In "One Strand in the Private Language Argument", John McDowell arrives at the idea that one cannot simply say that non-speakers feel pain without committing oneself to a bad picture of sensations that Wittgenstein attacked in his so-called private language argument. In an attempt to solve this problem, McDowell presents an account in which pains are conceived of as limiting cases of an 'object and designation' grammar. I hope to show two things about McDowell's paper. First, I will argue that he misreads Wittgenstein on some key points, which, had he understood them differently, would have undermined his motivations for giving the account of sensations that he does. Second, I will point out some serious difficulties that McDowell's account gets us into, which should lessen the temptation to accept it independent from his motivations. In the course of my discussion, I also hope to show that, contra McDowell, the case of non-speakers does not present any special difficulties for Wittgenstein's treatment of sensations and sensation talk.

McDowell clearly thinks that some aspects of Wittgenstein's discussion of pain are inadequate. He does not state explicitly where he thinks Wittgenstein goes wrong, but the locus of his concerns seems to be the claim that pain sensations are "not a something, but not a nothing either". As I read him, McDowell thinks that a strict Wittgensteinian must take the behaviorist line that actual sensations of pain and the like are irrelevant to our sensation talk in some important sense. McDowell hopes to preserve a sense in which sensations can be accepted as real and important that does not also commit him to a dualist conception of inner experience in which "raw" sensations are prior to, but somehow linked up with concept-involving awareness.

Before I consider the adequacy of McDowell’s account of sensations, it is worth wondering whether it was really necessary for him to undertake the project in the first place. Throughout his article, McDowell claims to be salvaging insights that Wittgenstein makes it hard for us to accept by drawing overly strong conclusions from them. Thus, McDowell expresses doubts about the Wittgenstein’s “sureness of foot” in § 293, from which he quotes the following selection:

The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something ... That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of a sensation on the model of ‘object and designation’ the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.2

Presumably, this quote illustrates some move on Wittgenstein’s part that McDowell finds objectionable. It is interesting that McDowell declines to quote the section in full, because the sentences that he sees fit to excerpt give a very misleading picture of what is going on in § 293. First of all, Wittgenstein sets up his ‘beetle in the box’ example in order to deal with an imagined interlocutor who claims that he knows what pain is only from his own case. Thus, Wittgenstein explicitly makes the claim that the thing in the box (i.e. the sensation) has no place in the language-game only in a case that he constructs as a reductio of a position he wants to reject. Note also that Wittgenstein says the sensation drops out as irrelevant “if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of ‘object and designation’.”3 This leaves open the possibility that the sensation plays a more significant role on a more appropriate construal of the grammar of sensation talk. Given what Wittgenstein writes in § 293, it is curious that McDowell should attempt to revive the ‘object and designation’ model in order to avoid consequences that Wittgenstein mentions as springing from just this model. To be fair, I must acknowledge that McDowell is aware of the problems with a simple ‘object and designation’ model and attempts to work around them. Still, his motivations for doing so at all arise from what I take to be a misreading of Wittgenstein.

In the same paragraph in which he represents § 293 as going wrong, McDowell presents § 304 as another example of Wittgenstein playing down the importance of sensations. As in the previous example, I am

2. McDowell quotes this on p. 289.