Describing Ourselves
Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness

GARRY L. HAGBERG
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For Julia
What is good and evil is essentially the I, not the world. The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious!

Ludwig Wittgenstein
*Notebooks*, 1916

The total speech act in the total speech situation is the *only actual* phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating. Stating, describing, &c., are *just two* names among a very great many others for illocutionary acts; they have no unique position.

J. L. Austin
*How to Do Things with Words*

There is a picture of the mind which has become so ingrained in our philosophical tradition that it is almost impossible to escape its influence even when its worst faults are recognized and repudiated.

Donald Davidson
‘Knowing One’s Own Mind’
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I had wanted for some time to bring together a reconsideration of Wittgenstein’s remarks on consciousness with particular cases of autobiographical writing, and Chapter 1 emerged as my response to John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer’s invitation to write for their edited volume *The Literary Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2004). Parts of my chapter for them, ‘Autobiographical Consciousness: Wittgenstein, Private Experience, and the “Inner Picture”’, enjoyed (as did I, to say the least) the benefit of public presentation, in a visiting speaker series at the University of Erfurt, where Thomas Glaser provided an acute and helpful commentary.

The title of Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost’s edited collection *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003) accorded perfectly with a desire I had to reconsider a frequently misunderstood idiom of philosophical work in connection with autobiographical issues. My piece for them was ‘The Self, Reflected: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and
Acknowledgements

the Autobiographical Situation’, and it provided much of the content of Chapter 2.

Strong encouragement for the work leading to Chapter 3 was provided by Jean-Pierre Cometti, who invited a piece for a special issue of *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (1 (2002), no. 219) entitled *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Mind*. My project for him, also presented in draft form at an unforgettable conference he organized entitled ‘Wittgenstein, Language, and Perception’ at the University of Aix-en-Provence, was published as ‘The Self, Speaking: Wittgenstein, Introspective Utterances, and the Arts of Self-Representation’.

Seeing throughout the history of philosophy a number of misconstruals and simplifications—misleading pictures—the mind has made of its own workings, and seeing the force of Wittgenstein’s undercuttings of those pictures, I wanted to reexamine some carefully selected remarks in connection with a particular dualistic picture of autobiographical self-investigation. Peter Lewis was kind enough to ask for a contribution to his collection *Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) and flexible enough quickly to accept and encourage my idea for a paper; this resulted in ‘The Self, Thinking: Wittgenstein, Augustine, and the Autobiographical Situation’ and has become the first two sections of Chapter 4. It was presented as the keynote address at the annual Building Bridges Conference (this year the bridge connected philosophy and literary studies) at the University of Illinois at Carbondale, where I was graciously invited by Christopher Nelson; another version was presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Aesthetics in Quebec City at the invitation of Bela Szabados and Alex Rueger. I must note that I am particularly indebted to Bela for his long-standing encouragement of (not only) this project and for his foundational article in the field on Wittgenstein and autobiography, as well as for his subsequent invitation to give another part of this book at a later CSA meeting in an extended session on Wittgenstein, this time in Halifax. The third section of Chapter 4, ‘Wittgenstein Underground’, was published as part of the symposium ‘Dostoevsky Recontextualized’, in *Philosophy and Literature*, 28/2 (October 2004). I remain indebted to Denis Dutton for his sustained encouragement of these symposia (and more generally for our stimulating and highly enjoyable ongoing co-editorship of that journal). This piece was presented in early-draft form to the Philosophy Research Seminar at Bard; I was on that occasion—as I so frequently am—grateful to and heartened by my students for their unstopping blend of stimulation, intellectual
engagement, encouragement, and steadfast refusal to assume very nearly anything as given.

When Michael Krausz told me he was editing a collection on the problem of single versus multiple interpretations and that he wanted an essay from me on the significance of Wittgenstein’s philosophical writings for this project, I saw at a glance that singular versus multiple \textit{self}-interpretation might be my subject, an idea he immediately fastened upon with his characteristic acuity and encouraging warmth. The result, providing here the basis of Chapter 5, was ‘Wittgenstein and the Question of True Self-Interpretation’ in his collection \textit{Is There a Single Right Interpretation?} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). Parts of this chapter were delivered, also at his invitation, at a session of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium at Bryn Mawr College—another most helpful and thoroughly enjoyable occasion.

Another part of that originally drafted material concerned the perception of persons as investigated with irreducible complexity by Wittgenstein, especially where the question of the distinctive nature of person-perception links to issues of biographical and autobiographical understanding. So in receiving an invitation from Richard Raatzsch to write for a special issue of \textit{Wittgenstein-Studien} (5 (2002)) entitled \textit{Goethe and Wittgenstein: Seeing the World's Unity in its Variety} that he was co-editing with Bettina Kremberg and to present a paper at a thoroughly delightful conference on the subject at the University of Leipzig, I was given a chance to develop that material further. And then Catherine Osborne invited me to present still another version at her engrossing conference ‘Wittgenstein, Literature, and Other Minds’ at the University of East Anglia. ‘The Mind Shown: Wittgenstein, Goethe, and the Question of Person-Perception’ became the foundation for the first two sections of Chapter 6.

Toward the end of the preceding piece I could see that I would need to extend the discussion of person-perception—particularly where this turns recursively to self-perception—into aspect-perception and ‘seeing-as’. It was thus my continued good fortune when William Day and Victor Krebs asked shortly thereafter if I might write for their collection \textit{Seeing Wittgenstein Anew} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). I found this invitation especially attractive as it afforded the possibility of reviving and integrating some work on §xi of part II of \textit{Philosophical Investigations} that I had done many years earlier while in residence at St John’s College, Oxford; I thus finally have an opportunity
to thank them (if from across a considerable span of time), and particularly Dr P. M. S. Hacker, for having made that productive and stimulating time possible. I also benefited much from some characteristically insightful and helpful advice from Colin Lyas some years back on this topic. The long-delayed precipitate was published as ‘In a New Light: Wittgenstein, Aspect Perception, and Retrospective Change in Self-Understanding’. As it was nearing completion, Jerrold Levinson invited me to give a paper to the University of Maryland’s visiting speaker series. Presentation once again aided and abetted (as did Jerry), and the end point of this chain of events is, at last, the final section of Chapter 6.

I was also becoming increasingly aware that any study of this kind would need to consider Wittgenstein’s too-little-discussed remarks on memory and the significance of these remarks for the clarification of issues pertaining to first-person narratives when David Rudrum invited me to write for his collection _Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates_ (London: Palgrave, 2005). The project, as it unfolded, became ‘Autobiographical Memory: Wittgenstein, Davidson, and the “Descent into Ourselves”’, and now constitutes the first two sections of Chapter 8. David also kindly invited me to take part in a conference entitled ‘Wittgenstein and Literature’ that he organized at the University of London’s School of Advanced Study, where some of the governing ideas for this book were aired.

Much of the content of the last section of Chapter 7 was part of another symposium in _Philosophy and Literature_ (27/1 (April 2003)), entitled _Wittgenstein and Literary Aesthetics_. It appeared there as ‘On Philosophy as Therapy: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Autobiographical Writing’, and versions of it were presented in San Francisco as part of a session, ‘Wittgenstein and the Arts’, at an annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, and at the Seventh Annual Comparative Literature Conference at the University of South Carolina, which was devoted to the work of Stanley Cavell.

Sections of this study were also given at a number of other philosophical conferences, and I want to thank, if too briefly, the organizers and the participants of these for their generosity in making it possible to give various pieces of this book hearings in their formative stages. David Goldblatt extended a generous invitation to speak in the visiting philosopher series at Denison University, Ohio, where animated discussion with him and others proved most helpful. John MacKinnon invited me to give part of this book at a spirited conference entitled ‘The Complementarity of Human Perspectives’ at the Institute of Humane
Acknowledgements

Studies at St Mary’s University in Halifax; on that occasion Richard Keshen provided an insightful and stimulating commentary. Arthur Lothstein extended a kind invitation to speak in the visiting philosopher series at the C. W. Post Center of Long Island University, resulting in a very helpful day and evening of discussion on parts of this book. Another section was presented to the Eastern Division meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics in Philadelphia; what I owe my friends and colleagues in the ASA would at this point be impossible to measure. I also presented some of these pages to national meetings of the ASA, in Reno in a session on Wittgenstein and Beckett with Gary Kemp, and still others in a session with Lydia Goehr in Bloomington. Other sections of the work-in-progress were helpfully discussed in the context of a plenary lecture delivered to the European College of Liberal Arts in Berlin, in a lecture to Smolny College in the University of St Petersburg, to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Glasgow (where exacting questions from Antony Duff and Simon Blackburn in particular helpfully led to revisions and expansions), in a seminar at Columbia University (on the relations of an earlier book to this then-forming project), at the visiting speaker series at McGill University, to the School of Philosophy of the University of East Anglia, to the visiting speaker series at the University of Sussex, to a similar series at the University of Warwick, and as a keynote address at the annual Mind and Society Conference at the Wittgenstein Archive, Cambridge (where pinpointing questions from Crispin Wright in particular also helpfully prompted some revisions).

It is with distinct pleasure that I thank the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and the Humanities at Cambridge University for granting the visiting research fellowship that made possible an extended return to the idyllic setting of this book’s inception some years earlier and provided the uninterrupted time to bring it to completion; here I particularly thank the Centre’s director at that time, Ludmilla Jordanova, along with Ray Monk and (once again) Michael Krausz, for having done so much to make this happen. I also thank the Centre’s present director, Mary Jacobus, and my co-fellows for much valuable stimulation during that time; I took much away from a number of public presentations of parts of this project there.

As is true of persons, without these events this book would not have had the developmental history it has, and thus would not be the book it is. It has been improved in many ways by all these philosophers, conference organizers, editors, fellow panelists, commentators,
Acknowledgements

Symposiasts, audience members, and late-night bon vivants (these, happily, are not exclusive categories), and I send my heartfelt thanks to them all. Every book—or so I imagine—is, also like persons, in a manner of speaking a palimpsest, and this one bears every kind of mark, ranging from direct, strong, plainly evident influences to the slightest under-layered traces of the encounters and experiences recounted above. And despite the passage of many years the sense of indebtedness to earlier teachers and advisers has not dimmed; it would thus, for me, be gratifying if traces (or more) from those earlier years were discernible in this book. Out of a longer list, I must mention, in connection with this project and its philosophical aspirations, Henry Alexander, Renford Bambrough, Frank Ebersole, and, going back to my earliest formative influences, John Wisdom. In more recent years I have invariably learned much from (if not invariably agreed with) the distinctive philosophico-critical writings of (and from some helpful and encouraging conversations in various contexts with) Stanley Cavell, Arthur Danto, Richard Eldridge, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Wollheim (among others far too numerous to mention here, alas—although many do appear in the text or footnotes). The one solitary part of this entire undertaking is this: its remaining shortcomings, at all layers, are my doing alone.

Lionel Trilling entitled a collection of his A Gathering of Fugitives, which was his way of naming a book that brought together a number of independent pieces each written for a particular separate occasion or collection. Although this book does bring together the pieces as indicated in the foregoing, it is not that kind of affair. It is, rather, something of a reunion of accomplices, and I owe it to Peter Momtchiloff and Oxford University Press, to the Press’s two extremely helpful anonymous readers (one later emerging from the darkness as none other than John Gibson, whom I particularly thank again for now having done even more for this project), and to Kate Walker and Laurien Berkeley (to whom I am especially indebted for discerning and sensitive copy-editing) that this reunion has been a particularly enjoyable, philosophically helpful, and productive one. Peter, John, and the still-anonymous reader will see herein just how much I owe to their acumen, good advice, and judgment.

Bard College is an institution to which I am greatly indebted, and it continues to be a remarkable place for work in aesthetics (in fact increasingly so). It is with a particularly deep gratitude that I want to thank James H. Ottaway, Jr., and Leon Botstein for creating a new endowed
chair in philosophy and aesthetics; the academic world should have more such positions and, indeed, more such visionary creators of them. For years at Bard I have drawn philosophical inspiration and insight from my close friends and colleagues William Griffith and Daniel Berthold, and now, fortunately, from Mary Clayton Coleman also. Carol Brener has once again expertly prepared numerous manuscripts throughout the process, and now Evelyn Krueger and Jeanette McDonald have joined her as well; I remain very grateful to them. As I complete this project I have now spent some very pleasurable and engaging months as a new member of the School of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia; it is an inspiring fact that I am already in a position to thank them sincerely for their stimulation and encouragement.

Lastly, on an even more personal note: My daughter, Eva Hagberg, has been an unfailing source of joy of a kind—the brilliant, sparky, effervescent, kind—that radiates throughout all of life. To Julia Rosenbaum, an art historian—now Julia Rosenbaum Hagberg—in this context (although it is a book on autobiographical or self-revelatory language), I will only say that I now know what it means to say that words fail. This book is for her.

G.L.H.

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and Norwich, England
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Introduction: Confronting the Cartesian Legacy

The voluminous writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein contain some of the most profound reflections of our time on the nature of the human subject and self-understanding—the human condition, philosophically speaking. Yet the significance of his writings for the subject (in both senses) can far too easily remain veiled. One of my aspirations throughout this study has been to help clarify that significance, while at the same time assessing and exploring the multiform implications of those writings for our understanding particularly of autobiographical (and more generally, self-descriptive) writing and thereby of the nature of the self and self-knowledge. Any such attempt to unveil significance of this self-reflexive kind—that is, of a kind that should prove central to reconsidering a nested set of beliefs concerning the self, self-knowledge, and self-understanding that are foundational to moral psychology—requires our going beyond Wittgenstein’s texts into actual autobiographical practices. For this reason this study contains fairly detailed discussions (which I would like to think of as one kind of philosophical criticism) of: philosophers writing as autobiographers (including Augustine and Iris Murdoch); a number of autobiographers whose writings, once seen in this context, are clearly philosophically significant; philosophers whose philosophical writings are themselves intrinsically autobiographically significant (including Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Stanley Cavell, and Donald Davidson); and literary figures whose writings cast distinctive light on the self and its descriptions (including Goethe and Dostoevsky, among others).

In a moment I will say a bit more about what is to follow throughout these chapters, but if I were to enumerate the fundamental aspirations of the undertaking, they would thus include these interlocking attempts:

1. to mine Wittgenstein’s later writings (and then to extend the discussion well beyond those writings but along discernibly Wittgensteinian
lines) for an account of the self of a kind that stands in striking, indeed revolutionary, contrast to the initially intuitively plausible alternatives;

2. to assess the significance of some of Wittgenstein’s later writings on language and mind for our understanding and clarification of particularly self-descriptive or autobiographical language;

3. to turn to autobiographical writing as a valuable and heretofore little-explored resource for the philosophy of literature (taking these writings, themselves the best examples we have of human selves exploring themselves, in the light of issues in the philosophy of language and mind);

4. to reconsider in a new light Wittgenstein’s multifaceted critiques of Cartesianism (on Cartesianism, see below), seeing in (and again, beyond) them a powerful way of clarifying the problems of autobiographical consciousness;

5. to see the self, if not as an inner entity we can explore through dualistically construed introspection, then as it is manifest in action (of both the word and deed types), but in such a way that the eviscerating reduction of behaviorism in both letter (the easier part) and spirit (the harder part) is avoided and where first–third-person asymmetries are acknowledged (if in nontheoretical, irreducible form);

6. most broadly, to take in turn the issues of self-consciousness, mental privacy, first-person expressive speech, reflexive or self-directed thought, retrospective self-understanding, person-perception and the corollary issues of self-perception (itself an interestingly dangerous phrase), self-defining memory, to bring these into (I hope) mutually illuminating contact with each other, and to develop a Wittgenstein-inspired account (I am being very brief here: a better term than ‘account’ might be ‘conceptual clarification’) of each; and

7. to help show, over the book’s course, some small part of the value of interweaving questions of subjectivity and selfhood with both autobiographical and autobiographically significant writings on the one hand and a therapeutic, nonscientific conception of philosophical progress on the other.

I should say at the outset that, consistent with widespread philosophical practice, in this study I use the term ‘Cartesian’ to refer to a cluster of intertwined metaphysically dualistic views in the philosophy of mind.
and language. Their precise articulations will follow chapter by chapter but, briefly and roughly stated, they include the views (a) that the self is most fundamentally a contingently embodied point of consciousness transparently knowable to itself via introspection, (b) that its contents are knowable immediately by contrast to all outward mediated knowledge (and that self-knowledge is thus non-evidential), (c) that first-person thought and experience is invariably private, thus presenting as a brute first fact of human existence an other-minds problem, and (d) that language is the contingent and *ex post facto* externalization of prior, private, pre-linguistic, and mentally internal content. It has in recent years been argued that, as it has been memorably put, Descartes’s Big Mistake occurred in the mid-twentieth-century. That is, anachronistic readings have retroactively converted him into what we now call a Cartesian, when in truth he was no more a Cartesian in that sense than, say, Freud was a Freudian (in the terms of what that has come to mean since his original writings) or even than Marx was a Marxist. So for the purposes of this study, my use of ‘Cartesian’ will refer to that cluster of metaphysically dualistic views, and not necessarily (although I do think occasionally) to the views explicitly endorsed by that historical figure.¹ Of course, the grip, the culture-deep initial intuitive plausibility of those dualistic views, in any case very much pre-dates Descartes as much as they outlive him, so to show that these dualistic views, or some of them, were not *his* explicitly endorsed positions, however historically interesting, is not at all to show that the views and positions contemporary philosophy debates under that heading have therefore evaporated. In this respect Gordon Baker and Katherine Morris, in their book *Descartes’ Dualism*, take a particularly helpful line: to come to see that these views are not ones advanced by Descartes can help to revivify a sense of how strange, alien, or prismatically distorting of human experience these philosophical pictures of selfhood in fact are, i.e. this is itself one way to change radically, therapeutically, our point of view, our way of seeing, these problems. For a helpful and historically informed survey of the broadly Cartesian position, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self.*² On the anticipations of Cartesian views in the writings of others, see Taylor’s opening remark on Descartes: ‘Descartes is in


many ways profoundly Augustinian’ (p. 143), where what is centrally intended is ‘the emphasis on radical reflexivity’ and ‘the importance of the cogito’. The self of the Cogito is, of course, a self necessary for the coherence of the deception that Descartes’s universal doubt posits (for deception to occur there has to be a deceived), and that self is knowable unto itself independent of any other (external) claim. So, while it may not capture all and only Descartes’s explicitly articulated views, the term ‘Cartesian’ still—even with these welcome and salutary concerns regarding anachronism—seems not utterly wide of the mark either. In any case, it is in this study the cluster of views that go by a well-entrenched name that is the focus, not historical attribution.

In the preface to John Updike’s collection of critical writings *Hugging the Shore*,³ he explains his title by suggesting that literary reviews, because they stay close to the texts they are criticizing and do not sail out into the open sea of fictional creation, ‘hug the shore’. Part of the discussion here, in that sense, hugs the shore of Wittgenstein’s texts and then of autobiographical or other philosophical or literary texts in turn, trying in each case to disclose what is particularly helpful in them for the achievement of a perspicuous and comprehensive view of first-person or self-revelatory speech, thought, and expression. But what we see along each of these shorelines is not, as I hope becomes increasingly clear as this study progresses, transparently evident upon simply looking at it. On the contrary, what we are enabled to see along one of the two shores, that is, either in Wittgenstein’s philosophy on the one side or in autobiographical or literary texts on the other, is powerfully shaped by what we have just seen—or more accurately (for reasons that emerge as the book advances) by what we have said about what we have just seen—on the other. Then, of course, other parts of the book sail into open waters.

In Chapter 1, I initiate a philosophical project central to the entire book and that continues, with increasing specificity, throughout it: unearthing a number of powerful but nevertheless often undetected influences on our thinking of conceptual pictures, or simplifying theoretical templates, in particular the fundamental pictures of selfhood that encourage correlated models of self-knowledge and especially of autobiographical self-investigations. Freedom from such pictures promotes conceptual clarity, which itself is a result of an acceptance of, or an openness to, complexity and particularity. The chapter begins with a reconsideration of the Schopenhauerian elements in Wittgenstein’s

early thinking about the self, followed by a close consideration of some of the remarks showing his struggle against, and ultimate freedom from, those early, theoretically neat, simplifying templates. Wittgenstein came to see what he called ‘the inner picture’ as a source of a great deal of philosophical difficulty and confusion, and in the second section of this chapter I look at his own analysis of the cognitive forces, or pressures of thought, that buttress the traditional Cartesian conception of selfhood. In the third section of this first chapter I turn to cases of autobiographical writing, showing something of the gulf that separates our picture-driven ways of theoretically construing autobiographical self-investigation from actual autobiographical practices. And this permits a glimpse of the great difference between real autobiographical privacy and the philosophical misconstruals of first-person privacy.

The second chapter begins with a reconsideration of the very idea of observing consciousness and the distinctive picture of introspection that this idea can easily enforce. ‘Introspecting’ is a word that carries the concept, indeed the word, of ‘inspecting’ within it, and the act of inspecting requires an object of inspection. With that conceptual linkage we are all too quickly bound up with notions of the self as viewer of inward objects, and consequentially with introspective language being descriptive (carrying, as we shall see, distinctively philosophical implications) language. But a close look at Wittgenstein’s remarks pertaining to this subject breaks this linguistically induced spell, and the second section of this chapter turns to the picture of metaphysical isolation engendered by this line of thinking, along with the correlated conception of autobiographical truth as verified correspondence between inner object and outward description. The third section of this chapter turns to some contributions Stanley Cavell has made to our understanding of the pressures that would lead us, seemingly inexorably but only falsely so, into this line of thinking. Here, telling asymmetries between the first- and third-person cases emerge, along with a deployment of a distinction between the metaphysical voice and its ordinary counterpart of the kind we will have encountered in Chapter 1 in connection with autobiographical privacy. And here the fundamental idea of self-narrative comes to the fore, an idea that will be examined in ever-closer detail throughout subsequent chapters.

A conceptual undertow can swiftly and powerfully drag us back into a way of thinking of the self and its description deeply aligned with Cartesian or dualistic metaphysics, and it can do this in ways that are not entirely obvious on the surface. One less obvious way
of staying within the template of dualism has been to argue directly against the inner half of the inner–outer picture. Behaviorism is, as we see in the first section of Chapter 3, such a position, and it has on occasion proven difficult to distinguish Wittgenstein’s position from behavioristic reductionism. But in this section we see why he is not what he called ‘a behaviorist in disguise’, why the first-person case cannot be assimilated to the third-, and why the language-games of our mental vocabulary do not permit reduction to the language-games of physical objects. We also see here why the perception of personally expressive gestures is not, against what the inner–outer template and the metaphysics of isolation would suggest, inferential (a subject to which we will return in greater detail in Chapter 6). Behavior is misconstrued as evidence in the vast majority of cases (where, that is, we are not looking for evidence, or signs, because of a particular context-specific suspicion), and seeing this, along with gaining a grasp of the noninferential character of our perception of emotional states, helps to free us from the tyranny of a dualistic self-concept. But then how do we characterize—if we characterize them generally at all—our first-person reports on what we call inner states? In the second section of this chapter we excavate and then scrutinize the presumption implicit in the preceding sentence, that is, that such language is itself rightly described as a matter of reporting. Wittgenstein shows that the matter is, instructively, not so simple or direct; the philosophical grammar of expression of states such as pain are not innocently construed on the model of inner object and outward designation. Our language of this kind, as it emerges under closer investigation, is not best characterized as descriptions, but rather—again if we want a kind of shorthand or generic category—as avowals. But then this makes us ask: If the matter is not successfully characterized in terms of descriptions (where this term imports metaphysical freight), how do we understand the acts of introspection upon which autobiographical or self-revelatory language would so evidently seem to depend (given that reductive behaviorism will by then, I hope, have been moved beyond the bounds of plausibility)? In the third section of this chapter we thus progress to a study of introspection of a kind neither engendered by nor supportive of dualism, or introspection that, in the manner of privacy as introduced in Chapter 1, is real, i.e. drawn from—or better, shown in—our practices. And it turns out that Kierkegaard’s ‘Diary of the Seducer’ is of great value in this respect: duplicity is not dualistic, and an inner secret is not metaphysically hidden.
Yet thinking—or our image of thinking—seems to require some residual form of ‘mentalist’, some conception of the self as private interior consciousness, where thinking of the self’s experience, intentions, hopes, fears, regrets, aspirations, and so forth just is autobiographical reflection. In Chapter 4 I consider both the influences on our thought that lead us to picture the act of thinking in a decidedly dualistic way and those remarks on thinking of Wittgenstein’s that can powerfully reorient our thinking about thinking. This reflexive analysis, really a layered diagnosis, looks into the way the mind tends to imagine its own workings, and the word ‘thinking’ turns out to be better understood as a particular tool in our language than as the name of a unitary mental event. And then turning to cases here as well, in this chapter’s second section we see in Augustine’s magisterial self-investigation a range of practices that, taken together as the raw material for an overview of self-directed thought, show autobiographical language to be far more diverse—and more interesting—than the picture of self-revelatory language as outward one-to-one linguistic correspondences of inward thought would begin to suggest. Augustine’s practice shows that the relation between what we call a thought and what the metaphysical voice might generically classify as a proposition is anything but direct and immediate. And here, in the third section, it is Dostoevsky’s underground man who helps show a further expanded set of practices that we would without question regard as self-directed thinking, but where this self-investigation shows a self positioned in relation to his remembered past, to his present self, and to his present utterances not with a transparent immediacy but rather with a layered complexity. The issue of speaker’s privacy—the distinctive relation to our own language that no one else does or could have—resurfaces here, and we see again, for deepened reasons, that we need to ‘de-psychologize’ our conception of first-person speech and writing in order to accommodate the interesting—and from the Cartesian point of view, very ill-behaved—facts of the case. Indeed our language, construed as merely contingent ex post facto expressions of prior determinate mental events, or really as an afterthought, can only further mystify the autobiographical processes that fall on a continuum between self-revelation and self-constitution (a matter also to be taken up in greater detail in subsequent chapters).

The contest between interpretive singularism (i.e. the view that there is only one correct interpretation) and multiplism (i.e. the view that there can be, in its weaker form, different, and in its stronger form, incompatible, interpretations) has concerned, primarily, the interpretation
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of cultural objects and culturally emergent practices, e.g. works of art, societal conventions and rituals, and so forth. In Chapter 5 I attempt to extend the discussion of the contest into the area of self-interpretation. Here I find those (still too-little-discussed) passages of Wittgenstein pertaining to retrospective meaning, i.e. the questions concerning what we did and did not mean on a given occasion, particularly helpful in excavating the metaphysical presuppositions embedded within standard ways of framing, or indeed picturing, the very problem of true self-interpretation. In order to understand the (sometimes misleading) motivations for favoring an interpretive singularism with regard to past first-person utterances, we need to examine the belief or intuition that there is a determinate mental event that constitutes meaning something and that this mental phenomenon of meaning itself requires the prior existence of an inner locus of consciousness, an inner Cartesian self that is the private sphere within which the act of meaning occurs. But Wittgenstein’s investigation into this alleged phenomenon, which runs parallel to his better-known investigation into the very nature of thinking itself (as examined in Chapter 4), shows that meaning something, on close examination, is found not to be at all what we expect when coming to the subject with certain philosophical expectations in mind. Here it emerges that the subject does not reduce to a single, uniform mental act, process, or state, and that various phenomena, not a single phenomenon, are (perhaps surprisingly—given their power to unsettle our picture-driven presumptions) relevant to the determination of retrospective meaning. In particular, the metaphysically misled notions of having meant something as (1) an easily remembered process or state, (2) a process that follows a course and upon which we can report, (3) a mental picture constituting the determinate thing that we mean, (4) an act of stipulation, (5) a focused directing of inward attention or the inner referent upon which we concentrate, (6) an act of inner ‘pointing’ modeled on outward ostension, and more generally (7) the ineliminable essence required for the words ‘meaning something’ to themselves mean, are all removed as candidates for the explanation of retrospective meaning. Yet it is often incontrovertibly true that on a given occasion we meant one thing and not another, and this blunt fact persistently argues against the adoption of a generalized (and given the foregoing considerations, de-psychologized) interpretive multiplism.

Thus, with Wittgenstein’s observation that guessing at how a word (like ‘meant’) functions will not yield valuable philosophical results and that the necessary task is to ‘look at its use and learn from that’, along
with a brief look at the distinctively active or ‘mind-making’ (as opposed to passively ‘mind-reporting’) character of self-reflection that Richard Moran and others have helpfully brought into focus, I turn back to the actual case of Augustine catching himself in the acts of retrospective self-interpretation. And I try, indeed, to learn from that. Among the various lessons I draw from this example (in addition to the more general one that one kind of project in literary interpretation can itself constitute the work of philosophical investigation), I suggest that the removal of prismatic metaphysical expectations itself constitutes indispensable progress toward a perspicuous, post-Wittgensteinian, highly context-sensitive and pragmatically situated understanding of retrospective meaning in particular, and more generally the nature of the linguistic self that is the subject of interpretation in the first place. And at this point we will be much better positioned to fathom the competing pulls, sometimes toward self-interpretive singularism, and at other times toward self-interpretive multiplism.

We next turn to this question: Is there a distinctive nature of the perception of persons, of human beings, that is unlike any other mode, or perhaps category, of perception, and if so, what does this tell us about our consciousness of self? Wittgenstein describes this most distinctive kind of perception, memorably, as ‘an attitude towards a soul’, and in elucidating this concept we see that it will not settle either into the traditional categories of Cartesian or behaviorist models of the self, or into any directly antithetical position advanced against these polemically opposed but category-sharing pictures of selfhood. Wittgenstein’s statement concerning the separateness of the language-games of the mental and the physical, and the correlated claim that if we try to characterize generally or theoretically the relationship between them we shall go wrong, proves helpful here—but it also invites the question asking exactly how then we are to understand this complicated relation between language-games. Employing examples in Chapter 6 from both Wittgenstein and, more extensively, Goethe in his writing on the perception of human qualities and mental states in artistic representation, we begin to see something of the value of a fidelity to the nuances of lived experience and the value of an awareness of the circumstantially situated and embodied-yet-irreducible character of the expression of, and the perception of, emotional or affective states. Indeed, Goethe’s concern with what has been called in this connection ‘the whole mind’, i.e. the experientially highly variegated and conceptually nonuniform aspects of mental life within what Wittgenstein called the
stream of life, proves strikingly similar (once one knows where and how to look) to Wittgenstein’s investigations into mentally revelatory actions. Goethe, like Wittgenstein, was wary of what he called ‘ossified doctrines’ that, once lodged into our conceptual substructure, exert a powerful but undetected influence on our subsequent thinking and, owing to their seeming naturalness, resist direct investigative scrutiny. An examination of Goethe’s writings on various works of sculpture, painting, and drawing show that distinctive mode of person-perception in contexts within which what Goethe called ‘the unity of mind and body’ is evident, even if difficult to describe succinctly (or without the examples to do the work of showing what is difficult to say compactly). Goethe, like Wittgenstein, sees the expressive self not through or behind the body, but rather in the contextualized action of the person. Goethe’s (and our) perception of Leonardo’s qualities of mind in his work, and his similar thoroughly human perception of a thought-induced tremble in a drawn figure of Rembrandt’s, shows that these perceptual phenomena are indeed instructively resistant to any simplified formulaic statement of the relation between the mental and the physical. Indeed the relations between these language-games are not accurately, or with a respectable fidelity to the nuances of experience, describable with the reductive concision traditional competing models or pictures of the self would, again seemingly naturally, suggest. Goethe—if with his own distinctive conceptual equipment—thinks deeply about the mind, and throughout his writings he shows a good deal about the self, both directly but also, like Wittgenstein, indirectly. In short, he offers material, of considerable philosophical significance, that shows how to comprehend, without lapsing into polemic-generated theory, the phrase ‘an attitude towards a soul’.

In a manner particularly fitting for a philosophical novelist, Iris Murdoch, writing in her diary, often gave voice to philosophical questions concerning the nature of that very writing. In the third section of Chapter 6 I turn to a number of those entries, particularly those concerning what she called ‘the unfrozen past’. In them she puzzles over the nature of our relations to our own pasts, and she claims, strikingly, that so long as one lives, one’s relationship with one’s past should keep shifting. Strengthening the moral dimension of this claim, she adds ‘re-thinking one’s past is a constant responsibility’. Here I suggest that one way of articulating this self-investigative process can be found through a reconsideration of Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect-perception, or ‘seeing-as’, in this context. These remarks can
prove particularly helpful here, because one often encounters three fundamental positions put forward concerning our relations to our pasts: (1) the view that we project onto past events new content, and thus see in them what we, perhaps only unwittingly, put there; (2) the view that the past is, contra Murdoch, ‘frozen’, and that it simply was what it was, period (and thus autobiographical verisimilitude reverts to simple correspondence between prior event and later description); or (3) the view that we construct, in narrative, an ever-evolving view of the past as we go along in the stream of life’s self-descriptions. But Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect-seeing, seen, indeed, in a new light within this context, show that we need not opt for straight projectivism, perceptualism, or constructivism. Continuing the theme from the previous two sections of this chapter, we come to see that our relation to the past is neither systematically bounded nor unbounded in any of these specific and uniform ways. Indeed, the process of coming to see some part of our past—our past actions, words, thoughts, reactions, hopes, fears, aspirations, or anything else in life that calls for retrospective reconsideration—in a new light or new aspects (or seeing newly emergent patterns of these) gives greater precision and clarity to what Murdoch was alluding to as ‘re-thinking’. And, as we shall see, closer attention to the vocabulary of sight, the language we use to capture many fine distinctions between categories and kinds of seeing, can prove helpful in coming to understand more fully why we tend to think of, or picture (employing ocular metaphors), the self’s relations to its past as we do.

Wittgenstein also wrote a set of remarks—still, I believe, insufficiently examined in the light of autobiographical issues—on memory, and in the first section of Chapter 7 I turn to an examination of a picture of memory, and of remembering, derived from empiricism but influential to the present day; this picture engenders the idea of objects of consciousness, where the concept of remembering is elucidated as an inward-directed act of perceptual scrutiny. But this image of memory (and thus of the alleged unitary mental act of remembering) cannot accommodate the relational embeddedness of memories, nor can it (as we see in reference to a closely related discussion of Davidson’s) account for the distinctions we make based on what we might call a memory’s semantic link to the world, i.e. some are true and some are not. This takes us in turn to Wittgenstein’s delicate unearthing of a false picture of recognition: what it is to recognize (a close cognate of memory) turns out to be a far more nuanced and interesting matter than anything