Postscript to "While Reading Wittgenstein PI §§ 1–19 (1): A Cautionary Tale"

The above has been critized as a misreading of the text, and I am aware it may also be considered witless. What Wittgenstein aimed to do, according to that criticism, was to shock the reader into a state of mind where language could properly be looked at. If I see Wittgenstein as confused or confusing, to speak provocatively, my critics see him as *deliberately* confusing his readers. That criticism is, I believe, partly based on a very influential article by Warren Goldfarb.[1] It is certainly strongly supported by it. I shall first give an example of such an opposite reaction to the early paragraphs, and then turn to Goldfarb's article to assess some of his claims.

In a recent volume from the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen[2], the editors write in their Introduction, in a discussion of Wittgenstein's literary style:

> "[T]he builders' game at the very beginning of the *Investigations* [...] can be viewed as an example of what one could call "Wittgensteinian irony". Here Wittgenstein responds to a general account (Augustine's about language) by offering not a counter-example but a case where it does indeed seem to fit, and this encourages the reader to realize how special that case is." (p. 53)

The example used, and the way it is handled, which the editors seem to endorse, is taken from the contribution by Lars Hertzberg, who himself writes:

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1 "I want you to bring me a slab: Remarks on the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*" (*Synthese* 56 (1983) 265–82)

2 Alois Pichler & Simo Säätelä (eds): *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, Working Papers No 17, Bergen 2005.

"The primary function of examples in philosophy, I want to say, is to confront us with ourselves *wanting to say a certain thing*. It is not so much a matter of deciding what kinds of thing are possible in the world or in language, as of getting clear about what we might be trying to do *in* actually saying this or that. An important form of this is what has sometimes been called "Wittgensteinian irony". This, in a sense, is the opposite of a counter-example. It is the move of responding to a general claim by offering a case where the claim does seem to fit – and then pointing out how special that case is. (The classical instance of this is the builder's game, offered in response to Augustine's account of language learning.)" (p. 84)

I believe Hertzberg's opening remarks are valuable in so far as they point, I believe correctly, to a difference between typical Wittgensteinian examples and those in mainstream analytical philosophy. This difference in conception of examples can partly explain why many mainstream philosophers find Wittgenstein obscure, pompous, or worse. It is difficult to stand aside and reflect in a manner that produces reminders to show what we take for granted, we do not have customs for training us in such self-reflective operations. Another partial explanation lies, I believe, in the way Wittgenstein is sometimes seen as presenting philosophers. See below for the quotation from Henry Staten. It is not pleasant to be ridiculed. But I think Hertzberg overreaches. If we think of famous examples in Wittgenstein, many are given as, or in, language-games. These have a long lineage in Wittgenstein, at least back to 1933. A builder example comes early in *The Brown Book*, notion(s) of language-games in both *The Blue Book* and the *Big Typescript*. These present themselves as parts of plain, serious attempts to understand the workings of language. Where is the detached, superior, and *ironic* Wittgenstein? Note further Hertzberg's own use of "I want to say", thereby distancing himself from actually standing by what he claims. He, while speaking for himself, is extending the use of the phrase, now it all seems a matter of what he wants to say: as if we express only our temptations.

Hertzberg sees Wittgenstein as first putting up a mythical account of what kinds of words we have, using "Augustine" as a cover name for who?, and then as making up an example that fits the account. But does Wittgenstein point out how special this case is, and are we led to realize how special it is? Is Wittgenstein ironical when he lays out his descriptive vocabulary, using it on his 'special cases', and further when he encourages us to see all sorts of matters about ourselves and our language described with that vocabulary? What kind of irony is it Wittgenstein supposedly presents us with? (I take it that, strictly speaking, irony is meaning the

opposite of what one says.) I am not denying that Wittgenstein sometimes writes ironically, one example is *On Certainty* § 481.[3] But he doesn't come across as an ironical or satirical author: he is no Swift, Peacock or Firbank. Here is a nice description of Wittgenstein as an author, giving him all the literary touches:

"First there is Wittgenstein's satirical turn: he will repeatedly present the philosopher as acting out an absurd or comical scene in his most intense movements of philosophical travail. Elsewhere we will see him looking out the corner of his eye at the mental object, or assuming a solemn facial expression in order to give his words a properly philosophical meaning, and so on. This is part of the generally "scenic" character of Wittgenstein's presentation [..] He will continually evoke the *scene* of language as the locus of meaning. It is also part of the persuasion that Wittgenstein is working as teacher of a method: the tone of satire does combat with the language of philosophy in a different way from the arguments and examples. Wittgenstein presents a philosophical scene not only as misguided but as foolish or even ridiculous. This, one might say, is not the force of truth, but of "style" – and one might certainly be annoyed by it if one is not amused or convinced. Let us keep in mind, however, that Wittgenstein's prime exemplar of the philosophic urge for presence is himself. To a certain extent his satire is self-satire. [..] For Wittgenstein is concerned not only or even primarily with philosophical problems, but with the *compulsion* which those problems exercise over us. Hence part of his task is to find words to express the characteristic experiences associated with certain typical philosophical notions; here his language works like lyrical poetry. If he can make his reader feel that this is *just* the experience associated with his own sense of his philosophical problem, then the persuasive force of the satire and of the new method in general is increased. [..] [T]his language is designed to exert pressure on the person thinking as well as on the problems thought about. This lead us then into more specific themes struck in PI 38.

A solitary scene, a philosopher in the immediate presence of an object, at which he stares […] I have called this a satirical characterization. It can also be read as a grim obsessive scene, almost a scene of madness: a man addressing an object, saying "This! This!" over and over. Wittgenstein treats philosophy as a compulsive or obsessive activity, the domination of imagination by certain exemplary scenes of language use which force their impress upon language and

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3   I take the example from Garver *Wittgenstein and approaches to Clarity,* p. 165.

perception and transform them into repetitions of these ideal or paradigmatic scenes. The "baptism" of an object described by Wittgenstein is such an exemplary scene. It is a version of the scene that lies behind Husserl's picture of primordial intuition, here reduced to an absurd nakedness, stripped of dignity – and of philosophical sophistication. As presented by Husserl, the scene is compelling, a scene of truth; as presented by the ironist it warns us away from itself. There is a war of language here, and there is no simple adjudication of competing claims." (Staten (1984), pp. 67-8)

This is entrancing stuff, coming closely after Staten's description, on page 66, of Wittgenstein as a teacher of method.

Now to the article by Goldfarb. The first thing to notice is that he is not very specific in what he takes as the opening sections, but he seems to include § 20, at least. Though one might expect a close reading of the selected sections, Goldfarb in fact does not provide that; with the exception discussed below. When he mentions a specific paragragh, § 5, and applies its 'lesson' on the example in § 2, he speculates freely on how we may take that example in two very different ways, and thereby disregards the comments Wittgenstein has on it. After what Wittgenstein says about the exchange in § 2 "Conceive this as a complete primitive language", it is odd, to say the least, to propose as one legitimate reading, Goldfarb's first, that the exchange is between guys just like you and me, employing four special sounds in those specific settings. But Goldfarb's proposed reading here, the domestication of the example, is *of a type* required in order for him to make convincing the thrust of his overall reading. Goldfarb sees Wittgenstein as *intentionally* bringing us to vacillate between two readings of the builder example in § 2. The second reading is to see them as cavemen, exhibiting their total language. (Goldfarb thus doesn't take seriously what Wittgenstein says in § 6 about the language in § 2 being imaginable as the whole language of a human tribe.) Goldfarb further sees Wittgenstein as intending by this that nothing conclusive should emerge from the example (p. 271). Thus his intent to shock and puzzle us. I am not denying that Wittgenstein's general strategy is shaped by his adoption of what Goldfarb calls "intentional naivité": thus forcing us, mainly through his hectoring of the interlocutor, to see the 'obvious' as very much not so (p. 269). But I am puzzled by what Goldfarb finds he must consider to be evidence for his understanding. One such piece of evidence I have discussed above, namely his first reading of the example in § 2. The second piece I find difficult to accept is his understanding of Wittgenstein's purpose with his first remark after quoting Augustine: Goldfarb sees Wittgenstein

as intending to shock (p. 268). This, Goldfarb indicates, is because his own (Goldfarb's):

> "... primary reaction to the citation from the *Confessions*, read by itself, is to think that what it expresses is obvious – it seems trivial, prosaic, well – nigh unobjectionable. It is just a harmless elaboration of the observations that early in life children learn what things are called, and learn to express their wants and needs verbally. It hardly goes beyond the level of the commonplace; surely no capital can be made of it."

As Goldfarb sees it, Wittgenstein aims to shock through his claim that this quotation contains a definite picture of the essence of language. But Wittgenstein, according to Goldfarb, doesn't *mean* that by his first sentence; he means to bring forth amazement in the reader: "*This* is giving the essence of language? *This* is a philosophical conception of meaning?" As Goldfarb notes, many readers take the first sentence straight as an expression of something Wittgenstein means. One may wonder: if Goldfarb is correct in his reading, was it necessary for Wittgenstein to be so obtuse? Would his point be lost if he expressed himself plainly?

A curious feature of Goldfarb's analysis emerges when we note how he treats Wittgenstein's linkage of the description of language learning he sees in the quotation from Augustine with the example in § 2:

> "Thus the relation of § 2 to Augustine's remarks is far from straightforward; Wittgenstein's note that the builders provide a case for which the description given by Augustine is correct has a double edge. Augustine's remarks can be trivial, if we take the notions that figure in it to be operating locally. The trouble comes when we segment the description, i.e., when we take "naming", "wishing to point", and so on, as if they picked out isolatable phenomena, whose character can be given independently of any surrounding structure."
> (p. 272)

Goldfarb uses his two readings of that example to judge Augustine's words, under reading (1) they are correct, in the light of (2), we get uneasy: "As we've seen, under reading (1) [of the example in § 2, HJ] there is no question about the word-for-word accuracy of Augustine's remarks." (p. 272). Goldfarb has two readings of the example in § 2, and two readings of the Augustine quotation. And the two sets seem to merge in his thinking. Well, they are separate, and the question is, given that they are merged, which two readings determine that the other text also has two readings? It seems that the readings of the example dictates the readings of the quotation; in line with Wittgenstein's linkage. Now, if we assume that I am correct

in claiming that a variant of Goldfarb's reading (2), of the example in § 2, is forced upon us by the surrounding text, then reading (1) disappears as a defensible way of understanding Wittgenstein's text. Does that have consequences for Goldfarb's claims about the text? It seems it must: one of Goldfarb's claims is that the two interpretations of § 2 carry over to give two acceptable ways of reading Augustine's remarks, and that both are important for understanding Wittgenstein. But, it seems, Goldfarb has now lost his textual basis both for reading § 2, and thus Augustine's remarks, in two ways, and that Wittgenstein himself was informed as to reading § 2 according to (1), and used this 'double' focus to clarify how he wants us to understand the Augustine quotation. – I do not think that Goldfarb can conclude directly *from* his own primary reaction to the Augustine quote to a conclusion that Wittgenstein wanted to share such a reaction with us.

Frankly, I do not see the *direct* relevance of the example in § 2 for telling us how to read Augustine properly through the eyes of Wittgenstein. If the talk is of his intention to make us read, or react to, Augustine's remarks in two different ways, then it is Wittgenstein's first sentence that is important here.[4] If our untutored reading of Augustine comes through without that first sentence, and if that sentence is read according to its content, as construing the example as a philosophical opinion, how can we interpret Wittgenstein as intending that the example also be read unphilosophically? Where in the text are the telling clues?

Goldfarb sees the text as a *conversation*; he sees Wittgenstein as engaged with at least one interlocutor. An interlocutor is someone who takes part in a conversation. I am not clear as to whether Goldfarb sees the opening pages themselves marked as a conversation, or whether he concludes they are because he sees PI as a conversational text. And when he discusses whether the interlocutor has a specific agenda[5], Goldfarb asks "what stance does he represent", and "why does Wittgenstein set up the particular oppositions that he does" (p. 266). Now, in a very obvious sense, Wittgenstein engages with some one else in the opening remarks, viz Augustine: Wittgenstein discusses a text by Augustine. But we do not say that Augustine is an interlocutor, the two of them do not have a conversation. It is

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4   "These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language."

5   "Wittgenstein does not ordinarily set up as his opponent one who expresses anything recognizable as a philosophical theory of naming, meaning, mind, or what have you. The interlocutor does not voice developed philosophical positions; he is not a sophisticated Fregean or Tractarian, who puts forward some tenet *p* of his system to which Wittgenstein counters "not *p*"." (p. 266)

usual in 'straight' philosophical texts for the author, in the presentation of his set-tled views, to write out, and answer, objections to and difficulties for those views. Such difficulties may even be of his own making. If such a practice does not create a conversation, it cannot be created by literary flourish. A practice in literary criti-cism is to talk of voices, sometimes as if different voices belong to different people voicing themselves in the text. In fiction, characters are present, but they do not speak for the author. But an author may also 'speak' in different voices: strident, confident, hesitant, hectoring, modest, reticent, etc. This is using different rhetori-cal stances and does not mean we find interlocutors, or any kind of conversation, in the text.

Those who claim the presence of interlocutors in the text owe us a clarifica-tion: is there a difference between an author discussing with himself, raising objec-tions and putting questions to himself over something he, or some one else, wrote and an author presenting a text where we find interlocutors? That is, is there a dif-ference beween an author carrying on a monologue and engaging in a conversa-tion? An author cannot create a conversation in a text without creating different characters or voices. The question then becomes: how do we identify the author with one of the characters, as against the amalgam of them?

As we all know, many young girls did, perhaps still do, keep diaries, and con-fide in their diary, addressing it as "Dear Diary". This is a literary genre, where the stuff poured out is intimate, hopes, doubts, secrets, etc. Written in something that keeps those confidences to itself, a diary does not speak. Do writers of diaries carry on conversations, with interlocutors? Is arguing with oneself a conversation: with partners having different agendas? Are there in such cases more than one self? The author writes for an audience, and may adress the reader, or himself, more or less explicitly (e.g. § 18 opens "Do not be troubled by the fact"), but what the author cannot do is to engage the reader to give the author reactions back. These are all commonplace observations.

Generally, we have many cases of dialogues in philosophy, but Goldfarb obi-ously doesn't see PI as a dialogue. So, does the text present an interlocutor, or per-haps more than one? With their own agenda? Why do we say it contains any? How is an interlocutor identified, what does he say or do? Who is an interlocutor engaging? Is it the author, or a figure given a voice in his thinking? An author may argue with himself, raise objections, point out weaknesses in a position, in his pre-sentation. An author may admit to preferences not fully accounted for, etc. An author may do many things relevant to his presentation of what he means. An author may step back from his running text, make various comments on what is

going on, such comments may take the form of questions, sometimes rhetorically.[6] To claim that PI is a conversation, with an interlocutor having his own agenda, is to claim that Wittgenstein writes an imaginary dialogue that includes a character whose 'philosophy' he, Wittgenstein, aims to undermine. Not only is Wittgenstein undermining a 'philosophical' stance, but one allowed to speak, to test Wittgenstein's objections to it. And, furthermore, to raise objections to Wittgenstein's stated positions. In order for this to be credible we need at least two views identified and held on to. We must be able to cut out Wittgenstein's own position as it were, and that, or those, he questions and replies to. Goldfarb's essay is full of expressions such as "Wittgenstein then points out", "The interlocutor starts by claiming", "Wittgenstein agrees", "Interlocutor says"; at the head of them we find "Wittgenstein examines".

Since PI is not a dialogue, what may encourage readers to believe there is more than one speaker? If we search systematically the first nineteen paragraphs for signs of these, here is a list of things, markers, to look for: questions[7], objections, quotations, comments or replies, and dashes. Another feature is the occurrence of words marking direct address, such as "you". What do we find? In our text. i.e. §§ 1-19(1), nine paragraphs contain none of these, they are: §§ 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 17. What do we find in the others? To summarize the findings: they contain several questions, inside and outside quotes, answers, some themselves questions. None of these indicate the presence of an interlocutor, with one possible exception.

The one section Goldfarb looks closely at is § 19. It is here he registers the presence of an interlocutor. It is unclear to me whether this is because he sees the text as divided using markers such as those listed above, or because he perceives a certain 'tone' in the text, or because of the ideas he finds set out in a particular structure. I am not going to argue against dividing the text between lines attributed to Wittgenstein and an interlocutor; but I assert two things. It is dubious whether an interlocutor occurs earlier in the text (the possibility is § 6). Most of the sections

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6   The rhetorical question. "Why does the Western movie especially have such a hold on our imagination? Chiefly, I think, because it offers a serious orientation to the problem of violence such as can be found almost nowhere else in our culture." (Robert Warshow, *Immediate Experience*, Enlarged Edition, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 121)

7   Question marks do not always mark what question, if any, is asked. Here is a good example, quoted from memory: "Michael, I want to get married", "You want to get married?", "Oh yes, thank you!" (from an episode of *That '70s Show*). Childish, I know.

in Part I do not contain an interlocutor. I say this, in spite of the numerous dashes (see below for that phenomenon) in the text.

Before I look closely at the second part of § 19, the part Goldfarb looks closely at, let me say that the first part sets out possibilities that the second part must be seen as discussing. One is: can a language consist, say, only of orders? (Wittgenstein seems to use exclamation marks to identify orders.) Since *we* use our words for many purposes, one may wonder which, if any, consequences ensue were words to be used for one purpose only. At issue here are the relationships between what one does and means when using language, the content of speech acts, versus the language itself, its words and what not. It is therefore of importance that the discussion of possibilities marks whether a statement is about a word, or sentence, or a speech act effectuated by using that word or sentence. I have marked below four instances where the English text deviates from the German original. In three places the English version scandalously leaves out an exclamation mark, in one case it adds one. Without arguing whether the sense requires any of those alterations, they surely distorts the original.

Goldfarb does not tell us in detail how he divides the text between the sayings of Wittgenstein and those of the interlocutor. Perhaps he, and anyone agreeing with his analysis, considers it obvious. Here is the second part of § 19, partitioned by using all the dashes, except one:

(1) : But what about this: is the call "Slab!" in the example (2) a sentence or a word?

(2) : 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.

(3) : 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.

(4) : But that is surely only a shortened form of the sentence "Bring me a slab!"[8], and there is no such sentence in example (2).

(5) : By why should I not on the contrary have called the sentence "Bring me a slab!" [9] a *lengthening* of the sentence "Slab!"?

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8   The English translation by Anscombe leaves out the exclamation mark in the German original.

9   Ibid.

(6) : Because if you shout "Slab!" you really mean: "Bring me a slab[10]".

(7) : But how do you do this: how do you *mean that* while you *say* "Slab"? [11] 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 the slab", why should you not be able to mean "Slab!"?

(8) : But when I call "Slab!", then what I want is, *that he should bring me a slab*!

(9) : Certainly, but does 'wanting this' consist in thinking in some form or other a different sentence from the one you utter?

This partition uses all the dashes in the text, apart from the one in (7) which must be internal. So the division is maximal. But other divisions can be made by taking other dashes as internal to remarks, so it is not necessary that Goldfarb himself has made the above division.

Let us for the moment *assume* first that this is the division among the speakers, and, second, that they take turns speaking.

Going into greater details, I find no problems in the attribution of lines (6) – (9); as I read Goldfarb, he concurs. (6) and (8) belong to the non-questing, bluff interlocutor, (7) and (9) to the questing, probing Wittgenstein. Following our assumptions, this gives us:

(1) : Wittgenstein
(2) : Interlocutor
(3) : Wittgenstein
(4) : Interlocutor
(5) : Wittgenstein
(6) : Interlocutor
(7) : Wittgenstein
(8) : Interlocutor
(9) : Wittgenstein

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10   Ibid.

11   The English translation by Anscombe has *inserted* an exclamation mark where the German origi-
      nal has none.

Does Goldfarb operate with the two assumptions given above, or does he give a different structure to (1)-(5) ? This reduces to the problem whether Goldfarb read the lines as given thus: W-I-W-I-W. (If he doesn't: he can change the order of speaking, or have fewer than five remarks.)

Goldfarb gives to the interlocutor the remark that the builders' language does not contain the longer sentence [that is, "Bring me a slab!" [12], HJ] (pp. 273, 274). So Goldfarb gives (4) to the interlocutor. It is reasonable to give (5) to Wittgenstein, and I see no evidence to suggest that Goldfarb thinks otherwise. The problem shows when we move up to (3). If we assume that they take turns speaking, then Goldfarb should attribute (3) to Wittgenstein. And this is strengthened by the fact that Goldfarb says that the interlocutor *responds* with the remark in (4). But Goldfarb has already given (3) to the interlocutor: "The things the interlocutor says in these sections have a very commonplace air: our order "Slab!" is elliptical for "Bring me a slab"." (p. 273) I assume (3) is Goldfarb's evidence for that assertion. As to (1) and (2), it is not clear to me how Goldfarb places those two remarks. He says that "The interlocutor starts by claiming that the builders' call is not our command, since our command is elliptical for "Bring me a slab"." (p. 273) I suppose "starts" means giving his first remark of the conversation. The problem is that the remark doesn't easily find a home in any of the numbered remarks.

There is another problem with Goldfarb's attributions. He says: "Wittgenstein agrees that our one-word command is elliptical (as it surely is)". (p. 274) "Agrees" assumes that the Interlocutor has previously said so, as he did if (3) is his. But where does Wittgenstein agree? There is no subsequent candidate remark. The previous remark, (2), is one where the utterer *denies* that the one word command is elliptical for our longer sentence. (We see here, by the way, how hopeless the discussion is with no clear distinction upheld between the word "Slab" and the command (call) "Slab!", and between our so-and-so and the builders' so-and-so.)

Wittgenstein raises, in (7) if we disregard exclamation marks, the possibility of seeing the word "Slab" in (2) as a sentence. Interpreter asserts, in (3), that "Slab!", the call, may be taken as an elliptical sentence, indeed ours. But Wittgenstein denies that the call (command) in (2) is our elliptical sentence. And if Goldfarb's remark refers to the claim that "Slab!" would be elliptical in our language as a command ("our command"), as against what it is in (2), then Wittgenstein in (5) seems to deny that.

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12   I have added the exclamation mark to the English translation.

I am generally puzzled by Goldfarb's attribution, on his own or on the basis of how he understands Wittgenstein's grander scheme, of 'heavy' philosophical opinions to the interlocutor on the slender basis of few, and short, lines. But I cannot here go into that larger topic.

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