

**“BUT WHAT ABOUT THIS?”:  
PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS §§19–20**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Philosophical Investigations* §§19–20 have received little critical attention and their importance has mostly gone unappreciated. In this paper these sections are examined a few sentences at a time in the order they were written with an eye to determining what Wittgenstein does and does not say and how he has been and can be misinterpreted. In addition it is suggested that the material deserves careful consideration because it sheds light on Wittgenstein’s way of tackling philosophical problems, illuminates his pronouncements about philosophy later in the *Investigations*, and serves as a valuable antidote to the widely-held view that whenever he discusses a philosophical problem he ends up advancing a philosophical thesis.

**T**hough strategically placed near the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations* and among the longest sections of the book, §§19–20 have not been subjected to much scrutiny (references by section number are to Wittgenstein 1958). The author of the most exhaustive study of the material skips over §19a and judges §20a, the most intricate and substantial of the four paragraphs of §§19–20, to be unworthy of extended discussion (Ring 1991), while the authors of the most important commentary on the *Investigations* allocate almost as much space to the 11 lines of §18 as to the 68 lines of §§19–20 (Baker and Hacker 1983; Baker and Hacker 2004 has slightly more on §19, slightly less on §20). Nor is there much discussion of the two sections in other work dealing with the early sections of the *Investigations*. When not passed over in silence (Mulhall 2001; Stern 2004), the material is handled cursorily and incompletely (Hallett 1977; von Savigny 1988, and McGinn 1997; the sections are discussed less perfunctorily in Goldfarb 1983 and Lugg 2000 but still not in their entirety.) While the sections are never dismissed in so many words, they are regularly treated as an aside, and reading the

commentators one has the impression they could be safely set aside, everything of value being more thoroughly and better explored elsewhere in the *Investigations*. The usual assumption seems to be that nothing much is lost when this material is disregarded, and rather than spend time figuring out what Wittgenstein is saying, we would be better off studying other, more important, parts of the book.

The dearth of critical discussion of §§19–20 is easily understood. There is no plainly expressed argument or unmistakable conclusion in the sections, and the only remarks plausibly read as philosophically substantial—an observation about forms of life in §19a and an observation about the use of words in §20b—are, to put it mildly, underdeveloped (§19a indicates the first paragraph of §19, §20b the second paragraph, etc). Moreover the ostensible subject of the sections seems much less consequential than the subjects broached in other sections of the book. On the face of it Wittgenstein’s discussion of the use of the command “Slab!” by a group of builders, our own use of the same command, and our sentence “Bring me a slab” is nowhere near as far-reaching as his discussion of meaning elsewhere in the book. Still it is beyond belief that he is treading water and his remarks about “Slab!” and “Bring me a slab” should be written off as long-winded, excessively complicated or philosophically trivial. Wittgenstein was not one to waste words, and were his remarks superfluous or badly-stated, he would doubtless have noticed the fact and done something about it, at least voiced a misgiving or two. As a matter of fact, however, he betrays no uncertainty about the quality of the discussion beyond the qualms he expresses in the Preface about the work as a whole, and the material occurs, with only small changes, in each draft of the book (Wittgenstein 2001, 69–70, 221–223, 460–462, 578–581, and 753–755).

In what follows I attempt to show that §§19–20 repay close examination. When considered in order, sentence by sentence, these sections prove to be anything but insignificant, and it is no mystery why Wittgenstein retained them in the final version of the *Investigations*. It is beside the point that there is nothing in the sections resembling a convincing philosophical argument or a well-supported philosophical claim, and it is immaterial that the topic under discussion is scarcely of major philosophical importance. Resisting the temptation to impose an interpretation on the text, we find Wittgenstein wrestling with a philosophical problem in uncharacteristic detail—indeed I am inclined to think he intended the material to be read as an object lesson in how he thought philosophical problems should be approached. The remarks of §§19–20 are exploratory rather than explanatory, and Wittgenstein is most generously read as attempting to do what he is reported as attempting to do in his lectures in the 1940s, namely “work his way into and through a question in the natural order and in the nontechnical way in which any completely sincere man thinking to himself would come at it” (Gasking and Jackson 1951, 77). He does not defend a philosophical thesis, positive or negative, but devotes himself to disabusing us of philosophical ideas that the philosophically-minded among us are likely to find attractive. There is no conflict between the discussion of §§19–20 and his view, expressed later in the *Investigations*, that “[i]f one tried to advance

*theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them” (§128). I turn now to the text, starting with the short first paragraph of §19.

It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others. And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. (§19a)

At first glance this paragraph seems speculative and dogmatic, not probing and tentative. Wittgenstein does not appear to be working “into and through a question” but to be assuming, even advocating, what he refers to earlier in the *Investigations* as “a particular picture of the essence of human language” (§1). Thus he has been interpreted as maintaining that “[a]ny language-game is complete” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 46) and as intending “to evoke the idea that language and linguistic exchange are embedded in the significantly structured lives of groups of active human agents” (McGinn 1997, 51). On a more thorough inspection of the text, however, matters are not so simple. While Wittgenstein attaches considerable importance to the idea of a language-game understood as “the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven” (§7), he does not commit himself in this passage to any substantive philosophical view. No thesis about language (or language-games) is advanced, and there is no reason to assume the conception of language as a practice or pattern of behavior is being endorsed. Wittgenstein in fact limits himself to stressing that rudimentary languages are imaginable and to observing that imagining a language means imagining a form of life.

Nor is Wittgenstein being ironic or confrontational (Schulte 2004, 29; also Cavell 1995, 144ff., and Goldfarb 1983, 270 on the builders’ language described in §2). The suggestion that he is warning against the quick acceptance of rudimentary languages, including the builders’ language at the centre of the discussion in the previous sections, is not unappealing. But it too labors under considerable difficulty. When Wittgenstein notes that rudimentary languages are imaginable and says that imagining a language is a matter of imagining a form of life, he does not seem to be saying anything he considers exceptional or shocking. Actually the opposite, he is most naturally read as expecting us to grant, not dispute, that the languages he describes are possible. (In this regard it is important to notice that, however problematic the soldiers’ language, a language of questions and “yes/no” answers poses no special problem.) Also there is the awkward fact that in neighboring remarks Wittgenstein takes model languages to be unobjectionable and later refers to them as “*objects of comparison*,” the purpose of which is “to throw light on the facts of our language” (§130; here and in what follows emphases occur in the original).<sup>1</sup>

But if Wittgenstein is not claiming that systems of communication are forms of life (as opposed to systems of signs with meanings) or aiming to get us to question whether rudimentary systems of communication count as languages, what is he doing in §19a? The most reasonable answer, I suggest, is that he is reinforcing the observation of §18 that we should “not be troubled by the fact that languages (2)

and (8) [i.e., the versions of the builders' language discussed in §2 and §8] consist only of orders." In §19a he bolsters this last point by stating what he takes to be an uncontroversial fact about the kinds of language we can imagine and an equally uncontroversial fact about what imagining a language involves, specifically that it involves imagining an activity involving words. He is saying in effect: If you are troubled by the suggestion that systems of communication of the sort described in §2 and §8 are genuine languages, you might want to consider whether you can imagine a language consisting solely of orders and reports in battle or a language consisting solely of questions and "yes/no" answers. This is not to advance a philosophical thesis. It is to stress that rudimentary languages are imaginable—in fact easily imagined—and to note that imagining a language of any sort whatsoever means imagining a form of life (the German is: '*Und eine Sprache vorstellen heißt, sich eine Lebensform vorstellen*').

But what about this: is the call 'Slab!' in example (2) [i.e., one of the four calls of the builders' language introduced in §2] a sentence or a word? If a word, surely it has not the same meaning as the like-sounding word of our ordinary language, for in §2 it is a call. But if a sentence, it is surely not the elliptical sentence: 'Slab!' of our language. (§19b, sentences 1–3)

The material in these three sentences is pretty clearly connected to the remarks of §19a. Wittgenstein sketches a likely response to what he has just said about rudimentary languages. He first introduces a question about the builders' language, next states a fact that may be thought to bear on the issue, then notes another seemingly relevant consideration. More specifically, in the first sentence he asks—or envisions someone asking—whether the builders' call "Slab!" is a sentence or a word. In the second sentence he observes that if a word, the builders' sequence of sounds is not the same as our word "slab." And in the third sentence he adds that if this sequence of sounds is deemed a sentence, it is not our elliptical sentence "Slab!" (To avoid prejudging the discussion, I refrain from attributing the remarks to an interlocutor; as far as I know Wittgenstein never used the word "interlocutor" [*Gesprächspartner*].) Much less clear is the point of the passage. One possibility that springs to mind is that Wittgenstein is sketching an argument he thinks is mistaken, the gist of which is that the builders' call means something different from our like-sounding call. On this view: "[§19b] opens a new argument. It implicitly raises an objection, viz. that 'Slab!' in language (2) does not have the same meaning that it has in our language. . . . If a word, it has a different use from our word 'slab'. If a sentence, it cannot have the same meaning as our elliptical sentence 'Slab!' (A speaker in §2 cannot have in mind the sentence 'Bring me a slab!' and hence cannot mean this by 'Slab!' Therefore 'Slab!' does not have the same meaning in §2 as in our language)" (Baker and Hacker 1983, 47; 2004, 73; also McGinn 1997, 52).

This interpretation provides Wittgenstein with a definite target and locates his remarks squarely within the context of the *Investigations*, meaning being one of the main concerns of the book. But it goes well beyond anything in the passage.

Wittgenstein does not refer, or have someone refer, to the “use” of the word “slab” or to what the builders may or may not “have in mind.” Nor is there anything in the text about the meaning of the sentence “Slab!”, only a remark about the meaning of the word “slab.” (Nor, I might note in passing, does Wittgenstein envisage it being argued—against all reason—that the builders’ call is neither a word nor a sentence.) While Wittgenstein’s specific choice of words may prove to be inconsequential, all he actually does is raise the question of whether the builders’ call “Slab!” is a word or a sentence and introduce two uncontroversial points—that if a word, the call does not mean what our noun means (“flat, broad piece of material”) and if a sentence, it is not our elliptical sentence (the only sentences the builders have besides “Slab!” are “Block!”, “Pillar!” and “Beam!”). Moreover I would question whether the *Brown Book* “makes [the] objection explicit” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 47; 2004, 73). Wittgenstein says in the *Brown Book*: “Note. Objection: The word ‘brick’ in language 1) has not the meaning which it has in our language” (1960, 77), and it is more than likely that he replaced this objection with a question—and suppressed the reference to meaning—for a reason.

Instead of interpreting Wittgenstein against the grain, we would, I submit, do better to take his remarks at face value. He does not formulate an argument in opposition to the idea that the builders’ call means the same as our like-sounding call but goes on, reasonably enough, to entertain a residual qualm we may have about his taking the builders’ system of communication to be a genuine language. He would have recognized that further discussion is required, there being little chance that philosophers on the other side of the fence will be persuaded by his remarks in §19a about the soldiers’ language (and his remarks in §18 about the builders). (He may even have harbored some doubts himself, the question of the intelligibility of the builders’ language being one he returns to; see Wittgenstein 1967, §§98–99; drafted after 1.1.46.) For this reason alone it makes sense for him to envision someone not accepting his assurances about the imaginability of rudimentary systems of communication. He would have recognized that those unpersuaded by the remarks of §18 and §19a may well raise the question of whether the builders’ call of §2 is either a sentence or a word and go on to suggest—in the rather halting way people do when they find something bothersome without knowing quite why—that neither possibility is unproblematic.

As far as the first question goes you can call ‘Slab!’ a word and also a sentence; perhaps it could be appropriately called a ‘degenerate sentence’ (as one speaks of a degenerate hyperbola); in fact it *is* our ‘elliptical’ sentence. But that is surely only a shortened form of the sentence ‘Bring me a slab’, and there is no such sentence in example (2). (§19b, sentences 4–5)

Read as a response to the protest in the first three sentences of §19a, this passage presents no special difficulty. It begins with three comments about the question of whether the builders’ call “Slab!” is a sentence or a word (I take “the first question” to refer to the question that opens the paragraph, not to an unstated question about the meaning of “Slab!”—compare Ring 1991, 14–15). Wittgenstein first observes

that “Slab!” may be regarded both as a single word (i.e., as a word that functions as a call) and as a sentence (i.e., as a sentence comprising a single word). Secondly, he suggests that it may “perhaps” be regarded as a limiting case (just as a straight line may be regarded as a limiting case of a hyperbola). And thirdly, he declares that it does not only sound the same as “our ‘elliptical’ sentence,” it is the same. (Presumably he puts “elliptical” in quotation marks so as not to commit himself to anything beyond his observation that the two calls are one and the same.) Then, having made these three points, he entertains an objection that a philosophically-minded opponent might think important. He recalls an idea already touched on (“[I]f a sentence, [the builders’ call] is surely not the elliptical sentence: ‘Slab’ of our language”) and imagines it being noted in support of this idea that our call is short for “Bring me a slab,” a sentence the builders do not have.

The difficult thing is to see that this is all Wittgenstein says, that he confines himself to noting some facts and sketching an objection that may be urged given what he has just said. He does not offer an explanation of ellipticality or discuss how the builders’ language is related to languages like German and English. Nor does he argue that the builders’ call “Slab!” is “equivalent to our elliptical sentence (since it has the same function in language-game §2 as ‘Bring me a slab!’ would have in the corresponding fragment of our language)” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 47; 2004, 74; also McGinn 1997, 52). The suggestion that the two calls are “equivalent” because they have the same “function” may be in the offing, but it is not mentioned, much less urged, in the present passage. There is nothing in Wittgenstein’s initial response or the objection he entertains to indicate that he is concerned with the meaning of the calls. To say that “Slab!” can be regarded both as a word and a sentence and thought of as a “degenerate sentence” is not to say anything about its meaning. And to note that the two calls are the same is hardly to say that they are “equivalent,” i.e., mean the same. Nor, presumably, is it fortuitous that the objection Wittgenstein goes on to introduce concerns the “shortened form” of the sign “Slab!”, not its meaning.

What Wittgenstein focuses on is not the “equivalence” of the two calls but the assumption that it is philosophically significant that our call “Slab!” differs from the builders’ call because it is missing words. The question of the meaning of the two calls is being, at least temporarily, bracketed in favor of the question of how they should be classified, i.e., the question of how the sequence of sounds (“s-l-a-b”) should be understood. Wittgenstein is addressing those among us who are inclined to respond to what he says in §18 and §19a by asking: “But what about this [*Wie ist es aber*]: is the call ‘Slab!’ in example (2) a sentence or a word?” He notes that this question involves a false choice and intimates that the protest articulated in the second and third sentences of the paragraph is misplaced. (This is a tack he often takes—see §16, §17 and §47 and compare §79: “Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts.”) It is a mistake to read him as announcing or presupposing a philosophical thesis. He simply observes that the builders’ call “Slab!” is wrongly regarded as a word (as opposed to a sentence) or

as a sentence (as opposed to a word), it being properly regarded as both. This last remark in turn prompts him to note that the two calls, the builders' and our own, are the same and to imagine it being argued that this is not so, our call being a “shortened form of the sentence ‘Bring me a slab.’” As the final long dash makes clear, Wittgenstein does not claim to have disposed of “the first question” once and for all and allows there is more to be said.

But why should I not on the contrary have called ‘Bring me a slab’ a *lengthening* of the sentence ‘Slab!’? Because if you shout ‘Slab!’ you really mean: ‘Bring me a slab’. But how do you do this: how do you *mean that* while you *say* ‘Slab!’? Do you say the unshortened sentence to yourself? And why should I translate the call ‘Slab!’ into a different expression in order to say what someone means by it? And if they mean the same thing why should I not say: ‘When he says “Slab!” he means “Slab!”’? Again, if you can mean ‘Bring me a slab’, why should you not be able to mean ‘Slab!’? (§19b, sentences 6–12)

The remarks of this passage appear less tentative than those of the last two. Wittgenstein takes up the issue of meaning and he is easily interpreted as considering—at long last—whether an “elliptical” sentence means the same as its non-elliptical counterpart, more precisely, whether our call “Slab!” means, “really mean[s],” the same as our sentence “Bring me a slab” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 47; 2004, 74; Ring 1991, 19–20; McGinn 1997, 53). But however attractive initially, this interpretation is hard to defend. Wittgenstein does just three things: first, asks why “Bring me a slab” should not be thought of as long for “Slab!” rather than “Slab!” thought of as short for “Bring me a slab,” secondly, envisions it being objected that the person who shouts “Slab!” really means “Bring me a slab,” and thirdly poses a number of questions concerning the fact that someone can say one thing (“Slab!”) and mean another (“Bring me a slab”). He does not deny one can shout “Slab!” and mean “Bring me a slab.” He concedes that one can and asks how this is possible, i.e., how one can mean a long sentence when one utters a short one. He asks: Do you say the longer one to yourself? Must you have your call translated to be understood? What prevents you, if “Slab!” and “Bring me a slab” mean the same, from meaning “Slab!” when you shout out “Slab!”? And why if you can mean “Bring me a slab,” are you not also able to mean “Slab!” itself?

Similarly it is a mistake to regard Wittgenstein as combating “an inchoate conception of ‘full sense’” (Goldfarb 1983, 275; also Hallett 1977, 89; McGinn 1997, 53; and Brenner 1999, 18). Wittgenstein would not have thought the idea of real meaning, complete analysis or true sense is antithetical to noting that one can meaningfully call out “Slab!” without saying “Bring me a slab” to oneself, be understood without having one’s call translated and mean exactly what one shouts out, i.e., “Slab!” Nor, to mention another interpretation that has been floated, should Wittgenstein be read as criticizing the view that “the meaning of an expression” is a matter of “what a speaker *really intends*.” (Ring 1991, 23; also Baker and Hacker 2004, 74; and McGinn 1997, 52). While Wittgenstein was ill-disposed to this view

of meaning, he does not have it in his sights in this passage. He should not be regarded as targeting the equation of meaning with intention because “[w]hat is translated as ‘mean’ [in the second sentence of the passage] is *meinen*—to mean, intend” (Ring 1991, 23; also Baker and Hacker 2004, 74). On “the most natural reading” of the sentence, Wittgenstein is following the usual practice in German of using “*meinen*” for persons (and reserving “*bedeuten*” for sentences). And besides how probable is it that he thought he could dispatch the conception of meaning as intending by the simple expedient of raising a few questions?

Far from making a positive philosophical claim in the passage, Wittgenstein continues his exploration of the thought that it is philosophically important that in English “Slab!” is—in the situation envisaged—short for “Bring me a slab.” He was under no illusion that a determined opponent will be swayed by his suggestion that “Bring me a slab” may be regarded as long for “Slab!” rather than the other way round. Realizing that it may now be objected that people “really mean” the longer sentence when they utter the shorter one, he tries to get us to see that it is of no philosophical consequence that “Slab!” means, even really means, “Bring me a slab.” If you think it is philosophical consequential, he is stressing, you must do more than observe that a person can say one thing and mean another (compare saying “It is 4 p.m.” and meaning “It is 4 o’clock in the afternoon”). By posing the questions he poses, he hopes to persuade us that there is nothing to be inferred—in the absence of an account of how “you *mean* [‘Bring me a slab’] while you say ‘Slab!’”—from the fact that “Slab!” means “Bring me a slab.” He is not defending a philosophical thesis but demanding further clarification. And the long dash at the end of the passage again shows he knows not everyone will be convinced.

But when I call ‘Slab!’, then what I want is, *that he should bring me a slab!*  
 Certainly, but does ‘wanting this’ consist in thinking in some form or other  
 a different sentence from the one you utter? (§19b, sentences 13–14)

These two sentences bring §19 to a close and have, not too surprisingly, been interpreted as an argument against a philosophical view, specifically the view that uttering a call like “Slab!” is intimately connected with wanting something to be done. Wittgenstein has been read as disparaging the “picture of a person’s meaning or wanting something as consisting in his saying to himself a sentence expressing what he . . . wants” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 47; and 2004, 74). (Baker and Hacker also write: “The debate focuses on the question whether a person’s meaning something by a sentence must always consist in his saying to himself another sentence expressing what he means.”) This interpretation is not without basis in Wittgenstein’s words—he asks whether wanting a slab to be fetched “consist[s] in” the speaker’s somehow thinking a different sentence from “Slab!” The only snag is that such a reading squares poorly with the passage as a whole. Wittgenstein does not argue against the idea that wanting a slab is a matter of saying something to oneself, only asks whether “wanting this” consists in the person who wants it thinking another sentence “in some form or other [*in irgend einer Form*].” To pose a question, as Wittgenstein does, is not to deny a claim, and it is exceedingly unlikely

that he would have overlooked the possibility that a builder who shouts “Slab!” unconsciously registers a different sentence, one that contains more information than “Slab!”, “Bring me a slab” for instance.

Equally it is a mistake to interpret Wittgenstein as contesting the idea that what a builder who shouts “Slab!” wants is properly described by means of “Bring me a slab” or a similarly long sentence (Goldfarb 1983, 276; and Ring 1991, 27). This attributes to Wittgenstein an easily-understood target and jibes nicely with the fact that the builder is correctly described as wanting a slab to be fetched. But once again Wittgenstein is being credited with a view he does not express (and does not have to be understood as advancing). He does not deny that “Bring me a slab” better expresses what is wanted than “Slab!” and he should not be criticized for failing to appreciate “the power of the appeal to wants in explaining the ellipticality of ‘Slab!’” (Ring 1991, 27). What Wittgenstein in fact does is entertain and question another line of thought that might be reckoned important in the present context. He first contemplates it being objected that he is overlooking that builders who shout “Slab!” when engaged in building want a slab to be fetched, then responds by raising a question of his own about how “wanting this” is being understood, specifically whether it is being understood as a matter of thinking a different sentence.

If Wittgenstein is neither criticizing the idea that meaning (or wanting) go hand in hand with saying something to oneself nor objecting to a suggestion about the proper description of wants, how should he be read? I think it clear that he is pouring cold water on the assumption that it is philosophically significant that when I shout “Slab!” what I want is “*that [someone] should bring me a slab.*” He agrees that people working on a building site who shout “Slab!” want a slab to be fetched (he says: “Certainly”) and asks whether their wanting this consists in their thinking a different sentence from “Slab!” It is, he is underlining, no response to the questions raised in the last passage regarding how one means “Bring me a slab” when one shouts “Slab!” to aver, however forcefully, that people who shout “Slab!” want a slab to be fetched. His point is that nothing philosophically interesting follows from this fact—that a slab is wanted—in the absence of an explanation of what “wanting this” involves. In other words, Wittgenstein is challenging those who believe that people who shout “Slab!” think “in some form or other” another sentence to say in what form they think this sentence, and challenging those who believe wanting a slab to be fetched consists in something other than thinking a sentence to say what they take “wanting this” to consist in. He draws no conclusion, just questions whether there is philosophical hay to be made from the fact that we sometimes utter a call because we want something. He is exploring, not theorizing, and the long dash at the end of the section shows that he believes further discussion is called for.

I conclude Wittgenstein does not state, intimate or presuppose a philosophical thesis in §19, still less develop an argument for one. He does not defend the proposition that rudimentary languages are “complete,” maintain that non-elliptical counterparts like “Bring me a slab” are long for elliptical sentences like “Slab!” or hold that wanting something is altogether different from thinking what one wants.

To have him advancing a single argument, one with a conclusion and premises, one has to ride roughshod over the bulk of what he says and ignore other arguments that he could be regarded as advancing. (Thus the first four sentences of §19a have been dismissed as “misguided stage-setting” for want of an identifiable “thesis.” See Ring 1991, 18–19.) No doubt arguments can be extracted from the text—the fifth sentence of §19b can, for instance, be rephrased as a claim to the effect that the builders’ call differs from our call because ours, unlike theirs, is “elliptical.” But such arguments have to be understood in context, and even were it possible to recast the section as a series of arguments, there would remain the question of how they are interrelated. It would still be necessary to consider how the conclusions of arguments that come later build on, respond to or otherwise connect up with the conclusions of earlier arguments, a task that would require getting straight on how the discussion develops, the very thing I have been attempting to spell out.

§19 is carefully thought out, not scattershot, and its dialectical structure is by no means an optional extra. In §19a Wittgenstein responds to an objection that the remarks of §18 may prompt, and in §19b he imagines an exchange of opinions that §19a may give rise to (it is hardly fortuitous that this paragraph consists mainly of questions). To feel the force of Wittgenstein’s remarks, one has to follow in his footsteps. One has to go through his remarks one at a time and take account of the ins-and-outs and back-and-forth character of the discussion. The various contributions to the debate, as in most debates of any complexity, are not independent, and when any are omitted, incidental interjections aside, the exchange becomes, if not incomprehensible, disjointed and incomplete. In the Preface of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein speaks of “the very nature of the investigation [as] compell[ing] us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction,” and in §19 he criss-crosses part of the field and provides what he refers to as “sketches of landscapes . . . made in the course of [his] long and involved journeyings” (ix). Indeed I believe that in §19 one sees in miniature what he was speaking about in 1931 when, soon after returning to philosophy, he wrote: “Work on philosophy . . . is really more work on oneself. On one’s own interpretation. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them)” (Wittgenstein 1998, 24).

The moral of the story so far is that a discussion that may appear at first sight to be theoretical and explanatory turns out on a second look to be no such thing. Reading §19 as Wittgenstein would have us read all his sentences, i.e., “slowly” (1998, 65), we see that it is, from beginning to end, exploratory and critical. Wittgenstein does not defend—in an idiosyncratic fashion—a philosophical position but “work[s] his way into and through a question.” He aims to dissuade us (without leaving philosophical hostages to fortune) from regarding ellipticity as philosophically significant. Here he proceeds in the way he says—later in the *Investigations*—philosophers should always proceed. It is no exaggeration to say that in §19 he scrupulously adheres to the principle that “we must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place” (§109). He grapples with a problem of the form: “I don’t know my way about” (§123), and “neither explains nor deduces

anything” (§126). “What [he] is destroying is nothing but houses of cards” (§118) and he is fairly regarded as “assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (§127). A consideration of §20, a section that has received even less scrutiny than §19, provides additional insight into what Wittgenstein takes to be the right way to treat philosophical problems. Initial appearances notwithstanding, he is still encouraging us to refrain from jumping to philosophical conclusions.

But now it looks as if when someone says ‘Bring me a slab’ he could mean this expression as one long word corresponding to the single word ‘Slab!’ Then can one mean it sometimes as one word and sometimes as four? And how does one usually mean it? I think we shall be inclined to say: we mean the sentence as *four* words when we use it in contrast with other sentences such as ‘*Hand* me a slab’, ‘Bring *him* a slab’, ‘Bring *two* slabs’, etc.; that is in contrast with sentences containing the separate words of our command in other combinations. (§20a, sentences 1–4)

In this passage, it is again tempting to think, Wittgenstein is hazarding a philosophical thesis, this time one about the meaning and use of sentences. He has, for instance, been read as saying what meaning “Bring me a slab” as a certain number of words consists in (Baker and Hacker 1983, 49; 2004, 75; and McGinn 1997, 54) and taken to be endorsing the doctrine of meaning as use (Ring 1991, 32–33). Neither suggestion, however, comports well with the text. Whatever Wittgenstein may go on to say, in this passage he merely poses a couple of questions and notes something he believes “we shall be inclined to say [*wir werden geneigt sein, zu sagen*].” To observe, as he does, that “Bring me a slab” is meant as four words when used “in contrast with sentences containing the separate words of our command in other combinations” is not to say what meaning consists in, even less to equate meaning with use. Nor should he be upbraided for “mishandling . . . the material” (Ring 1991, 33). In pointing out that “Bring me a slab” is generally judged to be a four-word sentence when used in contrast with the likes of “*Hand* me a slab,” “Bring *him* a slab” and “Bring *two* slabs,” he is underscoring the obvious. (It is no argument against Wittgenstein that using the sentence as four words “requires . . . contrasts . . . with expressions with other than four words”—in the original German the examples, i.e., “*Reich mir eine Platte zu*,” “*Bring ihm eine Platte*,” and “*Bring zwei Platten*,” comprise five, four and three words respectively.)

Had it been put to Wittgenstein, he would certainly have agreed “the issue . . . of meaning what we say as some number of words, is . . . bogus” (Ring 1991, 32). He is not introducing the thought that “Bring me a slab” may be meant as “One word” or “Four words”—this would have struck him as too preposterous to spend time repudiating. What concerns him is rather another way we are apt to think about elliptical sentences and their non-elliptical counterparts. He envisages someone thinking it significant that “Bring me a slab” may be regarded holophrastically as “Bring-me-a-slab” as well as regarded as comprising four separate words. His point is that this possibility is philosophically neither here nor there, the sentence being normally treated as meaning four words when used “in contrast with sentences

containing [‘bring’, ‘me’, ‘a’, ‘slab’] in other combinations.” He thinks reflection on how “Bring me a slab” is used shows that there is nothing to be gleaned from the fact that the sentence can be construed two different ways. (In this regard it is worth comparing the present passage with his remarks in §21 and §24 about the possibility of meaning “Isn’t the weather good?” as either a report or a query, another uncontroversial fact about understanding a sentence more than one way sometimes thought to be philosophically important.)

To understand what Wittgenstein is saying it needs to be noticed that he is not branching out in a new direction, and §20a is not, as has been suggested, disconnected from §19b (Ring 1991, 33). Wittgenstein is not forcing the issue when he writes at the beginning of the paragraph: “But now it looks as if . . .” While the focus of his remarks is different from the focus of his previous remarks, there is no hiatus between the two sections. Having observed in §19b that “Bring me a slab” can be regarded as a lengthening of “Slab!”, he has good reason to scrutinize the suggestion that “someone who says ‘Bring me a slab!’ must be able to mean this whole sentence as *one* word” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 49; and 2004, 74). And given his criticism of the suggestion that what we (really) mean when we say “Slab!” is “Bring me a slab,” it likewise makes good sense for him to examine the fact that a person may mean a sentence as one word or four. He is not finally advancing a philosophical thesis of his own but attempting to expose another wrong step we may take when we reflect on the relationship of “Slab!” to “Bring me a slab.” Realizing that his philosophically-minded opponents are likely to think he is missing a trick, it being possible to construe a sentence that comprises a number of separate words as consisting of a single word, he reminds us that whether a sentence is understood as consisting of several words or one depends on what it is used “in contrast with.”

But what does using one sentence in contrast with others consist in? Do the others, perhaps, hover before one’s mind? *All* of them? And *while* one is saying the one sentence, or before, or afterwards? No. Even if such an explanation rather tempts us, we need only think for a moment of what actually happens in order to see that we are going astray here. We say that we use the command in contrast to other sentences because *our language* contains the possibility of those other sentences. (§20a, sentences 5–10)

Wittgenstein now asks what using a sentence in contrast to other sentences—for instance “Bring me a slab” in contrast to “Hand *me* a slab” and “Bring *him* a slab”—“consist[s] in,” and he is naturally interpreted as arguing against one answer and proposing another. On this reading of the text he is urging two points: first that it is a mistake to think that a person who uses one sentence in contrast to other sentences has these other sentences before the mind, and secondly that speakers can be said to be using a sentence in contrast to others just when they are conversant with the contrast sentences. In particular he is to be understood as favoring the view that such a use of a sentence consists in the speaker’s standing ready to use the contrast sentences as and when the occasion arises, there being no saying whether all or

some of these sentences hover before the speaker’s mind, to say nothing of whether they hover there before, while or after the speaker utters the sentence. In brief: “The point of the dialogue is to establish that the contrast between meaning ‘Bring me a slab!’ as four words and meaning it as one word need not consist in anything present in the mind of the speaker when he utters the sentence. Instead, what is required is his mastery of a language in which this sentence can be used in contrast with other sentences consisting partly or wholly of the same words” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 49; 2004, 75; also Ring 1991, 32–33; and McGinn 1997, 54).

While unquestionably appealing, this interpretation is doubly problematic. First Wittgenstein does not say uttering “Bring me a slab” in contrast to “*Hand* me a slab,” “Bring *him* a slab” and the like does not consist in having these other sentences in mind. He simply asks whether these other sentences come to mind when a sentence like “Bring me a slab” is uttered and raises some questions about what is involved in their coming to mind. (The phrase “hover before one’s mind” is misleading—Wittgenstein writes: “*Schweben einem dabei etwa diese Sätze vor?* [Do these other sentences, for instance, come to mind?]”) Secondly, Wittgenstein does not state that the use of “Bring me a slab” in contrast to other sentences is to be explained in terms of the speaker’s having a mastery of English. He merely notes that this sentence is generally held to be used in contrast to other sentences because the latter sentences also belong to our language. Had he believed he could show that using one sentence in contrast to others consists in having a mastery of the relevant language rather than in having (all or some of) them in mind, he would surely have said so, at least given some indication that this is his view. He would have done more than raise a few questions, note that an examination of what occurs when one shouts “Slab!” shows “we are going astray” and remind us of something “we say.”

Wittgenstein is exploring another thought that suggests itself at this point in the discussion, not lamely defending a philosophical thesis. He is considering the suggestion that it is philosophically noteworthy that sentences generally regarded as comprising so many words, “Bring me a slab” for instance, may be taken to comprise a single word. Focusing on what he actually says we see that far from stating or presupposing a thesis about what using “Bring me a slab” in contrast to other sentences consists in, he introduces and responds to the complaint that he cannot get away with asserting that “Bring me a slab” is meant as four words when used in contrast to sentences containing “bring,” “me,” “a” and “slab” in other combinations. Rather than attempt to answer the question at the beginning of the passage (“But what does using one sentence in contrast with others consist in?”), Wittgenstein does what he often does—scrutinize the question itself. He takes issue with the idea that when we utter one sentence in contrast to others, we have these others before our minds, and adds that the latter sentences are usually thought of as sentences we have in our repertoire. (Here it is worth noting that “uttering a sentence in contrast to others” differs from “uttering a sentence” in much the same way as “being tall in contrast to other people” differs from “having this or that height.”)

Someone who did not understand our language, a foreigner, who had fairly often heard someone giving the order: 'Bring me a slab!', might believe that this whole series of sounds was one word corresponding perhaps to the word for 'building-stone' in his language. If he himself had then given this order perhaps he would have pronounced it differently, and we should say: he pronounces it so oddly because he takes it for a *single* word. But then, is there not something different going on in him, something corresponding to the fact that he conceives the sentence as a *single* word? Either the same thing may go on in him, or something different. (§20a, sentences 11–14)

This passage is harder to make out than the last two, and it has not, as far as I am aware, been discussed in the secondary literature. As a first shot at interpreting it, we might try reading Wittgenstein as stressing that there need be nothing different going on in a foreigner who mispronounces a sentence from what goes on in a native speaker who pronounces it correctly. On this reading, Wittgenstein is observing that the foreigner may differ from a native speaker solely in that he forms his vowels and consonants differently. His point is that that a foreigner who pronounces "Bring me a slab" as a single word may use and mean the sentence the same way as a native speaker no less than an English speaker who mispronounces "Bring *mir eine Platte*" may use and mean this sentence the same way as a native German speaker. Otherwise stated, Wittgenstein is observing that a difference in pronunciation may no more indicate an internal difference in speakers than a difference in velocity indicates an internal difference in moving bodies. This interpretation, however, falls short if only because Wittgenstein does not deny that something special goes on in the foreigner who mispronounces a sentence. He says: "Either the same thing may go on in him, or something different," i.e., there may or may not be something going on in him "corresponding to the fact that he conceives the sentence as a *single* word."

Mindful of this last point, one may try interpreting Wittgenstein as denying that something goes on in the foreigner corresponding to how he understands the call. The thought is that the discussion is directed against the idea that the foreigner's mispronunciation of "Bring me a slab" is a result of a misconception, i.e., of a wrong conception that occurs within him. We are to regard Wittgenstein as noting it is a mistake to hold that the foreigner mispronounces the sentence because he has a conception of it as a one-word sentence, "Bring-me-a-slab," rather than the normal conception of it as a four word sentence, there being nothing different happening in the foreigner who mispronounces the sentence "because he takes it for a single word." Such an interpretation, however, is also open to objection. Whereas the first interpretation accords well with the fourth sentence of the passage under discussion but not the other three sentences, the present interpretation accords well with the first three sentences but not the fourth one. Wittgenstein does not pronounce on the question of what goes on in the foreigner. He merely observes: "Either the same thing may go on in him, or something different." Whatever he is attempting to get over, he would not have believed he could show that nothing special happens in the mispronouncing foreigner just by declaring something special may or may not happen in him.

To do justice to all four sentences of the passage, it has to be recognized that all Wittgenstein does here is describe a situation, envisage it being regarded a certain way and question whether it ought to be so regarded. The thrust of his discussion is that it is one thing to grant that a foreigner might mispronounce “Bring me a slab” because he conceives it as (i.e., takes it to be) a single word, quite another to hold that there is something special going on in him corresponding to how he conceives (or takes) it. The only thing that can be reasonably concluded, Wittgenstein would have us notice, is that what happens in the foreigner may or may not be the same as what happens in a native speaker. He is warning against supposing that something special goes on in speakers who mispronounce sentences as a result of taking them incorrectly, no more and no less. Put otherwise, we are being alerted to a wrong turn we may be inclined to make when we ponder the possibility of someone mispronouncing a sentence like “Bring me a slab” because he or she misconceives it as a single word. There is, Wittgenstein is stressing, nothing to be inferred about what is going on behind the scenes from what is going on in full view.

For what goes on in you when you give such an order? Are you conscious of its consisting of four words *while* you are uttering it? Of course you have a *mastery* of this language which contains those other sentences as well but is this mastery something that happens while you are uttering the sentence? And I have admitted that the foreigner will probably pronounce a sentence differently if he conceives it differently; but what we call his wrong conception *need* not lie in anything that accompanies the utterance of the command. (§20a, sentences 15–18)

These four sentences, the final sentences of §20a, have also been read as explanatory, even as spelling out what Wittgenstein concludes from his discussion. Thus he has been interpreted as attacking the “picture of the mind as an internal mechanism, or repository of psychological states” and as “directing us to look for what grounds the structure of an utterance of the sentence ‘Bring me a slab,’ not in what *accompanies* the saying of the sentence, but in what, as it were, *surrounds* it” (McGinn 1997, 55). On this reading, Wittgenstein “introduces the idea that it is nothing that occurs *at the time*, or in the speaker’s mind, that determines that he means it as four words rather than one” and maintains that “[t]he mastery that grounds the native speaker’s meaning does not consist in facts that obtain at the time of utterance, but in an indeterminate horizon of actual and potential use of language that surrounds it.” The thought is that Wittgenstein is claiming that “Bring me a slab” is properly understood as meaning four words just when the person who shouts it out has an appropriate command of English (and it is immaterial whether he or she has a four-word sentence consciously in mind). In short, meaning a sentence as a number of words—even meaning as such—is more like walking than silently rehearsing a speech, and a foreigner’s misconception is to be explained by noting that his mastery of the language is incomplete, not by postulating the existence of something, a misconception, going on in him.

For all its initial plausibility, however, this interpretation leaves much to be desired and not only because Wittgenstein does not commit himself one way or

other to a philosophical view about meaning. A great deal has to be read into the text to have him pronouncing on what happens in the foreigner when such a person takes “Bring me a slab” to comprise a single word and arguing that “[i]t is not the existence of structure *inside* the speaker’s mind (or brain) that grounds our saying he means the sentence as four words rather than one” (McGinn 1997, 54). Had Wittgenstein intended to challenge this line of thought, he would have gone into the matter more deeply. He would not just have asked whether we are “conscious” of how many words the sentence has when we utter it and added: “Of course you have a *mastery* of this language . . . But is this having a mastery something that *happens* while you are uttering the sentence?” (He knew as well as anyone that what goes on in a person may go on subconsciously.) Nor is Wittgenstein charitably read as expressing in the last sentence of the passage “his opposition” to the picture of the mind as a theatre of mental goings-on. All he does in this sentence is reiterate something we may not yet have properly in view—that the “wrong conception [*falsche Auffassung*]” of a foreigner who “conceives [*auffaßt*]” a command differently from a native speaker “*need* not lie in anything that accompanies [his] utterance.”

Read in conjunction with the rest of §20a, on the other hand, the passage makes excellent sense. Nothing has to be added to make it comprehensible apart from clarification. In asking “What goes on in us when we say the sentence?” and recalling some points that he had made earlier in the section, Wittgenstein is reinforcing his criticism of the idea that something must happen in the foreigner who takes “Bring me a slab” holophrastically as “Bring-me-a-slab” different from what happens in the native speaker who takes it as four separate words. While it is, I suppose, arguable that the material—possibly the whole of §20a—could have been better structured, there can be no disputing the exploratory spirit of Wittgenstein’s remarks. He is noting that we are prone—those of us of a philosophical disposition at least—to read much too much into the fact that how we pronounce sentences depends on how we take them. His primary object is to get us to see that the philosophical significance of this anodyne fact is more apparent than real. He does not purport to polish off one philosophical view (that meaning is a mental phenomenon) or put forward an alternative view (that meaning is an ability, one involving the mastery of a practice). His discussion is open-ended, and it is no accident that in earlier versions of the *Investigations* the passage ended with a parenthetical note: “*Davon später mehr* [More about that later]” (Wittgenstein 2001, 71 and 223).

The sentence is ‘elliptical’, not because it leaves out something that we think when we utter it, but because it is shortened in comparison with a particular paradigm of our grammar. Of course one might object here: “You grant that the shortened and the unshortened sentence have the same sense. What is this sense, then? Isn’t there a verbal expression for this sense?” But doesn’t the fact that sentences have the same sense consist in their having the same *use*? (In Russian one says “stone red” instead of “the stone is red”; do they feel the copula to be missing in the sense, or attach it in *thought*?) (§20b)

It is tempting to suppose that in this last short paragraph Wittgenstein is summarizing his conclusions and providing his “own explanation of the ellipticality of ‘Slab!’” (Ring 1991, 28; also McGinn 1997, 56). This is not an outlandish assumption. In the first sentence Wittgenstein states that “‘Slab!’ is elliptical because it is short in comparison with a paradigm of our language (e.g., “Bring me a slab”), and in the fourth sentence he associates the sense of a sentence with its use. (“Elliptical” is again in quotation marks, I take it, to ward off easy assumptions about the notion itself.) Once more, however, there are difficulties. Wittgenstein does not suggest that ellipticality is properly explained in terms of the speaker’s “linguistic practice” (Ring 1991, 29). Nor does he characterize “[the] sameness of meaning [of ‘Slab!’ and ‘Bring me a slab’] in terms of sameness of use” (Ring 1991, 30). He notes that the sentence counts as “elliptical” because it is shortened (and is missing words), not because it leaves out something we think. And rather than state the meaning is a matter of use, he poses a question: “[D]oesn’t the fact that sentences have the same sense consist[s] in their having the same use?” Furthermore it is odd to regard the passage as containing “the most explicit identification, up to this point in the *Investigations*, of meaning and use” (Ring 1991, 30). Neither here nor elsewhere does Wittgenstein equate them. Indeed in §1 he contrasts them—he says (regarding the meaning of “five”): “No such thing was in question here, only how the word ‘five’ is used.” (As an aside, I might mention that Wittgenstein does not urge a “use” theory of meaning in §43. See Lugg 2000, 83.)

More plausible, but also too quick, is the suggestion that Wittgenstein is applying the “considerations [of §20a] to clarify the claim in §19(b) that ‘Slab!’ in language-game §2 is (synonymous with) the elliptical sentence ‘Slab!’ in our language” (Baker and Hacker 1983, 49; and 2004, 76). Wittgenstein does not argue: “Our sentence is elliptical, not because it abbreviates a ‘mental utterance’ of the corresponding sentence ‘Bring me a slab!’, but because our language contains the possibility of contrasting the sentences ‘Bring me a slab!’, ‘Take away a slab!’, ‘Bring him a slab!’, etc., each of which may, in certain circumstances, be shortened to ‘Slab!’” Nor does he question the idea that “there must be some privileged form for expressing the sense of any sentence,” or urge that “both of the sentences ‘Slab!’ and ‘Bring me a slab!’ are complete verbal formulations of their sense,” or assert that “the sense of a sentence depends on how it is used.” To repeat, he emphasizes that, to the contrary, “‘Slab!’ is shortened “in comparison with a paradigm of our grammar” (“Bring me a slab”) and asks: “Does not the fact that sentences have the same sense consist in their having the same *use*?” (It is important to notice that the translation omits a definite article—Wittgenstein is referring to “‘Slab!’” and “‘Bring in a slab,’” not sentences in general.) In addition, to mention one further dubious interpretative claim, it is not at all obvious that “[t]he final parenthetical remark ridicules the idea that the verbal expression for the sense of ‘slab’ is to be sought in the ‘language of thought.’”

§20b reads much more smoothly when it is taken for what it is—a sequel to §19b and §20a—and Wittgenstein is understood as considering another seemingly important point about elliptical sentences. Having explored the supposed philosophical

importance of the fact that sentences may be missing words, examined the observation that speakers who utter “elliptical” sentences really mean the non-elliptical counterparts, and disputed the claim that there has to be something special going on in a foreigner who construes a four-word sentence holophrastically, Wittgenstein now turns the spotlight on the idea that an elliptical sentence has the same sense as its non-elliptical counterpart (paradigm, model or sample). He concedes that “Slab!” counts as “elliptical” since it shortens another sentence, raises the question of whether there must be something, a sense, shared by sentences alike in sense, and responds by asking whether saying sentences have the “same sense [*gleichen Sinn*]” adds anything to saying they have the “same use [*gleichen Verwendung*].” (The long dash before the parenthetical remark shows he appreciates that his question is likely to fall on deaf ears and that there is more to be said.) Then finally, to round off the discussion, he poses another question: Do Russians feel anything is missing from “stone red” (“камень красный”) when they utter the sentence? Here he would have us slow down and ask ourselves whether Russians “feel the copula is missing in the sense, or attach it in *thought*” (and correlatively whether “same use” indicates “same sense”).

On the account of §§19–20 I have been defending, the importance of the material lies less in the intrinsic interest of the topic of ellipticity than in the subtlety of Wittgenstein’s treatment of it. (This is not to deny that Wittgenstein’s remarks bear on views about meaning that philosophers have promoted down the years, only to observe that these views are not presently under discussion.) Wittgenstein scrutinizes with considerable skill and flair ideas we may find attractive when we reflect on the likes of “Slab!” and “Bring me a slab,” and he exposes easy conclusions we are apt to defend about such sentences (and traps we are liable to fall into if we are not especially watchful). In choosing to discuss ellipticity at length, Wittgenstein is not going overboard but indicating how he thinks philosophy should be done, more precisely, demonstrating what working on a philosophical question, as he sees it, involves. He would, I conjecture, have thought he needed early in the *Investigations* a good example of his way of combating philosophical speculation, and for this reason, if for no other, he would have retained the material in the final version of the book. I see him as motivated by a wish to stress the idea, central to his thinking, that philosophical problems need to be regarded differently from how they are usually regarded, that they should be approached critically, leaving open the possibility that they should not be answered but set firmly aside. To his way of thinking “[i]t is not a difficulty for the intellect but one for the will that has to be overcome” (Wittgenstein 1998, 25; also Wittgenstein 2005, 300 [dated 22.11.1931]).

When reading §§19–20, and I believe other sections of the *Investigations* (see Lugg 2000), we tend to be our own worst enemy. Though Wittgenstein can hardly be said to make things easy for us, his remarks are not especially technical or arcane. When he is read as intending to make a positive contribution to philosophy, his remarks seem murky, not to say impenetrable. When he is read without presupposing what he is after, however, what he says is not only less opaque, it is

also more powerful and worthy of a philosopher of the first rank. To understand §§19–20 it is, I want to insist, essential that we curb our natural philosophical instincts and refrain from assuming that he is defending a philosophical thesis, one that for his own special reasons he chose not to express in so many words. This is not easily done. Even the entries in the index of the *Investigations* for “mean” and “sense” that direct us to §§19–20 credit him with philosophical views—that meaning is “not a mental act, process, experience” and “sense is use.” Wittgenstein meant it when he said: “All that philosophy can do is destroy idols. And that means not creating a new one—say in ‘absence of an idol’” (2005, 305). In §§19–20, at any rate, he attempts to persuade us, without committing himself to a philosophical doctrine, that certain plausible philosophical ideas about ellipticity are, if defensible at all, much less easily defended than we are likely to think.

The main lesson I draw from the present discussion is that when reading sections of the *Investigations*, such as §§19–20, in which philosophical work is being done, we need to attend to the words on the page as closely as Wittgenstein would have philosophers engaged in philosophical speculation attend to common-or-garden facts about meaning, the mind and the world. No less than the philosopher who would tell us how things are, “we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them *from close to*” (§51). And as in philosophy proper, “we must learn to understand what it is that opposes . . . an examination of details” (§52). If we are to understand Wittgenstein and not take him to be defending theses that he does not deign to specify, we have to stick to the letter of the text and resist viewing his remarks through the lens of our own preconceptions. Instead of digging beneath the surface of the text in the hope of uncovering a philosophical theory to ascribe to him, we should devote our energy to figuring out exactly what he is saying. To adapt two other remarks he makes about philosophy, “[w]hat is hidden [i.e., what is alleged to underlie his words] . . . is of no interest to us” (§126) and “[t]he aspects of things that are most important for us [i.e., his actual remarks] are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity” (§129). “*Nichts ist so schwierig, wie Gerechtigkeit gegen die Tatsachen* [Nothing is so difficult as doing justice to the facts]” (Wittgenstein 1993, 128–129).”<sup>2</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. It is, I believe, a mistake to think that Wittgenstein’s discussion stands or falls with the possibility of the builders’ system of communication functioning as a genuine language (compare the contrasting views of Rhees 1970 and Malcolm 1995). Wittgenstein would surely have regarded the soldiers’ language of orders and reports in battle as no more problematic than the elementary physical systems he had earlier studied as a scientist, e.g., the system comprising a single particle moving freely in space. The physical impossibility of such systems hardly precludes their being used as “objects of comparison.” On this theme, see Lugg 2000, 13, 20, and 197.
2. I am indebted to Lynne Cohen, Juliet Floyd, Warren Ingber and Puqun Li for suggestions, to Warren Goldfarb for providing me with his lecture notes on the *Investigations* and to Paul

Forster for alerting me more times than I care to remember to the fact that I had, despite my best efforts, attributed something to Wittgenstein not in text. Also I have profited from the very helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

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