voices?

In the context of the larger aims of the present essay, my purpose with this section is also twofold. Corresponding to the first of the above points, I want to demonstrate some of the characteristics that the passages in question share with the Socratic method as described in Section 1 above. For example, it seems crucial to me that Wittgenstein repeatedly 'asks' the interlocutor who gives expression to the idea of a putatively 'private language', 'what do you mean?', thus allowing the different possible senses that different individuals might be inclined (to try) to give to these words to be developed in more detail, thus increasing the potential for

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[107] Cf. also the following remark from within the range of remarks about the idea of a private language in the *Investigations*: 'What we are "tempted to say" in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material' (§254). Wittgenstein does not mean this to be the 'raw material' for constructive theorising but it is primarily 'something for philosophical *treatment*' (§254), as he goes on to characterise it – 'The philosopher treats a question; like an illness' (§255).

mutual understanding and, as a consequence, the potential for more comprehensive clarity on the part of the enquiring subjects as to the nature of the object under consideration.[108]

Then, corresponding to the second of the above points, I shall also try to indicate how the passages in question do not, unlike Plato's dialogues, just report one possible Socratic dialogue about the questions involved, but indeed manage to offer a structure which allows different readers to have different possible dialogues of this kind with the text; as it were, different conversations each time they encounter the text. I am aware that to demonstrate this feature of the text with sufficient clarity is not at all an easy thing to do.[109] For the present attempt, I have chosen to start from a discussion of Severin Schroeder's exposition in his book *Wittgenstein. The Way Out of the Fly-Bottle* (2006), which in many ways can be regarded as a fairly standard account in the scholarly literature and also, it seems to me, as a good representation of the ways in which many contemporary readers might be inclined to read the text.[110] I shall try to show how Schroeder's reading, although in itself a coherent and well-argued *possible* understanding of the text, ultimately fails as an interpretation of the text in that it fails to acknowledge the multitude of possible individual readings that can be had on the same level as the one Schroeder promotes as *the* reading.[111] To this end, I shall try to point out at least one alternative reading to each of Schroeder's interpretations of particular passages that I discuss.

In general, we can distinguish two tendencies, either of which commentators' exegetical accounts usually approximate in their attitude towards the idea of a 'private language'. On the one hand, there is the tendency to see Wittgenstein as arguing for the *falsity* of the idea of a 'private language'. On the other hand, there is the tendency to see him as arguing that its expression is ultimately *nonsense*.[112] In other words, while the former interpretative tendency

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[108] In this connection, cf. also the following observation by Mark Rowe: 'the dialogic form of the Investigations, unlike the straightforward dialogue form of most of Plato's work, means that it can suggest not only a conversation between one person and another, but one person talking to himself, and trying, not to present a conclusion, but to thrash out a difficulty' (Rowe 2013, 116).

[109] The difficulty of writing about texts like the *Investigations* (or, similarly, *Either, Or* (1843)) has been brought out rather brilliantly by James Conant in his (1989).

[110] Cf.: 'Anglophone philosophers have tended to see the so-called private language argument . . . as a courtroom trial, or even as a battle. On one side we find a whole crowd of great philosophers: the king amongst them is Descartes, but his army comprises Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Russell, James, Schlick, etc. On the other side Wittgenstein himself stands all by himself, like David against the Philistines. And unassisted, they suppose, he wins the battle . . . refuting all forms of dualism, solipsism and idealism' (Baker 1990, [110]).

[111] It should be noted that I do not strictly reject any of the readings that I critically engage with. Although my proposed reading ultimately introduces certain aspects the usefulness or correctness of which others may want to disagree with, I see myself essentially as offering something of a conciliatory account under which a great many apparent disagreements in the existing literature could be resolved (on the possibility of such a reconciliation, cf. also (Stern 2011, 345).

[112] As we shall see, these tendencies might not be restricted to 'commentators'. Notably, they turn up quite explicitly in Section 246, for instance (cf. also my discussion below).

Stewart Candlish (2012, 7–10) employs a similar distinction. His use of the distinction is prone to oversimplification, however, since he categorises particular readings as belonging to either of the two sides, which does not hold true of any cases that I can think of. – In the present essay, the distinction is

consists in ascribing one determinate sense to the idea of a private language and subsequently argues that it is a false hypothesis, the latter interpretative tendency consists in arguing that there is *no* possible sense that could be given to the idea in the first place.

Following the spirit of Wittgenstein's (and Socrates') practice of philosophising, I believe that we do best not to give way to either of these two tendencies when commentating on the text (as opposed to 'simply' reading it). Therefore, instead of taking it that the idea of a private language must either simply *have* a sense or *not*, I am going to argue that the idea of a private language is first and foremost *unclear* in its supposed sense as it is first introduced in PI §243, and that Wittgenstein's subsequent discussion is thus directed at the multitude of *possible* senses rather than at the truth or falsity, or mere nonsensicality, of (what would appear to be) only one possible 'sense' that we could try to give to it.

Schroeder sees Wittgenstein as presenting six major arguments against the idea of a private language. I agree with Schroeder insofar as, in principle, these arguments (or, at least most of them) are there to be found in the text (if one is so inclined to look for them). But I think that, in any case, their *force* is different from the way Schroeder presents them. According to Schroeder, Wittgenstein's sole concern is with what Schroeder calls 'the inner-object model: the view that psychological terms stand for objects, or states or occurrences, in a person's mind' (Schroeder 2006, 201–2) and Wittgenstein's 'procedure in §§243–315 is to develop the consequences of that view with respect to words for bodily sensations and feelings, and then to show how those consequences lead to absurdity or contradiction' (Schroeder 2006, 202). I believe that this is far from *all* that Wittgenstein is concerned with in these sections. Again, on my understanding Wittgenstein does not take it for granted that it is even clear what the talk of a private language is supposed to mean. Rather, in Section 243 Wittgenstein introduces the idea as the 'the raw material' of his subsequent attempts to see what *could* possibly be meant by someone who is tempted to express themselves in such a way. Hence, the six arguments, as extracted by Schroeder, can, at most, be said to form *part* of Wittgenstein's attempt to clarify the meaning of the expressions involved. But in this sense, Wittgenstein is really only *exhibiting* rather than asserting these arguments, like objects of comparison (different language-games).[113] Neither are the arguments 'obligatory'. Insofar as they *can* be extracted, they do not need to be (that is, not by every single reader; one can have an illuminating conversation with the text without

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not intended to represent any actual readings. Its primary purpose is to serve as a model for developing the outlines of my own reading in this section.

[113] In this sense the function of these arguments is similar to the argument which precedes §43, as discussed in Section 2 above. Furthermore, just as Wittgenstein's discussion of the language-game of the builders in §2 ff. does not lead to the abandonment of the idea that 'the meaning of a word is the object for which the word stands'—but only to its clarification—the discussion of the private language game does not lead to an abandonment of the idea of a private language, but *only* to its clarification.

specifically attending to such argumentative structures), and there are many more devices of philosophical communication in the text than just 'arguments'.[114]

Before looking at Schroeder's six arguments one by one, it will be helpful to briefly quote the famous words with which Wittgenstein introduces the idea of a private language in Section 243:

> But is it also conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences – his feelings, moods, and so on – for his own use? —
> – Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language? – But that is not what I mean. The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language. (PI §243)

It is worth noting that the introduction is performed in the form of a question as to whether we could imagine something, and that the possible meaning of that which we are asked to try to imagine might perhaps not be so easily grasped. We are thus being alerted to issues concerning mutual understanding in the relevant sections right from the start. Readers are being reminded that they should not take themselves to already understand even what the question here is. The voice introducing the idea responds to a first request for clarification by saying, 'But that is not what I mean' and makes one more attempt to specify what it is that they mean. But would it be wise to take ourselves to already understand what that person might mean?[115] — In the following I shall briefly expound each of Schroeder's six arguments, one after another, and also indicate in each case my reasons for thinking that, *pace* Schroeder, none of them show a supposedly definite idea of a private language to be false or its expression to be nonsensical.

1. The ascribability argument. According to Schroeder, Wittgenstein argues for the conclusion that 'introspection can never teach me how to ascribe a sensation to a particular person' (Schroeder 2006, 205). Schroeder takes this argument to be developed in Section 302, where Wittgenstein writes at the start:

> If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, this is none too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine pain which I *don't feel* on the model of pain which I *do feel*. (PI §302)

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[114] Traditional arguments might even seem to be the least important of these devices. This has been remarked upon by quite a few commentators, e.g. Ray Monk: 'most of the section that is . . . conventionally regarded as the "Private Language Argument" does not seem to centre on an argument at all; rather, it seems to be a mixed bag of bald assertions, metaphors, wry jokes and exercises of the imagination' (Monk 2005, 88). However, as I said above, Schroeder's reading, including his tendency to extract arguments, appears to me, not merely possible, but to be representative for much of the general readership of today and (partly) therefore worth considering.

[115] In this context, it may also be of interest to note that after writing that 'The philosopher treats a question; like an illness' (PI §255), Wittgenstein in fact continues by asking a question, namely: 'Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand?' (PI §256). Wittgenstein thus proposes to treat this question as a possible symptom of a philosophical perplexity. To this extent, it constitutes the 'raw material' of his subsequent philosophical enquiries. What one might make of it (or: mean by it) is entirely open at this stage.

Schroeder argues that 'the supposition that someone else might have what I, through introspection, defined as "pain" amounts to a contradiction in terms' (2006, 205). That's why, Schroeder implies, the idea of a private language leads to the result that the ascription of a sensation to another person would be impossible, and, hence, the hypothesis of a private language false. However, reading the paragraph Schroeder is referring to, I simply cannot find such a strong argument being expressed (nor can I find one anywhere in its vicinity). But, perhaps more importantly, it seems clear that, although potentially sound, someone convinced of the truth of some notion of a private language might not be convinced at all by this argument. For, they might think that the argument merely re-asserts their supposed scepticism about other minds. Thus, for one person this argument might seem to be a strong *reductio ad absurdum* of what they had in mind when considering the possibility of a private language. However, someone else might simply want to bite this bullet; yet another person might think that this whole argument rests on a misunderstanding of what they wanted to say when they first tried to express their idea; etc.

When put into context, the question Section 302 might put to someone could perhaps be paraphrased in the following way: 'If you mean that you could define a word for a sensation by focussing your introspective attention on it when it occurs, so that you could establish what counts as a correct use of the word for yourself without anyone else being able to understand it – given that this was actually possible – then would you further want to claim that this was how we actually acquired such words? For I could not see how, in such a case, one could possibly ascribe sensations to others.' Thus we see that Section 302 is a way of posing one question in one possible dialogue that can be had by someone with the text, viz. whether that someone (really) means to hold such a view—this question is hence neither polemical nor merely rhetorical, but an honest attempt to understand what is meant. The decision as to whether it is a tenable view that 'one knows of someone else's pain only on the model of one's own' is left entirely to the respective interlocutor (reader).[116] The force of any insinuated argument is thus left largely undefined by Wittgenstein.

2. The idle-wheel argument. Schroeder essentially derives this argument from the well-known beetle analogy in Section 293. There Wittgenstein asks us to imagine (as with §243, in this respect) the following scenario:

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[116] Cf. also the following passage from Baker about later Wittgenstein's method, which can now also be understood as pointing out the problem of writing Socratic philosophy in the special case of later Wittgenstein (although this is unacknowledged by Baker): '. . . individual treatment to individuals' particular 'problems'. It is radically individualistic because it demands the active participation of the 'patient' in a discussion. He must explain what he wants to say, how he wants to define expressions; he must acknowledge the pictures that influence him; he is invited to adopt novel ways of ordering things; and so on. Consequently, this procedure is essentially dialectical. It constantly demands that the interlocutor make decisions' (Baker 1999, [181]).

> Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle". No one can ever 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. (PI §293)

As to the question, 'But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless?' (§293), Wittgenstein then presents us with the following answer:

> If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn't belong to 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. (PI §293)[117]

Schroeder sees Wittgenstein here as stating the following two conclusions:

C1   The identity of such private experience is immaterial to our public talk about pain.
C2   The meaning of the word 'pain' is not determined by the identity of a private experience. In short: pain is not a private experience. (Schroeder 2006, 208)

Now, while I want to agree with C1, I believe that C2 is too strong a conclusion to ascribe to Wittgenstein. As to C1: surely, by virtue of being an element of a constructed language-game alone, the beetle in the box—or, analogously: a private experience of this kind—does not affect our public talk about pain. However, regarding C2, Wittgenstein does not draw the conclusion that, hence, pain was not a private experience. In this case, moreover, it even seems doubtful to me whether Wittgenstein actually exhibits an argument to such a conclusion.

In this connection, it is crucial to note the set-up of the language-game in Section 293. It is one construed strictly in terms of names and reference. A wider notion of meaning is excluded from it.[118] Wittgenstein also formulates a conclusion in analogy:

> 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. (PI §293)

Therefore, insofar as 'the meaning of the word "pain"' is not concerned in any direct way such as Schroeder seems to presuppose, C2 can be seen not to play a role in the general argumentative structure of the beetle analogy at all (that is, quite regardless of whether Wittgenstein asserts or merely indirectly puts forward such an argument for consideration).

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[117] Note that, when read as an analysis of the analogy (rather than an extension of its exposition), this answer is not particularly moderate and hence not as conclusive as it might appear. For, when assessing the analogy, we are free to imagine different possible scenarios, including the one in which it so happens that everyone has the same sort of thing in their box. Clearly, then, in such a case, depending on what exactly it is that everyone has in their box, this would have at least certain psychological consequences for what people say and do in relation to these boxes. This is to say: the thing in the box would not 'cancel out, whatever it is', or at least not in all respects.

[118] Peter Hacker notes this too: 'The example of the beetle in the private box is invoked to show that *if* one construes the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of name and object (e.g. "beetle" and the insect named), then the "object" *would* drop out of consideration as irrelevant to the shared language-game' (Hacker 1990, 9). Cf. also (Hacker 1990, 111–112).

With regard to the two above-mentioned interpretative tendencies, it can be seen that Wittgenstein does not argue for the falsity of an allegedly determinate idea of a private language ('pain being a private experience'), but rather attempts to clarify what could possibly be meant by someone who is tempted to say something of this sort. This can become clear, for example, from the fact that in Section 295 Wittgenstein describes ways in which good sense can indeed be made of the idea of a private reference, as alluded to in Section 293. In Section 295, he writes:

> So this is what I imagine: everyone says of himself that he knows what pain is only from his own pain. – Not that people really say that, or are even prepared to say it. But *if* everybody said it –– it might be a kind of exclamation. And even if it gives no information, still, it is a picture; and why should we not want to call such a picture before our mind? Imagine an allegorical painting instead of the words. (PI §295)[119]

From this it should, moreover, be clear that Wittgenstein is also not dismissing the expression of the idea of a private language as mere nonsense in these sections. On the contrary, he again exhibits the serious intention to be, in principle, charitable to someone who expresses an idea of a 'private language'.

3. Knowledge of other minds. Here is another well-known remark. I think in this case it will be useful to insert generic speaker names, following (or, trying to follow) the same pattern as in Section 2 above:

> 246. [Moderator/Hans:] In what sense are my sensations *private*? – [Franz:] Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it. – [Hans:] In one way this is false, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word 'know' as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know if I'm in pain. [(false)] – [Franz:] Yes, but all the same, not with the certainty with which I know it myself! – [Hans:] It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I'm in pain. What is it supposed to mean – except perhaps that I *am* in pain? [(nonsense)] (PI §246)

Schroeder takes up both of these lines of argument. First, he argues that, in the sense in which the scepticism supposedly expressed about other minds relies on *nonsense*, 'the attempt to argue that the first-person case provides a better standard of knowledge fails, for it isn't a case of knowledge at all' (Schroeder 2006: 209). Schroeder adds: 'Thus scepticism about other minds is stopped in its tracks' (Schroeder 2006: 209).

Secondly, in the sense in which the scepticism supposedly expressed about other minds is said to be *false*, Schroeder argues that Wittgenstein has actually shown it to be inconsistent. Here, Schroeder reminds us of Section 244, where he sees Wittgenstein as stating 'a *conceptual* link between pain, for example, and certain forms of expressive behaviour' (Schroeder 2006, 209). But, despite the fact that, knowing his manuscripts, it seems safe to say that Wittgenstein

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[119] Such a 'kind of exclamation' could for instance be intended to mean that (in most cases) one only *fully* understands what a certain heavy pain is if one has had this sort of pain oneself. Certainly, this need not therefore be true. Alternatively, the biblical story of Job could also be referenced or remembered in such a way.

(himself) indeed thought that there was such a conceptual link, in Section 244 he explicitly qualifies his words by saying 'Here is one possibility: . . .' (§244).[120] He writes:

> How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations? For example, of the word "pain". Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural, expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. (PI §244)

Wittgenstein does not argue here for 'a conceptual link' which would make it inconsistent to say 'we only know about our own pains (or, sensations)'. — As to the first part of the argument (but also in another response to the second of Schroeder's conclusions): there is a hint in Section 246 indicating that what is meant by the interlocutor might in fact not strictly adhere to 'the word "know" as it is normally used' (§246). But, while in Section 246 Wittgenstein solely presents us with an exclamation of irritation ('and how else are we to use it?' (§246)), it is only one remark further down that this question actually gets answered by an example from analogy. In Section 247, Wittgenstein namely writes:

> 247. "Only you can know if you had that intention." One might tell someone this when explaining the meaning of the word "intention" to him. For then it means: *that* is how we use it.
> (And here "know" means that the expression of uncertainty is senseless.) (PI §247)[121]

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[120] Schroeder, in a footnote, writes: 'Wittgenstein calls this "one possibility". What other possibility is there? We could also learn what pain is without ever feeling pain ourselves, by being shown someone who is visibly in pain' (Schroeder 2006, 213, n.35). This is, in one sense, correct. But some may find this to beg the question against certain popular theories of 'phenomenal concepts'. However, arguably, Wittgenstein would not have non-discriminately rejected just any notion of phenomenal concepts, as William Child argues persuasively in (Child 2015). Furthermore, Wittgenstein did consider it also conceivable, and hence possible, that someone could be born with our actual language (English, in this case) (see BlB).

Moreover, it should not be surprising that the first few remarks introducing the (unclear) idea of a private language (§§243–246, say) are somewhat more dogmatic. In this respect, they can be regarded as providing a preliminary demarcation of the terrain to be covered in its extremes.

On the 'sketching of *possibilities*' and §244, see also the following passage by Baker: '[Wittgenstein] has no intention of establishing facts of grammar (e.g., that "pain" is not the name of an object) or outlining psychological facts (e.g., that a child learns the meaning of the word "pain" through replacing the natural expression of pain by the emission of articulate sounds). Rather he adumbrates possibilities' (G. Baker 1992, [128]). (Cf. also Baker 1990, [116].)

[121] Cf. also §248. In §§246 and 295 Wittgenstein, in addition to teaching, gives further examples of how to use such an expression with perfectly good sense (and without it leading to scepticism about other minds), namely, as a joke or as an allegorical picture.

Stephen Mulhall, with whose interpretation I otherwise broadly agree, seems to equally overlook this important connection when he writes that 'several turns of phrase in his first paragraph [of §246] speak against the thought that Wittgenstein is either plainly aware of those alternative, non-epistemic uses of "I know", or concerned to open up the possibility that something real and important lies behind the interlocutor's misbegotten ways of articulating his conception of privacy—namely, his sarcastic rather than inviting uses of the questions "how else are we to use it?" and "What is it supposed to mean?"' (Mulhall 2007, 51). It must be noted, however, that Mulhall tries to rescue his Wittgenstein—he writes: 'For it is the interlocutor who directs our attention to the specific example of pain in his initial response to Wittgenstein's opening question, . . . If, then, we regard it as central to Wittgenstein's later conception of philosophy that he adopt a purely responsive role in his dialogues with his interlocutors . . . , then we might read his remarks in this paragraph as wholly negative in intent. The interpretative proposal here is

Again, it becomes clear that Wittgenstein neither dismisses an allegedly clear expression of an idea of a private language as false nor does he outright dismiss all such attempts as mere nonsense. Instead, Wittgenstein takes the urge, the temptation to express something-like-an-idea-of-a-private-language very seriously. It is the raw material of his philosophical activity. Schroeder, however, is of course not far off the mark at all. Most of the possible senses that one might want to give to the idea of a private language explored by Wittgenstein will indeed strike us as absurd or fantastic, while others strike us as trivial or uninteresting. Schroeder's reading is one possible reading – and a strong and therefore important one too. It is namely the reading of someone to whom Hans' 'arguments' speak, whose idea of a 'private language' is for instance such that what Wittgenstein has Hans say in Section 246 would not be a misunderstanding of it. However, as an interpretation of Wittgenstein's text, Schroeder's reading is therefore rather one-sided. For, as I am arguing, there is more than one such possible reading here. In fact, it would seem fair to say, there are at least as many as there are possible ideas of what a 'private language' might be following its initial introduction in Section 243.

4. The no-criterion argument. This is essentially the argument that is often said to prove the impossibility of private ostensive definition.[122] The paradigm case drawn on by commentators is the 'private sensation diary' in Section 258, where the idea of making use of a private sign is expressed in the following way:

> I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. (PI §258)

Wittgenstein asks how this sign is being given a *meaning*, and the answer he goes on to consider is this:

> by concentrating my attention; for in this way I commit to memory the connection between the sign and the sensation. (PI §258)

Schroeder then calls the way this view gets criticised in what follows in Section 258 the 'no-criterion argument':

> But 'I commit it to memory' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *correctly* in the future. But in the present case, I have no criterion of

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as follows: *if* the feeling we are concerned with is pain, and *if* by 'knowing' we mean certainty, then what the interlocutor is saying about knowing his own pain stands in need of a variety of decisive corrections. There may be other feelings and states of mind to consider, and other ways of using "I know" in the first person to canvass; but these are irrelevant to the particular interlocutory dialogue presently under way, and may anyway be better grasped when the assumptions behind this exchange are entirely uprooted' (2007, 52)—but this manoeuvre of Mulhall leaves a somewhat sour taste in one's mouth (or, more precisely perhaps, in Wittgenstein's). For, Mulhall does not sufficiently explain what he is still tempted to call 'the brusqueness and banked fire of Wittgenstein's responses' (2007, 53). But if we let go of the idea that it is always 'Wittgenstein and his interlocutor' who are speaking in the dialogues of the *Investigations*, then this whole problem disappears.

[122] For instance in (Hacker 1990).

correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'correct'. (PI §258)

Schroeder concludes, 'the attempt to construe the sign "S" as the name of objective mental occurrences fails' (Schroeder 2006, 212). And Schroeder is right to call this 'a powerful argument' (2006, 213). He might, furthermore, be correct in saying that this argument is 'directed at the very core of the inner-object picture' (2006, 213). But notably, this would again mean that it was directed against only *one* possible sense that someone might want to give to the, in itself primarily vague, idea of a private language and that, therefore, the argument is not as conclusive as Schroeder makes it appear.

As Schroeder points out, part of the argument's persuasive force is that it would seem absurd to us that one could be constantly (and systematically) mistaken about one's own sensations, as seems entailed by the particular proposal of a procedure of definition in Section 258. This has to do with the trivial fact that we normally do not have to identify our sensations at all, but their linguistic expressions often enough just come to us naturally, almost like a reflex. This reminder is repeated pointedly by Wittgenstein, much in line with many of his earlier remarks on rule-following,[123] in Section 290:

> It is not, of course, that I identify my sensation by means of criteria; it is, rather, that I use the same expression. (PI §290)

But does this not now contradict Schroeder's argument from Section 258?—I think, on the purely textual level, the answer has to be: Yes.[124] Hence, it would, again, seem wrong to ascribe too much force to any argument we might want to extract from Section 258—at least, wrong to put 'too much force' into Wittgenstein's mouth. The definition of a private symbol through 'concentration of one's attention in introspection' is not the only way in which one might try to make sense of the idea of a private language (this also goes back to Schroeder's 'ascribability argument' above). And thus we should not think that Wittgenstein was committed to such a view.[125] On the other hand, if we see the passages that are associated with what Schroeder calls the 'no-criterion argument' as constituting *more* than just *one* thing which someone might want to say in the course of a particular conversation concerning *one* possible way in which someone (else) might try to give sense to an idea of a private language, then we are in a position to appreciate the argument's limited application, appropriately. For someone whose interest in the notion of a private language revolves around the possibility of a private ostensive definition as envisaged in Section 258, however, just the questioning of the possibility of setting up a

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[123] Cf. for example: 'Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do"' (PI §217).

[124] See also (o) from the list in Section 4, above.

[125] See also: 'I turn to stone, and my pain goes on. – What if I were mistaken, and it was no longer *pain*? —— But surely I can't be mistaken here; it means nothing to doubt whether I am in pain!' (§288).
Cf. (Baker 1990, [112–113]).

criterion might be of great significance. But as Section 290 (quoted above) is apt to demonstrate, this *need* not be the case. For example, such a person might also, reasonably, protest, 'Well, I *believe* that this is the sensation S again' (Wittgenstein in fact goes on to consider just this possible response in Section 260; and does it necessarily help if one's interlocutor exclaims in response, 'Perhaps you *believe* that you believe it!' (§260)?).

5. An understandable use and *6. The grammar of a sensation word.* The first of Schroeder's final two arguments consists in 'drawing attention to an incompleteness, rather than an incorrigible flaw in the set-up of the private diary' (Schroeder 2006, 216). Schroeder cites Section 270, where Wittgenstein invites us to imagine a possible function of the sign 'S' whereby we learn to correlate it with the rise of our blood-pressure as shown by a manometer whenever we have the sensation. Schroeder writes: 'But any such further information that can make the use of the sign "S" understandable . . . will diminish its original privacy. . . . So the meaning of "S" will no longer be entirely incommunicable' (2006, 216). — The second of Schroeder's final two arguments could perhaps also be called 'the argument from ordinary language'. Like Wittgenstein, Schroeder poses the question: 'What reason have we for calling "S" the sign for a *sensation*?' (§261). Then, in loose connection with Wittgenstein's own remarks, Schroeder enumerates some interesting features of ordinary sensation words. For instance, bodily sensations usually have a location (like toothache, stomach ache, feeble limbs, *etc.*); furthermore, sensations normally have a degree of intensity and phenomenal qualities (a headache, for example, can be throbbing or piercing); sensations can moreover be pleasant or unpleasant, *etc., etc.* And Schroeder correctly concludes that, by every assimilation of the sign 'S' to the ordinary grammar of sensation words, 'its claim to absolute privacy is clearly relinquished' (2006, 218).

Now, both of these arguments are in principle perfectly acceptable. It just seems to me that, once again, there is more that needs to be said. For instance, Schroeder's qualified conclusion concerning S's being 'no longer *entirely* incommunicable' when associated with the rise of blood-pressure indicated by a manometer actually points to one further way to try to give sense to the idea of a private language which, alas, Schroeder does not consider. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, explicitly discusses this possibility, which could perhaps aptly be described as a 'private aspect of our shared language', in §§273–280.[126] Thus, it is almost symbolical that, the conclusions of Schroeder's two arguments mark really two points at which Wittgenstein's investigation is just about to take a fresh turn, respectively. For, the question remains: what is 'absolute privacy' supposed to *mean* here? And more generally: what *could* someone possibly mean by the notion of 'a private language'?

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[126] It is a curious fact that many commentators appear to avoid these sections in their expositions of Wittgenstein's remarks about 'private language' in *Philosophical Investigations*.

'. . . that one human being can be a complete enigma to another.'

Just as none of Plato's Socratic dialogues end with 'a truth in words' (Socrates and his interlocutors never end by saying 'q.e.d.'), Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Investigations* on 'private language' do not ultimately tell us what a private language is, or is not (or could not be), either. Yet, just like in every Socratic dialogue, there is much to learn on the positive side from Wittgenstein's remarks. I have stressed that whatever Wittgenstein's 'therapeutic' intents, his philosophy is not therefore merely negative. The same holds for this special group of remarks about 'private language'. Besides our getting to understand better the terrain surrounding the various inclinations we might feel to say something about the possibility of a 'private language' through considering their problematic consequences—as it were, dispelling the fog that is likely to surround one's unreflective use of words such as 'meaning', 'sensation', 'privacy', 'know', 'name', 'object', or 'mind' and thereby making us see more and see more clearly—what we can positively learn in engaging with these remarks may become clearest when looking at some of the few attempts made by Wittgenstein to help us to a glimpse of a possibly good and interesting sense that someone might want to give to the idea of a 'private language'.

For example, the remarks in §§269, 273–280, 295 (cited above) and 303 once more illustrate Wittgenstein's tendency to take seriously the person behind the philosophical idea, in that he honestly tries to understand what could be true in what is being said, although the expression of it might be, as usual in philosophical matters, somewhat complex, difficult, and potentially misleading. The most vivid example is perhaps the following:

> 280. Someone paints a picture in order to show, for example, how he imagines a stage set. And now I say: "This picture has a double function: it informs others, as pictures or words do —— but for the informant it is in addition a representation (or piece of information?) of another kind: for him it is the picture of his image, as it can't be for anyone else. His private impression of the picture tells him what he imagined, in a sense in which the picture can't do this for others." – And what right have I to speak in this second case of a representation or piece of information – if these words were correctly used in the *first* case? (PI §280)

First let us note that Wittgenstein is in no way explicitly dismissing the idea of such a private *aspect* of language (as one might call it). And for good reasons: after all, the particular phenomenon being described in Section 280 is surely familiar to many people: especially in art, but also in philosophy, we could often go on discussing a particular piece or question forever.[127] Even though we might agree on a large number of points, it seems there always remains an air of disagreement or misunderstanding. So why should we not use the expression 'private language' in speaking about this phenomenon, which Wittgenstein describes in Section 280? As

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[127] As Socrates also notes in the *Phaedrus*, it seems characteristic of such notions as 'just' or 'good' that 'we differ with one another and even with ourselves' (263a) in thinking or conversing about them.

long as we are not confused about how we use the words that are involved, and do not infer something like 'that, in reality, we could never *possibly* understand someone else the way we understand ourselves', for instance, I do not see any problem, in principle, with giving this sense to the words 'private language'—and neither, or so I argue, did Wittgenstein.

There is a corresponding stretch of remarks, not from *Philosophical Investigations* but from a related typescript (formerly published as 'Part II' of the *Investigations*, now published under the name of 'Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment'), which is apt to illustrate Wittgenstein's interest in this thought. I quote at length:

> 324. If I see someone writhing in pain with evident cause, I do not think: all the same, his feelings are hidden from me.
> 325. We also say of a person that he is transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards our considerations that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. One learns this when one comes into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even though one has mastered the country's language. One does not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We can't find our feet with them [German: *Wir können uns nicht in sie finden*].
> 326. "I can't know what is going on in him" is, above all, a *picture*. It is the convincing expression of a conviction. It does not give the reasons for the conviction. *They* are not obvious.
> 327. If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it. (PIF xi, 235ᵉ)

It appears reasonable to assume that Wittgenstein speaks partly from his own experience in this second of the above-quoted sections (although, I should mention, this is by no means necessary for the following discussion). As we can read in many of the available biographical accounts, Wittgenstein's life abroad, where he spent about half of his entire lifetime, made him frequently realise how two human beings can speak the same language and yet despite best efforts not understand each other; as it were, they feel that *somehow* they cannot play in tune with one another, even though they are playing one and the same song, from the same sheet of notes, that they are sharing, correctly, and each of them have known this song for all their life, and played it uncountable times, and both love it so dearly – yet something is lacking. 'If a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it', summarises this unsettling experience, viz. that speaking the same language is sometimes not enough to achieve understanding. What I mean is, of course, not the kind of situation in which, like in politics, someone is consciously saying one thing and meaning another, using the loopholes of ambiguity and equivocation. What I mean is the kind of tragic not-understanding each other despite the fact that we have tried our earnest best to understand and make ourselves understood, but we could not and now we might have run out of words.

And here we are finally full turn (in fact, almost home) from our somewhat lengthy journey with this present essay. We remember, for example, what Plato had Socrates say in conversation with Phaedrus about writing and philosophical understanding: that no one could really grasp the

meaning of one's philosophical writing, except (perhaps) for oneself. However, we also saw that this is not an insurmountable problem. Usually, in conversation – and it may take hours, days, years, a life-time – we can come to understand (almost) everyone, if only we try hard and long enough. (Being in good practice, like Socrates, certainly helps.) We also know these wonderful moments of human understanding, when after a long and difficult conversation we finally feel that we deeply agree and understand each other—when we are able to finish each other's sentences, sometimes better than we ourselves could have done. What I propose as the possible good sense one might want to give to the notion of a 'private language' can thus be seen to be connected to a problem that is really rather contingent (not, however, that this would make it any less difficult to deal with). It has to do with the medium of writing, with the abstractness of philosophy and with our modern lack of time.

Postscript

In this way, then (as indicated towards the end of the final section, above), Wittgenstein's discussion of a 'private language' in PI §§243 ff. can be seen to bear quite directly on the questions that have driven this essay all along, but especially on what is perhaps the most central question: what is the role of understanding *each other* in philosophy, especially in the form of philosophy that Socrates and Plato and Wittgenstein saw as being a worthwhile endeavour in the life of a human being?[128] As we saw, for Socrates the mutual understanding between participants in a philosophical conversation played such an important and unique role for his philosophical work that he consequently refused to write any philosophy, since he believed it was only 'in the living and breathing discourse' of words spoken between human beings that real (philosophical) understanding could take place. Plato, as the *Phaedrus* shows perhaps most vividly, had similar reservations concerning the writing of philosophy. Still, as his dialogues provide solid proof of, he did seem to feel that there was a role for the medium of texts and writing in philosophical instruction. And, finally, Wittgenstein, nowadays (in)famous for his so-called therapeutic approach to philosophy, also valued mutual understanding as an essential ingredient of philosophical understanding and clarity. A thorough appreciation of the role that mutual understanding plays in Wittgenstein's later philosophical writing, but particularly in his 'book' (*Philosophical Investigations*) can furthermore help us see how his philosophy was not wholly negative or destructive. For the only reason that we do not find positive take-home messages in his writings (however much we might be inclined to believe that we do) is that Wittgenstein also came to realise that real philosophical understanding, as such, cannot be lodged in a book; that the spirit cannot be made explicit, but the letter must be bent in order for the spirit to be able to enter. In other words, each one of us has to go our own way in coming to understand philosophically (although it is best, and perhaps most effective, to embark on this road with a companion – not those provided by Blackwell, Oxford or Cambridge, but a real person). Wittgenstein's writing of *Philosophical Investigations*, as I have attempted in part to argue in the final one and a half sections (4 and 4.1) of this essay, can therefore be seen as an attempt, not merely to satisfy his own vanity (as he so often complained), but to allow as many individuals as possible to use his book in accordance with their own modes of understanding, to have something like a 'private' Socratic dialogue with it, and to thus achieve, through 'reading',

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[128] There is a sense in which this entire essay can be read as a long commentary on these sections, something also expressed by Cavell in the following passage: 'the recurrence of skeptical voices, and answering voices, struck me as sometimes strangely casual and sometimes strangely conclusive, as sometimes devious and sometimes definitive. I knew reasonably soon thereafter and reasonably well that my fascination with the *Investigations* had to do with my response to it as a feat of writing. It was some years before I understood it as what I came to think of as a discovery for philosophy of the problem of the other: and further years before these issues looked to me like functions of one another' (Cavell 1979, xvi–xvii).

against all the odds, genuine philosophical understanding. Having achieved this is what makes *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein's masterpiece.

So what, now, are the possible morals we could infer from all this rambling about this book? Should we all try to write like Wittgenstein, or else stop? I think that the answer to this last question should be, quite clearly, 'No'. Here I am inclined to cite Stanley Cavell once more: 'If philosophy is a direction of thought, a mode, an impulse, a motive, the worst thing that can happen to philosophy is that it be—not parodied, that may be a good thing that can happen to philosophy—but that it be faked' (Cavell 1989, 60–61). On some reflection, the present piece of writing might be justifiably considered, in many ways, to be an ambivalent hybrid and thus, in many ways, certainly not an example of its own exemplar, and hence a failure. – On the other hand, however, the author's intention may not have been to imitate in any straightforward way.

I mentioned in the final section of the essay that I decided to discuss Severin Schroeder's interpretation since it seems to me to be representative of the way in which contemporary readers are most inclined to read Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. This obviously hangs together with the present realities of philosophical writing, in academia and especially in the Anglophone tradition.[129] For, while many of the great philosophers of the past have shown considerable sensitivity with regard to such difficulties inherent in writing philosophical texts,[130] it is striking—in fact, devastating—how little attention professional philosophers nowadays tend to pay to questions of this sort.[131] This is certainly somehow dependent on the present socio-economic realities of philosophical writing. But I do not want to go into any detail here about the underlying mechanisms of our market society which have finally made academic philosophers into slaves of the publishing industry. Instead, since I find myself sitting behind my desk, as so many of us constantly and inevitably do, I would like to ask: what ought one to do, as a writing individual, in order to make this profession the genuinely inclusive activity that it should be? – To be clear, there are no easy ways to answer this question. However, first and foremost, I believe, we shall have to learn to ask this question seriously. Only then could we go about answering it. Or, better still, we could start trying out various formats and underexplored media (and interlocutors)—but in a manner as critical and as charitable as the morals of teaching and producing philosophy in the public realm will demand of us, once these are thoroughly recognised.

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[129] See also (Nussbaum 1990, 3–10).

[130] At this point, perhaps most notably, *inter alia*: Socrates, Plato, Montaigne, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, Hamann, Herder, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

[131] Recent publications by Peter Hacker (2014) and Timothy Williamson (2015) might give some hope in this respect. But the curious fact remains that at least one of these two world-leading academic authors of philosophical prose tends to think of their dialogical writings as (merely) 'entertaining' pieces.

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