Wittgenstein’s Texts and Style

Internalism and Externalism about Style and Method

What did Wittgenstein write, and how did he write it? At first sight, such questions about texts and style will strike many readers as peripheral, if not simply irrelevant to an appreciation of his contribution to philosophy. Philosophers usually take it for granted that concerns about the way in which philosophy is written, and the nature of the texts in question, while perhaps of interest from a philological, aesthetic, or literary standpoint, are of little or no consequence once one turns to assessing the arguments and conclusions that a philosopher advances. However, Wittgenstein’s principal works, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, are each written in such strikingly unconventional ways that it takes considerable effort to translate them into conventional philosophical writing. Neither book contains any chapter or section headings. Neither book has a clear narrative, or straightforwardly states the author’s intentions. Neither book has a table of contents.

Each remark in the *Tractatus* is numbered in an elaborate decimal system, which supposedly indicates ‘the logical importance of the propositions’ (TLP 1, footnote). However, while this arrangement certainly looks extremely systematic, the intricate structure of the text raises many more questions than it answers. Frank Ramsey, one of the first reviewers of the book, began his review by noting that it is ‘very difficult to understand,’ at least in part because it is not written in ‘consecutive prose, but short propositions numbered so as to show the emphasis laid upon them in his exposition’ (Ramsey, 1923, p.465). Ramsey, like many subsequent readers, considered that while this way of writing gave the work ‘an attractive epigrammatic flavour. […] it seems to have prevented him from giving adequate explanations of many of his terms and theories’ (1923, p.465). Indeed, the *Tractatus* is so concise that it looks much more like an analytical table of
contents than a conventional philosophical text. In a conversation with a friend, Wittgenstein said that every sentence ‘should be seen as the heading of a chapter, needing further exposition’ (Drury, 1984, pp.159-60).

Each remark in *Philosophical Investigations* is numbered sequentially, from 1 to 693. Despite the linear arrangement, the topics discussed are intricately connected; many readers have approached it as a book in need of an analytical table of contents. Peter Strawson, one of the first reviewers of that book, began his review by saying that it is a treatment of a number of intricate problems, intricately connected. It also presents in itself an intricate problem: that of seeing clearly what the author’s views are on the topics he discusses, and how these views are connected. The difficulty of doing this arises partly from the structure and style of the book. (Strawson, 1954, p.702)

Strawson connects this with the part of Wittgenstein’s Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein says: ‘The best I could write could never be more than philosophical remarks […]. Thus this book is really only an album.’

In their brief opening remarks about Wittgenstein’s way of writing, and their subsequent interpretive practice, Ramsey and Strawson anticipated the predominant philosophical approach to its style and structure. They each regard it as an impressive authorial achievement, but one that significantly adds to the interpretive challenges in tracing and connecting the main lines of his thought. In a recent survey of the main approaches to Wittgenstein interpretation, Kahane, Kanterian and Kuusela characterize this view of his method as an ‘externalist’ one, on which ‘his style is external to method and content, and the latter can be extracted from his writings without any loss of substance’ (Kahane et al., 2007, p.20). In addition to Strawson, they list ‘Hintikka, Hilmy, Fogelin, Rundle, von Savigny and Glock’ (p.21) as examples of those who explicitly
endorse externalism. They all hold that the style is ‘characteristic of the man Wittgenstein’ (p.20) but independent of his philosophical method and content, which can be stated without loss in the explicit argumentative exposition ordinarily found in a journal article or scholarly book. Kahane, Kanterian and Kuusela contrast this with ‘internalist’ readings, on which Wittgenstein’s style of writing is an essential part of his philosophical method, and his method and style are internally related. They further distinguish a variety of ‘internalist’ approaches, including a ‘moderate’ version on which the style serves argumentative ends, and a ‘strong’ internalism on which the aim of the book is not ultimately argumentative at all, but is rather therapeutic, a matter of persuading readers to ‘give up their craving for a metaphysical point of view’ (p.23). They consider ‘Malcolm, Kenny, the “second” Baker, Hacker, Kienzler and Schulte’ (p.21) to be examples of moderate internalists, and the ‘later’ Baker, Cavell, Pichler and myself as proponents of strong internalism.

In other words, the externalist holds that Wittgenstein’s style is independent of his method and his arguments; the moderate internalist holds that his style serves methodological ends, but the method can be independently expressed and justified; the strong internalist holds that the style is more or less the method. While this way of dividing the field may seem clear-cut at first, it soon turns out that the range of possible views is considerably more complex than this classification suggests. This is largely because there is little agreement about just how to understand the crucial term, namely ‘style’. Externalists tend to use it as a catch-all term for all those aspects of Wittgenstein’s writing which they regard as not germane to the expository project of explicitly stating his problems, or laying out his arguments. If they do have an explicit understanding of the term, it is usually akin to Frege’s conception of ‘tone’: whatever aspects of a piece of writing that do not affect its sense or reference, aspects that could be removed by rephrasing that text without changing its semantic significance, and so are only of interest from a literary, poetic, or aesthetic perspective. While internalists naturally pay much closer attention to the way
Wittgenstein wrote and his mode of composition, they tend to disagree about which aspects of his style are essential to his philosophical methods. Some strong internalists, such as O. K. Bouwsma and the later Baker, seem to hold the view that every aspect of Wittgenstein’s writing is an integral part of his method. However, for the most part, there is a range of varying internalist readings, each turning on different aspects of Wittgenstein’s style. These include not only the disparity between the highly structured decimal numbering system of the *Tractatus* and the apparent lack of structure of the sequentially numbered *Philosophical Investigations*, and the related contrast between the condensed and oracular pronouncements of the *Tractatus* and the extended conversations typical of much of the later work, but also his use of such devices as multiple voices, thought experiments, provocative examples, striking similes, rhetorical questions, irony, and parody.

My own view is that the most important aspect of Wittgenstein’s style for an understanding of his philosophy is his use of multiple voices, and the way he forces his reader to engage with those voices in order to understand him, and it is this aspect that I emphasize here. Cavell’s reading of *Philosophical Investigations* along these lines is the best-known and most influential example of this approach to interpreting Wittgenstein (Cavell, 1979 is the locus classicus, but see also Cavell, 1966; and 1996). Perhaps this is why it is often taken for granted that questions about style and voice, and their relationship to the debate between externalists and internalists, are primarily an issue that arises for interpreters of the later Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, closely related concerns also arise for readers of the *Tractatus*. Externalists regard the last two paragraphs of the preface as making a very strong case on their behalf, as Wittgenstein clearly distinguishes there between what is said in the book, and how it is said. He says that the value of the work consists in the expression of thoughts ‘and this value will be greater the better the thoughts are expressed.’ After acknowledging that others may well be able to do better in expressing those thoughts, Wittgenstein goes on to insist that ‘the truth of the thoughts
communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive.’ However Wittgenstein ends his preface by saying that the value of the book also consists ‘in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved.’ Internalist readers of the *Tractatus* take this as an anticipation of the very different approach to what is said there that is provided in the penultimate remark, 6.54:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must overcome these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. (TLP 6.54)

From this perspective, the ultimate aim of the book is not to prove certain results, results which could equally well be formulated in other words, but to bring about a change in self-understanding that is not primarily of a cognitive nature (see Diamond, 1991, ch. 6).

At this point, it may seem as though Wittgenstein’s style of writing, and the question of the significance of his way of writing only really matters to the internalist. After all, the core of the externalist position is that the style of the author is philosophically inessential: the same points could equally well be presented in other ways, and indeed that is the task of the philosophical interpreter. Thus it is natural for the externalist to paint the internalist as holding that there are ‘good reasons why no attempt at all should be made to present his views in a more conventional form’ and to exasperatedly respond that ‘this could be true only on a very specialised view of the nature of philosophical understanding’ (Strawson, 1954, p. 70). In a similar spirit, Hans-Johann Glock, a leading advocate of externalism, has argued that internalist interpreters ‘owe us a clear and well-argued account of what *philosophical* substance (concerning problems, arguments or insights) is lost by rephrasing Wittgenstein’s thought in a more conventional manner’ (Glock,
2007, p.63; his preferred term is ‘stylistic’, not ‘internalist’). Indeed, one might think, insofar as the moderate internalist is able to state the philosophical substance that has supposedly been lost in the conventional rephrasing, it should not be too difficult to take those points and use them to supplement or complete the conventional account. Moreover, insofar as the strong internalist maintains that the philosophical substance is inseparable from his style, and so cannot be independently restated, the externalist will respond that we are left with an irrationalist conception of philosophy as unargued persuasion.

The question whether there are aspects of Wittgenstein’s views which are lost when restated in a more conventional manner is indeed an important one for the debate over the relationship between Wittgenstein’s way of writing and his philosophical method. However, the most important difficulty for the externalist, and one that is obscured by this focus on what, if anything, is lost in a conventional exposition, has to do with the relationship between Wittgenstein’s way of writing and the externalist’s philosophical method. For any interpretation of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, any expository restatement of his problems, arguments, or views, has to begin from a reading of the relevant texts. That, in turn, will presuppose, either explicitly or implicitly, views about what sort of text he wrote or was aspiring to write, and how to approach his way of writing.

In other words, the externalist and the internalist are in the same boat: There is no way out of the hermeneutical circle, no way of reading Wittgenstein’s writing without taking a position on his way of writing. This is not simply the platitude that every reading of a text involves presuppositions about how to interpret that text. Rather, it is the point that the implications of that very general principle in the quite particular case of Wittgenstein’s writing are considerably more far-reaching in comparison to the conventional monograph or journal article. For any interpretation of an author who published very little of his writing, and who wrote in a highly unusual way will require the interpreter to take a position on a number of questions about those
texts, and the way in which they were written, questions that are usually peripheral, if not entirely unproblematic. These include not only questions about the role of the author’s style, and the genre to which the work belongs, but also what counts as a work by that author, and how to identify the author’s projects, views and arguments. Furthermore, precisely because the answers to these questions can usually be taken for granted in reading conventional philosophical writing, externalists are often unaware of the extent to which their expository reconstructions of Wittgenstein’s philosophy depend on their interpretation of his way of writing. Indeed, the Achilles heel of most externalist readings of Wittgenstein is that they turn on controversial assumptions about Wittgenstein’s writing which are either presented as obvious, or simply taken for granted. Perhaps the most important of these is the assumption that the only alternative to rational argument is irrational persuasion.

**Identifying Texts and Works**

The *Tractatus* is the only major work by Wittgenstein published during his lifetime. The many posthumous books and articles that followed all involved, often to a remarkable extent, decisions by his editors as to what to publish, and how to present it. Even in the case of *Philosophical Investigations*, which Wittgenstein clearly authorized for publication and regarded as the best statement of his later work, there is a significant disagreement between on the one hand, G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, the editors of the first three editions, who published a typescript from the late 1940s under the title of ‘Part II’, and on the other, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, the editors of the fourth edition, who renamed it ‘Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment’. As a result, we face a number of serious and difficult questions about what to count as a work of Wittgenstein’s. For the vast majority of authors, the answer is very simple: One can start from the body of writing the author saw to the press, perhaps subtracting those publications that are not sufficiently significant to count as a work, and then adding those projects that were
more or less complete but remained unpublished at the time of the author’s death. The first part of this calculation is straightforward: The only other piece of philosophical writing that Wittgenstein published is a short conference paper that he disowned before he was due to present it; the only other book he published was a spelling dictionary for children in Austrian schools. It is the second part of the calculation that is problematic, precisely because he published so little, and left us so little more that he was close to being ready to publish.

One problem that any interpreter of Wittgenstein’s philosophy has to address at the outset is the issue of which text, or texts, to take as a starting point. Which of Wittgenstein’s writings set out his philosophy, and which set out views he rejected? There are a number of related but distinct questions here. One way of approaching this issue is at the ‘macro-level’, namely as a question about his writing as a whole. In that case, it becomes a matter of asking which parts of Wittgenstein’s writings to count as a ‘work’ of Wittgenstein’s. In other words, which of the many publications created by his editors on the basis of his Nachlass, the approximately 20,000 pages of manuscripts and typescripts he left to his literary executors, is best considered as a piece of preparatory, transitional, or rejected writing, and which is actually a work. ‘Work’ is used as a semi-technical term for those writings that are of primary importance, or major interest, writings that have a certain unity and finishedness.

Furthermore, the Nachlass itself is only a fraction of what Wittgenstein wrote, and is itself a selection from a larger body of philosophical work. In addition to Wittgenstein’s own writing, he was also the author, or co-author, of a great deal of work written down by others, principally in the 1930s, which is not part of the collection of papers that Wittgenstein entrusted to his literary executors. These include not only Moore’s 1930-33 lecture notes and many other notes by others who attended Wittgenstein’s lectures and took part in conversations with him, Waismann’s dictations and expository writing from the first half of that decade, and the recently discovered Skinner archive, dating from the mid-1930s. This chapter concerns the stylistic and textual issues
raised by the body of writing Wittgenstein left to his literary executors. (For some further
discussion of this greater body of philosophical writing, see M; PPO; VW; Gibson, 2010;
Schulte, 2011; and Stern, Citron and Rogers, 2013.)

There are two ‘default’ approaches to answering this question about what to count as a work.
One is to hold with Hacker, von Savigny, and Cavell, that only the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical
Investigations* are works of Wittgenstein’s; the other, probably taken for granted by most
interpreters, is to add in all or most of the posthumous publications as works, in effect deferring
to the judgment of his editors (see e.g. Hintikka, 1991; Kenny, 1976; 2005 on the history of
Wittgenstein editing). On another, more systematic, approach one would only include those
writings that reached some level of sufficiently polished revision, or that Wittgenstein once
considered to be prepared for publication (see Schulte, 1992, ch.1.3; 2005; Glock, 2007). Some
*Nachlass* interpreters would contend that this is still much too restrictive, and that in view of the
extent to which a trail of revised and rearranged remarks connects every stage of Wittgenstein’s
writing, the *Nachlass* as a whole should really be regarded as a single work (Hrachovec, 2000;
2005). Other *Nachlass* interpreters, including Baker and Hacker (1980; 1980a; 1985) and Glock
(1990; 1996), while repudiating this revisionary view, nevertheless draw extensively on the
*Nachlass* sources of the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* for guidance in understanding
those works.

In view of the far-reaching implications of any answer to this question about what counts as a
work of Wittgenstein’s, it is surprisingly rare for commentators to explicitly discuss and defend
criteria for identifying a work. Even when interpreters do discuss the issue of which writings
qualify as works, the meaning of the term, or its application in the case in question, is usually
taken for granted. (Exceptions to this rule include Schulte, 1992; 1999; 2005; and Stern, 1996;
2005.) For instance, as mentioned earlier, Hacker maintains that only the *Tractatus* and
*Philosophical Investigations* are works of Wittgenstein’s, holding that ‘all the other books
published under his name are unfinished or discarded writings’ (Hacker, 2012, p.2). Danièle Moyal-Sharrock has replied that the criterion for a text’s qualifying as a work by Wittgenstein, or as part of his philosophy, ‘is not whether Wittgenstein intended to form books from his notes, but whether or not those notes do form what can be considered a genuine and original contribution to philosophy’ (Moyal-Sharrock, 2013, p.3). Authorial intent and philosophical originality are both relevant considerations, but neither one considered in isolation is sufficient to settle the question of what counts as a work. Part of the difficulty one faces in adjudicating the disagreement between Hacker and Moyal-Sharrock is that there are a number of different factors that are prima facie relevant in assessing whether or not a piece of Wittgenstein’s writing qualifies as a work, and the relationship between his works and other writings. Indeed, Hacker is one of the leading exponents of a genetic approach to the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, on which Wittgenstein’s ‘unfinished or discarded writings’ provide essential evidence as to what he meant to say in his masterpieces. Insofar as they play this role, Hacker in fact holds that they are a significant philosophical contribution, and his four-volume *Commentary on Philosophical Investigations* is devoted to making use, not only of the other books published under Wittgenstein’s name, but also his extensive Nachlass.

Alternatively, one can take the question about which texts to start from to be a question about authorship, rather than one about what counts as a work. In other words, one can ask whether all of Wittgenstein’s works are part of a unitary philosophical project, or whether they should be divided into two or more, each with its own distinctive character. Here, once again, there are two widely accepted views. ‘Two Wittgensteins’-interpreters – among them Malcolm, Cavell, Hacker, Hintikka and Hintikka, Fogelin, Kienzler, and Glock – draw a sharp distinction between an ‘early Wittgenstein’ or ‘Wittgenstein I’, the author of the *Tractatus* and the pre-*Tractatus* writings, and a ‘later Wittgenstein’ or ‘Wittgenstein II’, the author of *Philosophical Investigations* and most, if not all, of Wittgenstein’s post-*Tractatus* writings. Some, like Cavell
and Fogelin, take this to be essentially a distinction between the philosophy of the \textit{Tractatus} and \textit{Philosophical Investigations}. Others, including Hacker, Hilmy (1987), Hintikka and Hintikka (1986), Glock and Kienzler (1997; 2001), who make extensive use not only of Wittgenstein’s other publications, but also his \textit{Nachlass}, are equally concerned with identifying the point at which there is a break between the early and the later work. These interpreters maintain that much of his later philosophy had already been formulated by the early 1930s, and that we can find clear formulations of many central commitments of the later Wittgenstein in his ‘middle period’ writings. On the other hand, Moyal-Sharrock has argued that Wittgenstein’s work underwent a further turn after the completion of \textit{Philosophical Investigations}. In particular, she holds that the ‘third Wittgenstein’ of \textit{On Certainty} solves epistemological and methodological problems that were not resolved by the ‘second Wittgenstein’ of \textit{Philosophical Investigations}.

‘One Wittgenstein’-interpreters hold that there is more unity than discontinuity between the early and later work. While this might, at first sight, seem to be the most plausible strategy, in view of the strangeness of speaking of one person’s writing as though it were the work of multiple authors, it has proven remarkably difficult to get away from the assumptions that frame the ‘multiple Wittgensteins’-approach. Early exponents of this view, among them Feyerabend and Kenny, tend to make the later philosophy look like a relatively modest revision of the earlier; more recently, Diamond, Goldfarb, Conant, Kuusela, and other ‘resolute’ readers, have argued that the methods usually attributed to the later Wittgenstein also animate his earlier work. At first, their insistence on the unitary character of Wittgenstein’s thought appeared to commit them to denying that there were any major changes in his philosophical outlook during the 1930s (see Hacker, 2001, sec.4). This seemed particularly hard to reconcile with his writings from 1929-30, which are the work of a philosopher criticizing and changing his earlier views (see Stern, 1995; but also 2010). However, since then ‘resolute’ readers have developed a variety of accounts of the continuities and discontinuities in Wittgenstein’s work during these years, including work by

The idea of a ‘Middle Wittgenstein’ has also played a significant role in this debate, although the precise boundaries of this period and its distinguishing characteristics are disputed. It even has an entry of its own in the *Oxford Bibliographies Online* series, under the title ‘Ludwig Wittgenstein: Middle Works’ (Biletzki, 2011), alongside entries on the ‘Early Works’ (McManus, 2010) and the ‘Later Works’ (Coliva and Moyal-Sharrock, 2010). Proponents of a ‘two Wittgensteins’-view usually see this as a relatively short period of transition from the earlier to the later philosophy in the late 1920s or early 1930s, followed by several years during which the later views were fully articulated (Hacker, 1986; Hilmy, 1987; Glock, 1990; 1996; 2001; 2007). ‘Resolute’ readers construe this period as a matter of an evolution from a unitary conception of philosophical method toward a plurality of philosophical methods. On both of these approaches, the ‘middle period’ is a time of transition to be understood in terms of what comes earlier and later. However, others have argued that it is best understood as a distinctive phase in Wittgenstein’s work from the first half of the 1930s that cannot be accounted for in terms of the dissolution of the Tractarian approach to philosophy and the emergence of the later Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein’s thought was rapidly changing during the first half of the 1930s, and his writing from this period should not be taken as a blueprint for his later work. During these years, Wittgenstein began to set out a conception of philosophy as aiming at systematic clarification of the rules of our language in a philosophical grammar. However, by the time he composed the first draft of *Philosophical Investigations* in 1936-37 he had given up this conception of philosophical grammar in favor of piecemeal criticism of specific philosophical problems. This approach challenges the assumption that the only available alternative to the standard account, on which there is a definitive rift between the early and the later Wittgenstein, is a ‘resolute’ reading on which Wittgenstein’s philosophy is unitary (Stern, 2005). Versions of
this reading can be found in work by Stern (1991; 2004, ch.5.2; 2005), Schulte (2002; 2011), Pichler (2004), and Engelmann (2011; 2013).

**Identifying Voices in the Text**

The previous section provided a brief outline of the leading ‘macro-level’ or (what one might call) ‘big picture’ answers to the question which of Wittgenstein’s writings set out his philosophy, and which set out views he rejected. There is no quick or simple way of choosing between these positions about the identity of Wittgenstein’s works, each of which has its erudite and expert advocates. An informed judgment not only calls for an evaluation of the competing views about which pieces of writing qualify as a work of Wittgenstein’s, and why, but also turns on identifying the particular views set out in those pieces of writing. In other words, the macro-level is dependent on the micro-level. Furthermore, the question as to which of Wittgenstein’s writings set out his philosophy, and which set out views he rejected, often arises again at the micro-level, and particularly when identifying different voices and their respective positions in his most polished dialogical writing.

Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that the micro-level, working on the scale of the paragraph or the page, not the book or the typescript, is the best place to look for answers to questions about the way Wittgenstein wrote, his mode of composition and the role of these stylistic considerations in his philosophical writing. On such a finer-grained approach, the principal frame of reference is not the work, but those relatively short sequences of sentences that he repeatedly revised and rearranged. For the basic unit in almost all of Wittgenstein’s writing, from *Notebooks 1914-16* to the manuscripts written during the last year of his life, including the posthumously edited selection published as *On Certainty*, is the remark (*Bemerkung*). A remark is a passage that may be as short as a single sentence, or as long as a series of paragraphs stretching over several pages. A blank line usually separates remarks from one another. First
drafts were often composed in notebooks; revised and topically arranged selections were copied into larger manuscript volumes, and repeatedly reorganized.

Delving further into the microstructure of the author’s writing, one can also distinguish between a number of different representations of any given paragraph in a particular manuscript, such as a normalized version, showing the result of implementing earlier revisions and choosing from undecided alternatives, and a diplomatic version, which provides detailed information about each stage of revision. For instance, *The Big Typescript* (2005, BT) is a diplomatic edition of a heavily revised typescript, which was probably dictated to a typist in the summer of 1933; later manuscript additions, deletions, and alternatives are shown in footnotes. Part One of *Philosophical Grammar* (1974, PG) can be regarded as a normalized version of the opening chapters of the same typescript, with the proviso that it also follows two separate sets of plans for revisions. The German-language edition of Wittgenstein’s 1930-32 and 1936-37 diaries (1997, DB) provides both normalized and diplomatic editions of those texts in a pair of parallel volumes; the diplomatic edition is reprinted, with a translation on facing pages, in *Public and Private Occasions* (2003, PPO). In principle, the same approach could also be applied to successive stages of revision of a given remark across different manuscripts and typescripts. The Bergen edition of the Wittgenstein *Nachlass* (2000) provides both normalized and diplomatic transcriptions, plus images of each page of the source text. The online Wittgenstein Source edition also offers a user-customizable view in which the viewer can control how much editing information is provided. (See Stern 2010b for details.)

Wittgenstein’s method of composition, revision, and rearrangement, leads from the remarks written down in his wartime notebooks, to a manuscript containing several stages of construction of the *Prototractatus*, and from there to the polished typescript of the *Tractatus*. In the case of *Philosophical Investigations*, there remains a much longer and more intricate trail of revision and rewriting available, including at least three successive drafts of the book (for details, see
Schulte’s preface to the *Kritisch-genetische Edition*, 2001). Remarks are often numbered sequentially in the more polished typescripts—each numbered section in the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* is a remark.

The Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, dated January 1945, begins by highlighting the role of the remark in the composition—in the sense of both the genesis and the arrangement—of the book. Indeed, Wittgenstein underlined the word ‘remark’ in the text, although the current English translation, provided below, does not:

The thoughts which I publish in what follows are the precipitate of philosophical investigations which have occupied me for the last sixteen years […]. I have written down 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. – Originally it was my intention to bring all this together in a book whose form I thought of differently at different times. But it seemed to me essential that in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth sequence.

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks. (PI, Preface)

Wittgenstein goes on to describe the remarks as ‘sketches of landscapes […] which then had to be arranged and often cut down, in order to give the viewer an idea of the landscape. So this book is really just an album.’

Because so much of Wittgenstein’s post-*Tractatus* writing takes the form of a conversation between multiple voices—voices that are rarely clearly identified or demarcated—the mere fact that a given passage sets out a view, or argues for it, is at most a prima facie reason to attribute
that position to Wittgenstein. Indeed, even if a position is not put in inverted commas, and does chime with a number of other passages, that does not by itself show that it is a view that Wittgenstein endorsed. For a substantial fraction of what is said there consists of attempts to express ‘what we are “tempted to say”’ about philosophical problems, which is ‘of course, not philosophy; but is its raw material’ (PI §254). If the dissenting voice usually known as ‘Wittgenstein’s interlocutor’ speaks, often indicated by putting those words in quotation marks, or placing a double dash before or after them, the very fact that the passage in question sets out the views that it does is actually excellent evidence that Wittgenstein did not accept them. In the case of a full-voiced statement of such a temptation, with an immediate response in the text, the interlocutory character of the words is unmistakable. Such cases include the following examples:

“Surely I can (inwardly) undertake to call THIS ‘pain’ in the future.” (PI §263)

“Once you know what the word signifies, you understand it, you know its whole application.” (PI §264)

However, in most cases, it is not so easy to tell the many voices in Wittgenstein’s writing from his ‘philosophical treatment’ (§254) of them. Many readers take it for granted that it is Wittgenstein who replies to ‘the interlocutor’. But the interlocutory voices, and the narrator’s responses show no such unity—they defend a variety of disparate views at different points in the conversation. Instead of defending polished or systematic philosophical positions, they explore intuitions and convictions—starting points for philosophical discussion, not its sophisticated results. In doing so, both voices articulate a wide variety of philosophical theories. In addition to these voices, we also encounter a voice that provides an ironic commentary on their exchanges. This consists partly of objections to assumptions the debaters take for granted, and partly of
commonplace observations about language and everyday life they have both overlooked. The commentator is a much more plausible candidate for an authorial representative than the disputing voices that dominate the conversation, though none of them can be unproblematically identified as Wittgenstein’s spokesperson. The closest the author of *Philosophical Investigations* comes to expressing his own views is when he steps back from this debate and offers us a striking simile, such as the proposal that ‘the philosopher treats a question; like an illness’ (§255) or draws our attention to ‘what we are “tempted to say”’ (§254). (For further discussion, see Stern, 2004, sec.1.3.)

However, matters are often not so clear-cut. Consider the following example of a passage that Hacker construes as evidence that Wittgenstein held that it is conceivable that a solitary individual could invent a language (Hacker, 1993, ch.3; 1993a, ch.1). At a crucial stage in the discussion of a private language, we are asked to explore the imaginary scenario, raised at the very end of §256, in which I didn’t have ‘any natural expression of sensation, but only had sensations […]. And now I simply *associate* names with sensations, and use these names in descriptions.’ The next section, §257, opens with a question and reply, all enclosed in quotation marks, making the point that ‘if human beings did not manifest their pain […] it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word “toothache”.’ It is not entirely clear who speaks each of the next six sentences, mostly interspersed with single dashes, which make up the middle of this remark; they are more like a series of reflections on the issues raised by the opening material, than a clear back and forth dialogue. They begin with the following exclamation:

—Well, let’s assume the child is a genius and invents a name for the sensation by himself! (PI §257)
It is possible to construe this exclamation as the narrator’s way of moving the discussion along, or as the interlocutor’s impatient reply, or as part of an indecisive soliloquy. Nevertheless, regardless of who speaks these words, the mere fact that they give voice to the view that a solitary individual could invent a language does nothing to settle the question whether Wittgenstein actually endorsed it. However, the rest of the remark does raise a number of pointed questions about the imagined act of inventing a name for a sensation that cannot be named in a public language, among them:

—But what does it mean to say that he has ‘named his pain’? —How has he managed this naming of pain? And whatever he did, what was its purpose? (PI §257)

The answer that follows is not a direct answer to this series of questions, but rather a reminder of what we overlook when we imagine that a super-child could invent a super-private word for a pain all by herself, or when we say that such a thing is logically possible, and thus conceivable, albeit not practically possible:

—When one says “He gave a name to his sensation” one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone’s having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word “pain”; it shows the post where the new word is stationed. (PI §257)

On an orthodox reading of this passage, of which Hacker is a leading representative, this is a grammatical claim about the meaning of the words in question, and our use of them. As I read them, they are rather one of the commentator’s ‘remarks on the natural history of human beings; not curiosities, however, but facts that no one has doubted, which have escaped notice only
because they are always before our eyes’ (PI §415). To be more specific, it is a point about what must already be in place before we can give any ostensive definition that Wittgenstein has already insisted on in the discussion of that topic in §§28-38. Looking back at the history of this remark’s composition, we can see how Wittgenstein’s reflections on the stage setting that an act of ostension presupposes antedate his first explicit discussion of a ‘private language’. (For further discussion of PI §§256-8 along these lines, see Stern, 2004, sec.7.2; 2010a; and 2011.)

However, for present purposes, it also provides an excellent example of why one cannot take an idea presented in the course of Wittgenstein’s polished discussion of a topic, such as the idea of the language-inventing child genius, at face value. Wittgenstein discusses any number of scenarios that he ultimately aims to convince us are nonsensical; we cannot infer from the fact that he discusses a given scenario that he regards it as philosophically unobjectionable.

*Philosophical Investigations* §372, a very short remark about language and necessity, is an excellent example of the hazards involved in recognizing the various voices in that book, and how large a role such considerations can play in any interpretation of the author’s views. In the first edition of Baker and Hacker’s analytical commentary, a section on ‘Arbitrariness and the autonomy of grammar’ (1985, vol.2, p.329) starts by quoting that remark in full:

> Consider: “The only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this intrinsic necessity into a proposition.” (PI §372)

Baker and Hacker tell us that while other philosophers who have considered this suggestion have been baffled by it, it sets out a point that Wittgenstein insisted on, namely that ‘rules of grammar, and hence “necessary propositions”, are arbitrary’ (Baker and Hacker, 1985, vol.2, p.329; see also Chapter xx, AUTONOMY OF GRAMMAR). Their extensive exploration of this idea starts by appealing to the manuscript sources of §372 in *Philosophical Grammar* and the ‘Big
Typescript’, where the point is discussed in much greater detail. Indeed, surely one reason why they begin by quoting §372 is that it is one of the few places in *Philosophical Investigations* where the very idea that grammar is arbitrary is explicitly discussed. The vast majority of quotations in this part of their exegetical essay are from other sources, and almost entirely from material dating from the 1930s. Baker and Hacker do make a strong case that Wittgenstein develops and articulates this view of grammar and necessity in some detail in the early 1930s. Like a number of other middle-period views about the nature of philosophy and philosophical method which play a leading role in Baker and Hacker’s overall approach to *Philosophical Investigations*, they seem to regard the fact that there is very little direct discussion of them in *Philosophical Investigations* as evidence that it is taken for granted there (see Stern, 2004, sec.5.2 for further discussion).

By the time Hacker wrote the third volume of the first edition, he had a change of mind. He now held that the pair of quoted sentences does not set out Wittgenstein’s later view, but a Tractarian one. Instead of construing §372 as a statement of Wittgenstein’s later conception of necessity, he proposed that ‘we are being invited to consider the quoted remark by way of contrast with the conception of necessity or essence that characterizes Wittgenstein’s later philosophy’ (Hacker, 1993a, p.238). Hacker now construed them as alluding to the position set out in the *Tractatus* on which ‘there are intrinsic necessities’ (1993a, p.237), and so one diametrically opposed to the view he attributes to the later Wittgenstein. Instead of reading them as an invitation to consider what he and Baker once regarded as the narrator’s view, he now construes them as voiced by a Tractarian interlocutor. In that case ‘we are being invited to consider the quoted remark by way of contrast with the conception of necessity or essence that characterizes Wittgenstein’s later philosophy’ (Hacker 1993, 238).

Hacker originally read the quoted passage as a compact statement of the conception of the ‘arbitrariness of grammar’ that he attributed to the later Wittgenstein; he subsequently came to
think of it as summarizing Wittgenstein’s early position on intrinsic necessities. Hacker does note that the quoted sentences were originally ‘typed into the “Big Typescript” without prefix or quotes, [which] were added in pencil’ (Hacker, 1993a, p.238). However, Hacker never considers the possibility that the view the author of the Investigations is quoting for our consideration is the view of the middle Wittgenstein who dictated the ‘Big Typescript’. For that is the place where it is stated, without quotation marks, as part of a section of that book with the heading: ‘Grammar is not Accountable to any Reality. The Rules of Grammar Determine Meaning (Constitute it), and Therefore they are not Answerable to any Meaning and in this Respect are Arbitrary’ (BT 233).

In short, as Engelmann (2011; 2013) puts it in his insightful discussion of Hacker on ‘grammar’, to which I am indebted here, Hacker assumes that there was a single crucial change in Wittgenstein’s philosophy with the emergence of his ‘later’ conception of grammar around 1930, and so his writings on grammar from the early 1930s can be taken as a guide to the interpretation of Philosophical Investigations.

The preceding discussion of Hacker’s reading of Wittgenstein on whether a solitary individual could invent a language, and on the arbitrariness of grammar, is only the briefest outline of his approach and some of the problems it faces. My aim in this final section here has not been to resolve these issues, but rather to illustrate how one cannot even begin to interpret Wittgenstein’s remarks without taking a position on questions about texts and style, voice and authorship.

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References


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Suggested Further Reading


Hacker, P. M. S.: 2015 ‘How the Tractatus was Meant to be Read.’ The Philosophical Quarterly 65 648-668.


