Overinterpreting Wittgenstein:

*Philosophical Investigations* *§§19(b)-20*

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Abstract: Although Wittgenstein maintains that there are no theses in philosophy, he is regularly interpreted as advancing or committed to such theses. In this paper I consider a striking case in point, Merrill Ring's discussion of §19(b), §20(a) and §20(b) of the *Philosophical Investigations*. I compare Ring's account of the text with Wittgenstein's actual words and stress the importance of refraining from taking Wittgenstein to be engaged in an explanatory or theoretical enterprise.

Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them there is a good deal that you will not say.) — *Philosophical Investigations* §79

Ludwig Wittgenstein is generally treated as failing to practice what he preaches, not least in his later philosophy, the *Philosophical Investigations* included.[[1]](#footnote-1) Commentators disregard or discount his pronouncements about philosophical speculation and take him to be defending, insinuating or presupposing substantive philosophical doctrines. Little attention is paid to his claim to be criticising and describing rather than conjecturing and explaining, and he is read far more often than not as committed to views comparable to the views of great philosophers of the past.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is especially true of §19(b), §20(a) and §20(b) of *Philosophical Investigations*, material ostensibly about the nature of elliptical sentences. While these paragraphs are interpreted differently by different commentators, they are typically taken to be explanatory and theoretical, and Wittgenstein is seen as intending to contribute in a positive way to philosophy.[[3]](#footnote-3) To focus the discussion, I examine Merrill Ring's painstaking study, '"Bring me a slab!": meaning, speakers, and practices', a paper about the material in which Wittgenstein is understood to be making important philosophical claims about elliptical sentences.[[4]](#footnote-4) An examination of this paper serves to set the record straight, clarifies what Wittgenstein says in §§19(b)-20, throws light on how he grapples with a philosophical issue and helps explain why he is almost always taken to engage in the very sort of philosophical theorising that later in the *Investigations* and elsewhere he explicitly disparagesas bankrupt.

There is much to be said for approaching §§19(b)-20, as Ring recommends, as 'a cartographer of territory already generally known' with the object of providing 'philosophers looking into Wittgenstein a useful, detailed account of one district of the country of the *Investigations*' (pp. 12-13). Like Ring, I think it essential to work through the material in order, sentence by sentence, keeping a close eye on how the discussion develops. To appreciate the force of Wittgenstein's remarks, it is, I believe, necessary to follow in his footsteps and refrain from selectively quoting his remarks. What I object to is Ring's 'philosophical commentary' (p. 12). I question the accuracy of his 'detailed map' (p. 13) and argue that, for all his good intentions, he falls into the trap, not unknown in cartography, of viewing the territory though the lens of his own expectations.

The burden of what follows is that the difficulties Ring encounters in interpreting Wittgenstein's remarks in §§19(b)-20 are largely of his own making. Had he not taken Wittgenstein to be attempting to provide a theoretical and explanatory account of ellipticality, he would not have concluded that 'confusions, often organizational but at least once intellectual, prevent [Wittgenstein] from achieving a perspicuous presentation' (p. 13). Nor would he have ended up in the awkward position of having to admit that §20(a), the longest of the three paragraphs (and one of the longest in the *Investigations*), 'elude[s] [his] grasp' (p. 12).[[5]](#footnote-5) Though §19(b), §20(a) and §20(b) are by no means easily understood, they are not as opaque or problematic as Ring contends. The reason these three paragraphs are difficult is not so much that they are hard to comprehend as that it is all too easy to read them as theoretical or explanatory. The material is, as Ring says, 'important both philosophically and to the understanding of Wittgenstein' (p. 13), but this becomes clear only when it is taken at face value.

In the first third of his essay Ring examines the beginning of §19(b), in which Wittgenstein discusses one of the calls of the builders' language introduced in §2:

But what about this: is the call 'Slab!' in example (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.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 surely is only a shortened form of the sentence 'Bring me a slab', and there is no such sentence in example (2).

On Ring's interpretation, the first four sentences of this passage are 'misguided stage-setting' (p. 19) and it is only in the fifth sentence that 'the central issue of §19(b) begins to emerge' (p. 17). In his view 'anyone who attempts to use [Wittgenstein's opening] question and the notions of word and sentence as guides to the subject matter of §19(b) and §20 will become thoroughly lost' (p. 13). Is this a reasonable view?

Ring holds that Wittgenstein's first sentence is 'tack[ed] on' (p. 15), that it is 'connecting tissue' (p. 18). He thinks the question of whether the builders' call is a sentence or a word is an improbable 'issue' for Wittgenstein to discuss (p. 17) and stresses that Wittgenstein's 'response ... runs neither long nor deep' (p. 14). Moreover, in defence of his conclusion that the first four sentences of the passage add nothing to the discussions, Ring notes that Wittgenstein merely claims that anyone who holds that the builders' sentence '*is* our "elliptical" sentence' is 'mistaken' (p. 14) and writes: '*All* that Wittgenstein does is ... assert the contradictory of the interlocutor's answer' (p. 17).[[6]](#footnote-6) Furthermore, noting that the fourth sentence of the passage begins with the phrase 'As far as the first question goes', Ring believes Wittgenstein is best read as having 'some second question ... in mind' (pp. 14-15), specifically one introduced in the fifth sentence of the passage. What really concerns Wittgenstein, he concludes, is not whether 'Slab!' is a word or a sentence but whether 'Slab!' and 'Bring me a slab' mean the same. As he sees it, Wittgenstein would have done better to 'have begun with the interlocutor saying, "'Bring me a slab!' cannot mean the same as 'Slab!'"' (p. 19).

Such an interpretation of the passage does not jump off the page. The question with which Wittgenstein opens the paragraph is not obscure or uninteresting. It is easily overlooked that 'Slab!' may count both as a word and a sentence, and Wittgenstein does not hesitate to alert the reader to similar errors later in the *Investigations.*[[7]](#footnote-7) Nor is it especially significant that Wittgenstein gives his 'answer ... quickly' rather than provides 'a deep analysis or a deep criticism' (p. 14). While it is true that he 'gives an "Either or both" answer' – 'although expressing a preference for calling it a limiting case of a sentence' – this hardly establishes that he is concerned with 'something different from what he implies it to be' (p. 14). Wittgenstein was not one to waste words, and he may well have decided that all is needed at this juncture is an 'either or both' answer and a bald assertion about the builders' call – that it is no different from our like-sounding call.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition I do not share Ring's 'suspicion' that Wittgenstein has another question in mind is 'borne out' by the text. The phrase 'the first question' is just as well, if not better, understood as a reference to the question that opens the paragraph.

More tellingly still, there is a simpler and less problematic way of reading the material. Whereas Ring confesses to being unable to find 'any way to make a significant connection between [§19(b)] and the preceding §19(a)' (p. 12), I see the two paragraphs as clearly connected. Wittgenstein had good reason to ask (or envision someone asking) whether the builders' call 'Slab!' is a sentence or a word given he had suggested in §19(a) that '[i]t is easy to imagine' rudimentary languages, indeed 'innumerabl[y]' many. On what I take to be the most natural reading of the text, Wittgenstein is introducing a protest to the effect that anyone who considers how the builders' call should be understood will have to agree that rudimentary languages are far from easily imagined. (The question 'Is the call a word or a sentence?' is also suggested by Wittgenstein's claim in §18 that it is not a problem that the versions of the builders' language introduced in §2 and §8 consist solely of orders.[[9]](#footnote-9)) No doubt other challenges to the remarks of §19(a) – and §18 – could be mounted. The one at the start of §19(b), however, is hardly inconsequential, and had Wittgenstein not attended to it sooner or later he would have left himself open to criticism.

In addition the middle three sentences of the passage are implausibly regarded as 'misguided stage-setting'. The first two of them express thoughts that someone who raises the question of how the builders' call should be understood might want to urge. If one has doubts about Wittgenstein's claims regarding rudimentary languages, one may well attempt to bring out the problem by noting that either answer to the question 'Is the builders' call a sentence or word?' is problematic. It is tempting to think Wittgenstein is in deep water since the call, if a word, does not mean what our noun means, and if a sentence, it is different from our elliptical sentence. (The call does not mean 'flat, broad piece of material', and it cannot be regarded as an elliptical sentence, the only other sentences in the builders' language being 'Block!', 'Pillar!' and 'Beam!') Moreover Wittgenstein is on firm ground when he responds in the third of the three sentences that the builders' call might be regarded as both a word and a sentence, in fact might be regarded as a 'degenerate sentence' (just as a straight-line may be regarded as a degenerate hyperbola). And it makes sense as well for him to add in the same sentence that the builders' call is in fact none other than our like-sounding call, 'Slab!', that their call not only sounds the same as ours, 'it *is* our "elliptical" sentence'.[[10]](#footnote-10) To understand Wittgenstein one only has to stick to the text and notice that he introduces, develops and counters a challenge to what he has been saying.

Ring's interpretation of the last sentence of the passage is more subtle. He takes Wittgenstein to be zeroing in on 'a suppressed premise', one that is needed to show that the builders' call means something different from our like-sounding call (p. 17). In his view Wittgenstein is taking the interlocutor to be objecting to the idea that the two calls mean the same, an objection that requires an additional assumption, namely: 'An elliptical form of words cannot mean precisely the same as its non-elliptical counterpart'. As Ring puts it, Wittgenstein is envisioning 'the interlocutor [stating] the reasons for his claim that "Slab!" does not mean the same in [the builders' language and our own]', and to understand the passage, it needs to be noticed, '[p]erhaps surprisingly', that 'it is the thesis expressed by that missing premise which is the long-awaited key to interpreting §19(b) and what follows' (p. 18). For Ring, the 'possibility of applying the assumption ["An unshortened expression and a shorthand version of it cannot mean the same"] to the relation between two expressions within *our* language ... guides the remainder of Wittgenstein's discussion in the rest of §19(b) and until the very last words of §20'.

There are several difficulties here. First, given what has already been said, it is hard to go along with Ring when he avers that 'the absence of any substantial discussion [before the fifth sentence of the passage] is a sign that we have not yet reached a topic which can be represented as the subject matter of §19(b)' (p. 17). None of the five sentences seems less substantial than any of the others. Secondly, as Ring himself concedes, the assumption that he takes Wittgenstein to be concentrating on is 'not ... an obvious view', 'the more natural assumption [being] that *of course* an elliptical expression and that for which it is elliptical do mean exactly the same' (p. 19). Thirdly, how likely is it that Wittgenstein would entertain the suggestion that 'Slab!' means 'Bring me a slab' but not the other way around (p. 26)? This requires that he be interpreted as slipping up when he has his interlocutor note in §20(b): 'You grant that the shortened and unshortened sentence have the same sense' – as Ring has it, 'the interlocutor should not be granting or allowing that – since he is denying it' (p. 33, ftn 5). Fourthly and most importantly, there is nothing in the text about meaning. Wittgenstein merely notes that our call 'Slab' is short for 'Bring me a slab', a sentence the builders do not have.

The simplest and, I suggest, best reading of the text is that Wittgenstein is continuing to debate with a philosophically-minded opponent who is convinced of the philosophical importance of ellipticity.[[11]](#footnote-11) He is putting into such a person's mouth an objection that may now be thought pertinent, and the fifth sentence of the passage should be read as introducing something that might seem important given the discussion of the first four sentences rather than read as 'the real starting point of the investigation' (p. 18). More specifically, Wittgenstein should be regarded as following up his rejection of the challenge posed in the opening sentence of the paragraph – the one directed at what he claimed in §19(a) (and possibly §18) – with another challenge, the thrust of which is that it is not true that the builders' call '*is*' our call, our call being short for a sentence that the builders do not have. He states this relatively clearly. He says: 'But that [i.e. his claim about the identity of the two calls] surely is only a shortened form of the sentence "Bring me a slab", and there is no such sentence in example (2)'.

Why would Ring stray so far from the letter of the text and make no provision for the fact that the discussion takes the form of a philosophical exchange? Presumably he would not accept the reading of the first five sentences of the §19(b) that I favour for the simple reason that it is, to his way of thinking, unilluminating, that it does not explain 'what [Wittgenstein] is up to' (p. 13), that it does not reveal 'the real issue in §19(b)' (p. 14). Though Ring aims to provide an accurate account of the material (and he is fully conversant with Wittgenstein's words), he mostly devotes his efforts in the first part of his paper to isolating a theme that could serve as 'the subject matter for §19' (p. 17). He reasons that since Wittgenstein is not challenging the 'Augustinian picture' of sentences as comprising names or the *Tractatus* conception of propositions as concatenations of words standing for objects, he must have an unexpressed target. Persuaded at the outset that Wittgenstein's aims are theoretical, he assumes that there has to be 'a topic which Wittgenstein pursues in §19(b)' (p. 16). He overlooks the possibility that, like most debates of substance, the debate in which Wittgenstein is engaged is not restricted to a single idea, topic or thesis, and he ends up thinking the material could have benefited from 'a more complete restructuring' (p. 15).

When the dialectical structure of the material is ignored and Wittgenstein taken to be defending or insinuating a thesis or conclusion, his remarks are pretty much bound to be reinterpreted as radically as Ring reinterpreted them. The only single 'thesis' that Wittgenstein can plausibly be regarded as concerned with is: 'An elliptical form of words cannot mean precisely the same as its non-elliptical counterpart' (p. 18). (Ring writes: 'Wittgenstein could have saved himself and his readers a great deal of trouble had he begun §19(b) straightforwardly by having the interlocutor say, "Our call 'Bring me a slab!' cannot mean the same as our 'Slab!' because the second is elliptical for the other"'.) It is but a small step from regarding Wittgenstein as engaged in an explanatory or theoretical project to regarding him as arguing for the view that the builders' call means the same as our like-sounding call, and it is hardly to be wondered that Ring fails to notice, at least to mention, that the discussion focuses on sentences that are short for other sentences. Had he not started out as he did, he would in all likelihood have seen that Wittgenstein is concerned with 'elliptical' sentences understood as missing words and only refers briefly (in the second sentence) to the 'meaning [*Bedeuten*]' of the word 'slab'. In fact he is most naturally read as bracketing, at least temporarily, the question of what the builders' call means.

Having examined the first section of Ring's discussion, I turn now to the middle and longest section, the subject of which is the balance of §19(b):

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 thingwhy 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!"?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?

Not unexpectedly given how Ring interprets the opening sentences of the paragraph, he interprets these nine sentences as bearing on the question: 'What is the proper explanation of the fact that the expression "Slab!" is elliptical for, and really means, "Bring me a slab!"?' (p. 20). In his view this is 'the central problem to be investigated' and '[t]he true core of §19(b) concerns [this] issue', i.e. 'How should we fill in the blank in the explanatory frame, "'Slab!' is shorthand for 'Bring me a slab!' because "?'[[12]](#footnote-12) Here too, I believe, Ring's map of the territory is distorted by his preconceptions regarding Wittgenstein's aims.

Ring reads the first two sentences of the passage as introducing the 'major issue' of 'how to best account for the ellipticality of "Slab!"' (p. 20). Given his discussion of the first five sentences of the paragraph, he thinks Wittgenstein is most naturally interpreted as imagining his interlocutor responding to his question about the possibility of regarding 'Bring me a slab' as long for 'Slab!' with the words: 'Because if you shout "Slab!" you really mean: "Bring me a slab"'. In particular he takes Wittgenstein to be saying how the interlocutor would explain ellipticality. This is debatable if only because, as Ring himself acknowledges, Wittgenstein's 'words may make it look otherwise'. But the interpretation also suffers from the more serious shortcoming that Wittgenstein does not refer to the idea that 'one linguistic form really means another linguistic form *because of some fact about the speaker*' (p. 21). In fact he merely asks why the long sentence cannot be regarded as long for the short one (rather than the short one as short for the long one) and imagines someone offering an argument against him, the substance of which is that the two utterances mean different things. Nor, I might add, is it likely that Wittgenstein would have explored the idea that 'Slab!', being 'a *dependent* form of words', means something different from 'Bring me a slab' (p. 20). He would have considered the claim that 'a *dependent* form of words' cannot mean the same thing as the sentence it depends on as too obviously false for serious discussion (evidently, '4 pm' means the same as '4 o'clock in the afternoon').

Similarly it is difficult to accept Ring's view that what is at stake in the middle five sentences of the passage is the idea that the meaning of the shout can be explained by referring to 'a "fact" about *the inner life* of the speaker, specifically about his thoughts' and correlatively that ellipticality is properly accounted for in terms of 'what is going on in the mind of a language-user' (p. 21). Wittgenstein does not refer or allude to the thoughts and feelings of speakers, still less does he 'initiat[e] an inquiry into the nature of an intention in speaking' and attempt 'a criticism' of 'the thesis' that 'a speaker's intentions are basic to the explanation of an expression's meaning' (p. 24). If this were so, it would be true, as Ring contends, that the 'lines of criticism' implied in Wittgenstein's questions 'vary widely in effectiveness and even the best of them is not sufficiently developed' (p. 26). One would have to conclude that 'the objections [Wittgenstein] levels seem irrelevant to the thesis, seem to miss the mark completely' (p. 24). And it is hard too to agree with Ring that the discussion of §19(b) – coupled with that of §20(a) – is 'quite decisive against the explanation that "Slab!" is elliptical because it omits something we think when we say it' (p. 22).

Ring's interpretation of the last two sentences of the section – those about wanting – is, perhaps, less strained. In his view the penultimate sentence contains 'a final and powerful appeal in defence of [the] thesis that one who says "Slab!" really means "Bring me a slab!"' while the final sentence falls prey to the objection that it is 'not at all adequate to the power of the appeal to wants in explaining the elliptical nature of "Slab!"' (p. 27). Neither point, however, is easily swallowed. Wittgenstein does not challenge the idea that 'the only words that strictly express what [the] speaker wants are "Bring me a slab!"', he simply writes: 'But when I call "Slab!", then what I want is, *that he should bring me a slab*!' And his final comment – 'Certainly, but does "wanting this" consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter?' – is reasonable enough as a response to the objection just mentioned. In any event it is far from evident that Wittgenstein would have done better to argue that what 'makes the phrase "Bring me a slab!" basic' is 'the primacy of the phrase "Bring me a slab!" which enables us to describe the want in only the longer form'. Nor, I would add, does Wittgenstein conflate 'the idea that the proper explanation of the ellipticality of "Slab!" is that the linguistic form omits something a speaker thinks when he says it' with the 'thesis' that 'the proper account of why "Slab!" is elliptical is that a speaker means the longer form in saying in the shorter' (p. 25). He does not at any point 'slid[e] back into his aim of attacking the idea that intending is a matter of having certain thoughts' (p. 27).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Nor are we forced to embrace Ring's interpretation of the material for want of anything better. Wittgenstein can be read, as he presumably intended, as continuing the debate of the first part of the paragraph. It is unnecessary to dig below the surface to see that he notes that 'Bring me a slab' may be viewed as a '*lengthening*' in response to the objection advanced in the fifth sentence of the paragraph about 'Slab!' being 'only a shortened form'. And it is likewise unnecessary to attribute to him something not in the text to appreciate that he next imagines someone rejecting this response on the grounds that whoever shouts out 'Slab!' really means 'Bring me a slab' and goes on to respond in turn by pressing those who think it philosophically significant that whoever says 'Slab!' really means 'Bring me a slab' to clarify what they have in mind. He is asking, albeit not in so many words, how someone who utters an elliptical sentence manages to mean its nonelliptical counterpart. The purpose of his series of questions is to get us to see that in the absence of an account of what it is to '*mean that*' there is nothing to be gleaned from the fact that I can say 'Slab!' and mean – even 'really mean' – 'Bring me a slab'.[[14]](#footnote-14) Moreover there is no need to go beyond the text to understand the final sentence of the exchange. Wittgenstein rounds off the discussion, not too surprisingly, by raising and responding to yet another objection. He imagines it being interjected that people who shout out 'Slab!' want a slab to be fetched, agrees that they do (he says: 'Certainly'), and concludes with a question of his own: '[D]oes "wanting this [that a slab be fetched]" consist in thinking in some form or other [*in irgend einer Form*] a different sentence'.[[15]](#footnote-15)

To explain why Ring's interpretation falls short of doing justice to Wittgenstein's words and what prevented him from even mentioning the straightforward interpretation I favour, one must again, I fancy, notice how he approaches the text. Given his initial assumption about the nature of the material (and how he interprets the first half of the paragraph), he could hardly avoid regarding Wittgenstein as engaged in the theoretical project of explaining the ellipticality of 'Slab!' And having decided that Wittgenstein is concerned with the thesis that '"Slab!" is parasitic upon "Bring me a slab!" *for having the meaning it does*', he would have felt it goes without saying that Wittgenstein is 'commenc[ing] an examination of the nature of that dependency by forcing the interlocutor to explain why we call it ["Slab!"] a shortened form of words' (p. 20). He would not have thought he needed to explore the possibility that Wittgenstein is doing what I suggested he was doing – detailing one way the discussion of the first part of §19(b) and earlier paragraphs might develop. In his eyes, it would have seemed to be of no great consequence that Wittgenstein confines himself to asking why 'Bring me a slab' cannot be regarded as long for 'Slab!' and envisaging it being protested that it cannot since people who call out 'Slab!' really mean 'Bring me a slab'.

Only someone with preconceptions of the sort that Ring brings to the text would, I venture to suggest, have believed his interpretation is 'given initial legitimacy by Wittgenstein's own formulation of the view' (p. 23). Ring is right that '[w]hat is translated "mean" [in "Because if you shout 'Slab!' you really mean: 'Bring me a slab'] is *meinen* – to mean, intend' and right too that Wittgenstein says: '[I]f they [i.e. the two sentences] mean [*bedeuten*] the same thing – why should I not say: "When he says 'Slab!' he means [*meint*] 'Slab!'"?' This is in and of itself, however, is no reason to conclude that 'in §19(b) and §20(a) Wittgenstein [is] attempting to criticise the view that linguistic meaning must be accounted for in terms of speaker's intentions'. '[T]he most natural reading' does not 'rel[y] upon the notion of a speaker's intentions in saying "Slab!"', and it is not at all 'perfectly straightforward to understand the interlocutor to be holding that "Slab!" really means "Bring me a slab!" because a speaker *really* *intends* "Bring me a slab!" when he or she says "Slab!"' Wittgenstein is far more naturally read as following the usual practice in German of using '*meinen*' when speaking of persons (and using '*bedeuten*' when speaking of sentences). As far as I can see, there is no good reason to think that 'the intended criticism of the idea that a philosophical account of *bedeuten* [meaning] is to be couched in terms of *meinen* is badly handled' (p. 25).

Once again, then, I consider Ring ill-served by his initial assumptions about the nature of Wittgenstein's project. If Wittgenstein were addressing the question of what should be inserted in the blank in an 'explanation frame', he could be criticised and §19(b) would indeed end on a 'disappointing note' (p. 27). Taking the text on its merits (and setting aside Ring's preconceptions), however, we see that Wittgenstein does not purport to resolve a philosophical debate, let alone claim to establish a 'thesis' about elliptical sentences. Understood as a discussion between Wittgenstein and a philosopher (or philosophers) of a more theoretical bent, the material is far from disappointing. Just the opposite, it serves as an object lesson in how Wittgenstein believed philosophy should be done. In §19(b) Wittgenstein is discouraging philosophers from theorising, not advancing a theory of his own.[[16]](#footnote-16) The dialectical character of his remarks is not incidental to what he is trying to achieve, and one has to ride roughshod over his words to have him offering an explanation of the ellipticality of elliptical sentences. The reason for the 'lack of argumentative power in these sections' is that Wittgenstein does not advance an argument, only calls for clarification. It is not for nothing that he ends the section with a long dash, one that Ring, perhaps inadvertently, omits when he quotes the last two sentences of §19(b) (p. 27).

It remains to consider the final section of Ring's paper, the bulk of which is devoted to §20(b):

The sentence is 'elliptical', not because it leaves out something that we think when we utter it, but because it is shortenedin 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?*)

Ring reads this paragraph in line with his interpretation of §19(b) as containing '[Wittgenstein's] own explanation of the ellipticality of "Slab!"' (p. 28). What Wittgenstein is doing, he argues, is stating what should go in 'the blank in the explanatory frame "'Slab!' is shorthand for 'Bring me a slab' because "'.

This interpretation is better rooted in the text than Ring's interpretation of §19(b). Wittgenstein expresses himself in a way that suggests that his aims are explanatory and he believes the ellipticality of elliptical sentences can be accounted for in terms of 'features of our language', notably 'the grammar of concepts' (p. 29). One can see why Ring takes Wittgenstein to be endorsing in the first sentence the idea that 'Slab!' is elliptical because it is 'our practice ... to treat "Bring me a slab!" as an ideal form, a paradigm' and 'Slab!' as 'deviant' (p. 28), takes him to be declaring in the fourth sentence that 'sameness in meaning' is a matter of 'sameness of use' (p. 30) and takes him to be reinforcing in his final parenthetical remark the point that meaning is a matter of practice by drawing attention to the fact that the 'form of expression [in Russian] is shortened ... only in comparison with paradigms of *our* grammar' (p. 31). Nevertheless, it is difficult to rest content with Ring's interpretation. On closer examination, it turns out that Wittgenstein leaves no theoretical hostages to fortune.

There is nothing in the paragraph about a speaker's meaning being properly explained in terms of 'linguistic practice' rather than in terms of 'a mental object' or 'a disposition' and precious little to suggest Wittgenstein's answer to the objection in the second sentence 'should be understood – and ... was *intended* by Wittgenstein to be understood – as a *model* for the type of answer that he will give when investigating psychological concepts such as pain, understanding, or belief' (p. 29). All there is is an observation about 'Slab!' being 'elliptical' because it is shortened in comparison with a paradigm sentence ('Bring me a slab', for instance).[[17]](#footnote-17) Nor does Wittgenstein commit himself to the proposition that sentences 'mean the same because they have the same use' (p. 30). He merely poses a question: '[D]oesn't the fact that sentences have the same sense consist in their having the same *use*?' It is no part of his argument that '"Bring me a slab!" and "Slab!" mean the same because they have precisely the same use' (he would not have needed to be told that the former can be used as an example of a four-word sentence, the latter as an example of a one-word sentence). Nor finally is it likely that Wittgenstein believed he could refute the idea that sentences have senses associated with them by noting that there is no copula in Russian (present tense) sentences, never mind chosen to bury his refutation within parentheses at the end of a section.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Actually the remarks of §20(b) are not difficult to fathom. Read as I am suggesting they have to be read – as exploratory and critical – they fall into place. One sees that Wittgenstein is taking up the idea that 'Slab!' and 'Bring me a slab' have 'the same sense [*den gleichen Sinn*]' and, as in §19(b), he refrains from advancing a philosophical view, positive or negative. He first reiterates that 'Slab!' counts as 'elliptical' because it is short in comparison with a paradigm of 'our grammar' and envisions someone putting it to him that since he allows that 'Slab!' and 'Bring me a slab' have the same sense, he must agree there is a sense that they share, one that should be verbally expressible.[[19]](#footnote-19) Next, in response, he asks whether saying this – that 'Slab!' and 'Bring me a slab' have the same sense – adds anything to saying they have the same use. Then finally, to round things off, he poses yet another question: Do Russians who say 'stone red [камень красный]' feel something is missing from the sense and make up the deficiency by introducing the copula 'in *thought'*? In brief, he notes a commonplace, rehearses an objection and raises some questions. And once again – leaving aside the parenthetical remark – he concludes the section with a long dash, also omitted in Ring's quotation of the passage (p. 30).

The reason that Ring forces the issue and interprets Wittgenstein against the grain would seem to be that, here too, he starts out assuming that §20(b) is meant to contribute positively to philosophy. Had he not presumed there is a philosophical view concealed in the text, it is unlikely he would have regarded Wittgenstein as advancing a philosophical explanation about the ellipticality of 'Slab!', one that refers to what we would say 'in the normal course of our linguistic practice' (p. 31). Nobody not already convinced that Wittgenstein intends to advance a thesis or explanation would take him to be expressing 'his typical view ... that such practices of explanation *constitute* what it is to be a paradigm' and to be asserting: 'That is our practice, that is what we do, and as such it is the end point of the (philosophical) explanation'. One has to bring to the text biases of the sort Ring brings to it to have Wittgenstein referring to our 'practices of explanation' when he speaks of 'a particular paradigm of our grammar' and to read him as insisting 'strenuously and hastily that use only, and not explanatory patterns, counts in deciding whether two expressions mean the same'.

So I regard Ring as going to enormous and unnecessary lengths when interpreting §19(b) and §20(b) to preserve his initial conception of Wittgenstein's aim. But while very high, the price he is willing to pay in the case of these two paragraphs pales in comparison with the price he pays in the case of §20(a). He argues that this paragraph, which seems as important as it is long, 'could have been omitted from the *Investigations* with at most modest intellectual loss' (p. 32), indeed holds that 'there is nothing of substance gained by Wittgenstein and perhaps some losses incurred by the insertion of the weak inquiry in §20(a) into the *Investigations*' (p. 33). Once he had concluded that §19(b) is concerned with speaker's meaning, he could not but interpret Wittgenstein as carrying over '[t]he topic ... of intending, meaning, *meinen*' and treat his 'criticism of the general idea of meaning', i.e. the idea of meaning as a matter of thinking or intending, as 'scattered over §19(b) and §20(a)' (p. 22).[[20]](#footnote-20) He is even obliged to regard Wittgenstein's remarks about 'meaning a certain number of words when one speaks' as 'the context in which to develop an account of speaker's meaning' (p. 32).

Were Ring not persuaded beforehand that Wittgenstein is concerned with the question of how to 'fill in the blank in the explanatory frame, "'Slab!' is shorthand for 'Bring me a slab!' because "', he would doubtless have noticed that Wittgenstein had good reason to scrutinise the possibility of a person meaning 'Bring me a slab' as '*one* long word corresponding to the single word "Slab!"' (§20(a), first sentence). He would have seen that Wittgenstein is turning the spotlight from the fact that a person may mean 'Bring me a slab' when he or she shouts out 'Slab!' on to the fact that the longer sentence may be taken holophrastically as 'Bring-me-slab'. In addition, had Ring not allowed his initial assumptions about the text to guide his interpretation, he would not, I imagine, have taken seriously the suggestion that Wittgenstein is focusing on the arcane topic of 'how many words we *mean* when we speak', to say nothing of the idea that we may mean 'Four words' or 'One word' when we utter 'Bring me a slab'.[[21]](#footnote-21) He would have read Wittgenstein more straightforwardly and charitably as submitting another phenomenon that may be thought to be philosophically important to critical examination, specifically the fact that a sentence normally held to comprise a number of words may be taken to comprise just one word.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The main point I have been labouring to make is that viewing the remarks of §§19(b)-20 as explanatory or theoretical is a prescription for failure. Reading them this way forces even a sophisticated reader like Ring to skate over what Wittgenstein actually says and to impose an interpretation on the text rather than elicit one from it. While the 'detailed map' Ring provides may accord well with his initial convictions, it does not correspond to the territory itself. In retrospect one sees that he was destined to misinterpret the material. Since he makes no allowance for the possibility that Wittgenstein is concerned with the muddled ways of thinking we are apt to fall into when grappling with philosophical problems, he cannot but attribute to Wittgenstein a view that Wittgenstein had no intention of defending. To borrow a couple of phrases from later in the *Investigations*, one could say Ring veers off course because he fails to see that Wittgenstein is out to destroy 'houses of cards' (§118) and to uncover 'one or other piece of plain nonsense' (§119). Contrary to Ring, Wittgenstein's remarks can be taken as they stand, and nothing needs to be read into the text to clarify 'what he is up to'. In §§19(b)-20 Wittgenstein does what he is reported as having attempted in his lectures. He 'work[s] 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'.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In taking issue with Ring's interpretation I have been stressing that of §§19(b)-20 belong to an on-going (and incomplete) investigation. The dialectical character of the sections is integral to what Wittgenstein is attempting to get over, and to obtain a 'thorough philosophical commentary' each contribution has to be considered in order (and the temptation to dodge from one part of the text to another with an eye to piecing together a view that Wittgenstein can be regarded as defending has to be resisted). What he says cannot be encapsulated in the form of a single argument with premises and a conclusion, and it is counterproductive to try to summarise his discussion in the form of a thesis (or series of theses).[[24]](#footnote-24) While he can be seen as hoping to 'achiev[e] a perspicuous presentation' (p. 13), he does not purport to give 'his own account of in what the ellipticality of "Slab!" consists' (p. 30). In §§19(b)-20, he provides what he refers to in the Preface of the *Investigations* as 'sketches of landscapes ... made in the course of ... long and involved journeyings' and 'the very nature of the investigation', as he also says there, 'compels [him] to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction' (p. ix).

It is an interesting question why Ring allowed his thinking about §§19(b)-20 to be dictated by his preconceptions to the degree that he did and why he was wholly unfazed by the fact that he ends up reading Wittgenstein as advancing obscure arguments for dubious conclusions. My guess is that he went so far down the path on which he set out (and tailored his interpretation to fit) because he was expecting to find in Wittgenstein demonstration, not merely criticism. Like most philosophers, Ring seems take it for granted that any philosophical discussion worth its salt establishes, defends or recommends an interesting point of view rather than aims to undermine our confidence in our untutored convictions. He seems to have assumed that a major philosopher like Wittgenstein has to have a thesis and to have forgotten that Wittgenstein says: 'If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them' (§128). Far be it for me to suggest that Ring is blinded by what Wittgenstein diagnoses as our 'craving for generality' and 'contemptuous attitude towards the particular case'.[[25]](#footnote-25) But I do not see how else to explain his promotion of an interpretation so at variance with Wittgenstein's actual words.

*Appendix: The antecedents of §§19(b)-20 in the* Brown Book

Ring compares the remarks of §§19(b)-20 with the remarks in the *Brown Book* from which they derive and suggests that they were 'interpolated into the main text' (p. 12). As he sees it, '[w]here in his texts to place the discussion was a continuing problem for Wittgenstein' and he was never able to 'find a natural home for it'. Wittgenstein would, he thinks, have been better advised to have used '[t]he *Brown Book* strategy for getting the material into the text', it being 'less misleading than the solution adopted in the *Investigations*' (pp. 18-19). Moreover noting that in the later work Wittgenstein is not 'criticizing an aspect of the Augustinian picture which he himself earlier accepted', Ring concludes that 'Wittgenstein's fundamental concern' in the *Investigations* differs from his concern in the *Brown Book* (p. 14). (He writes: '[Wittgenstein's] response to the question about the status of "Slab!" ... is given quickly [in §19(b)] and the machinery used in the *Brown Book* is not even presented'.) And to round off the discussion, he claims that reflection on the differences between the two discussions reveals that Wittgenstein is concerned in §§19(b)-20 with a different question from the one he begins with and it is necessary to look elsewhere for the subject of the material.

What has already been said indicates that matters are much less clear than Ring implies, and I shall limit myself to making two additional comments. First I would emphasise that it is hardly credible that Wittgenstein was never able to resolve the problem of where to place the material. No doubt its position in the *Brown Book* as a parenthetical note to what became §1a, §2b and §6b in the *Investigations* disrupts 'the central flow of thought' (p. 12).[[26]](#footnote-26) This by itself, however, hardly establishes Ring's point. As noted, §19(b) is closely connected to §§18-19(a), and there is an equally 'significant connection between [§§19(b)-20] ... and the following §21' (p. 12), the latter section being concerned with the idea that the same words can count as a command, question or report. In addition Wittgenstein seems to have been well pleased with where he relocated the three paragraphs. From about 1936 on, he betrays no second thoughts about where they should go, and it stretches a point to say, as Ring does, that they 'evolved into their final location' (p. 12).[[27]](#footnote-27) Wittgenstein was not one to paper over difficulties, and had he been bothered by where to place the discussion, he would surely have done something about it.

The other comment is that a study of the remarks of the *Brown Book* throws very little light on the discussion in the *Investigations*. As Ring himself notes, Wittgenstein uses the material differently in the two works, and it is unlikely he altered what he had earlier written for the sole purpose of getting it to sit well with §19(a). Whereas in the *Brown Book* Wittgenstein begins with an objection (he writes: 'Note. Objection: The word in [the builders' language] has not the meaning it has in *our* language'), in the various versions of the *Investigations* from 1936/1937 on he begins with a question (he writes: 'But what about this [*Wie ist es aber*]: is the call "Slab!" in [the builders' language] a sentence or a word?').[[28]](#footnote-28) More tellingly still, in the *Investigations* the reference in the *Brown Book* to the meaning of the builders' word 'slab' is suppressed, Wittgenstein's reason being, I take it, that he wanted to begin by considering the idea that 'elliptical sentences' are missing words, a topic not treated in the *Brown Book*.[[29]](#footnote-29) Though there are good reasons to study the *Brown Book*, the belief that it clarifies the discussion of §19(b), §20(a) and §20(b) is not one of them. Rather the reverse, the more material that is brought into play, the more likely these three paragraphs will be overinterpreted. It is hard enough as it is to read §§19(b)-20 correctly, and it makes no sense to make reading them even harder.[[30]](#footnote-30)

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1. Wittgenstein 1953. References by section number are to this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Compare Grayling, p. vi: '[It is not] true that Wittgenstein's writings contain no systematically expressible theories, for indeed they do'. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Baker/Hacker 1983, 46-50; second edition 2004, 71-76; Hallett, 88-92; and von Savigny 1988, 48-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In Arrington 1991, 12-34. Page references are to this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ring deems §20(a) 'unnecessary material' and holds that '[g]iven ... the difficulties of reading §19(b) and §20(b) properly, [it] further obscures the importance of the topics taken up in these sections' (p. 33). I do not know why Ring thinks Wittgenstein was only 'largely pleased' with his treatment of the topic' (p. 12). Wittgenstein expresses no reservations about the material beyond those he expresses in the Preface of the *Investigations* about the book as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I pass over the fact that Wittgenstein does not use the word 'interlocutor [*Gesprächspartner*]' in §19(b)-20 – nor, as far as I am aware, anywhere else. All italicised words occur in the originals. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Compare §49: 'Here we might saythough this easily leads to all kind of philosophical superstitionsthat a sign "R" [standing for a coloured square] ... may be sometimes a word and sometimes a proposition'. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare Wittgenstein 1998), 88: 'Anything the reader can do for himself, leave it to the reader' (dated 25.12.1948). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Originally §18 was coupled with §19(a). See Wittgenstein 2001), 68-69 and 220-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I assume that Wittgenstein puts 'elliptical' in inverted commas – also in §20(b) – because the question of how 'Slab!' should be understood is at issue and he does not want to prejudge the answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Compare Hallett 1977, 89: '[A]fter W[ittgenstein] puts the opening question, every long dash indicates an alternation between him and his *alter ego*'. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Also compare pp. 27-28: '[T]he only significant discussion in §19(b) concerns how to answer correctly the question "What is the proper explanation of the fact that 'Slab!' is shorthand for 'Bring me a slab!'?"' [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is also unfair to criticise Wittgenstein for 'den[ying] only a certain *interpretation* of what wanting something is' (p. 27). This seems to be exactly what he intends. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wittgenstein allows that people who shout 'Slab!' in some sense or other mean 'Bring me a slab' and poses a number of questions: Do they say 'Bring me a slab' to themselves? Is it necessary that 'Slab!' be translated into a different expression to be understood? Why cannot – if 'Slab!' and 'Bring me a slab' mean the same thing – a person who says 'Slab!' mean 'Slab!'? And what, if we can mean 'Bring me a slab', prevents our also meaning 'Slab!'? [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is no argument against Wittgenstein that 'the interlocutor ... has it absolutely right' (p. 27). He does not assume that people have to be conscious of something to want it. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Compare Wittgenstein 1953, §§126-127: 'Philosophy puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything ... The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose'. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There is, in fact, nothing in §20(b) that should cause either the mentalist or the behaviourist any concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I would also question Ring's claim that in §20(b) Wittgenstein 'makes the most explicit identification, up to this point in the *Investigations*, of meaning and use' (p. 30). In §1 meaning is contrasted with use (Wittgenstein writes: 'No such thing [as the meaning of a certain word] was in question [in the situation envisioned], only how [the word] is used'). For more on §1, see Lugg 2000, 8-16. Also see p. 83 for a brief discussion of §43, the section in which Wittgenstein is generally thought to defend a use theory of meaning. For Wittgenstein's views about use, see Wittgenstein 1958, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Like Ring (p. 28), I take '[t]he sentence' at the beginning of §20(b) to be a reference to 'Slab!' [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Incidentally, the sentences Ring quotes from §19(b) and §20(a) on p. 22 read very differently when the ellipses he introduces are restored. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ring admits this is an 'esoteric notion' and 'probably bogus' (p. 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. It is also wrong to admonish Wittgenstein for 'mishandling ... the material' when he speaks in §20(a) of 'Bring me a slab' as four words in contrast to sentences like '*Hand* me a slab' and 'Bring *two* slabs' (p. 33). We are, as he says, 'inclined to say [regarding the the number of words 'Bring me a slab' is usually taken to mean]: we mean [it] as four *words* when we use it ... in contrast with sentences containing the separate words of our command [i.e. 'bring', 'me', 'a' and 'slab'] in other combinations' (§20(a), fourth sentence). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gasking/Jackson 1951, 77-78. In my opinion §§19(b)-20 provide a partial answer to Gasking and Jackson, who wondered – they were writing before the publication of the *Investigations* – 'whether [what Wittgenstein attempts in his lectures] is realizable in the form of a book'. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Compare Malcolm 1963, 96: 'Any attempt to summarise the *Investigations* would be neither successful nor useful. ... What is needed is that [his thoughts] be unfolded and the connections between them traced out'. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Wittgenstein 1958, 18. In Wittgenstein's view philosophers are led 'into complete darkness' because they are 'irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does'. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The problem would have been further exacerbated by Wittgenstein's later introduction of the example of the shopkeeper in §1. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In the printed version of the *Investigations* §§19(b)-20 differ from the corresponding sections in the so-called *Urfassung* of 1936/1937 only in minor ways. In the early draft the material is sandwiched between §16 and §20, sections that reappear in the final draft, slightly revised, as §§18-19(a) and §21. See Wittgenstein 2001, 69-71, 221-223, 459-462, 579-581 and 753-756. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Wittgenstein 1958, 77, and Wittgenstein 2001, 69, 221, 460, 578 and 753. In Rush Rhees's translation of the so-called *Frühfassung* of 1938, a translation corrected by Wittgenstein, '*Wie ist es aber*' is rendered as 'But let's see'. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The possibility of regarding 'Bring me a slab' as a lengthening of 'Slab!' is also new in the *Investigations*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. In writing this paper I have benefited from Paul Forster's comments. Also I have Lynne Cohen to thank for help with the final draft. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)