

8-6-2008

# Three Wittgensteins: Interpreting the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

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Three Wittgensteins: Interpreting the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Philosophy  
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Date of Approval:  
August 6, 2008

Keywords: Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, logical empiricism, resolute reading, metaphysics

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## Acknowledgments

There are many people whom have helped me along the way. My most prominent debts include Ray Langely, Billy Joe Lucas, and Mary T. Clark, who trained me in philosophy at Manhattanville College; and also to Joanne Waugh, Stephen Turner, Kwasi Wiredu and Cahrls Guignon, all of whom have nurtured my love for the philosophy of language. This essay also would not have been possible without Richard Manning, who helped me develop the topic (including haivng pointed me to the existence of the resolute reading), and read many early drafts of this essay—and who was not shy about pointing out the mis-steps I had made. I have also significantly benefited from discussions with Rebecca Kukla, Jeremy Kelly, and Peter Olen. Thanks also to everyone who provided support (both emotionally and academically). I couldn't have done it without you all.

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## Three Wittgensteins

Thomas J. Brommage, Jr.

### ABSTRACT

There are historically three main trends in understanding Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The first is the interpretation offered by the Vienna Circle. They read Wittgenstein as arguing that neither metaphysical nor normative propositions have any cognitive meaning, and thus are to be considered *nonsense*. This interpretation understands Wittgenstein as setting the limits of sense, and prescribing that nothing of substantive philosophical importance lies beyond that line. The second way of reading the *Tractatus*, which has become popular since the 1950s, is the interpretation which most currently accept as the early Wittgenstein's view; for this reason I refer to it as the 'standard reading.' According to this interpretation, Wittgenstein did not consider metaphysical and ethical discourse as nonsense. Rather, relying upon the distinction between saying [*sagen*] and showing [*zeigen*], he meant that these truths cannot be *uttered*, but instead are only *shown*. The standard reading can perhaps be best understood in contrast with the third interpretation, dubbed the "resolute reading." The resolute reading takes seriously Wittgenstein's remark at 6.54 that "[m]y propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense [*unsinnig*]." According to the resolute interpretation, Wittgenstein is not advancing a series of philosophical theses in the *Tractatus*. Rejecting the distinction characteristic of standard readings, between

propositions without sense [*sinnlos*] and just plain nonsense [*unsinnig*], these interpreters read Wittgenstein as treating ethical and metaphysical inquiry, as well as a bulk of the doctrines in the text, as nonsense. To them, Wittgenstein did not intend to put forth any theses in the the text. Instead his methodology is therapeutic, similar to the later philosophy. It In this essay I explain each interpretation, and evaluate them in terms of textual and philosophical viability. I conclude by arguing that the biases which exist in the tradition of analytic philosophy substantively temper the interpretation of historical texts, which ultimately leads to the fundamental distinction between these three interpretations.

## *Wittgenstein and the History of Philosophy*

### *§1 History and Analytic Philosophy*

In 1916, Wittgenstein wrote: “[W]hat has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in the Preface to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he downplays any question of influence on his work by others. “I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers,” he tells us. “Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps one can excuse him for his reluctance to consider his philosophical thought as being influenced by his philosophical predecessors—exempting, of course, the “great works” of Frege, and his teacher and friend Bertrand Russell.<sup>3</sup> For Wittgenstein, writing in what would become the tradition of analytic philosophy, he must have had the feeling of great beginnings, of starting to write an entirely new chapter in the history of philosophy; or perhaps, as he might have thought, tolling the death knell of the tradition of philosophy as it has been known. After all, in the last paragraph of the Preface he does mention that within the pages of the *Tractatus* he had found “on all essential points, the final solution” of the great

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1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, tr. and ed. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 82. Hereafter abbreviated NB

2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 1961). Hereafter cited by passage number. All references to the text are to the Pears/McGuinness translation, unless otherwise noted.

3 See Preface to the TLP, p. 3.



philosophical problems that preceded him. This was not an uncommon belief in the early phases of analytic philosophy, as it was shared by Russell, and many of the members of the Vienna Circle.

While it might have been forgivable for Wittgenstein to express this sentiment, we have no such luxury. Situated now over one hundred years past the linguistic turn, those of us writing in the analytic tradition have a long history already behind us. And it is not only undeniable that we owe a debt to this tradition which precedes us, but also that analytic philosophy does have a history—in fact, a quite interesting one, in which trends and movements have died several times over. However, the twentieth century has also seen its share of anti-historical tendencies. The logical positivists were so convinced that this “new” style of logical analysis was so far beyond the metaphysics of past generations, that they eschewed as irrelevant the previous 2500 years of philosophical thought. In 1936, Ernest Nagel commented on the philosophy then “professed at Cambridge, Vienna, Prague, Warsaw and Lwow.”<sup>4</sup> According to him, this new brand of analytical philosophy was defined by its utter break with the philosophical tradition that preceded it. He notes that “students whose primary interest is in history of ideas will find that . . . they will profit little from talking with these men. Neither the genesis of doctrines nor the sociological settings are interests cultivated with much ardor.” To analytic philosophers, he continues, “the great figures in the history of philosophy and the traditional problems associated with them receive only negative attention.”<sup>5</sup> What he means by 'negative attention' is that the history of ideas is not interesting to the early

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4 Ernest Nagel, "Impressions and Appraisals of Analytic Philosophy in Europe." *Journal of Philosophy* 33, no 1 (1936): 6

5 *Ibid.*, p. 6-7

analytic philosophers due to its *successes*, but rather because of its *failures*. “[T]he approach taken is that the alleged problems not revealed as empirical ones are to be dismissed as pseudo-questions masquerading as genuine ones under the cloak of grammar.”<sup>6</sup> It should be noted here that Nagel specifies explicitly that he does not share this view; however this dismissive attitude toward historical matters is all too common, even today.

As the influence of positivism increased in the Anglo-American world, a whole generation of philosophers learned that to do philosophy properly, one must ignore history. Similar doctrines popped up throughout America in different disciplines, such as the “new criticism” of the formalists in literary theory. For the New Critics, a text must be understood on its own, without reference to any extra-textual influence on the work—whether biographical or contextual. Wimsatt and Beardsley even coined a term, the “intentional fallacy,” to capture this exegetical prescription. “[T]he design or intention of the author,” they argue, “is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”<sup>7</sup> But this is by no means a dated phenomenon. Still today, top-tier Ph.D. programs in philosophy focus disproportionately on current issues in metaphysics and epistemology, and require little knowledge of the historical tradition prior to the Twentieth century. The historian Anthony Grafton recalls that once there was at one point a sign posted in the philosophy department at Princeton which read, “Just say no to the history of ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

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6 Ibid., p. 7

7 William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *Norton Anthology to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1374-5

8 Grafton, Anthony. 2004: “A Note from Inside the Teapot,” in *Teaching New Histories of Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Center for Human Values. Available online at <http://www.pdcnet.org/tnhp.html>.

While this anti-historical attitude is troublesome, it is not completely without its reasons. In reading Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, or Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, one cannot take seriously the evocation of 'essences' in the former or the function of the pineal gland in the latter, in the face of contemporary metaphysics or neuroscience. Nor should we. Clearly our contemporary vantage point allows us a better idea of how the world works than theirs did. So, the argument goes, if we were to take these ideas to be on an equal footing with our own, we might run the risk of simultaneously denying any progress throughout the history of ideas. This might lead one to view philosophical theses as only true relative to a period of time—or worse (as a college freshman might put it) as 'mere opinion.'

As a result of this failure to take the history of philosophy seriously, it should come as no surprise that when analytic philosophers write about historical figures, usually tragedy results. Ripping arguments from text and context, the primary goal is not to understand a given philosopher, but rather to see how these arguments might inform our current philosophical debates. They tend to design 'rational reconstructions' of the mighty dead, modifying and updating historical figures to fit neatly within our contemporary terms and distinctions. Thus instead of just not reading Plato, the analytic 'historian' might instead *put Plato in conversation* with the contemporary philosophy of language by, for example, superimposing upon the dialogues the semantic view that all words are names. In viewing the historical Plato through contemporary spectacles, it is thought that one thereby makes his or her philosophy relevant to the 'real' philosophical issues—those which inform our contemporary debates. Alternatively, when analytic

historians do acknowledge a given thinker's context, it is usually in the form of a tacked-on 'historical introduction.' This plop-and-point methodology<sup>9</sup> remains a superficial nod to the influences upon, and the legacy of, a given thinkers' work when these themes do not inform the interpretation.

To the historian of philosophy, the main source of frustration with this type of historical work is its unapologetic anachronism. To treat Plato or Locke as if either were a colleague down the the hall from us does damage, not only to our understanding of the text, but also to the place of a given thinker within the tradition. That is not to say, however, that these poor historical methodologies have no function. In a sense, rational reconstructions do serve to justify our current concerns as the 'right' ones, and thus are dialectically necessary.<sup>10</sup> However this should not be confused with—and cannot be replaced by—reflective methodology and genuine historical research.

Since the 1970's, there has been a resurgence in philosophers who have successfully restored the esteem to the idea that historical work can be genuine philosophy. Daniel Garber and Michael Friedman, for instance, come to mind as two examples of those whose work I admire. Specifically, analytic philosophy itself has also become a respectable object of historical study, through the work of Tom Ricketts, Hans Sluga, and others. But historians of philosophy still are not taken seriously by many in the analytic fold. Now situated over a century after the linguistic turn, we may now be in

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9 I owe this expression to Thomas Williams, "Some Reflections on Method in the History of Philosophy" (paper presented at the "Philosophy and its History" conference at the University of South Florida, Tampa, FL, 2007)

10 For a similar analysis see Richard Rorty, "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres" in *Truth and Progress* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 267

a position to affirm that analytic philosophy *does* have a history; and indeed one worthy of philosophical attention.

## §2 *Three Wittgensteins*

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is arguably the most enigmatic text in the analytic tradition. Its sparse landscape is difficult to navigate. Turning to the voluminous body of secondary literature to understanding the text is often just as unhelpful. One finds numerous commentaries on the text, rarely consistent with one another, each of which think that they have *finally* discovered what Wittgenstein “really” meant. But nonetheless, his importance cannot be overstated. He remains to this day one of the most quoted and discussed thinkers in the analytic tradition—despite the fact that his own philosophy has often been appropriated and been used to argue for doctrines he did not hold, even some which he rejected explicitly. His thought has an influence arguably surpassing any other analytic figure:<sup>11</sup> several generations of philosophers—from the logical atomism of the early Russell, to the positivism of the Vienna Circle, and Oxford ordinary language philosophy—are all indebted to different phases of Wittgenstein's groundbreaking work.

In particular, over the past twenty years, we have seen a resurgence in interest concerning the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—a work which has been neglected for years, overshadowed by the so-called “later philosophy” exemplified by the *Philosophical Investigations*. This is despite Wittgenstein's direct statement in the

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<sup>11</sup> That is, despite the influence on his philosophy by certain thinkers who would on no account be considered philosophical antecedents to this tradition (e.g., Schopenhauer).

Preface of the *Investigations* that “the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.”<sup>12</sup> Some commentators, James Conant for example, have noted that the interest in the later philosophy has in fact done a disservice to a proper understanding of this text. Too often Wittgenstein is read backwards, as it were; that is, commentators read the *Tractatus* in direct opposition to the *Investigations*, thereby warping the understanding of both. This tragic fate has led to a potted history of Wittgenstein's philosophy, whereby in his early years he was a type of reluctant metaphysician, laying the ontological grounding for language and logic; and in the later work he sought to amend his ways, taking (for example) the method of “language games” as a replacement for logical analysis, or “forms of life” as a successor to the simple “elementary propositions.” Of course, since the *Investigations* is read as a renunciation of his early work, the *Tractatus* is interpreted in a question-begging way: those enthralled with the *Investigations* are lead to read the *Tractatus* as the complete opposite of what they take to be valuable in the later work.

The renewed interest in the *Tractatus* can be traced to the influence of Cora Diamond's controversial interpretation of Wittgenstein. Her work is polarizing, and commentators are split into two dominant camps, those who agree and those who disagree with her work. And each group of scholars is as rabid about the truth of their own views, and as hostile to the the other camp as could be. This has led to a fertile ground to re-evaluate what is important about Wittgenstein's early work. This essay is written as a contribution to, and perhaps as a vindication of, the importance of Wittgenstein's early philosophy.

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<sup>12</sup> Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, x.

### §3 *The Argument*

What follows is a second-order interpretation, so to speak; that is, this essay is an interpretation of the various ways that the *Tractatus* itself has been interpreted. There are, as I see it, historically three discrete ways that the *Tractatus* has historically been read. The number of such readings is somewhat artificial for two reasons. First, because commentators disagree as to the exact number of such readings. David Stern, for example, cites five discrete readings.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, the commentators on the *Tractatus* differ so radically about how to read the text that care must be taken not to do damage to the variety and nuance of the interpretations themselves. A complete survey of each interpretation would itself be a Herculean task—one far too large for the purposes of this essay. Since my goal will be to understand the influences that lead to the trends in Wittgenstein scholarship, a quick survey of each of these will suffice for my purposes. Great attention has been paid, not only to be sensitive to the differences between the different interpreters' positions, but also not to lose sight of the commonalities that inhere between them. So for that reason, I will present a tripartite division of the secondary literature over the past century, hopefully capturing the essence of each without getting lost in the details.

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13 David Stern, “*The Methods of the Tractatus: Beyond Positivism and Metaphysics?*” in *Logical Empiricism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Parrini, Salmon and Salmon (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 126-7. The differences between Stern's list and my own is that he separates off what he calls the “logical atomist” reading of Russell and Ramsey and the “irrationalist reading” of Engelmann and Janik and Toumlin. Since the logical atomist reading was inspirational to the way the logical positivists had read the text, I will deal with Russell and Ramsey in the context of my first chapter, on what I call the “positivist interpretation.” Likewise since the “irrationalist reading” shares some core affinities to the “metaphysical” reading of Anscombe, Geach and Stenius, I will link the two in what I call “the standard reading,” in my second chapter.

The chronologically earliest of the three readings I will present here is the interpretation offered by the Vienna Circle. It is widely known that the philosophical programme of the logical empiricists had been inspired by a very specific understanding of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. They read Wittgenstein as engaged in a common project, that of using the method of logical analysis to reduce ordinary discourse down to the language of immediate sense data sentences—or, as they interpret the term, “elementary propositions.” Likewise they read Wittgenstein as arguing that neither metaphysical nor normative propositions have any cognitive meaning, and thus are to be considered *nonsense*. Wittgenstein's lesson in the text, they argue, is contained in the closing remarks of the text, where he tells us:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—this method would be the only strictly correct one . . . What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence (TLP 6.53-7).

What is “passed over in silence” here is exactly the ethical and metaphysical pseudo-propositions which philosophy has henceforth sought to express. Elsewhere he describes the book as follows: “all of that which *many* others are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it.”<sup>14</sup> The positivist interpretation treats Wittgenstein as a sort of modern-day Hume, who sought to set the limits of sense and to prescribe that nothing of substantive philosophical importance lies beyond that line. Although certain

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<sup>14</sup> Letter to Von Ficker, November 1919. Quoted in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 178.



passages in the *Tractatus* can certainly be read to support the positivists' interpretation of the text, it is now clear from a wealth of posthumous textual evidence—including the notebooks from which the *Tractatus* was compiled, and many published biographical works and memoirs of friends and colleagues—that this understanding of Wittgenstein's early work could not have been what he intended.

The second way of reading the *Tractatus* became popular in the 1950's and 60's, and is currently the dominant interpretation of the text. It is the way which most specialists, and nearly all non-specialists, currently accept as the early Wittgenstein's view; for this reason I refer to it simply as the “standard reading.” Initially put forth by such commentators as G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Geach, and Max Black, it is currently espoused by a new generation of interpreters such as Brian McGuinness, David Pears, Peter Hacker and others. The standard reading was initially developed as a response to the positivist interpretation, and gained prominence just as logical empiricism had fallen out of fashion. According to these commentators, the Vienna Circle completely misinterpreted Wittgenstein. His intent in the *Tractatus* was not to toss ethics and metaphysics into the Humean bonfire; rather, relying upon the distinction between saying and showing, he was laying the metaphysical foundation for language and logic. The limits of language, it is true, are the limits of the effable; but these limits are outstripped by what is there in the world. Wittgenstein, on this interpretation, meant to indicate in the *Tractatus* that there is greater depth to our existence than can be captured by the representational power of language. Wittgenstein is clear in the *Tractatus* that these ethical, metaphysical and existential “truths” cannot be expressed in language, so we

must remain silent about them. But these insights, like the logical form of language, might still possibly be *shown by language*. The standard reading in this way paints Wittgenstein as a sort of modern-day Kant, who sought to set the bounds of language in order to make room for the mystical.

The standard reading can perhaps be best understood in contrast with the third interpretation, dubbed the “resolute reading.” Initially put forth in a series of papers in the 1980's and 1990's by James Conant and Cora Diamond, the resolute reading takes seriously Wittgenstein's remark at 6.54 that “[m]y propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense [*unsinnig*].” According to the “New Wittgenstein” interpretation, Wittgenstein did not intend to advance a series of philosophical theses in the *Tractatus*. For them, to shackle Wittgenstein with the contradiction of needing to express the inexpressible—to indicate metaphysical truths underlying language and logic—is to read Wittgenstein incorrectly. Instead, the resolute readers understand the *Tractatus* as having a *therapeutic* methodology, characteristic of his later philosophy. The so-called picture theory of meaning, his analysis of the proposition, and the distinction between saying and showing—each of which are central to the standard reading's interpretation of Wittgenstein's early philosophy—are all nothing more than an attempt to rid us of our misunderstandings concerning the relation between logic and the world. According to these commentators, the supposed “doctrines” of the text are ironically self-destructive; when one reaches the closing lines of the text (in particular 6.54), one realizes that the supposed doctrines of the text were merely a 'transitional' way of speaking, leading the reader to a larger point about the philosophical

temptation to present theories about language and logic. This interpretation thus treats Wittgenstein as a sort of modern-day Kierkegaard, denying his own philosophical positions in the very act of writing them.<sup>15</sup> Rejecting the distinction characteristic of standard readings, between 'philosophically illuminating' senselessness and just plain nonsense, these interpreters read Wittgenstein as treating ethical and metaphysical inquiry, and also a great deal besides, as just plain nonsense.

My argument here divides into four parts. In the first three chapters, I lay out the three interpretations outlined above, respectively. Through most of this essay, I will let the interpretations speak for themselves. This survey of the secondary literature is not intended to support one reading of Wittgenstein over another, but rather to come to terms with the various ways that Wittgenstein has been understood. As I mention above, my goal is to come to an interpretation of the historical influences on these three interpretations—not to conclusively show that one reading will trump the others.<sup>16</sup> Where criticisms will be leveled, I will let the internal faults of the reading itself shed light upon its own inadequacies. The purpose of highlighting these problems will be to allow a healthy skepticism<sup>17</sup> concerning the ability of any one reading to account for the text completely. I hope to show a larger methodological point about methodology in the history of analytic philosophy in the conclusion.

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15 James Conant has been the inspiration behind the connection between Kierkegaard and the early Wittgenstein. See Chapter 4, pp. 140-141.

16 Perhaps the only exception to this heuristic principle is the “positivist interpretation.” Many years have passed since the philosophy of the Vienna Circle has reigned supreme, and there has now been enough textual and contextual evidence to show with some certainty that the positivist reading is in fact a misreading of the text. However, this is not to say that there are certain features of this interpretation which are no longer in fashion. In fact, the resolute reading shares a rather uncanny resemblance in some ways to the positivist interpretation.

17 Here I mean the term in the classical sense, fostering a degree of *akatalepsia*, and hopefully also *ataraxia*.

#### *§4 Some Caveats about The Argument*

I am confident that Wittgenstein would have hated this essay. This should come as no surprise to many, since he disliked any summary of his thought.<sup>18</sup> It is not coincidental that the first book-length commentary on the *Tractatus*, Anscombe's *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, was first published five years after he died.<sup>19</sup> But I hope that Wittgenstein would have hated this essay less fervently than other published accounts of his work. Wittgenstein scholarship is tricky business. Of course, working in the history of philosophy and doing it well is itself a difficult enough task. Interpreting texts removed from our own context presupposes that one immerse themselves in the context of the thinker. Even good historians of philosophy sometimes fall prey to the temptation to privilege aspects of our contemporary philosophical understanding in diagnosing the mis-steps, or even positive contributions, of a given thinker. But for the historian of analytic philosophy, this problem is exacerbated by the “nearness” of the text. In a recent introduction to the re-printing of “Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy,” Stanley Cavell notes that since the early 1980's “the inner history of the development of analytical philosophy is only now being composed, as if only now is analytical philosophy, in its late development, disposed to oppose its internal opposition to history,

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18 Consider his 1933 letter to the Editor of *Mind*, where he disclaims all responsibility for the views which Richard Braithwaite attributes to him

19 G. E. M. Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1971).

no doubt a version of philosophy's internal opposition to time, you might say logic's opposition to rhetoric."<sup>20</sup>

Some time has passed since that remark was initially penned, but yet we historians of analytic philosophy still we have room to progress. We haven't yet had enough time to let analytic philosophy completely run its course—if, in fact, such a transition away from the method of logical analysis is inevitable. Many still believe that “the history of analytic philosophy” is in itself not a genuine field of scholarship—either from the anti-historical perspective of contemporary analytic philosophers, or from the perspective historians of philosophy as a genuine field into historical study. The consequence of this is that many analytic philosophers have not taken seriously methodological concerns when doing the history of philosophy. But this attitude is slowly waning, and I hope to hasten its demise by unmasking these temptations in interpreting philosophical texts.

If getting clear on any thinker is troubling enough, this goes doubly so for Wittgenstein. Due to his aphoristic writing style, commentators tend to privilege certain “crucial” passages over others, and reading the rest of the text around this focal point. Thus Wittgenstein scholars too often set their gaze so intently upon certain passages, that they let the rest of the text recede into the background. I have been careful to avoid falling into exactly the problem which it is my goal to diagnose. James Conant has recently bemoaned the fact that “a good *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the *Tractatus* has yet to be written.”<sup>21</sup> This essay is the humble beginnings of one; whether it is a good one, I will let my reader determine.

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20 Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 197.

21 James Conant, “Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism” in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* ed. Alice Crary (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 125.

Attempting to make sense of the *Tractatus* is a lifelong project. In this sense I feel that there is, of course, much more that could have been said than I have here. I hope eventually to work more diligently in the coming years to get clearer on each of the interpretations discussed here, and how they relate both positively and negatively to an understanding of the text itself. To those who would point to things which I have characterized poorly or omitted entirely, I would respond in the words of Wittgenstein himself from the preface of the *Tractatus*, where it is put more directly and simply than I ever could have put it: “May others come and do it better!”

## *Wittgenstein's Alleged Positivism*

### *§1 Introduction*

The first interpretation that I shall discuss here, historically the earliest of all the main trends in the interpretation of the *Tractatus*, is the one put forth by the Vienna Circle. I shall refer to it simply as the *positivist reading*. It is widely known that the philosophical programme of the logical empiricists had been inspired by a very specific understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Carnap, for instance, recalls that in meetings of the Circle, the *Tractatus* “was read aloud and discussed sentence by sentence.” But he also cautions us that “it is not correct to say that the philosophy of the Vienna Circle was just Wittgenstein's philosophy. We learned much by our discussions of the book, and accepted many views as far as we could assimilate them to our basic conceptions.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the unquestionable influence Wittgenstein has on the philosophy of the members of the Vienna Circle, it is a matter of some dispute whether the doctrines that they assimilated were actually Wittgenstein's. In this chapter, I intend to argue that this interpretation is not faithful to the text.

The positivist understanding of Wittgenstein is widely rejected today, even by some of the logical empiricists themselves.<sup>23</sup> But from the 1930's through the 1950's, it

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22 Rudolf Carnap “Intellectual Autobiography,” in *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* edited by Paul Arthur Schlipp. (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1963), 24-5.

23 Ayer admits that “the outlook of the *Tractatus* was misunderstood by the members of the Vienna Circle and the young English philosophers, including myself, who were strongly influenced by it.” Carnap, in a similar sentiment, tells us that he “had erroneously believed that his attitude toward metaphysics was similar to ours,” and that he “had not paid enough attention to statements in his book

was the dominant interpretation of the text. Since that time, two whole new generation of philosophers have reacted to it, spending a great deal of time attempting to disrupt this then monolithic understanding of the text.<sup>24</sup> Indeed they were successful, but it is of immense historical importance that previous generation of philosophers have been trained to view Wittgenstein in this quirky way. And as I will show, this is an important first step towards a full understanding of the changing attitudes towards Wittgenstein's early philosophy.

Although Carnap distances himself from Wittgenstein in the passage quoted above, even a cursory look at his philosophy reveals that the influence of the *Tractatus* ran deep, and was heavily influential to a number of other members of the Vienna Circle—most notably Schlick and Waismann.<sup>25</sup> In Carnap's infamous essay “Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language,” he credits Wittgenstein with developing “the logical and epistemological conception which underlies” the verification principle.<sup>26</sup> This influence is also directly noted elsewhere in connection with the development of his 'logic of science,' in *The Logical Syntax of Language*. “It was Wittgenstein,” he tells us, “who first exhibited the close connection between the logic of

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about the mystical.” See A. J. Ayer *Wittgenstein* (New York: Random House, 1985), 31 and Carnap “Intellectual Autobiography,” *op. cit.*, 27.

24 The counter-interpretation mentioned here will be discussed at length in Chapter 3, below.

25 Carnap has several distinct phases in his philosophy, the most notable being his early 'verificationist' phase in *The Logical Structure of the World* and in “The Elimination of Metaphysics,” following which he stopped talking about verification and began talking about testability. Likewise, his earlier work on logical syntax, best exemplified by his *Logical Syntax of Language* later gave way to a period where he took semantics more seriously, as a result of Tarski's influence. I shall limit my remarks to this earlier period, ignoring his work on semantics in such important works as *Meaning and Necessity*. See Rudolf Carnap, *Logical Structure of the World*, trans. Rolf A. George (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1967); “Testability and Meaning,” *Philosophy of Science* 3, no. 4 (1936): 419-71; *Logical Syntax of Language*, trans. Amethe Smeaton (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 2002); “The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1959), 60-81; *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947).

26 Carnap, *Logical Syntax of Language*, 65.



science (or simply 'philosophy,' as he calls it) and syntax.” He also directly mentions that Wittgenstein and Russell's shared view of philosophy—that philosophy is not a body of doctrines, but rather an *activity*, the primary function of which is as a critique of language (4.0031). This led Carnap and the Vienna Circle to the view that the sole function of philosophy is “the logical clarification of ideas . . . [that is,] of the sentences and concepts of science . . .”<sup>27</sup> Nor was Wittgenstein's influence particular to Carnap. For instance A. J. Ayer, in his “Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics,” stresses that the views expressed in his paper are “not original,” and that it was “inspired” by Wittgenstein.<sup>28</sup>

In this chapter I intend to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks, both philosophically and textually, of the positivist reading of Wittgenstein. In the first three sections, I will explain Wittgenstein's somewhat rocky relationship with the Vienna Circle, the philosophical position of logical empiricism, and the textual evidence that may indicate similarities between their philosophical positions. Following that, I present a critique of this reading, relying heavily upon his posthumously published notes and manuscripts, as well as biographical information from Wittgenstein's friends and colleagues. I intend to show that, although there are places in the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein sounds like he is putting forth a position very similar to the Positivists, the wealth of current evidence is inconsistent with this reading of the text.

Since I am committed to the premise that the understanding of a philosophical work cannot be isolated from such contextual details—both of the life of a given thinker,

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27 Carnap, *Logical Syntax of Language*, 282.

28 A. J. Ayer “Demonstration of the Impossibility of Metaphysics” *Mind* 43, no. 171. (July 1934): 335.

and the intellectual milieu in which the work was composed. I hope to draw a lesson from this analysis about the way that philosophical texts should be read. The idea that context is important for the interpretation of historical texts is relatively uncontroversial for understanding thinkers several hundred years removed. However, for more recent philosophical texts, such as those within the analytic tradition, the context in which the text emerged is largely taken for granted. I hope to show that the insufficiencies of the Positivist interpretation of Wittgenstein's early philosophy points to a larger problem of ignoring context, and will itself provide a standard by which any interpretation of the *Tractatus* must be faithful.

## §2 Wittgenstein's Relation to the Vienna Circle

The intellectual relationship between Wittgenstein and the positivists was complex, and certainly not without its conflicts. Wittgenstein was a very peculiar individual, and loathed others interpreting or adapting parts of his philosophical work. The story of the interaction between Wittgenstein and the positivists is a fascinating one, which has been discussed many times, and has developed its own historical mythology. For example, Wittgenstein never actually met with the Circle in its entirety, as is commonly believed.<sup>29</sup> Rather he did meet with a small group of them, including Schlick, Waismann and Carnap in late 1920's and early 1930's—in his infamous 'transitional' phase, when he had begun re-evaluating the consequences of the *Tractatus*. Likewise, it is not true that that the influence of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* spread evenly

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<sup>29</sup> Carl Menger “Memories of Moritz Schlick” in *Rationality and Science*, ed. E. T. Gadol (New York, Springer-Verlag: 1982) p. 86n3.

across all of the members of the Circle. For instance Otto Neurath, one of the founders and intellectual cornerstones of the group, remained skeptical of Wittgenstein's views. Often in the meetings of the Circle, Waismann alone remained his most adamant supporter. However, Wittgenstein's influence on many of the most prominent logical positivists—including Schlick, Carnap and Ayer—is unmistakable.

By the time that Wittgenstein had met with Schlick and his colleagues, Wittgenstein had already returned to Vienna after teaching grade school for several years in Lower Austria. The *Tractatus*, having been published five years earlier, was already receiving much attention, specially in the philosophical circles of Vienna. Hans Hahn taught a seminar on recent developments in the philosophy of mathematics in 1922, in which Wittgenstein's work had been included. From this, Wittgenstein had gained admirers such as the mathematician Kurt Reidemeister, and the philosopher Moritz Schlick.<sup>30</sup> At the time, Schlick was one of the head members of a small group of philosophers, scientists and mathematicians who met on alternate Thursdays to discuss the philosophy of science. Over the next few years, '*Der Schlick-Kreis*' would eventually crystallize into a shared philosophical position, which would in turn become an influential philosophical methodology in the English speaking world.<sup>31</sup>

The Circle devoted nearly a whole academic year to the *Tractatus*, reading it aloud, sentence by sentence.<sup>32</sup> This would prove to have a particular and significant influence on the discussions in the Circle. As Karl Menger, who was at the time a mathematics student at Vienna, reports: “[a] new kind of jargon had developed. In

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30 Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. Brian McGuinness and trans. Brian McGuinness and Joachim Schulte (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 13.

31 Menger, “Memories,” 85.

32 *Ibid.*, 86.

particular, two terms, new in the 1920's, had been completely integrated in the vocabulary Schlick and all other members of the Circle and were freely and perpetually used by the Circle: *elementary propositions* and *tautologies*.”<sup>33</sup>

Schlick initially wrote to Wittgenstein in late 1924, to invite him to the meetings:

As an admirer of your *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* I have long intended to get in touch with you . . . Every winter semester I have regular meetings with colleagues and gifted students who are interested in the foundations of logic and mathematics and your name has often been mentioned in this group, particularly since my mathematical colleague Professor Reidemeister reported on your work in a lecture which made a great impression on us all. So there are a number of people here—I am one myself—who are convinced of the importance and correctness of your fundamental ideas and who feel a strong desire to play some part in making your views more widely known.<sup>34</sup>

Schlick would eventually travel with a small group of students to Otterthal in 1926, where Wittgenstein was teaching school. The trip was likened by Schlick's wife to “a holy pilgrimage” to meet what he had described as “one of the greatest geniuses on earth.” However when Schlick arrived, he had found that Wittgenstein had already resigned his post in scandal and left town.<sup>35</sup> The two would finally meet in 1927, when Wittgenstein returned to Vienna to help design and build a house with Paul Engelmann for his sister. His conversations with Schlick would continue over the next few years, and would come to include Frederick Waismann, Herbert Feigl, and a young philosopher named Rudolf Carnap—who would eventually become the most famous member of the Circle. Of course, these meetings were not always constructive. Often Wittgenstein's preoccupation with his architectural work would leave him in no mood to discuss

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33 Ibid., 86-7.

34 Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, p. 13.

35 Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 241-2.

philosophy. In one infamous instance, he read the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore to the positivists while sitting with his back to them.<sup>36</sup>

Wittgenstein would return to Cambridge in 1929. That same year the Vienna Circle would officially be formed—christened, as it were, by the publication of *Die Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*, a sort of 'positivist manifesto'.<sup>37</sup> Soon to follow would be the journal *Annalen der Philosophie*, which would later be renamed *Erkenntnis*: the main journal for the logical empiricists.<sup>38</sup> By 1930 the Vienna Circle had ceased being a casual meeting on Thursday nights, to become a proper philosophical movement of international influence.

Wittgenstein, however, did not approve of the philosophy he had inspired. In a letter to Waismann in 1929, he wrote:

Because Schlick is no ordinary man, people owe it to him to take care not to let their 'good intentions' make him and the Vienna school which he leads ridiculous by boastfulness. When I say 'boastfulness' I mean any kind of self-satisfying posturing. 'Renunciation of metaphysics!' As if *that* were something new! (WVC 18)

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36 Peter French argues that his concern here is indeed philosophical. Arguing from a series of comments from *On Certainty* and *Philosophical Remarks*, French concludes that “Wittgenstein must be counted among Rorty's pragmatists [presumably from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*], standing against the dominant Western epistemological tradition as well as the poetic interpretation of the aims of philosophy. He was tempted during those days in Vienna, it may be supposed, to make a kind of Heideggerian turn to the poetic, possibly accounting for his reading of Tagore to the Circle.” see Peter French, “Why Did Wittgenstein Read Tagore to the Vienna Circle?” in *Protosoziologie im Kontext: 'Lebenswelt' und 'System' in Philosophie und Soziologie*, ed. Gerhard Preyer, Georg Peter, and Alexander Ulfig. (Wurzburg: Verlag, 1996), 249.

37 Collaboratively written by Neurath, Carnap and Hahn. It has been published in English as “The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle” in Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. Robert Cohen and Marie Neurath (Boston: D. Reidel, 1973), 299-318. This work will be discussed in greater length below in §3.

38 Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. Brian McGuinness and tr. Brian McGuinness and Joachim Schulte (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 17-18. Hereafter abbreviated WVC.

Although Wittgenstein had lost patience with the Circle, they would remain his major supporters for years to come. And as the political climate in the 1930's became increasingly inhospitable, the logical empiricists spread their brand of philosophy abroad, emigrating to Britain and the United States.<sup>39</sup> Positivism was gaining momentum—especially in the English speaking world—and Wittgenstein would come to play a role not unlike an 'estranged father' to his philosophical progeny.

### §3 *The Positivist Programme*

It should be somewhat suspicious to generalize a philosophical position from an entire philosophical movement; one runs the risk of painting with too coarse a brush-stroke.<sup>40</sup> Too often commentators tend to reify the philosophical positions of the members, ignoring the spirited disagreements within the Circle between phenomenism and physicalism, coherence and correspondence, and verification and testability. To add to this confusion, the members were themselves scientists of all types, from mathematicians to sociologists. But despite these drastic differences in approach and interest, there *is* remarkable agreement that lies at the core of their respective systems. Thus it is not hard to unify this motley group of thinkers into a single position, at the risk of abstracting a bit. Perhaps the most ideal text from which to get a synoptic view of

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39 Carnap would hold a position at the University of Chicago, and later at UCLA, where he would join Reichenbach on faculty. Feigl would go to Minnesota, and Frank to Harvard. In England, Waismann would move to Cambridge, and later to Oxford. Karl Popper fled for New Zealand. See Susan Sterrett, *Wittgenstein Flies a Kite: A Story of Models of Wings and Models of the World* (New York: Penguin, 2005), xx.

40 Due to the problems associated with summarizing the views of this diverse group of thinkers, I shall limit my focus to the more prominent members of the Circle, who were actively engaged in philosophical (not overtly mathematical or scientific) work, viz., Schlick, Carnap, Neurath and Waismann.

their philosophical aims would be the programmatic statement, “The Scientific Conception of the World.” Dedicated to the work of Mortiz Schlick, and presented to him “as a token of gratitude and joy at his remaining in Vienna,”<sup>41</sup> this pamphlet sought to propagate the philosophical aims and goals of the Vienna Circle abroad. It is thus the most direct source for their central aims.

The goal of the Circle can accurately, although somewhat vaguely, be described as the development of a unified science: “to link and harmonize the achievements of individual investigators in their various fields of science.”<sup>42</sup> Any such project seems to face an immediate problem: how to generalize from seemingly distinct fields of inquiry—both *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*—without losing explanatory power. This was achieved by paying close attention, not to the content of these respective sciences, but rather to the *methodology* of scientific inquiry. But still they needed a universal scientific method—an abstract way to represent various elements of these scientific methodologies, or “a neutral system of formulae.” Such an *Einheitsprache* would need a universal vocabulary and syntax, and would need to be “freed from the slang of historical language” to have “a total system of concepts.”<sup>43</sup> In Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* they found just that.

Gottlob Frege, although neglected in his own lifetime, had become an inspiration to the fledgling program of analytic philosophy. Carnap had attended Frege's lectures in Jena as early as 1910, but he admits he was not aware of the philosophical significance of

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41 Preface, “The Scientific Conception of the World,” *op. cit.*, 299 Schlick had an attractive offer from the University of Bonn—and declined—opting to return to Vienna after a visiting appointment at Stanford University in 1928-9.

42 Carnap, Hahn and Neurath, “The Scientific Conception of the World,” 306.

43 *Ibid.*, 306.

his logic until after Russell had devised a similar logical system based on Peano's notation.<sup>44</sup> Following the publication of *Principia Mathematica*, the “new logic” had proven itself to be a very powerful tool for the clarification and analysis of the sentences of natural language. It is this powerful new philosophical methodology which prompted Wittgenstein to come to Cambridge in order to study with Russell in 1912.

The new method of logical analysis revealed that the ordinary language that we use to express ourselves often seduces philosophers into untenable positions, through what amount to linguistic confusions. Russell's major contribution to this end had been his “Theory of Descriptions,” which takes as its basis that the logical form of the proposition is *not* identical with its grammatical form in natural language. It is by attending to the 'surface grammar' of language, the words themselves—rather than *the true logical form* of a given piece of language—that leads to these confusions.

In “On Denoting,” he puzzles about how a proposition can be meaningful when the referent of the grammatical subject, the thing it is about, does not exist. To use Russell's own example, consider the sentence:

(1) The Present King of France is bald

This sentence seems to harbor an inconsistency, since through the law of excluded middle, either the proposition (1) must be true, or its negation:

(2) The present King of France is not bald.

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<sup>44</sup> Carnap, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 6. Carnap's notes from 1910-14 have been published as *Frege's Lectures on Logic* ed. Rech and Awodey (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2004).



However, to establish the meaning of either (1) or (2), it seems that there must be something these propositions are *about* in order to establish their respective truth or falsity. The fact that there is no 'present King of France,' no existing object to be the truth-maker of the proposition, tempts us to say that such a proposition not meaningful. The inelegant solution of Meinong<sup>45</sup> allows for *all* subjects—whether they exist or not—to subsist nevertheless, and to have a sort of outside-being [*Aussersein*]. Thus although there is no such thing as a golden mountain, such an object does have a kind of quasi-existence; and indeed for Meinong, this complex is just as 'golden' and 'mountainous' as any peak, or brick of gold. This theory of complexes bloats one's ontology to an intolerable size.

Famously, Russell propounded a version of Occam's Razor in dealing with philosophical problems, “wherever possible, substitute [logical] constructions out of known entities for inferences to unknown entities.”<sup>46</sup> To allow for ontological economy, Russell's solution was to attend to the logical form of such denoting expressions, rather than the words themselves; the supposed problem is merely a confusion that results from assuming that the logic of the proposition should follow the grammar of the sentence, the subject-predicate form. This conflation of the subject-predicate form of grammar and the true logical structure of a given sentence is one of the main things that the new logic of *Principia* sought to revolutionize. Russell thought that we should instead interpret this as an existentially quantified expression, for which there either is, or is not, an object *x* that

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45 A version of which was adopted earlier by Russell in his theory of denoting phrases in *Principles of Mathematics* (New York: Norton, 1996), Chapter V.

46 Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1985), 161

satisfies the predicates 'is bald,' 'is the present King of France,' and an identity constraint to specify that there is only one such entity. If there is such an existing object that can satisfy the conjunction of these conditions, then the sentence is true; otherwise, we can merely call the proposition false, instead of meaningless. The existentially quantified proposition then always has a truth value whether the subject term exists or not, thus sidestepping the possible meaningfulness of such expressions. What Russell had shown, above all else, is that certain philosophical perplexities are shown to result from a failure to attend closely to the logical features implicit in, and obscured by, ordinary grammar.

Wittgenstein, having been trained in logic by Russell, agreed with much of this characterization of philosophy. Indicating his debt to Russell, Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* that “[a]ll philosophy is a 'critique of language.’” He adds that “[i]t was Russell who performed the service of showing that the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its real one” (4.0031). A bit earlier, talks about the misleading character of natural language:

It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from [natural language] what the logic of language is. Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes (4.002).

The *a priori* methods of logic, and the universal philosophical methodology that it represented, seemed to provide an indubitably certain place from which to start; and in addition, the method of analysis that it provided—a discovery of the true logical form underlying the natural language statements we use to philosophize—provided to the Vienna Circle a powerful critique of the speculative metaphysics dominant in Europe throughout the Nineteenth Century.

Another prominent influence on the logical positivists was the empiricist epistemology of the British tradition, through the influence of the epistemological work of Ernst Mach. Mach was a physicist and philosopher who held the Chair of Inductive Sciences at the University of Vienna from 1895 onwards.<sup>47</sup> His epistemology was a phenomenalist empiricism, which borrowed heavily from the British empiricism of David Hume and John Stuart Mill.<sup>48</sup> According to a phenomenalist epistemology, the only thing truly present to the mind are sensations. If sensations are the only thing to which the mind has direct access, then objects as we know them are really nothing but mental constructions built out of these sensations. That is, the mind cannot access the world itself, but rather only grasps the qualities of these objects which are given to the mind. This type of empiricism lends itself to a deep epistemological anti-realism and a suspicion of metaphysics, just as with Hume. Although not all of the positivists accepted this Machean phenomenism—most notably the physicalist Neurath—Mach's influence of this empiricist methodology would shape the philosophical position of Schlick, as well that of Carnap in his mighty *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt*.<sup>49</sup>

The positivism of the Vienna Circle would unite the method of logical analysis characteristic of Frege and Russell, with the empiricism of Mach.<sup>50</sup> Frege and Russell's *a priori* science of logic provided a model for correct reasoning, by which one can reform philosophy to a degree of mathematical certainty. So long as one reasoned correctly according to wholly empirical premises, an entire model of the world and all that could

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47 This is a title which later Moritz Schlick would also hold.

48 Or, in the case of Ayer, to David Hume.

49 Carnap, *Logical Structure of the World*, op. cit.

50 With Russell, there was an influence on both of these major themes, himself an empiricist with phenomenalist tendencies.

possibly be known could in turn be constituted. This is exactly what they found in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

As mentioned above, the positivists rejected a great deal of 19<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysics, including primarily the idealism of the Hegelian tradition, and the more moderate forms of idealism resident in the two major schools of Neo-Kantianism. To Carnap, for example, from the 'new logic' "follows the impossibility of any metaphysics which tries to draw inferences from experience to something transcendent which lies beyond experience and not in itself experientiable."<sup>51</sup> To Carnap, "[l]ogic is no longer merely one philosophical discipline amongst others, but we are able to say it outright: Logic is the method of philosophizing."<sup>52</sup> Instead of relying upon philosophy as a tool to gain access to that which transcends experience it should rather be viewed as a scientific enterprise, going "hand in hand with empirical science . . . no longer viewed as a domain of knowledge in its own right, on par with, or superior to, the empirical sciences."<sup>53</sup> The proper function of philosophy then is, in some sense, solely negative; philosophy is "a critique of language." The problem as they saw it, is that a great deal of metaphysics is generated by a naïve assumption that the logic of language is identical with the grammar of the sentences of ordinary discourse; thus this type of speculative metaphysics does not provide genuine philosophical insights, but rather confusions that result from *a misuse of language*.

The major thesis that the positivists borrowed from Wittgenstein's early philosophy is his theory of nonsense. According to their understanding, nonsense is

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51 Carnap, "Elimination of Metaphysics" 145.

52 Carnap, "The Old and the New Logic," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York, Free Press, 1959),133.

53 *Ibid.*, 133.

created in one of two ways. First, if a term is used which does not have a legitimate meaning, usually defined in terms of direct sensory 'verification' through the world. Questions of "God" and "ethics" model this first type of nonsense for the Vienna Circle. To the positivists words like "substance," "being," "God," etc., should be revealed for what they really are—devoid of meaning. To see that this is the case, one merely needs to examine the way philosophy relies upon the constructions in ordinary language. Grammatically speaking, nouns can be used simultaneously for substantives like 'table' and 'water,' but also for intangible relational qualities like 'friendship' and 'love'; and in even more egregious cases, nouns can be made substantive by being derived from verbs, like 'being.' In such an accidental grammatical slip, certain philosophical terms have been torn from their original meanings, have become reified and abstracted, and serve only as a type of high-brow 'slang.' And although these terms are circulated, often they have no actual value. Carnap's critique of Heidegger in "Elimination of Metaphysics," for example, might be seen in just this light

The second way a sentence can be denied cognitive meaning is when, through ignoring the true logical role of a given term, the sentence combines words in an illegitimate way. This can be seen in cases of cross-category equivocation. An example that might illustrate this is the expression "Caesar is a prime number." This says nothing since the predicate can only apply to numbers, not people. Perhaps the best example of this is Carnap's infamous critique of Heidegger's statement "The Nothing itself nothings." What Heidegger was misled by "employing the word 'nothing' as a noun," since 'nothing' is "not a particular name, but a certain *logical form* of the sentence that serves this

purpose,” viz., a negated existential quantifier. By using a word which has a defined grammatical role. It is the goal of a properly scientific *Weltanschauung* to reveal the inappropriateness of these uses of terms, and to eliminate them from their philosophical usage.

To more properly establish philosophy as a scientific endeavor, and in direct opposition to the “metaphysical concept poetry”<sup>54</sup> of their philosophical predecessors, they espoused the infamous 'verification' theory of meaning. According to this, cognitive meaning is denied to any non-tautological statement which cannot be in principle 'verified' through the empirically given.<sup>55</sup> For example, metaphysical and normative utterances, because they are neither tautological nor verifiable through experience, are considered *cognitively meaningless*, and should be eliminated from philosophy.<sup>56</sup>

To this end of creating a unified science, Carnap advocated altering natural language reports of scientific claims by reducing them from the material mode of speech—a high level 'slang' which contains philosophical conclusions put in ordinary language—down to the physical language of protocol-sentences. These phenomenalist or physicalistic statements<sup>57</sup> should be those that “refer to the given, and describe directly

54 Ibid., 133.

55 That a given statement must be “in principle” verifiable is important. That is, although that “A planet revolving around Alpha Centauri can support human life” is unverifiable given the present state of technology, it is not impossible to verify this. But, as Ayer tells us, “I do know what observations would decide it for me, if, as it is theoretically conceivable, I were once in a position to make them.” A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952), 36. See also Schlick, “Postivism and Realism” in Ayer, *Logical Positivism*, 88-89.

56 There is a confusion lingering here, which the positivists were not aware of until much later. It is one thing to be true logically, by virtue of its form (ex., if p, then p), and quite another to be semantically true by meanings alone (ex., a 'bachelor' is an unmarried man). For the latter, they can be shown to be logically true by the addition of a meaning postulate, whereby a semantic truth can be transformed into a logical truth. See Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 222-6.

57 Carnap of the *Aufbau* sought to reduce natural language down to phenomenalist sense-date reports. Later, in *The Unity of Science* (mostly due to the influence of Neurath) he advocated a more physicalist position in regard to protocol sentences. Carnap, *The Unity of Science*, tr. Max Black

given experience or phenomena, i.e., the simplest states of which knowledge can be had.”<sup>58</sup> Through such a reduction, what follows is a direct series of reports which can then be universalized between all sciences. By analysis of scientific statements back to the language of immediate sense-experience, Carnap and those influenced by him sought to reduce all sciences to their core: what the experimenter experiences. Sense-verification as a criterion of meaning 'revealed' to them that certain timeless philosophical truths, “[t]he suppositions of sentences of metaphysics, of the philosophy of values, of ethics,” reveal themselves not to be real problems at all, but rather are “pseudo-problems.” Carnap writes that:

. . . there is a sharp boundary between two kinds of statements. To one belong the statements as they are made by empirical science; their meaning can be determined by logical analysis or, more precisely, through reduction to the simplest statements about the empirically given. The other statements, to which belong those cited above, reveal themselves as empty of meaning if one takes them in the way that metaphysicians intend . . . If a metaphysician or theologian wants to retain the usual medium of language, then he must himself realize and bring about clearly that he is giving not description but expression, not theory or communication of knowledge, but poetry and myth.<sup>59</sup>

Through this clarification of statements, “pseudo-questions are automatically eliminated.” A given proposition in the material mode of speech, which employs macro-slang for concepts and processes, would through analysis be restated in terms of the observations involved in the sentence; these sense-data statements can be verified by being compared with the world one-by-one.

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(Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995).

58 Carnap, *Unity of Science*, 45.

59 Carnap, Hahn and Neurath, “The Scientific Conception of the World,” 307.

As a consequence, even philosophical discourse concerning such areas as politics and art, is likewise vilified. As to ethical statements—which seem *prima facie* not nearly as suspicious as their metaphysical counterparts—the only type of meaning that they can have is purely “emotive.” That is, “[t]hey have no logical content, but are only expressions of feeling which in their turn simulate feelings and volitional tendencies on the part of the hearer.”<sup>60</sup> The only possible role of an ethical statement is merely to express approval or disapproval of specific actions, or to persuade others to adopt similar attitudes. But morality, as an autonomous field of philosophical inquiry, is vacuous. The Vienna Circle read the *Tractatus* in harmony with the views to which they were committed. Carnap confirms this understanding, telling us that Wittgenstein's great inspiration to the positivists was to have “shown that the so called sentences of metaphysics and of ethics are pseudo-sentences.”<sup>61</sup> And, indeed, there are remarks that seem to support this.

#### §4 *Russell's Wittgenstein*

One of the first published misunderstandings of the *Tractatus*, which helped to support the positivists' reading, is Russell's Introduction to the text. Russell had benefited from his conversations with his protege, and had integrated a great deal of Wittgenstein's philosophy into his own work. In the series of lectures published as the *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, for example, Russell mentions that the ideas contained therein “are very largely concerned with explaining certain ideas which I learned from my friend and

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<sup>60</sup> Carnap, *Logical Syntax of Language*, 278.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.



former pupil Ludwig Wittgenstein.”<sup>62</sup> References to Wittgenstein's influence are generously sprinkled throughout the lectures.<sup>63</sup> Such allusions to Russell's debt can also be found in the influential set of lectures published as *Our Knowledge of the External World*.<sup>64</sup> It is noteworthy that Carnap adopts his position from a careful scrutiny of *Our Knowledge of the External World*, in which Wittgenstein is explicitly mentioned as having an influence. Carnap specifically cites this set of lectures as instrumental to developing his philosophical methodology. “Some passages made an especially vivid impression on me,” Carnap writes, “because they formulated clearly and explicitly a view of the aim of philosophy which I had implicitly held for some time . . . I felt as if his appeal had been directed at me personally. To work in this spirit would be my task from now on!”<sup>65</sup>

After having approached several publishing houses leading up to 1921, the *Tractatus* had been rejected several times. Wittgenstein had asked Russell to compose the Introduction to the book, hoping that it would make it easier to be published. The endorsement of the world famous Cambridge logician certainly did help it eventually get published; however, it would be mistaken to say that Russell's interpretation is an accurate presentation of the ideas in the *Tractatus*. In a letter dated April 9, 1920, Wittgenstein indicates his disapproval of the Introduction: “There's so much of it that I'm not quite in agreement with,” he writes, “both where you're critical of me and also where you're simply trying to elucidate my point of view” (WC 118).

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62 Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 35.

63 Ibid., 46, 67, 91.

64 Bertrand Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 12, 213n.

65 Carnap, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 13.

Russell's Introduction begins by stating that the *Tractatus* concerns “the conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language.”<sup>66</sup> Such a language, as expounded in Russell's lectures on logical atomism, would have very specific features.

In a logically perfect language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact, with the exception of such words as 'or,' 'not,' 'if,' 'then,' which have a different function. In a logically perfect language there would be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the words which simple things can enter in, one word for each simple component . . . Actual languages are not logically perfect in this sense, and they cannot possibly be, if they are to serve the purposes of daily life. A logically perfect language, if it could be constructed, would not be intolerably prolix, but, as regards its vocabulary, would be very largely private to one speaker. That is to say, all the names that it would use would be private to that speaker and could not enter into the language of another speaker.<sup>67</sup>

Here the two primary reasons that Russell gives for “ordinary language” being modified are first, that it allows for nonsensical combinations of symbols, that some such combination of symbols are impermissible; or secondly, there is no meaning attached to a given term, because it does not have a unique referent.<sup>68</sup> In Wittgenstein's own terminology, natural language often contains several 'symbols' for the same 'sign.' However, there is textual evidence that Wittgenstein's philosophical method was not so much concerned with revising ordinary language in favor of such an ideal language of logic. In the *Tractatus*, he tell us that: “[a]ll propositions of our colloquial language are actually, just as they are, logically completely in order” (5.5563). The *Tractatus* is concerned with the essential aspects of representation as such, which corresponds just as

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66 Russell, Introduction to TLP, 7.

67 Russell, *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 58-9.

68 Russell, Introduction, 8.

much to ordinary language as it does to logical symbolism. Logic, for Wittgenstein, is the form of representation—“a reflexion of the world”—and not a language in itself (6.13). For Wittgenstein, the reduction of ordinary language to the ideal language of logic, through a Russellian “hierarchy of languages,” is improper. While Russell was concerned primarily with amending the defects that result from philosophizing in natural language by translating it into the ideal language of logic, as I will show below no such commitment is appropriate to Wittgenstein.

Perhaps the most obvious place where one can get a clear view of the problems of Russell's exposition are his criticisms of the *Tractatus*. Aside from some rather technical points, such as the ability of Wittgenstein's definition of number to account for transfinite quantities, Russell's main points of contention are with Wittgenstein's discussion of “the mystical,” and Wittgenstein's distinction between saying [*sagen*] and showing [*zeigen*]. Russell rightfully points out that, for Wittgenstein, the logic of representation in language is itself ineffable—since it is a precondition for the use of language. That is, one must use the form of representation of language to represent itself in speaking about it. After which, Russell here first puts forth a very common criticism of Wittgenstein's early thought when he accuses his former pupil of standing in performative contradiction. “What causes hesitation [to accept this point] is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be spoken. . . . The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr. Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying his ethical opinions.”<sup>69</sup>

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69 Ibid., p. 22.

This suggests to Russell a “loophole” for Wittgenstein, that if he were to postulate through the existence of “a hierarchy of languages,” that one can express on the meta-level features of the object language in question—and in this way, Russell thinks, Wittgenstein intended to express the inexpressible. Russell commits himself to the existence of “levels” of language in his ramified theory of types, the solution to the infamous contradiction in Frege's *Grundgesetze* concerning a class which contains all and only the classes which are not members of itself. But as mentioned earlier, the idea of such a hierarchy of languages, and the ability for one language to be completely described from a meta-language, is antithetical to Wittgenstein's project.<sup>70</sup> Russell's ramified theory of types in *Principia*—perhaps the most compelling reason for accepting such a hierarchy of languages—was robustly criticized in the *Tractatus*; Wittgenstein refers to it as an “error” (3.331), and which he thinks “vanishes” (3.333) in a proper logical symbolism. Russell's “intellectual discomfort” at this point leads to a misunderstanding, not only for Russell, but also for the Vienna Circle.

#### §5 *The Positivist Wittgenstein*

The positivists read Wittgenstein as saying that only non-tautological propositions which are fact stating—or, more precisely, those that are capable of modeling the world as it is—are meaningful. Those which are not, including the pseudo-propositions of ethics and metaphysics, should be considered *nonsense*. In this way, as I mentioned earlier, the positivist interpretation of the *Tractatus* paints Wittgenstein as a sort of

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<sup>70</sup> For more on this point, see above pp. 91-2.

modern-day Hume—who sought to set the limits of thought, and prescribed that nothing of substantive philosophical importance can lie beyond that line. A good deal of evidence which supports the continuity between the *Tractatus* and the project of the Vienna Circle concerns a shared view of the nature of philosophy. Both Wittgenstein and the positivists viewed the function of philosophy as primarily negative—the method of philosophy is that of *logical analysis*.<sup>71</sup> “Logic is no longer merely one philosophical discipline amongst others,” Carnap tells us, “but we are able to say it outright: Logic is the method of philosophizing.”<sup>72</sup> In the spirit of Russell's logic and the explanatory successes that resulted from his theory of descriptions, which Ramsey once praised as a “paradigm of philosophy,”<sup>73</sup> the method of logical analysis seemed to promise the solution to all outstanding philosophical puzzles.

In a series of remarks from TLP 4.111 - 4.115, Wittgenstein offers us a more robust view of his conception of philosophy. He tells us here that philosophy is not a body of doctrines, but rather an “activity,” the function of which is the clarification of thoughts. “Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries” (4.112). He denies that philosophy is itself a science, but rather its role is to “set limits to the much disputed sphere of natural sciences” (4.111, 4.113). “The correct method in philosophy,” Wittgenstein tells us in 6.53, “would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science . . .” Recall that this is nearly identical to the positivists' view of philosophy, for whom its function was to limit the range of

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71 See above, §3.

72 Carnap, “The Old and New Logic,” 133.

73 F. P. Ramsey, “Philosophy” in *Philosophical Papers* ed. D. H. Mellor (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 1n.

meaningful contingent statements to those which can be established on the basis of the empirically given, and those statements which follow deductively from these empirically verified statements. Of course, Carnap and Wittgenstein both were deeply influenced by Russell's work in logical theory—so it should not be surprising that they would have similar views on the nature of philosophy. Both are, after all, two members of the budding analytic tradition.

More interesting, however, are the remarks which seem to indicate that Wittgenstein, like the positivists, thought that philosophy should be concerned with nothing propositions capable of verification. In the Preface to the text, Wittgenstein tells us that his book “will . . . draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thought.” Such a limit, he continues, can “only be drawn in language and *what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.*”<sup>74</sup> Also at 4.003, Wittgenstein says that “[m]ost propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but senseless. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their senselessness. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language.” Following this, he adds a cryptic example: “They are of the same kind as the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful.” It seems telling that his example of such 'senselessness' is a proposition which contains the normative terms 'good' and 'beautiful.' Further, in the concluding remarks 6.52-3, he tells us that “[w]e feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the

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74 Preface to TLP, emphasis mine.

answer.” Adjoining this: “And so it is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really *no* problems.” That is, the problems of life are not 'real' questions, and so the proper answer would be a denial of the question. 6.53 continues:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.

Some additional passages which also support the positivist interpretation include 6.4-6.421, where Wittgenstein addresses value judgments. He writes:

All propositions are of equal value.

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.

Hence also it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.

Ethics is transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)

These passages seem to indicate that Wittgenstein intended to disassociate the sphere of fact from that of value. It is Wittgenstein's clearly stated position that for a proposition to have meaning, it must say something about the world; only a proposition which can be decomposed through analysis into a truth-functional combination of elementary

propositions has sense and is expressible.<sup>75</sup> A value-laden expression does not say anything about how the world *is*. Although it might indicate *how the world ought to be* or *that it ought to be that way*—in either case it is not genuine proposition for Wittgenstein. This is because the essence of language is to represent the world, so fact stating claims are the only ones which can be truly meaningful—the only ones which can be spoken; the solution for those who may wish to utter normative or metaphysical claims is to remain silent. And famously, Wittgenstein's last word in the text is “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (7).<sup>76</sup> Throughout all of these passages, Wittgenstein seems to sound remarkably similar to the Vienna Circle. However just because Wittgenstein, like the positivists, may have sought to create a gulf between statements of fact and value, it still remains an open question whether he assigns the same significance (or lack thereof) that the positivists did to them. This relies upon understanding *the relationship* between these two spheres, not merely the demarcation of each to their respective sides.

The remarks thus far surveyed, if taken alone, would seem to indicate that Wittgenstein shared roughly the same philosophical outlook as the positivists. As to the nature of philosophy, the ability to express the factual, and the inability to express all else—all of this is consistent with the position of the Vienna Circle. In this respect, it is not surprising that this simple understanding of Wittgenstein's position was embraced by them. As his long time friend Paul Engelmann remarks, “[a] whole generation of disciples was able to take Wittgenstein for a positivist, because he has something of enormous importance in common with the positivists: he draws the line between what we

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75 This will be analyzed at length above in Chapter 3.

76 TLP, Ogden translation used for emphasis.



can speak about and what we must be silent about just as they do.”<sup>77</sup> Certainly it is one of the main contentions of Wittgenstein's early thought that that of which one cannot speak, one must remain silent (7). Wittgenstein refers to this in the Preface to the *Tractatus* as “the whole meaning” of the book. However, as I will next show, the significance of this final remark is taken wrongly by the positivists—perhaps due to their reading a very British empiricism into the *Tractatus*, a work otherwise conspicuously silent on epistemological concerns. As Engelmann continues, the difference between Wittgenstein and the positivists is that the positivists “have nothing to be silent about.” He explains:

Positivism holds—and this is its essence—that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. *Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about.* When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant, it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean.<sup>78</sup>

### *§6 Elementary Propositions and Verification*

Wittgenstein was committed to the Russellian notion that the clarification of propositions is garnered through the process of analysis. We find Wittgenstein saying at 3.25 that “A proposition has one and only one complete analysis.” A complete analysis, he tells us earlier, is when “in a proposition a thought can be expressed in such a way that elements of the propositional sign correspond to the objects of the thought” (3.2).<sup>79</sup> And

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, trans. L. Furtmüller and ed. Brian McGuinness (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), 97.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97. Emphasis in original.

<sup>79</sup> It is important not to be misled by the epistemological language of this quote. Wittgenstein never provides an answer to how these elements correspond to thoughts. When pressed by Russell on this point, Wittgenstein replies: “I don't know *what* the constituents of thought are but I know *that* it must have such constituents which correspond to the words of Language. Again the kind of relation of the

elsewhere he tells us that “the analysis of propositions must bring us to elementary propositions” (4.221). Elementary propositions [*Elementarsätze*] are “names in immediate combination,” and are the last residue of analysis—since names “cannot be dissected any further” (3.26).<sup>80</sup> We are also told that an elementary proposition “asserts the existence of a state of affairs [*Sachverhalte*]” (4.21).<sup>81</sup> A proposition, he further specifies, is “[a] truth function of elementary propositions” (5). That is, a proposition is true just in case all of its component elementary propositions are true. But what of these elementary propositions? And what determines their truth or falsity? The term “Elementary proposition” is somewhat enigmatic in the text, since Wittgenstein never adequately explains what it means. But in the empiricist gaze of the Vienna Circle, elementary propositions were interpreted by them to mean simple observation statements, or “protocol sentences.”

Recall that for the logical empiricists, committed to the phenomenalism or Mach and the logic of Russell, philosophy's true role was on par with that of science. The only legitimate contingent propositions are those which satisfy the verification criteria of meaning. All other philosophical statements are merely “pseudo-statements” and can have no value in philosophy. Reading elementary propositions as sense-data statements brought Wittgenstein's position in line with their own. On this interpretation, Wittgenstein's commitment to clarification of philosophical statements by analysis—that

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constituents of thought and of the pictured fact is irrelevant. It would be a matter for psychology to find out” (WC 98-9).

80 cf. TLP 4.22: “An elementary proposition consists of names. It is a nexus, a concatenation, of names.”

81 Ogden and Ramsey, in the original translation of the TLP, renders Wittgenstein's term *Sachverhalte* as “atomic fact.” Pears and McGuinness, however, translate it “state of affairs.” To avoid confusion, I will henceforth use the German term throughout.

is, supposedly reducing them down to the language of sense-impressions—seems perfectly catered to verificationism.

Ayer tells us that the Vienna Circle “took it for granted that the elementary statements which yielded this criteria of meaning [viz., the verification principle] were reports of observations.”<sup>82</sup> Also Karl Popper, in his discussion of Wittgenstein's position, makes the same conflation between elementary propositions and observations statements:

All genuine (or meaningful) propositions were truth-functions of the elementary or atomic propositions which described “atomic facts,” i.e., facts which can in principle be ascertained by observation . . . If we call a statement an “observation statement” not only if it states an actual observation but also if it states anything that may be observed, we shall have to say that *every genuine proposition must be a truth-function of, and therefore deducible from, observation statements*. All other apparent propositions will be, in fact, nonsense; they will be meaningless pseudo-propositions.<sup>83</sup>

In addition, Karl Menger reports that members of the Circle, when questioned, provided 'this is red' as an example of an elementary proposition.<sup>84</sup>

However, the equation of sense-data statements to Wittgenstein's elementary propositions cannot be textually maintained in the *Tractatus*. We find him saying at 6.3751, “the logical product of two elementary propositions can neither be a tautology nor a contradiction. The assertion that a point in the visual field has two different colours at the same time, is a contradiction.” If a specific color report, such as 'this point on object A is simultaneously red and blue' is a contradiction, then it cannot be logically simple since *Sachverhalte* “are independent of one another” (2.061). From the existence or non-existence of a *Sachverhalt*, he tells us, “it is impossible to infer the existence or

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82 A. J. Ayer “Editor's Introduction” to *Logical Positivism*, p. 12.

83 Karl Popper, quoted in Anscombe, *Introduction*, 25. Emphasis mine.

84 Menger, “Memories,” 87.

non-existence of another” (2.062). However, the assertion that 'this is red' does exclude other color attributions to that same point. “For two colors e.g., to be at one place in the visual field, is impossible, logically impossible, for it is excluded by the logical structure of colour” (6.3751).<sup>85</sup> Also, since Wittgenstein asserts that a *Sachverhalt* exists if and only if the corresponding elementary proposition is true (4.25), it follows that if an elementary proposition were to come into contradiction with another, then it would be false that both *Sachverhalte* could exist, again *contra* 2.062. If this is due to “the logical structure of colour” as he puts it in 6.3751, then it follows that colors are *not* logical simples, and thus cannot be constituents of an elementary proposition—for if it has logical structure, then it cannot be simple. However *Sachverhalten* are simple, and as such they cannot contradict one another. Elementary propositions, according to the text, are the “simplest” kind and consist only of “a concatenation of names” (4.21, 4.22). Since names uniquely stand for objects in the fully analyzed proposition, it follows that colors are not objects, but rather “forms of objects” (2.0251).<sup>86</sup> Thus the logical empiricists' interpretation of elementary propositions as simple observation statements cannot be what Wittgenstein meant by this term.

Interpreting elementary propositions as sense-data statements is a crucial step for the positivist interpretation of Wittgenstein since, according to the verification principle, a contingent statement is meaningful if and only if it corresponds to sense experience. However, this is certainly not the last word on Wittgenstein's alleged verificationism

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85 This argument is adapted from Anscombe, *Introduction*, 27.

86 It might be objected that at 4.123 Wittgenstein does speak of colors as objects. He describes internal properties as ones in which “it is unthinkable that its object should not possess it.” The example he provides to illustrate this is “This shade of blue and that one stand, eo ipso, in the internal relation of lighter to darker. It is unthinkable that these two objects should not stand in this relation.” However, one must not be too hasty to overlook that he qualifies this as a “shifting use of the word 'object'.”

because, as it is widely known, a great deal of how the positivists read Wittgenstein was gained directly from Wittgenstein in his conversations with the Vienna Circle. From the notes of these meetings, there is textual evidence which seems to support that he did indeed hold a verificationist theory of meaning. There are a great many places throughout the Waismann notes of Wittgenstein's meetings with the Circle,<sup>87</sup> as well as in *Philosophical Remarks*,<sup>88</sup> where he discusses verification. He refers to the sense of a proposition as “its method of verification,” and adds that “[i]n order to understand the proposition, you need to know its verification. To specify it is to specify the sense of the proposition” (WVC 227).

There are many problems, both historically and textually, when we try to read what Wittgenstein means here by “verification” in exactly the same sense as the positivists. Anscombe reports that Wittgenstein reacted in outrage when, during a meeting of the Moral Science Club at Cambridge, a member attributed the verification principle to him. “Who? Me?” he exclaimed.<sup>89</sup> First, even if Wittgenstein *did* hold a position where the only criterion of the meaning of a proposition was by its experiential verification in the late 1920's and early 1930's, this does not necessarily reflect a position that he held leading up to the initial publication of the *Tractatus* in 1921. Secondly, and I think more importantly, the word 'verification' meant different things for Wittgenstein and the positivists. There are three main points of contrast between the meaning that Wittgenstein seems to give 'verification' and that of the Vienna Circle. For Wittgenstein, verification can be read as a sufficient condition for the meaningfulness of a term or

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87 See WVC 47-8, 53, 70-1, 79, 97-8, 126, 158, 186, 204, 211, 221, 226-7, 232.

88 See *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees and tr. Raymond Hargraves and Roger White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 62, 66, 174, 200, 282, 287, 289. Hereafter abbreviated PR.

89 Anscombe, “Ludwig Wittgenstein” *Philosophy* 70 (1995): 405-6.

proposition, whereas for the positivists it is both a necessary and sufficient condition. In addition, for the logical empiricists, verification was a single method of testing all propositions, and is garnered specifically through appeal to immediate sense data. Lastly, Wittgenstein clearly differs with the positivists on the question of conclusive verification. In the remainder of this section, I shall endeavor to illustrate these three points.

For the Positivists, the verification principle was a single criterion for meaningfulness, which was used as a test for the meaning of all propositions. In its earliest form, the Positivists held that verification is at least a necessary condition, but more often both a necessary and sufficient condition, for a statement to have meaning.<sup>90</sup> As Schlick put it, “a proposition has a storable meaning only if it makes a verifiable difference whether it is true or false. A proposition which is such that the world remains the same whether it is true or false simply says nothing about the world; it is empty and communicates nothing; I can give it no meaning.”<sup>91</sup> It is important to the Vienna Circle that verification be at least a necessary condition for the sense of a proposition, for otherwise they would be unable to claim that the absence of verification implies that a proposition has no meaning. However, it should be noted that “verification” as the Vienna Circle uses the term—that is, as a condition for the possibility of the meaning—is not the same as what Wittgenstein means by the term. Wittgenstein often says that a given method of verification determines the sense of a proposition; or put differently, verification is a sufficient condition for its sense.

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90 This “strong” version of the verification principle later gave way to a “weaker” version under criticism that it cannot account for general laws, sometimes called the verification “criteria.” See Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 36-8

91 Schlick “Positivism and Realism,” 88. The reader should note that Schlick does not exclude tautological propositions from verification here.

It was in his Cambridge lectures in the early 1930's, he infamously remarked, “The sense of statement is the way in which it is verified.” However he went on to clarify, seemingly aware of this ambiguity, that “this is necessarily merely a rule of thumb, because 'verification' means different things, and because in some cases the question 'How is it verified?' makes no sense.”<sup>92</sup> G. E. Moore, who recorded this remark, concluded that Wittgenstein meant that verification is a heuristic device by which one can clarify meanings when there is ambiguity, and not as an absolute criterion for meaningfulness as such.<sup>93</sup> Likewise in the recorded notes of his lectures, Wittgenstein makes an important distinction between verification *being* the meaning of a proposition, and *determining* the meaning of a proposition. “My reply,” he tells us, “is to deny that the verification *gives* the meaning. It merely *determines* the meaning, i.e., determines its use, or grammar.”<sup>94</sup>

The Positivists, on the other hand, often talked of verification as *a criterion of meaningfulness*—as a conclusive test which gives meaning to a proposition, not as a tool for clarification. Waismann in his *Theses*, for instance, talks of verification as both a necessary and sufficient condition for the meaningfulness of a proposition. “If I cannot specify under what conditions the proposition is to count as being verified, I have not given the proposition a sense” (WVC 245). It does not follow from Wittgenstein's

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92 G. E. Moore, “Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33” *Mind* 63 (Jan. 1954): 14.

93 It is important to take these remarks in the 1930's in connection with Wittgenstein's *Satzsystem* view of language, where language is not a monolithic entity with one standard grammar (viz., logic), but rather consists of several integrated systems with differing grammars, and thus differing methods of verification. Wittgenstein's so-called verificationism can be read in this way as a tool for clarification in his broadly inferentialist view of language. See Jose Medina, “Verificationism and Inferentialism in Wittgenstein's Philosophy” *Philosophical Investigations* 24 (Oct. 2001): 304-313

94 *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932-5* ed. A. Ambrose (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 28-9. Hereafter abbreviated 'LAM.'

insistence that verification determines sense, that if there is no verification then the proposition has no sense—that would be to deny the antecedent. Here we find a rather significant difference between Wittgenstein's use of “verification” and that of the logical empiricists; and on this point, Wittgenstein can only be made to appear in harmony with the Positivists' version by equivocating on the word.

Secondly, nowhere in the relevant remarks does he specify that this process of verification must be *experiential verification*, let alone by appeal to immediate sense-data. Rather, Wittgenstein often talks about verification in the plural—of *methods of verification*. In the Waismann notes, for instance, he says:

Sometimes verification is very difficult, for example 'Seitz has been elected mayor [of Vienna].' How should I set about verifying this proposition? Is the correct method to go and make inquiries about it? Or ask the people who were present? But one [witness] was watching from the front and the other one from behind. Or should I read about it in the newspapers? (WVC 48)

What he seems to be revealing here is that the differences between these methods of verification for any given proposition are irrelevant, and any would seem to satisfy the condition of meaningfulness. However, he denies that all of them must be necessary together, rejecting the conception of verification whereby the proposition “always keeps a back-door open.” That is, no matter how one sets out to verify the proposition “we are never sure that we were not mistaken.”<sup>95</sup> Put simply, Wittgenstein never accepted sense-verification as a sole criterion for the meaningfulness of a proposition.

It should also not escape the reader that in the above quote, Wittgenstein's examples of verification are not direct observations, but instead are secondhand reports. Of course, one can see an individual—but how is it possible to see that *he is a 'mayor'*?<sup>96</sup>

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95 Ibid., p. 47

96 That is, excluding the cliché appearance of a sash on the person which labels him 'Mayor.'



Such methods are not to be reified and conglomerated into a *single method* of verification, as the Vienna Circle thought—much less a method which relies exclusively upon non-inferential sense reports. As Wittgenstein tells us in the *Philosophical Remarks*, “between the proposition and its verification there is no go-between negotiating this verification” (PR 87).

Not only did the positivists err by assigning a specifically phenomenalist epistemology to the *Tractatus*, and by equating Wittgenstein's elementary propositions to their protocol sentences, but the introduction of any specific epistemological presence in the *Tractatus* is highly suspect. Wittgenstein rejected epistemological concerns,<sup>97</sup> referring polemically to theories of knowledge as mere “philosophy of psychology” (4.1121). “Psychology,” he tells us, “is no nearer to philosophy than natural science.”<sup>98</sup>

He continues:

Does not my study of sign-language correspond to the study of thought processes which philosophers held to be so essential to the philosophy of logic? Only *they got entangled for the most part in unessential psychological investigations, and there is an analogous danger for my method.* (4.1121, emphasis mine)

It seems that the positivist reading of Wittgenstein succumbs to just this “danger.” Committed to the empiricism of Ernst Mach, they allowed substantive epistemological biases to temper their reading of the *Tractatus*. It should be clear from the reasons here

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<sup>97</sup> It might be objected that Wittgenstein *did* investigate into epistemological matters. While it is true that in the last few years of his life, especially 1949-51 has provided important insight into the nature of doubt and knowledge in *On Certainty*, perception in *Remarks on Colour* and (of course) the analysis of “inner” and “outer” in the *Philosophical Investigations* and *Last Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, this is irrelevant for the discussion of his Tractarian position.

<sup>98</sup> recall 4.11, quoted above, where he distances the role that natural science plays in philosophy. “Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences. (The word 'philosophy' must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences).”

outlined that Wittgenstein *did* think there was some relation between the mind and elementary propositions, as he says that a completely analyzed proposition is one in which “a thought can be expressed in such a way that elements of the propositional sign correspond to the objects of the thought” (3.2). But nowhere does he state exactly what exactly that connection is. A 1919 letter to Russell, when asked directly about the relation between a fact and a thought, Wittgenstein specifies: “I don't know *what* the constituents of thought are but I know *that* it must have such constituents which correspond to the words of Language. Again the kind or relation of the constituents of thought and of the pictured fact is irrelevant. It would be a matter for psychology to find out” (WC 98-9). By superimposing an epistemology on the text, the Positivists were able to read Wittgenstein as agreeing with their own philosophical predilections.

Lastly, it should be noted that Wittgenstein in certain places seems to suggest that there is no such thing as 'conclusive' verification. According to the “strong” version of the verification principle characteristic of the early view of the logical empiricists, a statement must be capable of being *conclusively verified* as a condition for its meaningfulness. As Schlick tells us, “a genuine statement must be capable of conclusive verification.”<sup>99</sup> If it is true that a method of verification determines its meaning, it follows that different methods of verification signal different meanings of the word. An example that Wittgenstein uses in the Waismann notes is the word 'time' (WVC 53, 98). This word can be used in two different ways, in the sense of objective 'clock time,' and additionally as the phenomenological consciousness of temporality. The latter is verified

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99 Moritz Schlick “Dis Kausalität in der gegenwärtigen Physik,” p. 150 quoted in Popper, “The Logic of Scientific Discovery” (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 40

by looking inward, as it were, whereas the former would be verified by looking outward. During my wait in line at the DMV, for example, it may seem like an hour has passed. However, a quick glance at the clock might reveal that instead I have been waiting only fifteen minutes. Throughout his discussion of verification, Wittgenstein continually states that if a proposition has more than one method of verification, then that signals that the statements have different senses. This also indicates that Wittgenstein meant verification as a way to determine the sense when the threat of ambiguity looms. “In order to obtain a clear notion of the meaning of a word,” he tells us, “it is necessary to attend to the sense of the propositions in which it occurs, to the way they are verified” (WVC 227). Again Wittgenstein is claiming that verification serves to *determine* the sense of a given proposition rather than, as the Positivists' thought, that it is precondition for meaning; “[t]he verification is not *one* token of truth, it is *the* sense of the proposition” (PR 200). As he would say later in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “Asking whether and how a proposition can be verified is only a particular way of asking 'How d'you mean?' The answer is a contribution to the grammar of the proposition” (PI 353).

In summary, even if it is objected that Wittgenstein had a verificationist theory of meaning—perhaps in a much looser connotation than the sense-verification of the logical empiricists—it is not the same as what the Positivists intended. First, verification for Wittgenstein was not a necessary condition for meaningfulness, but rather a sufficient condition. Its goal was not to be a conclusive test for the proposition, such that without verification a statement is meaningless. Rather it was used as a tool to clarify the

proposition, to decide between different meanings of a term in ordinary language, not to serve as a prerequisite for meaning. Secondly, Wittgenstein seems to indicate that there are not one but many possible methods of verification, and relies upon other methods besides sense-data to determine its meaning. In fact, superimposing any specific epistemology on the *Tractatus*—whether phenomenalist or otherwise—seems to be antithetical to Wittgenstein's stated aims in the text. And finally, he seems to indicate that there is no such thing as 'conclusive verification,' as did the logical empiricists in the later 1920's and early 1930's. For each of these reasons, although Wittgenstein uses the same word as the Positivists did, it is an error to understand that Wittgenstein meant the same thing as they did by verification. And even if everything I argued here were false, the first appearance of this talk of verification is in 1927—so it is at best implausible, and at worst flatly anachronistic, to ascribe these views to Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*.

#### *§7 Evaluating the Positivist Wittgenstein: Ethics*

Interpreting a text, when taken in isolation from the contextual background in which the text was written, leads to hasty and spurious interpretations. Likewise, when reading the sparse passages of the *Tractatus* independently of an understanding of Wittgenstein's life and the influences upon his work, may easily lead to misunderstanding. For years following the publication of the text, it was taken as a dogma that Wittgenstein held exactly the same view of philosophy as the Vienna Circle. However in our present time, we are now in a much better position to understand the text, having access to many posthumous publications which provided contrary evidence to

Wittgenstein's alleged positivism. One must remember that the great wealth of unpublished manuscripts and notes, and also what we now know about Wittgenstein's life was not available in the 1930's. Indeed, the first book-length treatment of the *Tractatus*—Anscombe's *Introduction*—was published in 1959. Thus it is not merely bad scholarship that led the Positivists to conclude that Wittgenstein shared their views, but rather an incomplete picture of the man who Wittgenstein was. In the next two sections, I hope to provide some of this recent evidence which indicates the inconsistency of Wittgenstein's philosophical aims and those of the Vienna Circle. In this section I will deal specifically with the question of ethics in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*; and in the next section, I will compare the views of the positivists and Wittgenstein on metaphysics.

One important feature of Wittgenstein's work that the positivists tend to interpret incorrectly is the relation between fact stating and normative discourse. Above, we saw that part of the temptation to read Wittgenstein as a positivist may be due to the fact that he makes a rigid demarcation between the role of language to express facts, and its inability to express value. From this, I believe, the members of the Vienna Circle assumed that because the function of language is to represent the world, that normative propositions cannot be expressed—therefore they must be committed to the Humean bonfire.<sup>100</sup> But as to the status of ethics in the *Tractatus*, again the positivists misinterpret the text. One of the most frequently cited pieces of evidence to this effect comes from a letter Wittgenstein wrote in 1919 to Ludwig Ficker, a potential publisher of the work. Here Wittgenstein tells us that “the point of the [*Tractatus*] is ethical.” He goes on to inform him that his work consists of two parts, “the one which is here, and of everything

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<sup>100</sup> It should be noted here that even Hume did not think that moral discourse is meaningless.

which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, although Wittgenstein never presents an account of how ethics is possible, this does not imply that he had no such intent.

Wittgenstein addresses the place of value judgments leading up to the 'conclusion' of the book—perhaps as a segue to the second, unwritten part of the book—from proposition 6.4 through 7. This section of the book is fraught with peculiarities, including the invocation of mysticism and passages on solipsism. On the status of ethical propositions, proposition 6.4 and its surrounding passages deserve careful attention. He writes:

All propositions are of equal value.

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.

Hence also it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.

Ethics is transcendental.

(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.) (6.4-6.421)

This is often taken as conclusive evidence that Wittgenstein thought that the propositions of ethics are pseudo-propositions, and outside the proper bounds of philosophy.

It is not clear from this alone exactly what the relationship is between the world of fact and the world of value, but elsewhere he makes it a bit clearer. In a lecture given to

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<sup>101</sup> Letter to Ludwig Ficker, November 1919. Quoted in Monk, *op. cit.*, 178.

the Heretics Society at Cambridge in late 1929, published as “A Lecture on Ethics,”<sup>102</sup> he clarifies his position on the question of value. He distinguishes between two senses of ethics, what he calls the “trivial or relative sense” and “the ethical or absolute sense” (LE 5). The word 'good,' for instance, is used in the relative sense when it “means coming up to a certain standard.” It is in just this sense that one might talk of a 'good chair' as one that meets up to a given standard of comfort, or a 'good guitarist' as one who can play with proficiency. The latter, absolute sense of value is what we generally understand as an 'ethical statement.' Wittgenstein makes clear the difference between the two is that “every judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value.” The 'right' route to a given destination, for example, might be re-stated as a series of directions which allows one to arrive at that destination in the shortest amount of time; in this and similar ways, such a proposition can be restated—removing all normative language—as a set of fact-stating propositions, without loss of meaning. He concludes that while “all judgments of relative value can be shown to be mere statements of facts, no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value” (LE 5-6).

Wittgenstein has us imagine a completely omniscient being, who knows “all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and . . . all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived” (LE 6). If he were to write down all the facts in the world in a substantial tome of all that is, Wittgenstein says that there would not contain a single normative judgment in this hypothetical 'book of all things.' Nor would any given

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<sup>102</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review* 74 (Jan. 1965): 3-12. Hereafter abbreviated 'LE'

collection of facts there logically imply a given value judgment. “Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts” (LE 7).

One of Wittgenstein's deepest commitments, dating all the way back as early as his war notebooks, is that the bivalence of a proposition is a necessary condition for it to have sense. To know what a given statement means is to know under which circumstances it would be true, and which circumstances it would be false. Having this clarification in mind, let us return to TLP 6.4. “All propositions are of equal value” (6.4); that is, as Rush Rhees puts it, none “occupies an 'exceptional position.’”<sup>103</sup> Statements of fact are those that can in principle be evaluated either as true or false, essentially so: fact stating propositions are contingently true, only given the existence of a given set of state of affairs which obtains in the world. Tautologies and contradictions are themselves limiting cases, since tautologies are always true and contradictions always false regardless of the state that the world is in. This means that they do not represent anything about the world—their content “cancels one another,” (6.462) since neither delimits the range of possibilities in logical space (4.023). Tautologies are consistent with every possible state-of-affairs of the world, while contradictions are consistent with none. Facts are, accordingly, contingent.

Wittgenstein uses two words to describe propositions which do not accord with the world: *sinnlos* and *unsinnlich*. The former is perhaps best translated in English as

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<sup>103</sup> Rush Rhees, “Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics” in *Discussions of Wittgenstein* p. 94.



'senseless,' the latter as 'nonsense.'<sup>104</sup> Tautologies and contradictions, he believes, are senseless (4.461)—that is to say, they do not express anything about the world. But he is careful to point out that they are not nonsense (4.4611). The way the world is could be different, since there is no *a priori* reason to conclude there *must* be a way the world is or is not; “all that happens and is the case is accidental,” (6.41) it is not subject to any necessity that it must be that way. “There is no *a priori* order of things” (5.634). Thus normative statements (and by this I mean value-laden statements in the *absolute* sense—or a “value that does have value”) cannot be reduced to factual statements; since the world is a collection of facts (1.1), and since value-statements are non-factual, then they “must lie outside the world.” Thus, ethics, which is something “higher” than the world, and “cannot be put into words” (6.421).

But just as Wittgenstein did not say that tautologies and contradictions, as statements of logical necessity, were “not nonsense” (4.4611), it is likewise too hasty to think that for Wittgenstein normative statements are nonsense in the strict sense. He tells us that “[i]t is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics,” (6.42) since propositions must be bivalent, and necessary truths cannot be. “The only necessity that exists is logical necessity” (6.37). But ethics is not merely expressed propositionally, rather they often may come in the form of optatives, commands, or prescriptions. Or, as is directly relevant to Wittgenstein—in poetry and literature. It is clear that there is an aspect of showing in aesthetic works which was important to Wittgenstein. Consider, for example, an exchange between him and Engelmann in 1917, “When Wittgenstein was working on

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104 Much more will be said of this in the next chapter.

the completion of the *Tractatus*.”<sup>105</sup> Engelmann had sent him a poem by Uhland, called “Count Eberhard's Hawthorn.”<sup>106</sup> Wittgenstein says in reply: “The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—*contained* in what has been uttered!”<sup>107</sup> This provides us important insight into Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus*. That genuine propositions must be fact-stating is clearly Wittgenstein's position. But there is an element of language which can “contain” unsayable insights. The poem, which talks about the growth of a sprig on a hawthorn bush, contained both for Engelmann and for Wittgenstein, some ineffable truth about life. It is in this capacity that language can *show* us ethical insights, although they cannot be directly *said*. Just as his theory of logical necessity requires that these special propositions do not say anything but only *show* (4.461), so too one “cannot express” the ethical. However, this does not mean that the role of ethics is purely emotive for Wittgenstein; and just as with Wittgenstein's recognition of tautologies and contradictions, ethical statements do not say anything about the world, but are not to be considered nonsense.

It is the Vienna Circle's failure to identify the two categories of non-fact stating propositions—the category of senslessness, and the category of nonsense—that led them to the conclusion that Wittgenstein meant that ethics must be nonsense because it is not fact-stating. It seems to have escaped the positivists that, despite their denial of the cognitive power of prescriptions, they illicitly put forth a position about how one ought to

105 Engelmann, *Letters to Wittgenstein*, p. 82

106 Engelmann quotes Karl Krauss, who once said that this poem is “so clear that no one understands it.”

Ibid., p. 82.

107 Ibid., p. 7

*ought* to philosophize, in accordance with the verification principle. Again, it is in light of the unpublished manuscripts and letters that Wittgenstein reveals a position that the point of the *Tractatus* is ethical. The book can be viewed, in a performative way, entirely as a prescriptive account of how one ought to philosophize. Thus for Wittgenstein to deny meaning to ethics is to deny, perhaps, the intent of the book itself. After all, as he directly tell us, “the point of the book is ethical.”

### §8 *Evaluating the Positivist Wittgenstein: Metaphysics*

Another aspect of Wittgenstein's thought that the positivists had neglected is his attitude toward metaphysics. We saw above that the temptation to read Wittgenstein as conforming to the positivists' position derives from their agreement that, although fact-stating propositions have sense, the expression of ethical or metaphysical claims—being non-fact stating, and thus “outside the world” (6.41)—are relegated to the class of nonsense. Again there are passages that seem to support this. For example, in 6.53, he tells us that:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.

But with the biographical and contextual evidence that we currently have access to, it is difficult to make Wittgenstein's Tractarian view consistent with the Positivists on the question of metaphysics. Even textually, to do so requires that one ignore Wittgenstein's

invocation of “the mystical” [*das Mystische*]. Its very existence in the text is itself seems to be a challenge to the positivist reading of Wittgenstein. Even Carnap, in retrospect, tells us that he “had erroneously believed that his attitude toward metaphysics was similar to ours,” due to the fact that the Vienna Circle “had not paid enough attention to statements in his book about the mystical.”<sup>108</sup> The word appears in three places at the end of the *Tractatus*. The passages surrounding this damning statement on “the proper method of philosophy” (6.53) are surrounded by talk of the mystical (6.44, 6.45, 6.522). What exactly the mystical is, and how it relates to Wittgenstein's early philosophy is a difficult question.

At 6.44 he tells us that it is “not *how* the world is . . . but *that* it is” which is the mystical. 6.522 reads: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.” This line is a comment on the remark 6.52, which reads “[w]e feel as if all possible scientific questions are answered our problem is still not touched at all. Of course in that case there are no questions any more; and that is the answer.” Additionally, and more helpful for our purposes, he tells us that the feeling of the mystical is “the contemplation of the world as a limited whole” (6.45) The German word here rendered 'limited' is '*begrenztes*' which I believe is important, since it corresponds to an important philosophical distinction in the legacy of German language philosophy.

Immanuel Kant, at the end of the *Prolegomena* makes a distinction between the terms *Grenze* and *Schranke*. The former word may be rendered in English as 'bounds,' and the latter as 'limits.' Bounds, Kant tells us, “always presuppose a space existing outside a certain definite place and enclosing it.” By contrast, “limits do not require this,

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<sup>108</sup> Carnap, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 27.

but are mere negations which affect a quantity so far as it is not absolutely complete.”<sup>109</sup> Kant wants to specify that our knowledge of mathematics and natural science are *limited*—that there is knowledge beyond our current state of mathematics and physics, but that we cannot pass a certain point because of obstacles with respect to the current level of development of these sciences. However, this means for Kant that in principle, there are no insoluble questions in either domain. Bounds, on the other hand, *do* imply that there is something beyond the line itself.<sup>110</sup> As I want to understand this crucial passage, the word should be translated as 'bounded,' and not 'limited.' But acknowledging that Wittgenstein meant “the world as a bounded whole” has important consequences for how we understand “the mystical.”

If the mystical is viewing the world as bounded whole, then that would imply that there is something beyond this world of facts—or, more precisely, a “feeling” to that effect. This squares nicely with Kant's intent in drawing this distinction; indeed for Kant, there is something beyond the bounds of knowledge, that is the noumenal world of things-in-themselves. In Kant's transcendental idealism, we cannot know *what* things are like beyond our representational capacities—but Kant makes it clear that we do know *that* there is something beyond:

We cannot indeed, beyond all possible experience, form a definite notion of what things in themselves may be. Yet we are not at liberty to abstain entirely from inquiring into them; for experience never satisfies reason fully but, in answering questions, refers us further back and leaves us dissatisfied with regard to their complete solution.<sup>111</sup>

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109 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* tr. Paul Carus (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 86.

110 *Ibid.*, 88.

111 *Ibid.*, 86.

The same term with the same connotation was used by the Kantian Schopenhauer, who we know Wittgenstein read and enjoyed greatly when he was young. He tells us:

But what now prompts us to make enquiries [about that which lies beyond our representations] is that we are not satisfied with knowing that we have representations . . . We want to know the significance of these representations; we ask whether this world is nothing more than representation. In that case, it would inevitably pass us by like an empty dream, or a ghostly vision not worth our consideration . . . This much is certain, namely that this something about which we are enquiring must be by its whole nature completely and fundamentally different from the representation; and so the forms and laws of the representation must be wholly foreign to it. We cannot, then, reach it from the representation under guidance of those laws that merely combine objects, representations, with one another . . . [W]e can never get at the inner nature of things *from without*.<sup>112</sup>

And this distinction also illustrates the basic feeling Wittgenstein had toward the mystical. Although we cannot *speak* about what is beyond the limits of the world for Wittgenstein, it is clear that there is something beyond the bounds of language, by the very fact of it being bounded. “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.” In Wittgenstein's system the mystical shows itself, although the insights that are provided by it are beyond the bounds of language. This parallels another remark about the mystical in the Notebooks, where he tells us that “The urge towards the mystical comes of the non-satisfaction of our wishes by science” (NB 51). Although this part was deleted from the final version, this is the first sentence of an early version of 6.52: “We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.” Even if one could compose a complete picture of the world

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112 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. 1, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 98-9.

by writing down every fact, as in the example he provides in the “Lecture on Ethics,” then all scientific questions would be answered; but there would still be something missing: why these things exist at all. In this sense, the question is: why is there something rather than nothing? That, for Wittgenstein, is the mystical: “not *how* the world is . . . but *that* it is” (6.44).

It is not clear that Wittgenstein equates metaphysics with mysticism. However, there is some relationship between them. Russell tells us in “Mysticism and Logic” that metaphysics is “the union and conflict of two very different impulses, the one urging men towards mysticism, the other urging them towards science.”<sup>113</sup> This is consistent with the analysis here, that the urge toward mysticism begins with a dissatisfaction with the world of science. Science tells us what is, it does not explore the meanings underlying these facts. This project is not left to the philosopher, however, since the insights that are provided transcend the bounds of language. The mystic is committed to silence.

According to this Kantian interpretation of Wittgenstein's mysticism, metaphysics is not something to be “overcome,” as Carnap and his brethren thought, so much as relegated to a position outside language. In an early typescript he gave to Russell, he says that “[p]hilosophy consists in logic and metaphysics: the former is its basis” (NL 106). Although the logical analysis of language is the basis of philosophy, that does not negate any value that metaphysics might have from Wittgenstein's perspective.

This reading of the final sections is confirmed by some other biographical considerations. First, one must remember that Wittgenstein was a deeply spiritual man,

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113 Bertrand Russell, “Mysticism and Logic” in *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1917), 1.

and this indeed found its way into his philosophical work. He was fond of unorthodox religious figures, such as Kirkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Tagore. Often he would say that he was “not a religious man” but could not help “seeing every problem from a religious point of view.”<sup>114</sup> The exact significance of this remark, as is often the case with Wittgenstein, remains somewhat obscure. However, this at least gives us an indication that he did not share the positivists' view with regard to religion, and moreover metaphysics in general. Despite the fact that he admits not being religious, is not evidence that he had no respect for religion. In fact, there are numerous sources which tend to show that he did see his thought as analogous to theological thought. Norman Malcolm, in his *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* goes to great length mining and evaluating the evidence from which it might be said that Wittgenstein *was* deeply spiritual, even if not religious.<sup>115</sup>

Elsewhere, Malcolm reports on Wittgenstein's change in attitude towards religion, long before the publication of the *Tractatus*. He tells us:

He told me that in his youth he had been contemptuous of it, but that at about the age of twenty-one something had caused a change in him. In Vienna he saw a play that was a mediocre drama, but in it one of the characters expressed the thought that no matter what happened in the world, nothing bad could happen to *him*—*he* was independent of fate and circumstances. Wittgenstein was struck by this stoic thought; for the first time he saw the possibility of religion.<sup>116</sup>

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114 Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995).

115 A great deal of the evidence presented here by Malcolm regards his later work, not in the *Tractatus*. However similar comparisons can be found in the *Tractatus*, as I have shown.

116 Malcolm, Norman. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 58. The play has been identified by McGuinness as Ludwig Anzengruber's *Die Kreuzelschreiber*. See Brain McGuinness, *Young Ludwig: Wittgenstein's Life 1889-1921* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 94. The line in question is "Mir kann nichts geschehen," or rendered into English, "Nothing can happen to you."



Malcolm says this had a significant impact on his thought. However, one need look no further than his “Lecture of Ethics” to find a very similar sentiment. In his discussion, he attempts to formulate some examples of statements of absolute or ethical value.

I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have [such an experience] *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “how extraordinary that the world should exist.” I shall mention another experience straight away which I believe you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say “I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens” (LE 8).

This “experience of feeling absolutely safe” and that “nothing can happen to me” is parallel to several remarks in the Notebooks and elsewhere. Wittgenstein immediately connects these experiences with spirituality, “the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God” (LE 10).

Russell also informs us of how important the mystical was for Wittgenstein. In a 1919 letter, he tells us “I had felt in [the *Tractatus*] a flavor of mysticism, but was astonished when I found out he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silensius, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk” (WC 112).<sup>117</sup>

Granted for Wittgenstein metaphysical insights can never be adequately captured by fact-stating propositions. However, these anecdotes allow us to connect these scattered quotes in the text, by giving insight into the type of person Wittgenstein was.

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<sup>117</sup> Letter from Russell to Ottoline Morrell, Dec. 20, 1919.

One cannot discount this evidence when interpreting the text, especially when one's interpretation denies the spirit of these important insights.

### *§9 Conclusion*

No one really accepts the view any more that Wittgenstein, in his early philosophy, shared his philosophical position with the Vienna Circle. Even some of the positivists themselves have since concluded that their interpretation of the *Tractatus* was flawed. Ayer admits that “the outlook of the *Tractatus* was misunderstood by the members of the Vienna Circle and the young English philosophers, including myself, who were strongly influenced by it.”<sup>118</sup> Much of the evidence cited above has been used repeatedly by commentators against this type of interpretation. However, it was against this background that the *Tractatus* was initially read, so it serves as a basis for the discussion to come. Although the Vienna Circle missed the boat on their interpretation of the *Tractatus*, we are currently in a somewhat better position to understand the text given the wealth of posthumously published notes and manuscripts, including extensive biographical materials and memoirs of Wittgenstein's friends and colleagues. All of this dates to much more recently, and would not have been available to the Vienna Circle in the late 1920's and early 1930's. The unavoidable conclusion that one is led to is that the text cannot be read apart from the context in which it is initially written. Indeed, it is only by ignoring the biographical details of Wittgenstein's life and the background of his work, and the uncritical acceptance of similarity between certain views of Wittgenstein

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<sup>118</sup> Ayer, *Wittgenstein*, p. 31

and those of the logical positivists, that the Vienna Circle were led to read their own philosophy into the text. Although Wittgenstein was neither an empiricist nor a verificationist, certain passages could be interpreted in just this way. This became the dominant interpretation for many years, contrary to Wittgenstein's stated objections. Although given the positivists' dismissal of historical method in philosophy, one might wonder if such material would have informed the text if it had been available.

I would be remiss were I not to point out that the Vienna Circle themselves, interestingly enough, were themselves lead to an anti-historical and anti-contextualist position due to the historical period in which they were writing. In the aftermath of World War I, and the increasingly hostile economic, political and social climate of the Vienna at the time (following the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), they sought a way to free themselves from it. Many of the members of the Circle were themselves Jewish, and with the rampant anti-semitism at that time<sup>119</sup>—culminating in Hitler's rise to chancellor in 1933—they found themselves in a position where the dismissal of normativity was itself a rebellion against the existing order. In a sense, it is the context in which the Positivists were writing that shaped their own philosophical positions.

Above in our discussion, we were given a hint about how to read Wittgenstein on these matters. “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical” (6.52). Although the proper object of philosophy might be seen solely as the application of logic to empirical premises, metaphysics for Wittgenstein is not unreal or illicit, but rather is a domain which transcends the proper bounds of language. The question remains: what do we make of these insights that cannot be spoken, but show themselves?

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<sup>119</sup> Karl Luger, the mayor of Vienna until 1910, was openly anti-semitic.

One is reminded here of Heidegger's phrase, "it is one thing to report narratively about beings and another to grasp beings in their being. For the latter task not only most of the words are lacking but above all the 'grammar.'"<sup>120</sup> And, indeed, that leads us to our second interpretation.

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<sup>120</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* tr. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 38-9

## **Saying, Showing, Modeling**

### §1 *Introduction*

By the late 1960's, the influence of logical positivism in the Anglo-American world had effectively died. By that time the *Philosophical Investigations* had been posthumously published, and it had become widely known that Wittgenstein had developed an entirely new way of thinking about language, focusing not on logical analysis, but instead on the contextual use of language for his theory of linguistic meaning. And just as with Russell's atomism and Carnap's positivism, Wittgenstein would come to inspire yet another major movement in the analytic tradition: Oxford "ordinary language" philosophy. But most importantly for our purposes here, the waning of positivism in the Anglo-American world also became the impetus for a gradual whittling away of the positivist reading of Wittgenstein. The "standard reading," as I will call it, was developed as an alternative to the interpretation of the text put forth by the Vienna Circle.

Some of the interpreters who constitute the standard reading include G. E. M. Anscombe, Erik Stenius, Peter Hacker, Max Black, Brian McGuinness and David Pears, to name just a few. This is the interpretation of the text which most specialists, and nearly all non-specialists, consider to be Wittgenstein's view in the *Tractatus*. In this chapter, I wish to explain some of the core doctrines of the standard reading. I should note here that my terminology might be somewhat misleading. There is no such thing as

*the* standard reading, as if there were a single doctrinal image. Rather I use this term to refer to a motley collection of varying interpretations that carry, if I may, a 'family resemblance' to one another. Some of the 'standard' readings are even *prima facie* inconsistent with one another. For example, Pears and Black read Wittgenstein as a semantic realist, who espouses a very specific set of theses about the world in the opening remarks, upon which his theory of language is then generated. From this model of language, the meaning of linguistic expressions are not dependent upon our linguistic capacities; rather language's ability to represent the world, according to this interpretation, is grounded upon these the links forged between names and simple objects. Other interpreters, such as McGuinness, Ishiguro and Rhees read Wittgenstein as a linguistic anti-realist, who believed that the structure of the world only shows up through language. To them, the postulation of simple objects in the opening passages merely follows from the structure of our language. In more radical cases, Wittgenstein has been even labeled a linguistic idealist.<sup>121</sup> The dispute here is a matter of the direction of the causal arrow: is our awareness of the world as it shows up to us dependent upon the way that language works, or is the structure of language derived from the nature of the world? Which side Wittgenstein falls on this issue is still an open question, and evidence can be garnered for both sides.

As I hope this brief—but by no means unique—example shows, individually addressing each version of the standard reading in this chapter would not be prudent; an analysis of the fine-grained details between the different interpretations would itself take

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121 G. E. M. Anscombe, "The Question of Linguistic Idealism," in *Essays in Honor of G. H. von Wright*, ed. Jikko Hintikka, *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 28 (1975).

volumes. So for my present purposes I will narrow my focus to what I see as a few central conceptions of standard interpretations, and treat differences between the different versions of the standard reading as of relatively minor significance.

What I take as characteristic of the standard readings as a whole is that they take Wittgenstein to be engaged in a roughly Kantian project: specifying the necessary conditions for, and setting the proper bounds of, language—without casting judgment upon that which does not lie within its domain. Although the proper object of what can be articulated in philosophy is, as Wittgenstein says in 6.53, fact-stating discourse—excluding speculative metaphysical and normative claims—that does not mean that they are 'nonsense' in the way that we would want to say 'pointless,' as the members of the Vienna Circle sometimes seem to sound. Nor is it the case for the standard readers that propositions which are not fact-stating are necessarily empty of content, as it was for the positivists; to these commentators, Wittgenstein's position is instead much more nuanced. They ascribe to Wittgenstein two distinct types of nonsense in the *Tractatus*: first substantive, philosophically illuminating nonsense, and then secondly just plain nonsense.<sup>122</sup>

The former class of nonsense is denoted by the term '*sinnlos*,' or as it is perhaps better termed, 'senselessness.' This category is linked to Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing. Senseless propositions are neither “pseudo-truths,” nor “cognitively meaningless,” but are genuine insights which just happen to transcend the expressive power of language; they cannot be spoken of, but rather can only *show themselves*. Echoes of this point are found in 6.522, “[t]here are, indeed, things that

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<sup>122</sup> I shall discuss this in greater detail in § 7 below

cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.” However there is also a second class of propositions Wittgenstein calls *unsinnig*, which are just plain nonsense. As we shall see, the question of whether a proposition is nonsense in the strict sense [*unsinnig*] is based upon the logical form of the proposition itself, not from the representational relation by which a proposition stands to reality. To get a few miles more out of the Kant analogy: standard readers understand Wittgenstein as seeking to annul language in order to make room for the mystical.<sup>123</sup>

## §2 *The Bild Theory*

One of Wittgenstein's most unique and important innovations in the *Tractatus* is his 'picture' theory of meaning. It is central to his theory of language and perhaps, as we shall see, central to the standard readers' interpretation of the book. Von Wright dates the picture theory to 1914, which is relatively late in the development of the thoughts in the *Tractatus*.<sup>124</sup> He recounts that it was inspired by a magazine article about a lawsuit in Paris involving an automobile accident. The report stipulated that in the ensuing trial, a scale model of the accident scene was devised so as to recreate the events: miniature cars and people standing for the objects at the scene, in their respective spatio-temporal

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123 This is a reference, of course, to Kant's claim that he “had to annul knowledge in order to make room for faith” (B xxx). I take issue with some overzealous comparisons between Wittgenstein and Kant. It is clear that his particular version of transcendental idealism is derived from Schopenhauer's particular take on Kant, not on the Kantian philosophy itself. It is not true however that, as McGuinness says, “one wanted to abolish reason to make way for faith, the other to remove the whole of ethics and religion from the area of speculation into that which is inexpressible” Kant did not want to 'abolish' reason, nor did Wittgenstein seek to 'remove' inquiries into ethics and religion. McGuinness, *Young Ludwig*, 253.

124 Much of his views on logic were formulated much earlier, as early as 1912-13. There are two pre-*Tractatus* manuscripts, “Notes on Logic” and “Notes Dictated to Moore,” which pre-date this development. This may indicate that the *Bild* theory originated as an outgrowth of his views on logic, not the other way around.



ordering. As the story goes, it occurred to him at this time that just as the model could serve as a representation of the accident—insofar as the parts of the model (these miniature automobiles, houses, people, etc.) stand for the objects in the world (the real life automobiles, houses, etc.). So too, he thought, this might also bear some insight into the nature of the proposition.<sup>125</sup> In his Notebooks, dated 29 September, 1914, Wittgenstein wrote one of earliest known passages concerning the picture theory: “In the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally. (As when in the law-court in Paris a motor-car accident is represented by means of dolls, etc.)” (NB 7). This is often ascribed as the beginning stages of the Tractarian theory of meaning, that “a proposition is a picture of reality” (4.01). Von Wright explains:

The picture [in court] served as a proposition; that is, as a description of a possible state of affairs. It had this function owing to the correspondence between the parts of the picture and things in reality. It now occurred to Wittgenstein that one might reverse the analogy and say that a *proposition* serves as a *picture*, by virtue of a similar correspondence between *its* parts and the world. The way in which the parts of the the proposition are combined—the *structure* of the proposition—depicts a possible combination of elements in reality, a possible state of affairs.<sup>126</sup>

There is no reason to believe that Von Wright's story is false. However it should be pointed out that there are some other important influences on the *Bild* theory, which might prevent one from falling into confusion due to the usual translation of the term “picture.” One should be careful not to understand Wittgenstein as talking about literal 'pictures.' A prominent influence upon Wittgenstein's theory of meaning which is frequently cited in the literature was Heinrich Hertz.<sup>127</sup> Hertz is mentioned by name twice

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125 The story was first recounted by von Wright in “Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Biographical Sketch” in *Philosophical Review* 64, no. 4 (1955): p. 532-3

126 Von Wright, “Biographical Sketch,” 533 Emphasis in original

127 He is now famous for the discovery of radio waves. His name has been immortalized as an SI

in the *Tractatus*, which is rather a lot considering Wittgenstein's sparse use of citations.<sup>128</sup> When Wittgenstein arrived in England in 1908, it was not to study logic in Cambridge, but rather to study engineering in Manchester. Wittgenstein had been trained at the Oberrealschule in Linz, following which he received certification in engineering from “the MIT of imperial Germany,” the Technische Hochschule at Charlottenberg in Berlin.<sup>129</sup> The training of engineers relies heavily upon physics, and at least by the time he got to Manchester to study engineering, Wittgenstein in his study likely would have come across Hertz's 1899 book *Principles of Mechanics*. The parallel between Hertz's philosophy of physics and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is so gripping because Hertz uses “pictures” or mental “models” as a way of understanding the physical processes of the world—which shows a remarkable similarity to Wittgenstein's Tractarian theory of meaning. They both use the same German word '*Bild*,' however Hertz' word is usually rendered in English as “model,” and not “picture.”

“We form for ourselves images or symbols of external objects,” Hertz says in his Introduction to *Principles of Mechanics*. A correct picture of the world would be given a form “such that the necessary consequents of the images in thought are always the images of the necessary consequences in nature of the things pictured . . . there is a certain conformity between nature and our thought.”<sup>130</sup> Later Hertz says:

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measurement of frequency in electromagnetic waves.

128 4.04 and 6.371. Hertz is tied with Whitehead for third, behind Frege and Russell, in the number of times mentioned. And Whitehead's name appears, each and every time, with Russell's. I do not count the references to Newton in this figure, for since he only talks about “Newtonian mechanics” it is not a proper citation.

129 Kelly Hamilton, “Wittgenstein and the Mind's Eye” in *Wittgenstein: Philosophy and Biography* ed. James Klagge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 55.

130 Heinrich Hertz, *The Principles of Mechanics Presented in New Form*, trans. D. E. Jones and J. T. Walley (New York: Dover, 1956), 1

But we have accumulated around the terms “force” and “electricity” more relations than can be completely reconciled amongst themselves. We have an obscure feeling of this and want to have things cleared up. Our confused wish finds expression in the confused question as to the nature of force and electricity. But the answer which we want is not really an answer to this question. It is not by finding out more and fresh relations and connections that it can be answered; but by removing the contradictions existing between those already known, and thus perhaps by reducing their number. When these painful contradictions are removed, the question as to the nature of force will not have been answered; but our minds, no longer vexed, will cease to ask illegitimate questions.<sup>131</sup>

This is reported to have been frequently quoted by Wittgenstein, and part of the above quoted passage was even considered as a motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>132</sup> Likewise, in the *Big Typescript* Wittgenstein wrote, in a similar spirit “[a]s I do philosophy, its entire task consists in expressing myself in such a way as to make problems disappear” (PO 181). In the manuscript, Hertz' name follows this line in parentheses. “Philosophy unravels the knots in our thinking,” he continues, “hence its results must be simple, but its activity is as complicated as the knots it unravels.” (PO 183).

In addition, there is a recent and growing body of research that attributes the development of the 'picture' theory as related specifically to Wittgenstein's engineering training. His courses in Berlin, and later in Manchester, relied heavily upon descriptive geometry; likewise, many have hypothesized that Wittgenstein's use of the notion of modeling might be a consequence of this engineer's training in mentally visualizing experiments,<sup>133</sup> or even developed through his work on aerodynamics at Manchester in

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131 Ibid., p. 8

132 Alfred Nordmann, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 30. See also McGuinness, *Young Ludwig*, 39

133 Kelly Oliver, “Wittgenstein and the Mind's Eye,” 56-60

which scale-models were used in wind tunnels to demonstrate various properties of propellers, etc.<sup>134</sup> Wittgenstein himself confirms this, telling the Vienna Circle that “I have inherited this concept of a picture from two sides: first from a drawn picture, second from the model of a mathematician, which already is a general concept. For the mathematician talks of picturing where a painter would no longer use this expression” (WVC 185).

These points of disagreement reflect what is misleading about von Wright's story, which surrounds the terminology in ambiguity, and threatens to lead the reader astray. Wittgenstein's technical notion of picture is *not* meant to be a literal picture, which he refers to specifically in the *Tractatus* as a “spacial picture.” In fact, the term 'picture theory,' is itself a misnomer. In the *Tractatus* he explicitly notes that pictures are merely one of many possible means of representation: “[t]he gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common” (4.014).<sup>135</sup>

David Stern has roundly criticized this translation of the term, opting for the use of the original German term rather than translating it all. He says:

Wittgenstein used the German word '*Bild*' to talk about the model, a term usually translated as “picture”; as a result, the theory of meaning it inspired is generally known as the picture theory. While both words cover such things as images, film, frames, drawings, and paintings, the idea of a three-dimensional model is more readily conveyed by the German word '*Bild*' than the English “picture.” . . . [T]he theory invokes generalizing from what models, pictures,

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134 Susan Sterrett, *Wittgenstein Flies a Kite*, passim.

135 Ogden translation for emphasis.

and the like are supposed to have in common, and treats two-dimensional pictures as just one kind of *Bild*.<sup>136</sup>

I agree with his assessment, and for this reason I prefer to discuss Wittgenstein's theory by translating *Bild* as “model” rather than “picture.”

So what is this *Bild* theory and why is it so important? It is initially explicated very early in the text within the second proposition, but important elucidations are also given within the fourth proposition. It is often thought that Wittgenstein's entire representational theory of linguistic meaning is based upon it, and so understanding what it is will be central to our concerns here. “We model facts to ourselves,” he begins (2.1).<sup>137</sup> The world for Wittgenstein, as with Russell during his logical atomist period, is composed of “facts” [*Tatsache*] (1.1), which he describes as “the existence of states of affairs” [*Sachverhalten*] (2).<sup>138</sup> Elsewhere he defines a fact as “what corresponds to the logical product of elementary propositions when this product is true” (WC 98). *Sachverhalten* are logically simple, and cannot be further analyzed or reduced to more simple facts (thus Ogden's rendering 'atomic fact'). As a consequence, *Sachverhalten* are logically independent of one another (2.061-2); the existence or non-existence of one does not determine the existence of any other. They are composed of a concatenation of objects, which stand in relation to one another (2.01). By “objects,” he does not mean spacial objects like tables, chairs and bunnies, but rather 'logical' objects. These logical

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136 David Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35-6

137 I will modify the English translation, replacing “picture” with “model” for the German term *Bild* throughout.

138 The most substantive point of disagreement between the Ogden-Ramsey translation and the Pears-McGuinness translation is the term *Sachverhalt*. While the Ogden renders the term “atomic fact,” the opts for the more literal “state of affairs.” In order to avoid this controversy entirely, I shall use the German term throughout.

objects, we are told, “hang together like links in a chain” (2.03) When a set of *Sachverhalten* (a *Sachlage*) exist, the fact also exists. That is, if objects exist in the way shown by the proposition, then it is expressed by the existent fact which corresponds to it. Facts therefore are collections of *Sachverhalten* which obtain in the world.<sup>139</sup>

A proposition, in its fully analyzed logical form, consists of a concatenation of names which stand in relations to one another (4.221). Propositions also stand externally in a representational relation of modeling, each name stands for an object in the world. The proposition is true just in case there is an isomorphic relation between the proposition and the world—that is, if there is a one-to-one correspondence between each name and object, and correctly maps the logical relations that hold between them. The proposition is false when there is no such isomorphism. Wittgenstein explains:

In the proposition, each word corresponds to a simple object, and should model the relations that inhere in 'logical space' just as the picture does in physical space and time: the elements of the model stand, in the model, for the objects . . . That the elements of the model are combined with one another in a definite way, represents that the things are so combined with one another (2.14-2.15).

The model serves roughly the same relation between proposition and referent as does Frege's term *Sinn*.<sup>140</sup> That is, it picks out the reference of a proposition. The proposition, as a model, provides the sense of the proposition—it tells us what it would be like for the proposition to be true. In expressing the proposition's sense, it aids us in judging whether the proposition is true or false.

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139 This reading been criticized by what Wittgenstein says in TLP 2.0124. If a state of affairs is a possible fact, then how can there be a “possible state of affairs”? Either this is redundant or absurd.

140 I say “roughly” because there are two points of disagreement. First, *Bedeutung* for Frege is the truth-value of the proposition, whereas for Wittgenstein it is not. Secondly, a sentence for Frege is a complex name for its truth value. Proposition are not themselves names for Wittgenstein, but rather are composed of names.

It is important to remember here that models need not be true. There are as many possible models as possible configurations of the world. A given fact-stating proposition carves up reality into two halves, as it were: those which may contain the existing *Sachlage* that corresponds to the proposition, and those that do not. In this way, the model is what allows one to discriminate between possible configurations of the world, but also to distinguish between the proposition's truth or falsity. For any given model, its logical objects may or may not obtain in the world—put differently, there may or may not be an existing fact to make it true. This is especially important for his account of modeling to be an accurate theory of linguistic representation. In order to know what the proposition means, we must know what the world must be like in order for the proposition to be true.

But some absolutely essential features of language, however, is never quite represented in the model. As mentioned above, the proposition is a concatenation of simple names in definite relation to one another. The proposition is true when it is isomorphic with the world—that is, when the simple objects in the world stand in the same relations to one another as the names do in the proposition. Although each word corresponds to a simple object in the world, the truth-functional relations between the names themselves do not represent anything in the world. He explicitly tells us at 4.0312 that “the logical constants do not represent,” what he refers to as his “fundamental idea” or *Grundgedanke*.

But further the representing relation itself, between the names in the proposition and the objects in the world, is also itself not represented. For Wittgenstein, language has

an inherent capacity to represent the world, which is internal to the representation itself. Looking back at some of the the earliest extant scripts, for example Egyptian hieroglyphs, one can see this capacity to represent most clearly. Although modern languages have significantly evolved and become more complex, they have not lost their inherent representational capacity—although Wittgenstein says that this fact is often obfuscated by the appearance of words in more evolved languages. “In order to understand the essential nature of a proposition, we should consider hieroglyphic script, which depicts facts that it describes. An alphabetic script developed out of it without losing what was essential to depiction” (4.016). But there is always something vital to the depiction itself which is not itself depicted, and that is the mode of projection between the proposition and the world. That is, the representational relationship itself. A proposition or model does not *say* how it is to be interpreted as a representational model of the world, but rather *shows* it. This is key to understanding why the primary function of language is to say something about the world, although not every aspect of the proposition needs to contain this function.

### §3 *Correspondence without Confrontation*

One should resist the urge to over-interpret the possible methods by which a proposition is compared to extra-linguistic reality. This path can be a tenuous one, for with certain presuppositions it can lead—as it did with the Vienna Circle—to the view that a specific criterion of verification is necessary to establish the meaningfulness of a proposition. In the last chapter, I surveyed some reasons to conclude that, although



Wittgenstein maintains a version of the correspondence theory of truth, that does not mean he is a sense-verificationist.<sup>141</sup> And indeed the question of how, and to what in the world the proposition is to be compared, is not clear from the text.

Wittgenstein addresses how to understand the connection between language and the world in a series of highly metaphorical passages from 2.1511 to 2.1515. The model, he tells us, “reaches right out to” the world, like “feelers.” This is, admittedly, a rather enigmatic statement; but in the 1929 paper “Some Remarks on Logical Form,” he explains that what he meant by the proposition reaching out to reality is that “the forms of entities are contained in the form of the proposition which is about these entities.”<sup>142</sup> These remarks also contain a useful analogy which I believe sheds light on what Wittgenstein meant here. He compares the representational relationship between model and the world to measuring length: “it is laid against reality like a measure” (2.1512). On this he comments, “[o]nly the end-points of the graduating lines actually touch the object that is to be measured.” Not only here, but also later in *Philosophical Remarks*, he uses this analogy of measurement to describe the agreement of a proposition with reality. The world, in a sense, is the “yardstick” by which the truth or falsity of a proposition is judged. What I take Wittgenstein to mean by this comparison is two-fold. First, only certain forms of representation are necessary to determine the truth of the proposition. Later in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein distances himself from a single method of comparison between the proposition and the world, where he tells us that “[a] gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes and the sound waves, all stand to

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141 See above Chapter 1, §6

142 “Some Remarks on Logical Form,” 169; reprinted in PO 34

one another in same the internal relationship of depicting that holds between language and the world. They are all constructed according to the same logical pattern” (4.014). That is to say, not every possible method of representation is relevant to establish the correspondence between the model and the world. For example, to determine the weight of an object a ruler would not help—since a measurement of its spacial dimensions would tell me nothing about its weight. “A model, conceived in this way, also includes the pictorial relationship, which makes it into a model” (2.1513). That is, what in non-linguistic reality the proposition is intended to determine is *itself determined* by aspects of the model; the proposition *shows* its specific relationship to the world, just as asking for the weight of an object prescribes a background understanding of a specific system of measure and certain measurement tools. In less metaphorical terms, I believe that this confirms a point established in the last chapter—that Wittgenstein did not think that there was a single universal “method” of verification, as the positivists read him as saying.

Likewise, in a similar discussion in *Philosophical Remarks*, one finds confirmation of this point. “I should like to say: for any question there is always a corresponding *method* of finding. Or you might say, a question *denotes* a method of searching . . . You cannot compare a picture with reality, unless you can set it against it as a yardstick. You must be able to fit the proposition on to reality” (PR 43). The comparison between model and world is internally determined by its method of depicting, as it were; what one is looking for in the correspondence relationship determines the relevant method of projection onto the world.

The second and more important point that I believe is maintained by this analogy is that, just like the ruler laid against the object, “only the end-points of the graduating lines actually touch the object that is to be measured.” In the act of measuring, one need not consult each and every line between the two ends of the object—for the size of the object does in a very specific way determine the measurement. Let's say I were to measure a sample of fabric. Although it is clear that every line literally touches the edge of the fabric, the only relevant gradation lines are the ones that touch the two edges of the sample. I would not count up each and every centimeter, but rather I would look where the object touched the ruler to determine its length. It is not the measuring instrument that determines the relationship of depicting, but that demand is determined by what is modeled. Again from the *Philosophical Remarks*, “The method of taking measurements, e.g. spatial measurements, is related to a particular measurement in precisely the same way as the sense of a proposition is to its truth or falsity. The use, the application, of a yardstick doesn't presuppose any particular length for the object to be measured . . . All that I need is: I must be able to be certain I can apply my yardstick” (PR 44).<sup>143</sup>

As mentioned earlier the representational capacity of language, although perhaps obfuscated in the advanced languages we know, is an essential feature of language. The way that a proposition 'connects' with reality is made explicit by the process of logical analysis. A proposition has “one and only one complete analysis” (3.25). Wittgenstein accepted Russell's theory of descriptions as a method of analysis, by which he suggests that the process of analysis is made by repeatedly inserting definite descriptions in place

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143 See also NB 37, where he says “[a] yardstick does not say that an object that is to be measured is one yard long.”

of complexes until all terms are replaced by simple names (3.26). In the proposition, the last residue of analysis are “simple signs” which are not capable of further analysis. A completely analyzed proposition reaches 'ground-level' at elementary propositions, which in turn are composed of names in relations to one another. These “elements” of the propositional sign each correspond to objects (3.2, 3.22). A name refers to [*bedeutet*] an object. Objects can only be referred to, “I cannot *speak* about them: I cannot *put them into words*” (3.22). The existence of simple signs as the end result of analysis is necessary for a proposition to be able to express sense (3.23).<sup>144</sup> When we end up with nothing but names, we have reached ground-level since “a name cannot be dissected any further.” A name is “a primitive sign,” not capable of further analysis (3.26).

#### §4 *Saying and Showing*

There is an important contrast that runs through the entirety of the *Tractatus*, which the standard reading takes as central to a proper understanding of the text. This is the distinction between what can be said [*gesagt*] and what can only be shown [*gezeigt*].<sup>145</sup> In a 1919 letter to Russell, Wittgenstein refers to this distinction as his “main contention,” and declares it to be “the cardinal problem of philosophy”—a point he accuses Russell of missing (WC 98). One of the most obvious places to look for clarity on this point is the “conclusion” of the text, the seventh proposition. It specifies that “[w]hereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent.”<sup>146</sup> In the Preface, he refers

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144 A similar argument is given for simple objects in 2.02-2.0212

145 It is important to note that Wittgenstein sees these as exclusive categories. While there is a reading of “showing” that includes saying—perhaps where showing makes saying evident—Wittgenstein distances himself from this reading at 4.1212, where he says “[w]hat *can* be shown *cannot* be said.”

Thus the contrapositive, what can be said cannot be shown, must also hold.

146 The Ogden translation is used here for effect

to this final remark as “the whole meaning [of the book].” If a proposition can be expressed, then one of the lessons of the *Tractatus* is how to render it with clarity, without ambiguity or constructions which violate the logical syntax of our language. But, what about those other non-propositional 'truths,' those that cannot be uttered?

On the positivist reading, the proper bounds of linguistic expression are limited to what can be spoken of; anything else is relegated to the periphery, and is not considered cognitively meaningful. That is, either a proposition can be expressed or it is nonsense. Since those propositions which are constituted by truth-functions of elementary propositions are those which can be spoken, what is the status of the other non-truth stating propositions such as those of ethics and metaphysics? How can the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown allow us to redeem these insights, without lapsing into positivism? These are important questions, and the standard reading has a distinctive answer which is grounded in the distinction between showing and saying.

It has been suggested by P. T. Geach<sup>147</sup> that Wittgenstein's distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown was borrowed from Frege. Geach cites Frege's argument in “Concept and Object”<sup>148</sup> as the single most important influence on Wittgenstein's distinction; thus, he argues, it is by looking to Frege that we can attain a clear view of this distinction. Frege's article is a response to an attack on his *Grundlagen der Arithmetik* by Benno Kerry, but also contains important insights into Frege's formula language of *Begriffsschrift* itself. Kerry attacks Frege's sharp separation of concepts and

147 Peter Geach, “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein” in *Essays in Honor of G. H. von Wright*, ed. Jikko Hintikka, *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 28 (1975): 54-70

148 Frege “On Concept and Object” in *The Frege Reader* ed. Michael Beaney (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 181-193.

objects by arguing that sentences such as “The concept 'horse' is easily obtained,” show that concepts can also serve the function of objects in sentences.<sup>149</sup> Kerry was, of course, missing Frege's point. But it is instructive to understand *why* Kerry's criticism is a misunderstanding of Frege's point.

In the Introduction to the *Grundlagen*, Frege lays out three principles to which he would adhere in the text:

- [1.] There must be a sharp separation of the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
- [2.] The meaning of word must be asked for in the context of a proposition, not in isolation;
- [3.] The distinction between concept and object must be kept in mind.<sup>150</sup>

He comments on this third principle, that “it is an mere illusion to suppose that a concept can be made into an object without altering it.”<sup>151</sup> Adding the words 'the concept' in front of an concept term does not somehow perform some sort of semantic magic trick, which changes a concept term into an object term. To the contrary, it is *not the way the words are compounded* that is important, but instead the *logical role* of the term in a *Begriffsschrift* formula that determines whether it is a concept or object.<sup>152</sup> For Frege, the role of a concept term is different than a concept, since objects or arguments are

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149 Frege in fact allows for a given word to serve both as a concept and as an object in differing contexts. The example that he provides in the *Grundlagen* is the word “moon.” In the sentence 'The moon is bright tonight,' it is used as an object word; in the sentence 'Titan is a moon,' it is used as a concept word. See Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic* trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), §64.

150 Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, x. See also *The Frege Reader*, *op. cit.*, 90

151 *Ibid.*

152 As Kwasi Wiredu has pointed out, there may be a deeper, ontological distinction that Frege may have omitted between concept and object. On this reading, 'the concept “horse”' is indeed a concept. But further, this would also imply that concepts (or 'senses,' as in his “On Sense and Reference”) also must be objects for Frege.

saturated, whereas concepts or functions are not—the latter cannot stand on their own, but only have meaning when an object or argument gives it a truth-value.

The expression “x is a man” is considered 'unsaturated,' and will take an object in the variable place of the function. By substituting objects, the completed formula then points (or refers) to the True when, e.g., 'Martin Heidegger' is plugged in for the variable; likewise it would point to the False when 'Hannah Arendt' is. Although in “Concept and Object” Frege explicitly refuses to define what concepts or object are, he does indicate that these roles each become perspicuous through its *Begriffsschrift* formulation. The proper logical role of an unsaturated predicate term, as a concept, is to take an object in its variable place; the proper logical role of an object is to fill that variable place in the concept term. Although concepts can sometimes serve as argument places for other concepts, this amounts to nothing more than confusing a first-order predicate under which objects fall, and a second-level concept under which first-level objects fall.<sup>153</sup>

The resulting confusion of Kerry is due largely due to failing to pay attention to Frege's foundational third principle, the distinction between concept and object. Kerry not only transgresses Frege's third principle, but in his confusion he also sins against the second. This is because Kerry attempted to set the role of “the concept 'horse’” outside the context of a proposition, and then smuggled it back into the proposition with its logical role as a concept and not an object pre-determined—a violation of the context principle. And as Frege points out, a transgression of the second principle is also a violation of the first. “If the second principle is not observed,” he tells us, “then one is almost forced to take as the meaning of words mental images or acts of individual mind,

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153 Beaney, *A Frege Reader*, 189

and thereby to offend against the first as well.” So Kerry can be interpreted as rejecting the distinction between concept and object, by simultaneously violating the holophrastic principle and lapsing into psychologism.

Thus Frege concludes, with a seemingly paradoxical air, that “The concept 'horse' is not a concept.”<sup>154</sup> To Frege, this is not paradoxical at all, but merely a consequence of the 'grammar' of these terms. It is not a concept at all, but rather a name—since the logical role of this term is to name an object, and only objects can be named. Frege shows that Kerry's alleged counterexample amounts to nothing more than “an awkwardness of language,”<sup>155</sup> which shows the insufficiencies of ordinary language and the necessity of the clarity generated by the *Begriffsschrift* notation. Of Kerry's criticism of Frege's alleged 'definition' of concepts and objects, Frege says that it was not intended to be a definition at all:

. . . my explanation is not meant as a proper definition, One cannot require that everything be defined, any more than one cannot require that a chemist decompose every substance. What is simple cannot be decomposed, and what is logically simple cannot have a proper definition . . . On the introduction of a name for something logically simple, a definition is not possible.<sup>156</sup>

Although such a distinction can be drawn perspicuously in an adequate *Begriffsschrift* sentence, it cannot be adequately drawn in language; indeed, such a notation should allow one to see that Kerry's example is no example at all: it illicitly uses a certain type of word in a logically inappropriate role, because he mistakes the role taken by 'the concept “horse”' to be that of a concept.<sup>157</sup> In an adequate formula language of logic, no such

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154 Ibid., 185.

155 Ibid., 185.

156 Ibid., 182.

157 Frege says in a 1902 letter to Russell: “[T]he words 'function' and 'concept' should properly speaking be rejected. Logically, they should be names of second-level functions; but they present themselves



confusions could be possible, since it can be *shown* that such sentences contain logical infelicities, even if one is unable to *say* so in any precise way. Put differently, logical analysis will clarify semantic confusions, or reveal certain constructions as outright nonsensical in ordinary discourse.

But Frege's distinction between concepts and objects is not merely a linguistic doctrine, but rather it is “founded deep in the nature of things.”<sup>158</sup> What Geach attempts to argue is that, both for Frege and for Wittgenstein, there are aspects of language which inform us about the nature of the world. Reading Frege this way—just as Geach attempts to show—we can see the obvious overlap with the doctrine of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein not only incorporated Frege's context principle into the *Tractatus* (3.3), but also the notion of an ineffable logical form that cannot be stated in language.<sup>159</sup> Frege did not attempt to define the logical roles of concepts and objects, but instead relied upon the *Begriffsschrift* to show the distinction. But even if Wittgenstein's distinction is influenced by Frege, it is certainly not identical to it. For Frege, to talk of concepts or objects one must move to a meta-level in which the second-level function “( ) is an object” can be satisfied by a first-order object. But this is not an option for Wittgenstein. One of his deepest held conviction, throughout both the early and later work, is that there are no meta-languages.

Wittgenstein never explicitly denies the existence of meta-languages—for to do so would put him in contradiction. But there are passages which support this.

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linguistically as names of first-level functions. It is therefore not surprising that we run into difficulties in using them.” See *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1980), 141

158 Frege, “Function and Concept” in *The Frege Reader*, 148

159 As will be discussed below, in the final version of the *Tractatus* the holophrastic principle was moved from 3.202 in the *Prototractatus* to 3.3. This may be evidence for its importance. See below §7.

Wittgenstein's denial of Russell's theory of types (3.331-332), amongst other things, can be seen as a rejection of this hierarchy of languages. Also as mentioned above, the fact that the mode of projection between the proposition and the world cannot be itself represented is also indicative of this point (2.172, 2.174). For if the representational relationship needed able to be represented (say in a meta-language), we run into a regress problem. “You can't get behind the rules,” he tells us later, “because there isn't any behind” (PG 244). As he puts it later in the *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*: “I will be talking about the word 'foundation' in the phrase 'foundation of mathematics.' . . . This does not lead to an infinite hierarchy. Compare the fact that when we learn spelling, we learn the spelling of the word 'spelling' but we do not call that 'spelling of the second order.’”<sup>160</sup> Note that even the thought of surmounting to a meta-level immediately brought to mind fear of an infinite heirarchy.

His solution for anything which requires ascending or descending a level from language—whether it is to a meta-language, or to the world—is to cast this relationship in terms of *showing*. In the *Tractatus* there are many things besides the logical role of expressions that are ineffable. These include the “form of representation” which is common to model and modeled (2.172-174); the sense of a proposition (4.022); propositions of logic (4.461); logical constants (4.0312); the “logic of facts” (4.0312), or any “internal properties” of a proposition (4.124); the existence of the soul (5.5421); the truth of solipsism (5.62); that there are laws of nature (6.36); the ethical and anything

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<sup>160</sup> *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: Cambridge 1939*, ed. Cora Diamond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 14.

“higher” (6.42); the mystical (6.52); and perhaps even the lessons of the *Tractatus* itself (6.54).

For Wittgenstein, only fact-stating propositions have meaning. That is, any statement which specifies a fact—a set of simple objects in determinate relations to one another—can be made into a model. Those propositions which are not fact-stating do not have pictures, and thus cannot be given sense according to the theory of the *Tractatus*. But then does it follow that these are meaningless, or rather merely cannot be modeled? While the positivist reading opts for the former, the standard reading argues that the latter disjunct is true. This is the standard reading's distinctive answer to the positivists: just because something has no meaning does not mean that it is nonsense.

#### §5 *Sense and Senselessness*

According to the *Tractatus*, any proposition which cannot stand in an isomorphic modeling relationship to the world has no sense. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein tells us that tautologies and contradictions “are without sense” (4.461). But in the following 'comment' paragraph, he clarifies: “[t]autologies and contradictions are not, however, nonsensical” (4.4611). This underlies an important point—that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* discerns between two different categories of propositions which do not have sense. Indeed, he consistently uses two different words. In the previous context the word used is '*sinnlos*,' perhaps best rendered in English as 'without sense' or 'senseless'; the latter word '*unsinnig*,' is the more appropriate German equivalent to 'nonsense.'

To make this criterion clear, recall that for Wittgenstein, a necessary condition for meaning is that a proposition is bivalent: there are cases under which it may be true, or it may be false. This is not merely a consequence of the *Bild* theory, but rather is more fundamental to his thinking—appearing prior to the earliest discussion of modeling.<sup>161</sup> Necessary propositions, and those that do not “carve up” logical space, cannot have meaning. What is distinctive about the truth-functions of tautologies and contradictions is their lack of contingency. The tautology “if p, then p” is true no matter what is plugged in for the variable 'p,' due to the nature of material implication.<sup>162</sup> Since the same variable sits in both the antecedent and consequent phrase of the conditional, it is impossible for this statement above to have a true antecedent while having a false consequent, the only case in which the material conditional is false. Likewise consider the contradictory statement “both p and not-p are true.” By the truth-functional nature of the conjunction, both conjuncts must be true for the entire statement to be true; but this is impossible since whatever truth value 'p' has, 'not-p' will have the opposite value.

For Wittgenstein, the bivalence of a proposition is a necessary condition for the possibility of meaning. Since a given tautology would be consistent with every state of affairs and a contradiction is always incompatible with every state of affairs, neither tautologies nor contradictions have unique models. And since by the *Bild* theory meaning is reserved for those propositions that assert the existence or non-existence of a state-of-affairs, these limiting cases do not properly speaking have a sense at all. “There is no

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161 Cf. “Notes on Logic”

162 Here I mean “material implication” in Russell's sense—not as Sellars uses it. For Russell “material implication” is defined the horseshoe operator (e.g., 'p  $\supset$  q') in *Principia Mathematica* to mean ' $\sim p \vee q$ '. This is what Sellars calls “logical inference,” which is to be distinguished by “material inference,” in which the conceptual content of the conditional statement plays a role in its validity.

model which is a priori true,” Wittgenstein tells us (2.225), which would need to be the case if tautologies were able to be modeled.

Neither tautologies nor contradictions have sense, because neither have determinate content. “The propositions of logic are tautologies,” Wittgenstein tells us. “[They] therefore say nothing” (6.1-11). However, it would be a very uncharitable reading of Wittgenstein to shackle him with the position that *logic is nonsense*—after all, what then is the *Tractatus* about other than the necessary conditions to which logic is committed? This lesson informs the standard readings. Although tautologies and contradictions do not *say* anything—are “without meaning”—it does not follow that they are “nonsense” in the narrower way. Standard readers interpret these propositions and their ilk as philosophically illuminating nonetheless, since they *show* something—although they are not capable of representing a state of affairs about the world. But Wittgenstein also asserts that certain expressions are just plain nonsense—which he calls *Ein Unsinn* or *unsinnig*—and which can contain no substantive philosophical insight. Russell's classic example “Quadruplicity drinks procrastination,”<sup>163</sup> might be an instance of the latter. It is true that the items which fall into either category have no sense, since there is no way for these expressions to be models. Peter Hacker is one of the main proponents of such a distinction:

Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not turn purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy. The task of philosophy in this respect then is twofold, to bring one to see what shows itself, and to prevent one from the futile endeavor to

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163 Bertrand Russell, *Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 166.

say it by teaching one 'to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.'"<sup>164</sup>

Although one may be convinced that there are two types of senseless propositions, it still remains an open question how this new category is to be populated. Consider, for example, those propositions which contain normative or metaphysical terms. These non-fact stating propositions on the Positivists' reading are not cognitively meaningful, and thus are relegated into the realm of unqualified nonsense. But are they so for Wittgenstein? Standard readers say no. They argue that many types of propositions considered nonsense may, in fact, still be philosophically illuminating.

Anscombe suggests what she calls a "rather trivial" example that seems not have sense, but which can nevertheless be illuminating in this way: the proposition "'Someone' is the name of someone."

This is obviously true. But it does not have the bi-polarity of Wittgenstein's 'significant propositions.' For what is it that it denies to be the case? Evidently, that 'someone' to be the name of someone. But what would it be for 'someone' to be the name of someone? Someone might christen his child 'Someone.' But when we say "'Someone' is the name of someone," we are not intending to deny that anyone in the world has the odd name 'Someone.' . . . Here a statement which appears quite correct is not a statement with true-false poles. Its contradictory, when examined, peter out into nothingness . . . [N]or, of course, is this a logical truth in any sharp sense of 'logical truth.' It is, rather, an insight; the opposite of it is only confusion and muddle (not contradiction).<sup>165</sup>

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164 Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 18-9. His quote is from PI §464

165 Anscombe, *Introduction*, p. 85

She ventures to guess, on Wittgenstein's behalf, that he would have considered this example “something which *shewed*—stared you in the face, at any rate once you had taken a good look—but what could not be said.”<sup>166</sup>

Due to the isomorphic relation between language and logic, it follows that on the standard reading, the form of the world can be 'read off' from the form of language. Thus, perhaps language *is* able to show things which cannot be said. There are parallels here amongst the standard readings on this point. For instance, Janik and Toulmin say:

Much of the difficulty that people have experienced in interpreting the *Tractatus* revolves around the fact that both ethics and logic relate to what can be “shown” but not “said”; consequently, “the mystical” is ambiguous. In the first place, it refers to what the world has in common with its representation, its mirror, that is, language. Secondly, it refers to the poetic power of language to convey the “meaning of life.” . . . Language can thus represent facts by means of propositions, not alternatively convey emotions in poems. The aim of the *Tractatus* is to distinguish the two, and thereby protect them from confusion.<sup>167</sup>

Thus it seems that the question of how to 'save' ethical and metaphysical propositions from Wittgenstein's own theory may be based upon a misunderstanding. The standard readers charge that the positivists conflate the two separate notions of not having sense within the *Tractatus*. Although propositions concerning ethics and metaphysics are not truth-functions of elementary propositions, this does not imply that they are nonsense. Recall the example of showing in the literary work, as mentioned above.<sup>168</sup> In the poem there were ethical and existential truths conveyed by the poem, but not directly. They were not *said*, but rather *shown*. The standard readers will instead claim that these

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166 Ibid., p. 86.

167 Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 193

168 See above p. 59

propositions belong to the category of philosophically illuminating senselessness, not nonsense.

## §6 *Nonsense*

Perhaps some further light might be shed upon this distinction by considering some other things that Wittgenstein thought were nonsense in the stricter way, *unsinnig*.

Here are three key passages:

"1 is a number," "there is only one [number] zero," and all similar expressions are nonsensical [*unsinnig*].

(It is just as nonsensical [*unsinnig*] to say, "There is only one 1" as it would be to say, "2 + 2 is at 3 o'clock equal to 4.") (4.1272)

The reason why "Socrates is identical," means nothing is that there is no property called "identical." The proposition is nonsensical [*unsinnig*] because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination, and not because the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate (5.473).

Roughly speaking, to say of *two* things that they are identical is nonsense [*Ein Unsinn*], and to say of *one* thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all (5.5303).

In each of the above remarks, Wittgenstein uses the stronger word for nonsense: '*unsinnig*.' The first is a relatively straightforward passage, speaking of 'formal concepts' such as "the words 'Complex,' 'Fact,' 'Number,' etc." It is nonsense to use formal concepts in propositions, such as "1' is a number," "a' is an object" or "φ' is a predicate." Formal concepts for Wittgenstein are not linguistic items, but rather are properly "presented in logical symbolism by variables" (4.1272). "When something falls under a formal concept as one of its objects, this cannot be expressed by means of a proposition. Instead it is shown in the very sign for this object" (4.126). These are "pseudo-concepts"



for Wittgenstein, since they are features of logical form being used perniciously as concept terms. Just as with Frege's "concept" and "object," formal concepts are not themselves predicates for Wittgenstein, but characteristics of logical form in symbolism; and likewise for both Frege and Wittgenstein, they cannot be spoken about, but only shown in an adequate symbolism. Such logical items show their function, but do not say. So to use them as predicates generates nonsense. The function ' $\phi$ a' says that "a has the property  $\phi$ ," but the variable letter 'a' and function ' $\phi$ ' both do not say anything on their own, but rather show their function in a logical language.

Likewise, consider the third passage, where he is responding to Russell's use of the symbol '=' to indicate identity. For Wittgenstein, if a piece of symbolism is superfluous, then it does not belong to a proper *Begriffsschrift*. Wittgenstein thought that the identity sign was "not an essential constituent" of logic (5.533). He demonstrates that it is superfluous by developing a way to express identity and difference without using the sign; rather identity claims can be simply expressed symbolically by "identity of sign," the use of the same variable occurrence twice in the proposition.<sup>169</sup> Likewise difference between two objects can be expressed by "difference of signs," or using two different signs for objects (5.53). In both cases, nothing is necessarily signified by the sign for identity. There is no need to say, for example:

$$(\exists x,y).f(x,y).x = y$$

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<sup>169</sup> Landini has recently suggested that Wittgenstein meant to employ the use of exclusive quantifiers to symbolize identity claims. See Gregory Landini, *Wittgenstein's Apprenticeship with Russell* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The proposition 'there is only one thing  $x$  which satisfies the property  $f()$ ,' since that says the same thing as merely repeating the same variable within the proposition, as follows:

$$(\exists x).f(x,x)$$

The same can be said for the difference notation  $\sim(x=y)$ , such as in:

$$(\exists x,y).f(x,y).\sim x = y$$

Wittgenstein would re-write this:

$$(\exists x,y).f(x,y)$$

Since the same logical formula can then be re-written omitting the identity sign without loss of meaning, Wittgenstein thinks that this shows the identity symbol is nonsense.

“Logic must take care of itself,” he writes at the head of the second passage. Wittgenstein heads the second remark by stating “If a sign is *possible*, then it is also capable of signifying” (5.473). And in the second case, we have an instance of nonsense, not because the symbol is itself impermissible or redundant, but because there has been no meaning given to the sign 'identical' as a predicate term (5.4733).

What is common to all three of these passages is that nonsense [*Unsinn*] is created by failure to give signification to a sign in the role that it appears. He clarifies his position on this at 5.4733. Wittgenstein tells us “Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give meaning to some of its constituents.” In the first example the error is the usage of strictly logical items 'up' a level in vernacular English; the second is trying to fit a

specific term in a place where it does not belong, while the third is because a superfluous symbol is introduced. On the standard reading, it is important to discern this strict usage of the term 'nonsense' from the weaker term, 'senseless.' A proposition is without sense just in case the external relation of representation with the world is not possible—that is, it is not fact-stating. However those propositions are *nonsense* (in the stronger sense) because they use terms in ways that are not meaningful, defying the internal aspects of logical syntax.

The sensible statement, 'the cat is on the mat' makes sense to us due to semantic considerations (that the proposition is well-formed) and syntactic considerations (that we understand the signification for each of the signs). Consider the difference between James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" from *Through the Looking Glass* as two possible candidates of nonsense. The former may be considered nonsense due to Joyce's literary use of portamento. *Finnegan's Wake* is simultaneously written in several different languages, often collapsing several meanings into each word. Joyce's concern here is to express in multiple ways, giving more than one signification to each sign. In fact, Joyce is so concerned with multiple semantic expression, that many of the sentences violate the considerations of syntax. No better example can be given than the fact that the book is circular: the beginning of the first sentence is contained on the last page of the book. Joyce's method of writing is that each sign signifies several ways at once, too much so for the constraints of syntax.

In Carroll's poem by contrast, although all the lines of the poem are written in a "grammatical" style, few lines actually contain meaning for us. In many cases, even

though we can identify the part of speech of each of the words in the poem, the meaning is lost on us. The reason is largely due to the fact that, although perfectly composed iambic pentameter, the meanings of most words are largely unknown. Both Joyce's "novel" and Carroll's "poem," may in one way or another be considered 'nonsense.' But are they nonsense, or merely senseless? Both texts can be read, and 'understood' in a way—we can imagine the narratives of Carroll's hero slaying the beast, vorpal sword in hand; or imagine a plot within Joyce's shifting, dream-like narrative. But both also might be considered nonsense to the first-time reader, yet sense can be made out of the supposed nonsense (so to speak). In this way, they can be considered revelatory even if literally meaningless. This is largely due to the context of how the nonsense appears. However, a nonsense utterance, when ripped from context, may be that—just plain nonsense. The sudden exclamation "Kree jaffa!" would be nonsense to many of us. This is 'nonsense' in the more general connotation of the term.

While the standard readers will take such instances of words appearing without defined roles to be nonsense, they still think that one may make sense of senselessness, as it were—that these ineffable 'truths' can be contentful and philosophically illuminating. There are 'truths' for Wittgenstein, which cannot be represented by language and thus cannot be spoken about—but that does not imply that they are entirely meaningless, as I believe my example above has shown.

The senselessness of certain propositions is a consequence of his theory of meaning; they are themselves taken, not to be 'nonsensical,' but instead to inform us of what our bounds are. But, as Wittgenstein rightfully points out, one cannot draw this

limit in thought, “for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable.”<sup>170</sup> Therefore he instead seeks to draw the limit in language. Here he seems to presuppose that there are things which can be the object of thought—be they elucidations on the form of language, the nature of the world, ethical or aesthetic insights—all of which fall outside the proper bounds of language. As an unfortunate consequence of this, Wittgenstein must speak about the ineffable.

### §7 *Self-Defeating Text?*

Perhaps the most puzzling of philosophical moves made in any philosophical text is when Wittgenstein asserts the following:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless [*unsinnig*], when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.  
Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. (6.54-7)

What is one to make of this? Are we not to re-read the text, since the author himself seems to dismiss it in its entirety to be 'senseless'? What a depressing thought to convey to the reader after she has just followed Wittgenstein down the narrow paths and the sparse landscape that comprise the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's view here is consistent with other places in the text, ex. 4.003, where he says that “Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false but nonsensical” [*unsinnig*].

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170 TLP, Preface

Wittgenstein's commitment to fact-stating language in the *Bild* theory seems to shackle him with a performative contradiction: he must speak about things which, by his own philosophical position, are unable to be spoken. So it follows that Wittgenstein would need to amend certain things in the process of ascending the ladder. However, his solution only pushes the contradiction to the level of absurdity: one must throw the propositions out as “nonsense.”

The standard reading seems to give Wittgenstein an 'out': we should render '*sinnlos*' as senseless (viz., not having sense) whereas we can use the stronger word, '*unsinnig*,' to indicate nonsense. This would be fine, were he to use '*sinnlos*' in the passage above. But as if to make the interpreter's job harder, Wittgenstein's German reveals the '*unsinnig*' ('nonsense') in 6.54—not the weaker term '*sinnlos*.' Thus, we should conclude either that Wittgenstein was not being careful in his word choice in 6.54, or that he truly meant that his propositions are nonsense in the more strict usage.

The question must be asked: is the *Tractatus* self-defeating? Surely we understand the propositions in the text; therefore, how can they be nonsense? Peter Hacker tries to explain away Wittgenstein's condemnation of his own propositions as nonsense from undermining the scope of the work. “Wittgenstein was quite correct and consistent; the *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseudo-propositions . . . Apparently what someone means or intends by a remark can be grasped even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense.”<sup>171</sup> Hacker here interprets this remark in terms of the class of philosophically illuminating nonsense, not the class of plain nonsense.

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<sup>171</sup> Hacker, *The False Prison*, 26

Max Black, in his *Commentary*, defends Wittgenstein on similar grounds. Wittgenstein is speaking—in violation of the central and final doctrines of the *Tractatus*—about that of which one cannot speak, and in so doing has 'stretched' the proper boundaries of the concepts employed. But this does not imply that Wittgenstein's project is in some way self-defeating:

By the 'world' he does not mean the physical cosmos, but something vaster and philosophically more interesting; by a 'name' he means not the familiar names of persons and places, but the 'pure name' whose necessary existence follows from the over-arching conception of what language in its essence must really be like, and similarly for other expressions that he uses in 'stretched' ways. Such an exercise in 'revisionary metaphysics' . . . is neither absurd nor self-authenticating. Wittgenstein is trying out a new way of looking at the world, which forces him to twist and bend language to the expression of his thoughts. His own conclusion that the new vision is incoherent was a result that had to be won by severe mental labor . . . A negative metaphysics is, such as that of the *Tractatus*, has its own rules of procedure: the ladder must be *used* before it can be thrown away.<sup>172</sup>

Both Hacker and Black's defenses try to save the *Tractatus* from the threat of performative contradiction—perhaps obviously so, as Black *did* see fit to write a 400 page commentary on the book. However, not all interpreters are satisfied by this, as we shall see. Black is right to point out that there can be interesting philosophical uses to words or concepts which do not 'fit' their determinate uses. An example that he gives in his exposition is “the greatest of all numbers,” for which we might use the infinity symbol as a notation to refer to this denoting phrase. After the development of the transfinite arithmetic, the aleph notation would be used to express the cardinality of infinities; so the simple symbol must be discarded. But, although we may be able to say that the infinity symbol is 'senseless' due to developments in twentieth century mathematics, I

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<sup>172</sup> Black, *Commentary*, 385-6.

think it would be a stretch to say that this symbol is 'nonsense' as if to mean plain nonsense.

Consider, also, the practice of teaching the Bohr model of the atom in the context of introductory level chemistry classes. Although it is false picture of the atom that electrons sail around the nucleus in fixed paths—like planets around the sun—it is not completely true that it serves no purpose. Rather, such models as this help to introduce us to the basics of atomic physics. Later, the student will learn that the position and velocity of an electron cannot be measured exactly, and that the electron has a probability of being anywhere around the atom—even having a non-zero probability of being inside the nucleus at a given time! Once one has a better view of quantum dynamics, one then can “see the atom rightly,” and can then “throw away” this simpler view. It is not *nonsense*, just *false*. But might still serve a useful purpose pedagogically in aiding the student to come to a entry-level understanding of the atom. So too, perhaps for the student of the *Tractatus*. How are we to understand this as plain nonsense? Or rather, how are we to declare the book nonsense when it is clear we understand it? These are serious questions which remain unanswered by the standard reading.

### §8 *Conclusion*

Most Wittgenstein interpreters to this day remain convinced of the truth of one form or another of the standard reading. It is the common view taught in seminars on the *Tractatus*, and great pains are taken to understand the text in its context, unlike the positivist interpretation, which did not take into account the context in which the text was



written. However, there is one serious question that the standard reading cannot account for: if Wittgenstein maintains that we can understand things which, properly speaking have no sense, then how can he declare in 6.54 that his “propositions are nonsense.” The standard readings seem to be consistent with Russell's quip in the Introduction that “Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said . . .”<sup>173</sup> Such criticism was repeated by Russell in Wittgenstein's 1929 dissertation defense, where Wittgenstein responded: “Don't worry, I know you'll never understand it.”<sup>174</sup> Recently, a new school of interpretation has grown around this problem, taking the question raised in 6.54 as its starting place. That will be subject of the next chapter.

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173 TLP, p. 22

174 quoted in Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 271

## *Throwing Away the Ladder: The Resolute Reading*

### *§1 Introduction*

For years following the renunciation of the positivist interpretation, the standard reading remained—and to a large degree still remains—the dominant interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Most Wittgenstein specialists, and nearly all non-specialists, accept it as the definitive understanding of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. Recall that according to these commentators, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* is portrayed as a sort of reluctant metaphysician, who later saw the error of his ways and then authored an entirely new philosophical method, inconsistent with the first. This new method of “language games,” instead of focusing on the necessary logical aspects that must exist for language to exist at all, focuses on the diversity of linguistic practices. According to this received view of Wittgenstein's corpus, the posthumously published 'later' philosophy exemplified by the *Philosophical Investigations* is in direct opposition to the philosophy of the *Tractatus*.

In the late 1970's and early 80's, the idea that Wittgenstein was putting forth metaphysical doctrines in the *Tractatus* started to come into question. Inspired by commentators such as Rush Rhees, Brian McGuinness, Peter Winch and Hide Ishiguro,<sup>175</sup> the anti-metaphysical interpretation began to increasingly hold sway over Wittgenstein scholarship. This opened up new avenues for at last amending the 'two systems' view—

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<sup>175</sup> Peter Winch, “Persuasion”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 17 (1992), 123-137. McGuinness, “The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*,” op. cit; Ishiguro, “The Use and Reference of Names,” op cit.

which is now increasingly being exposed as a fundamental dogma of Wittgenstein scholarship. If the schism between Wittgenstein's early and later philosophy is that in the former he was a sort of metaphysician, which he later sought to repudiate from the 1930's onward, then denying that Wittgenstein intended to put forth specific metaphysical theses in the early work might also provide a way to amend this perceived discontinuity in Wittgenstein's thought. Since that time, an exciting new interpretation of the *Tractatus* has emerged, initially outlined by Cora Diamond and expanded upon considerably by James Conant. The "Resolute Reading," as Tom Ricketts has named it,<sup>176</sup> has been quickly gaining attention and is currently attempting to gain status as the dominant reading of the text. Without hyperbole, this new interpretive model may be the most original and controversial proposal for understanding Wittgenstein since Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*.<sup>177</sup> It borrows some of the most powerful insights from the anti-metaphysical interpretation, but at the same time denies some of its characteristic 'standard' features, including allowing language to "show" us things which cannot properly be said. And indeed, Diamond and Conant's work has gained many admirers, such as Juliet Floyd, Michael Ostrow, Rupert Read, Alice Crary and Michael Kremer; and likewise, many detractors, including Ian Proops, Peter Hacker, H. O. Mounce and John Koethe.<sup>178</sup>

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176 See Thomas Ricketts, "Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Hans Sluga and David Stern (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.

177 Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

178 For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my focus to the two major proponents of the resolute reading for its positive doctrines, Cora Diamond and James Conant. Other resolute readers will be mentioned only where necessary.

In the last chapter I outlined the standard reading, which was developed as a reaction to the reading of the *Tractatus* put forth by the Vienna Circle. Rather than understanding Wittgenstein as an empiricist and anti-metaphysician, certain commentators tended to react in the opposite dialectical fashion: to read him as not putting forth any specific epistemological position in the text, whether empiricist or not. Rather, through the distinction between saying and showing, he indeed meant to indicate that language can reveal ontological, ethical or even existential 'truths,' which are strictly speaking ineffable through language. The standard readers argue that while these insights into the nature of the world are not fact-stating, and thus according to the *Bild* theory cannot be spoken of, they nevertheless can be *shown* by a scrutiny of the logical structure of language. This aspect of ineffability—that the most fundamental insights are indirectly reflected by the structure of language—is characteristic of standard readings. Through the identification of two separate categories of nonsense into which non-fact stating truths can fall, the standard readers agree that these revelatory pseudo-truths fall into the former class, not the latter; that is to say, although they do not have sense in a fact-stating manner, they can nevertheless reveal to us certain features of the world which transcend the proper bounds of language. Taking the distinction between saying [*gesagt*] and showing [*gezeigt*] as central to Wittgenstein's philosophical project, the standard reading uses it to define the distinction between the two categories. In this way, the standard reading paints Wittgenstein as a type of contemporary Kantian, who sought to annul language in order to make room for the mystical.

Unlike the standard reading, the resolute reading does *not* take Wittgenstein to be laying the groundwork for the necessary conditions of language. Instead these commentators deny that Wittgenstein is literally putting forth *any philosophical theory whatsoever* in the *Tractatus*. While the resolute reading does address and seek to amend some of the more obvious defects of the standard reading—including the contradiction of needing to speak about the truths which surpass the power of language, and taking seriously Wittgenstein's injunction at 6.54 to understand his propositions as nonsense—it is not universally accepted as the definitive reading of the text. In this chapter, I intend to analyze the arguments for the resolute reading as put forth by its major proponents, and articulate some of the criticisms put forth by its major detractors. I intend to demonstrate that the resolute reading is a powerful suggestion for understanding the text, but cannot on its most canonical form claim to be the truly definitive understanding of the text.

## §2 *Throwing Away the Ladder*

One of the most characteristic features of the resolute reading is its starting place.

At 6.54 Wittgenstein writes, in conclusion of the text:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical [*unsinnig*], when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

The resolute readers of the *Tractatus* take Wittgenstein's claim here seriously, that the propositions of his text are in fact *nonsense*. That is, not senseless [*sinnlos*] in the sense that they surpass the representational capacity of language, but rather *plain nonsense*

[*unsinnig*]. The resolute readers take this remark as their hermeneutic anchor, insisting that the proper interpretation of the text is to understand that the propositions of the *Tractatus* themselves are in fact nonsense, and thus in the end must be thrown away.

Standard readers will be tempted to interpret this remark at 6.54 to mean that his propositions are nonsense in the weaker connotation; that is, although they have no sense, they can still inform us about 'truths' which transcend the proper bounds of language. Indeed, the original translation of the text by Ogden and Ramsey used the word 'senseless' in this passage, instead of 'nonsense'—leading an entire generation of readers to gloss over the significance of this remark. However, even a cursory look at the original German of 6.54 above reveals that the word used is not *sinnlos*, meaning 'without sense' or 'senseless,' but rather *unsinnig*—'nonsense'! That is, Wittgenstein is not saying that his propositions fall into former category, but rather the latter; his propositions are, by his own word, just plain nonsense—that is, they are no better than gibberish, and thus show us nothing.

Many standard readers contend that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are literally meaningless, because in the course of the book he needed to speak about things which are, by the lesson of the text, ineffable. But a variety of commentators who endorse the standard reading have tried to downplay or interpret this remark such that it denies the obvious. Such a defense is put forth by Black in his *Commentary on Wittgenstein's Tractatus*.<sup>179</sup> He notes that Wittgenstein's conclusion is “profoundly unsatisfactory,” and suggests that “this ladder need not be thrown away.”<sup>180</sup> Arguing that while most of

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179 Max Black, *A Commentary on Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964).

180 *Ibid.*, 376-7.

Wittgenstein's remarks in the text cannot be literally meaningful since they cannot be modeled on the *Bild* theory, he suggests that Wittgenstein really means to say they are “senseless,” and not nonsense. Instead he rejects the suggestion that the remark at 6.54 implies that the remarks in the book are nonsense. Black argues that, “[i]f we take 'seriously' the conclusion that metaphysics is nonsense, it seems our confidence that we succeed in understanding the book must have been a self-delusion. It is one thing to say we must throw away the ladder away after we have used it; it is another to maintain that there never was a ladder at all.”<sup>181</sup>

Black seeks to put forth a line of defense which thwarts the temptation to read Wittgenstein as equating “‘nonsense’ with gibberish,” and “‘what ‘cannot be said’ with what cannot be rationally communicated.”<sup>182</sup> Instead he takes Wittgenstein as meaning that his propositions are meaningless since they illicitly employ what Wittgenstein calls “internal” or “formal” concepts, rather than and legitimate “external” or “material” concepts. Wittgenstein calls the former “pseudo-concepts,” as they stand for terms which belong to the symbolism itself. The terms 'object,' 'complex,' 'fact,' 'function,' and 'number,' are examples that he provides—all of which Wittgenstein thinks are properly symbolized through an adequate *Begriffsschrift*, but are ineffable in language (4.1272). It is nonsense by Wittgenstein's own philosophy to say, for example, 'There are objects.' Although this is constructed in a similar grammatical style to the expression 'There are books,' it is only by analogy that we feel the former expression is legitimate.<sup>183</sup> Objects in the *Tractatus* instead are only shown in symbolic form by the use of a bound variable.

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181 Black, *Commentary*, 379.

182 *Ibid.*, 379.

183 “So one cannot say, for example, 'There are objects', as one might say, 'There are books'” (4.1272).

Although the latter statement actually says something about the world, the former is an attempt to treat the concept which is itself internal to the symbolism as if it were a symbol for it. In this way a formal concept will 'show' us its logical role, through the way it is symbolized. Thus they are not properly concepts which can be spoken of, but rather show themselves in the use of language.

Black explains that “[l]ogical syntax cannot include such remarks as 'The world is everything that is the case' or 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things.’” Since these remarks use the pseudo-concepts 'world,' and 'fact,' which are “used by Wittgenstein in invented or stretched senses.”<sup>184</sup> In each case of these remarks, terms which stand for formal concepts are employed, thereby giving us the illusion that they have legitimate usages in language. Sentences which use these words, just as with tautologies and contradictions, are not fact-stating. They do not express propositions according to the *Bild* theory. But when we reach 6.54 at the end of the book, we simply realize that to get to the point he was trying to make, it required him to appear to speak about things which could not be spoken about; throwing the ladder away is constitutive of this realization. For Black, “Wittgenstein is trying out a new way of looking at the world, which forces him to twist and bend language to the expression of his new thoughts . . . A negative metaphysics, such as that of the *Tractatus*, has its own rules of procedure: the ladder must be *used* before it can be thrown away.”<sup>185</sup>

Peter Hacker argues that Black's line of reasoning is “mistaken,”<sup>186</sup> but nonetheless mounts a line of defense similar to Black's. Hacker rightfully points out that

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184 Black, *Commentary*, 382. The quoted expressions are remarks 1 and 1.1, respectively.

185 *Ibid.*, 386.

186 P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* Revised edition (New York: Clarendon Press, 1986), 25.



Black confuses the categories of senselessness and nonsense. Senseless propositions, like tautologies and contradictions have legitimate uses outside language—but do not have meaning in a fact-stating way. Sentences which use formal concepts, unlike tautologies and contradictions, are always illegitimate for Wittgenstein. Hacker readily admits that Wittgenstein's propositions, such as the ones quoted above, are nonsense—but not pure nonsense. Rather they are what he calls “illuminating nonsense.”<sup>187</sup> This strange notion of nonsense, he tells us, “will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy.”<sup>188</sup> He also when we reach the conclusion, we must realize that they are nonsense. But they still do have the power to enlighten us about the structure of logic and language, which is the conclusion we come to understand after the ladder has been tossed.

One can't help but be struck by the vagueness of Hacker's explanation here. He might be defended on this charge by pointing out that of course it must be vague—he's trying to express what is ineffable. But this points to exactly what is so philosophically troublesome about this doctrine. Both Black and Hacker seem to presuppose, strangely, that there really is a sense to be understood underlying nonsensical sentences. And this is reflected in how daunting a task it is to write about their commitment to communicate the ineffable. To do so, commentators must use troublesome phrases such as “illuminating nonsense,” and assorted grammatical tricks in order to somehow talk about what Wittgenstein supposedly thinks is shown but cannot be spoken. While they try to claim

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187 Ibid., 18.

188 Ibid., 18.

that these are 'truths' of a sort, they are not 'truths' in the sense that they correspond to an existing fact; and then somehow they attempt to pull an ontological moral out of the *Tractatus*, to articulate these pseudo-truths on Wittgenstein's behalf—all the while denying that they are really saying anything. As Conant points out:

Some of [the standard readers] think it helps to call what is at issue here a 'fact,' placing the word 'fact' in quotes to mark the difference between such facts and garden-variety facts. Facts are what can be spoken of, what can be depicted by meaningful propositions. What is at issue here is not that sort of fact, but rather something much deeper. Something? Well not some *thing*. It is something much deeper than a fact or a thing. It is like a fact, in that we can, in our thought about it, get it right or wrong; but it lies at too deep a level—deeper than any ordinary fact—to be a mere fact.<sup>189</sup>

This type of “backpedaling” as he calls it, is common to ineffability interpretations of the *Tractatus*. And yet still the standard readers have composed volumes on a philosophical doctrine which they claim cannot be articulated, and yet still think that we can understand what Wittgenstein meant to say all along.

Not only is the category of “illuminating nonsense” philosophically troubling and difficult to understand, but it also leaves Wittgenstein in a strange position. Throughout the literature, standard readers cite many things which can only be shown by language—which by the lesson of the text itself, are ineffable. Yet, nonetheless, they feel confident interpreting Wittgenstein not only as attempting to speak about these things of which one cannot speak through the course of the book, but moreover they assume that these lessons are able to be communicated to the reader.

Cora Diamond, in her seminal article “Throwing Away the Ladder,” first outlines what would be called a 'resolute reading' of the *Tractatus*. She frames her discussion

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<sup>189</sup> James Conant, “Why Worry about the *Tractatus*” in *Post-Analytic Tractatus* ed. Barry Stocker (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 169-70.

through a critique of P. T. Geach's article "Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein."<sup>190</sup> Diamond agrees with Geach that Wittgenstein developed this leitmotif as an expansion of Frege's analysis of the distinction between concepts and objects; but she denies that Geach understands the exact implications of the differences between Frege's use of the distinction and Wittgenstein's.

For Frege, the distinction between concept and object is not be drawn in language. Rather, what makes something a concept or object is its combinatorial role within a logical statement; concepts and objects *show* themselves by their symbolization in an adequate *Begriffsschrift*.<sup>191</sup> As Wittgenstein put it in the 1914 "Notes Dictated to Moore": "It is impossible to say what [the logical properties of language] are, because in order to do so, you would need a language which hadn't got the properties in question" (NM 108). For in order to speak about the distinctive logical roles of concepts and objects, one would need to use these same linguistic items to talk about them—thus employing them as both as *explanans* and *explanandum*. Simply put, if we were to use words which denote concepts in language, then one must refer to them—and that would be to treat them as objects, not as concepts, in order to draw the distinction between them in language. This is because, for Frege, the distinction is an ontological one, which is "founded deep in the nature of things."<sup>192</sup> To understanding this distinction drawn in language is to understand something about the world.

For Geach's Wittgenstein, the distinction between saying and showing allows one, from a scrutiny of the structure of language, to gain insight into the nature of the world.

190 See Peter Geach, "Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein." Geach's argument was presented in more detail above, so so I will not repeat myself here. See Chapter 3, §4.

191 See above, §4.

192 Frege, "Function and Concept," 148.

“Paradoxical as is the doctrine of aspects of reality that come out but cannot be propositionally expressed,” Geach tells us, “it is hard to see any viable alternative to it so long as we confine ourselves to philosophy of logic: and in this domain Wittgenstein revised Frege's views without unfaithfulness to Frege's spirit.”<sup>193</sup> Yet these ineffable 'truths,' to Geach and other standard readers, do somehow succeed 'gesturing at' these features of reality nonetheless. Although they are not strictly speaking 'truths' in a fact-stating way, and although language has no capacity to represent them, standard readers believe them to be conveyed by language. Just as the distinction between concept and object is real, although it transcends the representational capacity of language—so too, they think, Wittgenstein meant to hint at the fact that there is more to reality than language can represent.

What Diamond objects to is that, despite the express intent of the author of the *Tractatus*, standard interpreters still try to pull an ontological moral out of the *Tractatus* by 'reading between' the propositions, as it were. She tells us: “One thing which according to the *Tractatus* shows itself but cannot be expressed in language is what Wittgenstein speaks of as the logical form of reality. So it looks as if there is this whatever-it-is, the logical form of reality, which has reality alright, but which cannot say or think it has.”<sup>194</sup> Diamond calls this, and similar ways of reading Wittgenstein, as “chickening out.” She explains what an alternative picture would entail:

What counts as not chickening out is then this, roughly: to throw the ladder away is, among other things, to throw away in the end the attempt to take seriously the language of 'features of reality.' To read Wittgenstein himself as

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193 Geach, “Saying and Showing,” 68.

194 Cora Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder” in *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 181

not chickening out is to say that it is not, not really, his view that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but show themselves. What *is* his view is that that way of talking may be useful or even for a time essential, but it is in the end to be let go of and honestly taken as real nonsense, plain nonsense, which we are not in the end to think of corresponding to an ineffable truth.<sup>195</sup>

According to her analysis, both the positivist and standard readings constitute such a chickening out at the end. That is, both readings take the lessons of the *Tractatus* to be meaningful, and to contain philosophical insight, contrary to Wittgenstein's explicit statement that his propositions are nonsense and that the ladder must be thrown away.

It is also important to note that in the penultimate remark Wittgenstein says “he who understands *me* finally recognizes *them* [his remarks] as nonsense.”<sup>196</sup> This indicates that in 6.54, the author does not ask us to understand the *doctrines* espoused in the text—if there are any; but rather *him*, the author of the text. This can be read as indicating that Wittgenstein had no intent to endorse the supposed “doctrines” of the text itself. As James Conant puts it:

The primary characteristic that marks out a reading of the *Tractatus* as “resolute” . . . is its *rejection* of the following idea: what the author of that work, in section 6.54, aims to call upon his reader to do (when he says that she will understand him when she reaches the point where she is able to recognize his sentences as nonsensical) is first to grasp, and then to apply to the sentences of the work a *theory* that has been advanced in the body of the work—a theory that specifies the conditions under which sentences make sense and the conditions under which they do not.<sup>197</sup>

Once the ladder is thrown away, one comes to realize that the *Tractatus* does not “show” us something about the world, or about language. Instead, to the resolute readers, the

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195 Ibid., 181.

196 Emphasis mine.

197 James Conant, “Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism” in *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond* ed. Alice Cray (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 42.

penultimate remark shows something about the text itself—that the sentences he is using throughout the *Tractatus* literally mean nothing.

### §3 *Austere Nonsense*

As mentioned above, the central feature of the standard reading is the identification of two separate categories of nonsense. First, 'philosophically illuminating' nonsense—which is not able to be stated, but can only be shown—relies upon the structure of language to *show* us ineffable features of language and the world. It is often pointed to Wittgenstein's use the term *sinnlos*, meaning 'senseless' or 'without sense,' to where this ineffability doctrine exists in the text. Standard readers take various things discussed in the *Tractatus* to populate this category of redeemable nonsense, including but not limited to the propositions of logic, and the “form of representation” between language and the world—and in stronger cases, even existential, ethical and metaphysical insights—all of which Wittgenstein alludes to (although cannot say) throughout the course of the text. Anscombe's provides the example of the sentence “‘Someone' is not the name of someone” as an example of this type of philosophically illuminating nonsense.<sup>198</sup> She thinks that the grammatical form of this statement shows the logical role of the word “someone,” and indicates to us that it cannot be used as a proper name. That is, not through the literal meaning of the sentence itself, but through the underlying feeling it leaves its reader or hearer that it does not quite make sense.

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<sup>198</sup> Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 85-6

However, the second category of nonsense for which Wittgenstein uses the term *unsinnig*, is just gibberish or plain nonsense. Included in this category are statements which contain terms whose linguistic role has not been defined within a sentence. The nonsense utterance “Kree Jaffa,” on the other hand, is just pure nonsense; it means nothing to us. While the standard readers take this dual notion of nonsense as central to Wittgenstein's position, the resolute readers deny this dual notion of nonsense exists in the text. Indeed, the resolute readers accuse both the standard and positivist readings of falling into the same error, of attributing to Wittgenstein a “substantial” view of nonsense. Instead, they interpret Wittgenstein as only putting forth a single, *austere* notion of nonsense—there's sense, and then there's just plain nonsense, and nothing else. And according to this new interpretation, Wittgenstein only accepts one type of nonsense—just plain nonsense.

To get clearer on Wittgenstein's theory of nonsense, let us go back to the text. In 5.473, for example, Wittgenstein uses the example “Socrates is identical” as an example of nonsense. He tells us that the reason it is nonsense “is that there is no property called 'identical.' The proposition is nonsensical because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination, and not because the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate” (5.473). Likewise, in 5.4733, he adds that: “Socrates is identical says nothing, because we have given no meaning to the word 'identical' as an adjective.”

A word on the distinction between sign and symbol here is in order. Wittgenstein defines a symbol as “any part of a proposition that characterizes its sense” (3.31) and a sign as “what can be perceived of a symbol” (3.32). That is, the latter is the written or

spoken form of the word or phrase, and the symbol is what that sign represents linguistically. It is important to note that in natural language, it often happens that “the same word has different modes of signification—and so belongs to different symbols—or that two words that have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way” (3.323). Wittgenstein provides the example of the verb 'is.'

[T]he word 'is' figures as the copula, as a sign for identity, and as an expression for existence . . . (In the proposition, 'Green is green'—where the first word is the proper name of a person and the last an adjective—these words do not merely have different meanings: they are different symbols.) (TLP 3.323)

The phrase 'Green is green' can have three separate interpretations, in all of which the word 'is' has a different logical function. This is revealed to us by making it explicit through an adequate symbolism.<sup>199</sup> In the first case, we might read it as an instance of the predicative 'is,' a relation between concepts and objects, with the first occurrence of the word 'green' as a proper name (Mr. Green), with the latter as an adjective: 'Mr. Green is green.' Secondly, as a relation of objects, an 'is' of identity with proper names on either side: 'Mr. Green is Mr. Green.' Lastly, we can read the 'is' in this sentence as a claim to co-extensionality, a relation between concepts: 'Every green thing is colored green.' In each case, the translation into symbolism (where the predicate Gx is 'x is green' and 'g' stands for the proper name 'Mr. Green') shows that each variant uses a different sense of the word 'is.' These three variations may be symbolized accordingly:

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<sup>199</sup> This discussion is borrowed from James Conant's “Two Conceptions of *Die Überwindung der Metaphysik*: Carnap and the Early Wittgenstein” in *Wittgenstein in America*, edited by Timothy McCarthy and Peter Winch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 27-8.



- (1)  $Gg$
- (2)  $g = g$
- (3)  $(\forall x)(Gx \leftrightarrow Gx)$

The text at 5.4733 above seems very clear-cut, and from it one is led to believe that the expression “Socrates is identical” is nonsense because it illicitly uses a two-place relational term where a one-place predicate should be used. It is this type of nonsense that the standard readers rely upon to “show” us something about the logical forms of the terms, and why such a combination is linguistically or logically impermissible. It might be said that this type of illicit grammatical combination *shows* us something about the logical syntax of language itself—the logical role of the relation “identical” as a two place predicate term. The statement is nonsense, on this reading, because there are not two terms to fill this relation. We are shown that this construction is impermissible by the combination of otherwise acceptable terms which together do not make good sense. In this way, standard readers will consider this piece of nonsense to be a case of illuminating nonsense, which indicates to us that the term 'identical' only has meaning as a relation, not as a singular predicate term. Due to a violation of logical grammar, this statement means nothing; but insofar as it is nonsense, it can “show” us something about the impossibility of such a linguistic combination. The lack of sense of these linguistic items, it is thought, merely follows from Wittgenstein's commitment to bivalence as a necessary prerequisite for a proposition to have meaning. In each case, as necessary features of language, it is impossible for these to be false, and thus according to the *Bild*

theory cannot be modeled. And just as with tautologies and contradictions, although they has no meaning, it is not just gibberish.

Hans Glock's analysis of nonsense in *The Wittgenstein Dictionary* is an illuminating statement of this two-fold notion of nonsense in the *Tractatus*. Using Glock's own terms, we might call these two criteria for sense “contextualism” and “compositionism.”<sup>200</sup> Contextualist nonsense is generated when there is no role defined for a given word, relative to the context in which the term appears in a sentence. In Tractarian terms, this type of nonsense emerges when one cannot understand the symbol from the sign—just like with 'green is green' above. Compositional nonsense results from an inappropriate combination of symbols, often viewed as an impermissible 'clash' between two logical categories. Put in Tractarian terms, this type of nonsense emerges when a proposition is composed of signs that do symbolize something, but for which the logical (or perhaps, ontological) categories of the signs clash in their composition. It is this second type of nonsense that the resolute readers reject. Using Wittgenstein's own example, 'Socrates is identical,' Glock tells us the first type of nonsense “is a matter of deprivation, that is, due to the fact that we have failed to give 'identical' any adjectival meaning.” This is nonsense, not because the sign 'identical' is illicit, but because no meaning has been given for the word as it appears in the context of the sentence. But he continues:

At the same time, the *Tractatus* espouses a form of compositionism: the sense of elementary propositions is determined by the meanings of their constituent names, that is, by what objects they stand for. Objects have a logical form, which is their possibility of entering into certain combinations

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<sup>200</sup> See Hans-Johann Glock “All Kinds of Nonsense” in *Wittgenstein at Work: Method in the Philosophical Investigations* ed. Erich Ammereller and Eugene Fischer (New York, Routledge, 2004).

with other objects. Objects, and derivatively their names, fall into different logical categories . . . In the case of a meaningful proposition, to grasp the meaning and logical form of its names is to grasp the possible combinations of objects it depicts . . .”<sup>201</sup>

In the passage cited above, Glock cites 3.318 for evidence that Wittgenstein meant violations of compositional rules create nonsense: “Like Frege and Russell I construe a proposition as a function of the expressions contained in it.” But even in this seemingly direct statement of compositionism, it is important to note that it is rooted in the contextualist thesis, given the requirement at 3.314: “An expression has meaning only in a proposition.” Indeed, all of the remarks in this section are comments on 3.3, the most explicit statement of the context thesis in the text. Resolute readers hold that “contextualist” nonsense is the only type that the text allows, and “compositional” nonsense is an illusion, perhaps a legacy from the understanding of Wittgenstein as a Russellian atomist.

This reveals a difficult interpretive question, which the standard readers tend to ignore: how are we to know that the word 'identical' is a two-place relational term in this context, since *ex hypothesi* the utterance itself is nonsense? If it truly is nonsense, then we should not be able to discern the linguistic roles of its constituent parts. Simply put, nonsensical utterances have no grammatical or logical parts. Diamond makes clear this difficulty in a celebrated series of papers concerning the role of nonsense in Frege and Wittgenstein. She makes two key points about nonsense sentences: first, that nonsense sentences have no discernible logical parts; and secondly, that pieces of nonsense cannot play a role in a sensible sentence. As to the first point, she alleges that we are no more

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<sup>201</sup> Hans-Johann Glock *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 259-60.

able to understand the logical role of the items in the sentence 'Socrates is identical,' than we are to fix the logical role of a term in plain nonsense utterances, such as 'Kree jaffa.' She criticizes the view that a term has a sort of implicit “logical power,” an essential role determined by the character of the word itself.

The discovery that, although we can put words together so that they make no sense, there is no such thing as putting together words within a certain role in the language, or with certain logical powers, so that on account of these roles or these powers, the whole is nonsense—this is surely one of the great things in Frege, and one of the most important things owed to him by Wittgenstein.<sup>202</sup>

To Diamond and the resolute readers, there is no such thing as fixing the role of words in nonsense sentences because, simply put, nonsense has no sense. Wittgenstein relies solely upon his own version of Frege's context principle: “Only propositions have sense; only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning” (3.3). It is only in the context of a sensible sentence, for both Frege and Wittgenstein, that a word has a logical role. To think otherwise is to draw an analogy to other similarly constructed sentences, such as 'Socrates is happy,' and to presume that only a term with that logical role that can satisfy the construction 'Socrates is ( ).' That is, “Socrates is identical” is constructed in a similar fashion to “Socrates is wise,” but trying to force a relational term where a predicate should be. On this compositional view, it is because the relational term 'identical' does not fit where the adjective should be that nonsense results. But one might wonder how this can be recognized as a predicate rather than a relational term which accidentally omits the second term in the relation, modeled on something like “Socrates is identical to the teacher of Plato” To recognize the word 'identical' as a relational term in “Socrates is identical” would then be to fix the logical role of the word outside the

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202 Cora Diamond, “Frege and Nonsense,” in *The Realistic Spirit*, *op. cit.*, 91.

context of the sentence, and then smuggle it back into the nonsense utterance with its logical role fixed. But words can only have meaning in the context of a well-formed sentence.

On the Frege-Wittgenstein view, if a sentence makes no sense, *no* part of it can be said to mean what it does in some other sentence which does make sense—any more than a word can be said to mean something in isolation. . . . In general, then, what the assignment of meaning to Logical Elements does is connect a sentence's being constructed out of these Elements in some definite way with its expressing some definite sense. . . . If I know the rules of the language, I know what a sentence composed in such-and-such a way out of such-and-such Elements says; but I do not know (there is no such thing as knowing) that what I see or hear *is* this Element, unless the whole of which it is part has a sense to which the meaning if this Element contributes in the way determined by the rules.<sup>203</sup>

Just as Benno Kerry misunderstood Frege's distinction between concept and object<sup>204</sup> due to the failure to understand the logical role of the word within the context of the sentence, so too do the standard readers fall prey to the same error in advocating a compositional theory of nonsense. In this sense, as Diamond puts it elsewhere, “[w]e are all Benno Kerrys through and through.”<sup>205</sup>

The second point, that nonsense cannot be part of a sentence with sense, is made by her explicitly in “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.”<sup>206</sup>

. . . the *Tractatus* view is that, when you ascribe to someone the thought that p, you give what the person thinks by using a sentence you understand. Your understanding of the person who talks sense is an understanding of what he or she says, an understanding that is the same thing as your capacity to use an intelligible sentence of your own language in giving the context of that person's saying or thought . . . “Smith said that p” is itself nonsense unless what we put for “p” makes sense.<sup>207</sup>

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203 Ibid., 100-1

204 See above: Chapter 3, §4

205 Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” 184.

206 Cora Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*” in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (New York: Routledge, 2000), 149-173.

207 Ibid., 156.

While Diamond's discussion is tied here to belief attribution, the point she is making underlies her theory of austere nonsense. Not only is it the case that it is improper to speak about the logical role of nonsense phrases, but otherwise sensible sentences cannot contain pieces of nonsense. The expression “Smith said p” will make no sense to us when what is substituted for 'p' is a nonsense utterance. But it is important for the resolute readers that nonsense can nevertheless play a psychological role. As we shall see below, the resolute readers rely upon this as the purported function of the text.

There is textual support in the *Tractatus* for Diamond's conception of nonsense. One of the most explicit pieces of textual evidence is that Wittgenstein tells us that “any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can *only* be because we have failed to give a meaning to some of its constituents” (5.4733).<sup>208</sup> It is important not to lose sight of the word “only” in this passage. The resolute readers take this to indicate that there is only one type of nonsense, and it results from a failure to recognize the symbol in the sign, not from the result of taking two logically incompatible words and trying to put them together. The obvious reason why this is the case is Wittgenstein's commitment to the context principle. If a word is understood outside of the context of the proposition, there is no clear way to discern exactly what role it has. As pointed out in the last chapter, this is a reformulation of one of Frege's three “fundamental principles” in the Introduction to the *Foundations of Arithmetic*, “[N]ever ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of the proposition.”<sup>209</sup> Confusions result (as they did with Benno Kerry) when one attempts to fix the logical

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208 Emphasis mine.

209 Gottlob Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980), x.

role of a given word outside of the context of the proposition. In fact, Frege is careful to point out that concept words can, at times, be used as object words; an example that Frege provides is “moon,” such as in the sentence “The moon is bright tonight” and “Titan is a moon.” In the former case it is being used as a object word, and the latter case as a concept word. “We should not be deceived by the fact that language makes use of proper names . . . as concept words, and vice versa,” he tells us. “This does not affect the distinction between the two.”<sup>210</sup> To recognize the logical role of the word 'moon,' one must look to see how it is being used in the context of the sentence. There is no set logical role of a word outside the context of its significant use in a sentence. Thus it is not the case, for either Frege or for Wittgenstein, that there is a special type of nonsense generated by category errors; that is, when otherwise meaningful signs are put together in illicit ways. Rather it is only when a sign has no clearly defined meaning that we arrive at nonsense.

Austere nonsense does not result from a violation of logical syntax, or similar category mistake—but rather when a symbol cannot be perceived in the sign or or group of signs that compose the proposition. This is in harmony with what he says in 6.53: “The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said . . . and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that *he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.*”<sup>211</sup> Note that he would have needed to say “symbol,” not “sign,” if his intent was to allow category mistakes to be nonsense. Failure to give meaning to a

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210 Ibid., 64.

211 Emphasis mine.

symbol might exist for example in the case of ambiguity. That is not what he means here. Rather, for Wittgenstein, there is no sense that underlies nonsense.

The resolute readers present a unique and powerful interpretation of the text. But this conclusion does not come cheap. Detractors have criticized them, as we shall see, for offering a reading not unlike Carnap's. In collapsing the two categories, they argue, the New Wittgenstein interpretation collapses into the positivist interpretation. In reaction to the positivist interpretation, the standard readers had taken a great deal that the positivists had considered nonsense, and instead argued that they were merely senseless. The resolute readers seek to return these 'philosophically illuminating' insights and move them back to the realm of pure nonsense. But in so doing, they out positivist the Positivists, if you will; they populate the category of pure nonsense with much more than the Vienna Circle had ever dreamed. The entire book, on the resolute reading, is not intended to assert any positive philosophical doctrines whatsoever. Rather, the entire book, as James Conant puts it, "forms a continuous train of nonsense."<sup>212</sup>

#### *§4 Not Chickening Out*

The standard reading, as outlined in the last chapter, is deeply troubled by a seeming contradiction. Wittgenstein explicitly states that propositions which do not model the world in a fact-stating way are not genuine propositions. However this puts Wittgenstein in an unfortunate place, since a good deal of the text is spent talking about just those things which, by Wittgenstein's own lights, are inexpressible. Although

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<sup>212</sup> James Conant, "The Methods of the Tractatus," 223n85



commentators attempt to downplay this contradiction, it is a necessary consequence of every interpretation which contends that Wittgenstein intends to show the ineffable, and thus cannot be overcome by the standard readings. One is reminded here of Ramsey's quip, "[w]hat we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either."<sup>213</sup> And likewise one might also concur with Ramsey's sentiment, when he says "we must then take seriously that it is nonsense, and not pretend, as Wittgenstein does, that it is important nonsense!"<sup>214</sup>

One clear advantage in reading the text in accordance with the resolute interpretation is that, by denying the distinction between the two types of nonsense, the resolute reading does not commit Wittgenstein to the inconsistency of needing to speak the ineffable, as the standard reading does. If the *Tractatus* contains no positive philosophical theses and therefore does not contain philosophical insight, then Wittgenstein was not in the uncomfortable position of needing to utter that which one cannot. The text hints, gestures at, or communicates *nothing*. On the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, most of Wittgenstein's propositions in the text should be tossed away after they have been surmounted. If they are right, most of the sentences in the text cannot be taken to express propositions, by his own standard.

However, clearly one cannot take *every* remark in the text as nonsense, otherwise we would be forced to take 6.54 itself also as nonsense—and perhaps be led to the conclusion that none of it is nonsense. To the resolute readers, the *Tractatus* contains two distinct types of remarks, which operate on two different levels, and have different

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213 F. P. Ramsey, "Law and Causality" in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. D. H. Mellor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146

214 F. P. Ramsey "Philosophy," in *Philosophical Papers*, 1

functions. The upper level consists of a sort of 'instruction set' for how to read the book, which are referred to as “framing remarks.” The Preface of the text and the closing propositions (6.53 - 7) are usually taken to be framing remarks, as also are certain remarks early within the fourth proposition—“in the precise middle of the book”—on the nature of philosophy.<sup>215</sup> All the rest of the text which is not included in the set of framing remarks is on a 'lower' level, and the resolute readers consider these remarks to be nothing but gibberish, just plain nonsense. It is these surface level propositions that Wittgenstein is talking about in 6.54, which the reader must throw away after she has “climbed out through them, on them, over them.” Since, according to the resolute readers, there is no 'philosophically illuminating' notion of nonsense, propositions thus either have sense, or they are just gibberish. Thus Wittgenstein should be understood as intending all of his propositions, save the framing remarks, to be considered nonsense in the ordinary meaning of the term. And even if there were such a category, as pointed out earlier, the German text at 6.54 reveals that he meant his propositions not to be considered *sinnlos*, but rather *unsinnig*—relegating them to the category of plain nonsense. The *only* remarks which Wittgenstein actually intends to endorse are the framing propositions. All else—his supposed theory of propositions, of logic, of the *Bild* theory of meaning and his ontological opening remarks—all get tossed out as ladder is thrown away. As Michael Kremer has recently explained it:

. . . when we reach this pseudo-conclusion [6.54] we simply withdraw our assent to the idea that any of [the propositions of the *Tractatus*] made sense. We declare it to be nonsense. In so declaring we are not using 'nonsense' in some technical way whose meaning is defined by the “picture theory” [sic] or any other theory. We are using the word “nonsense” in a pre-theoretical,

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215 Conant, “The Methods of the *Tractatus*,” 223n84

common-sense way. We are simply saying, lo and behold, none of this actually made any sense!<sup>216</sup>

However, this is not just nonsense for nonsense's sake; rather these nonsense propositions do have a function, according to the resolute reading: *to get one out of one's ordinary philosophical ways of thinking about logic and language*. They are intended to have a 'therapeutic' goal, to rid one of philosophical confusions, which are represented by the supposed “doctrines” espoused in the text. That is, although the nonsense remarks that comprise the *Tractatus* are not intended to have a logical or philosophical role, they can nonetheless have a *psychological role* in tempting one into a certain metaphysical views of the nature of language. They tempt us into philosophizing in our traditional ways, lure us into waxing metaphysical, and creating theories which justify the use of language—in order to undermine these beliefs in the end as one finally ascends the ladder. Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* is, as he will put it much later, “to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense” (PI §464). To read the *Tractatus* without chickening out then is to understand that, just as the *Philosophical Investigations* should be read as a complexly ironic dialogue between a voice of philosophical temptation and the voice offering “therapy” for these ills—so too must the *Tractatus* also be read in this way. In fact, according to the resolute readers, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* anticipates the methodology of the later work.

An advantage of the resolute reading is that it allows for greater consistency throughout Wittgenstein's corpus. The standard potted history of analytic philosophy often interprets Wittgenstein as having two discrete phases of philosophical development.

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216 Michael Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” *Noûs* 35, no. 1 (2001): 42-3.

In his early years, including up to the publication of the *Tractatus*, he was mostly inspired by Russellian logical atomism, and was a type of reluctant metaphysician. After he returned to philosophy in 1929, he gradually began changing his mind about the views expressed in the *Tractatus*, and started taking a quite different standpoint to analyze the philosophical problems of language. His later methodology, exemplified by the *Philosophical Investigations*, is often considered to be a renunciation of his earlier work. Instead of espousing a view which ascribes the metaphysical conditions underlying logic and language, his later work shows the insufficiencies of this by renouncing philosophical theories about language. Instead, the goal of his later philosophy is *therapeutic*, to rid us of our philosophical confusions, and the urge to wax metaphysical. Throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*, he often likens philosophy to a type of “therapy” (PI §133) or “treatment” (PI §254), and refers to philosophical problems as a type of a “disease” (PI §593) or “an illness” (PI §255). “There is not *a* philosophical method,” he tells us at §133, “though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.” If the resolute reading is correct, then Wittgenstein is consistent in his methodology and views on the nature of philosophy in both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Both share the same goal, of attempting to rid us of our confusions concerning logic and language. And both also share the same therapeutic project, just offering therapy for different philosophical diseases.

§5 *Imagination and Nonsense*

What does it mean to read the *Tractatus* resolutely? This is a difficult question which has not yet been fully explained by any of its proponents.<sup>217</sup> One of its largest difficulties still present to this new interpretation is understanding how the putative passages of the text reinforce what they see as its aim. Some have begun this project in piecemeal phases, but this research project is still currently being developed.

There are aspects of the resolute reading which initially appear to be implausible. For instance, how can we say that the *Tractatus* is complete nonsense, if we seem to understand it in the process of reading? After all, isn't the hallmark of nonsense that it *should not* make sense? First, it is important to note that nonsense is not always transparently so. It is vital to understand that even nonsense utterances can nonetheless appear to make sense. In ordinary language, often the grammar of the sentence obfuscates the emptiness of the thought contained in it; "So much so," Wittgenstein tells us, "that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes" (4.002). In other words, natural language can still give the illusion of sense to sentences which really have none. If that were not the case, then the philosophical nonsense of the theologian would have readily occurred to her as such before the temptation to wax metaphysical arises. What the *Tractatus* is trying to combat, according to the resolute reading, is what might be called the "metaphysical impulse" of philosophers. This impulse might take many forms,

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217 Conant has recently described the resolute reading not as so much a doctrine about how to read the text, but rather as a "research program," yet to be finished. See "Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism," 111n4

including: the urge to theorize about the transcendent, or from a transcendental, God's eye perspective on reality—or even, as John McDowell has termed it, theorizing about language, from a “sideways-on” perspective.<sup>218</sup> Wittgenstein was attempting, throughout his career, to show us that this impulse is misguided, and that the use of language to express the insights is doomed to failure

But moreover, since according to Diamond nonsense can neither constitute nor be a part of an otherwise sensible sentence, one might wonder how the resolute readers can be confident in talking about, much less condemning, nonsense. If a given pseudo-proposition 'p' is in fact nonsense, then to tell someone else “It is nonsense to say *p*” should itself be nonsense. This is because, as Diamond points out, nonsense cannot play a logical role in an otherwise sensible statement. To do so would require that one to understand 'p' in the first place as nonsense—to understand, in a way, that this locution cannot be understood—which, of course, is not understanding it at all. Diamond's theory of austere nonsense addresses this concern directly. She points to another function of Tractarian nonsense that is relevant here, which she calls the 'imaginative activity' involved in taking nonsense for sense.

To want to understand the person who talks nonsense is to want to enter imaginatively the taking of that nonsense for sense. My point is that the *Tractatus*, in its understanding of itself as addressed to those who are in the grip of philosophical nonsense, and in its understanding of the kind of demands it makes on its readers, supposes a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it. If I could not as it were see your nonsense as sense, imaginatively let myself feel its attractiveness, I could not understand you. And that is the very peculiar use of imagination.<sup>219</sup>

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218 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (New York: Harvard University Press), 34-5

219 Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,” 157-8.

The point is that, in trying to understand a nonsense locution, one can imaginatively enter into the game of taking that nonsense for sense. It is readily apparent that this is the case. Consider Davidson's example of understanding Ms. Malaprop—interpreting the literally meaningless expression in the way the author intended to mean it;<sup>220</sup> or, to use perhaps a more familiar example, interpreting what my cat might want when she squares up and gives me a hearty “meow.” In each of these cases, one can imagine what the utterance might mean, and can understand the motivations that underly it, by giving content to the contentless claim.

To Diamond, a similar phenomena is happening in the *Tractatus*. Although Wittgenstein himself never himself fell into this metaphysical “disease of the imagination,”<sup>221</sup> Wittgenstein understood the temptations that might lead a philosopher to do so. He meant for the reader of the text to enter imaginatively into the game of taking nonsense for sense, with the eventual goal of getting the reader to understand what might inspire one to philosophize about language in the traditional sense. And each of the supposed “doctrines,” surveyed in the *Tractatus*—from the opening “ontological myth,” and the *Bild* theory of meaning, to the distinction between saying and showing—all are attempts to 'lure us in' to the nonsense, to make us feel the temptation to provide metaphysical conditions on which logic and language must rest; that is, until the ladder is pulled from under our feet at the close of the book. In so doing, Wittgenstein is able to undermine this impulse to do philosophy in the way it has traditionally been done,

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220 Donald Davidson, “Nice Derrangement of Epitaphs” in *Truth, Language and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 89-107

221 *Ibid.*, 160.

eventually to bring one to the realization that this impulse is misguided. This is perhaps why Wittgenstein says in the opening of the preface that “this book will be understood only by someone who has already had the thoughts that are expressed in it.” Or perhaps as he should have put it: someone who has already had the temptation towards the pseudo-thoughts expressed in it. That is, those who have felt the urge to philosophize in a manner consistent with the pseudo-doctrines in the text. Additionally, he points to the subject matter of the book as showing “the reason why [the problems of philosophy] are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood.”

In her infamous paper “Throwing Away the Ladder,” Cora Diamond discusses the stages that the reader psychologically undergoes in the process of passing “from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense” (PI §464).<sup>222</sup> First, the reader attempts to make sense of a given locution in the text—for example, “‘A’ is an object”—by imagining it is a significant proposition. This would require imagining it as a bivalent proposition, and understanding the conditions under which such a pseudo-sentence might be considered either true or false. That is, the reader begins by imagining “its truth and its falsity *both* to be graspable.”<sup>223</sup> As one enters into this philosophical stance, one gradually comes to recognize it as illusory: “Wittgenstein’s aim is to let us recognize [this perspective] to be only the illusion of a perspective.”<sup>224</sup> Once one comes to realize why this does not make sense, we realize the error involved in this impulse. This second phase shatters the illusion of sense into which we had previously imaginatively entered.

As Diamond puts it:

222 Although Diamond does not describe these as discrete stages or number them as I do, I think it is easier to understand the import here by referring to them as such.

223 Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” 195.

224 *Ibid.*, 196.



When Wittgenstein says that we cannot say “There are objects,” he does not mean “There are, all right, only *that there are* has to get expressed in another way.” That the sentence means nothing at all and is not illegitimate for any other reason, we do not see. We are so convinced that we understand what we are trying to say that we see only the two possibilities: *it* is sayable, *it* is not sayable. But Wittgenstein's aim is to allow us to see that there is no 'it.'<sup>225</sup>

Finally, as the ladder is tossed, we come to realize that there is no thought which corresponds to these supposed sentences, that instead they are just plain nonsense.

Warren Goldfarb has given a few specific examples of such “transitional vocabulary” in the *Tractatus*. In the opening stanzas, for instance, Wittgenstein “helps himself to talk of possible situations.”<sup>226</sup> However for Goldfarb, this talk of possibilities of objects combining in states of affairs is not ontological, “[f]or this would make the obtaining of a state of affairs a property of the combination of objects, whereas Wittgenstein is explicit that the combining of objects *is* the obtaining of a state of affairs. Wittgenstein's talk of possible states of affairs in the 2's is simply inconsistent with the conception of the fact that he is adumbrating. I would suggest this is intentional.”<sup>227</sup>

Goldfarb thinks that Wittgenstein was well aware of the difficulties in taking these possibilities as ontological possibilities of objects. It is instead a “transitional mode . . . it dissolves from the inside, so to speak.” When we reach 5.525, “The certainty, possibility, or impossibility of a situation is not expressed by a proposition, but by . . . a proposition with a sense,” we come to realize this transitional mode of speaking. “So we see what the transitional vocabulary was meant to lead us to: an appreciation that our understanding of possibility is not ontologically based in some realm of the possible, but

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225 Ibid., 197-8.

226 Warren Goldfarb, “Metaphysics and Nonsense: On Cora Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit*” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 23 (1997): 65.

227 Ibid., 65.

arises from our understanding of and our operating with the sensible sentences of our language.”<sup>228</sup> On Goldfarb's example, this means that one throws away the talk of the combinatorial possibilities of objects. Likewise later, this “conception of fact” which was the reason for the dismissal of the former pseudo-doctrine, is itself also overcome.

As the reader progresses in the text, and certain supposed “doctrines” get surmounted, she comes to realize that the rungs that have lead her to this point have spontaneously disintegrated. The resolute reading thus understands the book as a complex dialectic, where previous rungs of the ladder must be overcome, due to the insights reached in later phases.<sup>229</sup> But unlike a Hegelian dialectic, there is no final synthesis—one is left at the end holding on to nothing. When one reaches, for example, the picture theory, one overcomes what McGuinness calls the “ontological myth”<sup>230</sup> in the opening stanzas; likewise, when one surmounts to the 3's, one realizes that all of this talk of modeling was all a way of talking about the way propositions are understood, etc. Finally when one reaches the closing remarks, one has surmounted all of the rungs. There is no way to go 'higher,' one must then throw away the ladder, having realized that all of the propositions are literally nonsense—but hopefully the reader is better off for the journey itself.

In this way, the resolute reading thus brings Wittgenstein's method in the *Tractatus* close to that of Kierkegaard,<sup>231</sup> specifically in regard to what he calls “indirect

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228 Ibid., 66.

229 A complete interpretation of the text in this dialectical fashion has been put forward in Matthew Ostrow, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: A Dialectical Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

230 See “The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*,” op. cit. McGuinness is not himself a realist reader, but the anti-realist picture he puts forth of Wittgenstein's account of language in the *Tractatus* shares some basic features with the resolute readers.

231 The comparison between Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard was made respectable by Stanley Cavell,

communication.”<sup>232</sup> In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, as well as several of the other pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard does not seek to express his doctrines *directly*, but rather communicates them *indirectly*. In the *Postscript*, for example, the “author” Johannes Climacus describes the opposition between the truths of Christian ethics which are by their very nature “subjective” truths and defy rational expression; these are in opposition with doctrinal teachings, which can be communicated directly. The overt assumption of the work is that the two are fundamentally different, and that the truths of Christianity are misunderstood if they are expressed directly. At the end of the text, Kierkegaard breaks his pseudonymity, declaring himself to have been the author all along—remaining faithful to the point that the content of the work cannot be directly communicated. In so doing, Conant thinks, Kierkegaard undercuts the distinction which was operative in the rest of the text. “My pseudonymity or polynymity has not had a causal ground in my person,” he tells us, “but it has an essential ground in the character of the production.”<sup>233</sup> He continues:

So in the pseudonymous works there was not a single word which is mine, I have no opinion about these works except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as a reader, not the remotest relation to them, since such a thing is impossible in the case of doubly reflected communication.<sup>234</sup>

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specifically in relation to the *Philosophical Investigations*. James Conant, in a series of articles developing the resolute reading, has used similarities between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as sharing a common method. See Stanley Cavell, “Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy” in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 195-234; James Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?” in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 242-283; James Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell* ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), 195-224.

232 This is perhaps why many of its detractors prefer to describe it polemically as the “postmodern” or “deconstructive” reading.

233 Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 551.

234 *Ibid.*, 551.

Although Kierkegaard does not openly declare his work is nonsense, the closing stanzas reveal to us, just as with Wittgenstein, that he denies the truth of his own “doctrines” in the text. At the end, we take away the lessons from the work, which were not literally what was written by its 'author.' So too in Wittgenstein's text, the resolute readers believe, by gradually coming to terms with the book as nonsense, we withdraw our consent from the initial impulse to take his nonsense remarks as having content. At the end, we are left with just this: the understanding that such a locution is nonsense. We understand that that the 'doctrines' in the text are nonsense, and in throwing them away, hopefully we will forebear from waxing metaphysical in the ways described henceforth. As it turns out, the resolute reading shares with the positivist reading an opposition to metaphysics, but for very different reasons.

### *§6 Criticisms of the Resolute Reading I*

The resolute reading has come under severe criticism from commentators such as Peter Hacker, H. O. Mounce, Ian Proops, Peter Sullivan and John Koethe. Each of them has put forth different criticisms, but as I see it, they can roughly be divided into two main charges. First, they object that the resolute reading fails to accurately take account of the *Tractatus* textually. This includes not only the question of how the resolute readers are to account for some of the more troubling parts of the text; but also, what to do with what seem to be the most prominent doctrines in the text, such as the *Bild* theory of meaning and the distinction between saying and showing. This is the question of internal

consistency. Secondly, they charge that the resolute reading cannot accurately account for the changes that takes place in Wittgenstein's "turn" from the early philosophy to the later philosophy. In this section I will address the first criticism. The second will be my concern in the next section.

One might identify a bit of sophistry in the argument put forth by Diamond and Conant, which critics have not resisted exploiting. In taking 6.54 as the locus of their analysis, one gets the the feeling that the resolute readers are holding on to this remark so tight, that they let the rest of the text slip through their fingers. Peter Hacker points to "the spareness of evidence they muster" to support their interpretation.<sup>235</sup> But for the resolute reading to be successful, it need not only be interesting and interpretively advantageous to read the text this way, but also accurate to the text itself. Critics of the resolute reading argue that they fail on this count.

Peter Hacker's "dissenting opinion" in *The New Wittgenstein* collection, entitled "Was He Trying to Whistle It?," is one of the earliest and most comprehensive criticisms of the resolute reading. Throughout he points to several methodological and textual problems, for which the resolute reading has not yet accounted. His argument is largely polemical, and he resorts sometimes to just making fun of the positions of the resolute readers. But one of his more cogent charges is that Diamond and Conant seem to be methodologically inconsistent, in that they seem to want to use evidence from the text to support their reading which, according to them, should be considered nonsense. Hacker remarks that "Wittgenstein did not say, in *Tractatus* 6.54, 'My propositions elucidate in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as

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<sup>235</sup> Hacker, "Was He Trying to Whistle It?" in *The New Wittgenstein*, op. cit., p. 360.

nonsensical—*except for propositions 4.126-4.1272!*”<sup>236</sup> In effect, Hacker thinks that in attempting to save Wittgenstein from the charge of performative contradiction, they end up allowing for the same thing in the end—since the resolute readers still have him speaking about what constitutes nonsense. I think Hacker here misses the point. First, the resolute readers do not use the term 'nonsense' in the pejorative way, the way that Hacker seems to take it. Secondly, he seems to overlook the distinction between the framing remarks and the rungs of the ladder. The resolute readers do exempt a handful of remarks in the 4's as constituting part of the frame.<sup>237</sup> The remarks which, according to Wittgenstein's own philosophy contain “formal concepts,” do not show us something deep about their nonsense, which Hacker readily admits. But in these passages, Wittgenstein here is talking about remarks using these formal pseudo-terms, revealing that sentences which employ them are nonsense. That Wittgenstein can *mention* sentences containing formal concepts as nonsense without *using* them, is a hair which Hacker does not wish to split.

Another critic of the resolute reading is H. O. Mounce, who has published his criticisms in his review of *The New Wittgenstein* collection.<sup>238</sup> Mounce's refusal to accept the resolute reading centers upon his refusal to downplay the distinction between saying and showing—not only in the *Tractatus*, but also its role in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein.<sup>239</sup> He even goes so far as to attack Hacker's paper in the collection, which itself is critical of the resolute reading itself, saying that his disagreement is “not so great

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236 Ibid., 362.

237 This will lead to another textual problem, addressed below.

238 H. O. Mounce, “Critical Notice of *The New Wittgenstein*,” in *Philosophical Investigations* 24 (2): 185-192

239 Ibid., p. 191.

as one might have supposed” on the import of the distinction between saying and showing. He offers two main lines of criticism: first, that the resolute reading of Wittgenstein is “indistinguishable from positivism;”<sup>240</sup> and secondly, that the resolute readers ignore the historical influences that lead to specific things contained in the text. To the second charge, Mounce provides Schopenhauer as an example, whose “influence on Wittgenstein is entirely neglected” by the resolute readers. He points to the discussion of solipsism in the 6's as an example of the influence of Schopenhauer on the *Tractatus*.

Mounce thus claims that an inappropriately anti-historical view of the *Tractatus'* development leads the resolute readers to easily dismiss the doctrines in the text out of hand. I will deal with this objection more fully in the next section, but in brief one might point to the fact that the passages on solipsism may still have been influenced by Schopenhauer, without Wittgenstein simply reiterating Schopenhauer's philosophy in the *Tractatus*. The argument can be made that, although Schopenhauer was the inspiration to some of the supposed doctrines of the text, that the goal of the *Tractatus* is to show the misguided nature of his philosophical predecessor. If Wittgenstein is not understood as attempting to communicate doctrines, then this objection has no teeth. And in fact, this seems to square better with Wittgenstein's pronouncement that he has sought “the final solution” to the philosophical problems plaguing the tradition. It is only because Mounce believes that Wittgenstein is endorsing these passages that this problem surfaces. Moreover, it is false that the resolute readers ignore the historical influences on Wittgenstein. They, perhaps more than any other group of commentators, seek to show

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240 Ibid., p. 187.

the continuity of the *Tractatus* with certain other thinkers in the tradition, most notably with Frege.

The first charge of Mounce's—that the resolute reading lapses back into the positivist interpretation of Wittgenstein—can also be shown to rest upon a confusion. The first chapter of this essay, I laid out in great detail some of the problems that follow from too hastily reading the *Tractatus* in harmony with the philosophy of the Vienna Circle. The standard reading itself was developed as a response to the defects of the positivist reading. So, one might think, if the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* seeks to deny the distinction between senselessness and nonsense, which was central to the objections against the positivist interpretation, doesn't this mean that the resolute readers are just lapsing back to positivism? What Mounce misses is one of the characteristic features of the resolute reading, the denial of the distinction between austere nonsense and substantial nonsense. As was pointed out above, the resolute readers deny the doctrine of “illuminating nonsense” which results from a cross-category clash between logical items. Mounce seems to ignore the fact that the positivists themselves endorsed the substantial conception of nonsense—which is, in fact, central to Carnap's critique of Heidegger in “Elimination of Metaphysics.” Carnap there describes two ways that nonsense arises—the first is using a term in an otherwise sensible context, when the term has no meaning. The second way he describes are sentences which “consist of meaningful words, but the words are put together in such a way that no meaning results.”<sup>241</sup> The latter is what the resolute readers would call a substantive theory of

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241 Carnap, “Elimination of Metaphysics,” 67.



nonsense since, according to the austere theory of nonsense, there are no such things as meaningful words used syntactically in a way that does not constitute meaning.

The common charge that Hacker and Mounce both articulate is that the resolute readers fail to understand the significance of the distinction between saying and showing. Hacker points to the fact that early versions of the distinction, which appear as early as 1913-1914, are present in the last section of “Notes on Logic” and in the “Notes Dictated to Moore.”<sup>242</sup> Likewise recall that in a 1919 letter to Russell, Wittgenstein says: “I'm afraid you haven't got a hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed by prop[osition]s—i.e., by language . . . and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy” (WC 98).

Michael Kremer has proposed a solution to this problem.<sup>243</sup> He points to the Preface of the text, where Wittgenstein tells us that “[t]he book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood.” Later he tells us that he has “found, on all essential points, the final solution to these problems.” If the distinction between saying and showing is in fact a “problem of philosophy,” then it follows that the goal of the *Tractatus* is to solve it, and to show how it follows from a misunderstanding of “the logic of our language.” If it is, as Wittgenstein says, the “cardinal” problem of philosophy, then Kremer thinks that “we will find the key to the resolution of all the problems of

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242 See Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” 371-2

243 Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” 64.

philosophy in its dissolution.”<sup>244</sup> If Kremer is right, then the distinction between saying and showing is one of the main problems to be overcome in the text—not its main insight.

But there is another set of textual problems with regard to the status of the so-called “framing remarks.” Recall that the resolute reading prescribes a distinction between the rungs of the ladder, which are thrown away at the conclusion of the text, and the framing remarks which are the only things to be understood literally in the text. The “framing remarks” are often taken to include the Preface and closing comments 6.53-7, and as well as certain passages in the early 4's. First, nearly all resolute readers include the Preface of the text in the framing remarks. However, one might point to Wittgenstein's claim in the Preface of the book that “the *truth* of the thoughts communicated here seems to me to be unassailable and definitive.”<sup>245</sup> According to Conant and Diamond, the Preface is part of the 'frame' and this should be taken literally, which is inconsistent with the claim that Wittgenstein did not intend any philosophical theses. However, this might still possibly be answerable. Michael Kremer has interpreted this remark to refer to the framing propositions themselves.<sup>246</sup> But this does not answer some of the other puzzling passages which are considered part of the frame. For example, 4.11-4.116 are also considered to be framing remarks, but one might point to 4.115 as an appearance of the distinction between saying and showing in these remarks. Here he tells us that philosophy “will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said.” As Hacker points out, “It seems implausible to suppose that

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244 Ibid., 64.

245 TLP p. 29. Emphasis in original.

246 Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense”

this is a sudden intrusion of irony into an otherwise serious sequence of remarks.”<sup>247</sup> Or likewise, if the concluding remarks are part of the frame, one wonders how to interpret 6.522, which reads: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.” After all, the supposed mysticism of the *Tractatus* is one of the main misunderstandings that the resolute readers seek to combat.

Not only do resolute readers need to explain *how* the supposed doctrines of the text appear in the framing remarks, but likewise they need to explain *why* some of the text is not considered part of the frame which probably should be. David Stern has pointed out certain remarks which the resolute readers rely upon for their interpretation, “such as those passages that set out the conception of sense and nonsense that Diamond considers its central contribution.” Two examples that he provides are 3.3, the reformulation of Frege's context principle, and 5.473-33, which the resolute readers rely upon to argue that Wittgenstein only admitted an austere conception of nonsense. Neither these passages are generally contained in the frame by these commentators.

Lastly, the resolute readers are not consistent about exactly which remarks constitute the frame of the work, and which are to be thrown away as nonsense pseudo-propositions. They provide no consistent criteria for distinguishing between the two; and in fact, James Conant seems to have changed his mind several times about which propositions are to be included in the frame of the book. In some early papers Conant is more extreme, saying that “the propositions of the *entire* work are to be thrown away,”<sup>248</sup> but later he adopts Diamond's view that the Preface and the Conclusion are part of the

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247 Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” 370.

248 Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?,” 274

frame, and all else is to be thrown away. Still more recently, Conant has denied specifying that location in the work determines the frame, but has said that “[w]hat determines whether a remark belongs to the frame of the work . . . [is] its role within the work. [It is not] simply a function of where in the work it occurs (say, at the beginning or the end of the book). Rather, it is a function of how it occurs.”<sup>249</sup> He instead now specifies that “It will depend on the kind of sense a reader of the text will (be tempted to) make of it.”<sup>250</sup> Given Conant's recent perspectival understanding of the text and the nonspecific type of therapy that it purports to provide, these resolute readers put themselves in a position of being unable to criticize modified or weakened versions of the resolute reading, which might allow for example a different set of remarks constituting the frame than they intend—including perhaps even the distinction between saying and showing. And in fact, some standard readers have recently put forth interpretations just like this, which adopt an austere conception of nonsense, while at the same time preserving the doctrine of showing.<sup>251</sup>

### §7 Criticisms of the Resolute Reading II

As the resolute reading has it, the methodology of the *Tractatus* is identical to that of the *Philosophical Investigations*. That is, Wittgenstein sought to resist the urge to put forth theories about logic and language, but rather was aiming to provide therapy to cure

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249 Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” 457-8n135

250 Ibid.

251 Marie McGinn, *Elucidating the Tractatus: Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy of Logic and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Daniele Moyal-Sharrock, “The Good Sense of Nonsense: -A Reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as Nonself-repudiating” *Philosophy* 82, no 1 (2007): 147-77.

us of this disease. However, it seems at best a little convenient, and at worst flatly anachronistic, to apply his later methodology as an interpretive strategy for understanding the *Tractatus*, as James Conant has self-consciously pointed out.<sup>252</sup> A conclusive answer to the question of how to divide Wittgenstein's corpus is still a topic of debate amongst scholars; but many—myself included—have been under the impression that the sharp division, which the potted history of Wittgenstein's “two philosophies” implies, warps the understanding of the philosophy on both sides of this false dichotomy. For one thing, this understanding of Wittgenstein's corpus, which sharply divides the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, does not take proper account of Wittgenstein's 'middle phase'—the transitional period between 1929 and 1945. Further, amongst the commentators who take Wittgenstein to have an early and later philosophy, it remains an open question where exactly to draw the line; some place it as early as “Some Remarks on Logical Form,” or as late as the “Big Typescript.”<sup>253</sup> Just as with Frege and Heidegger, two thinkers who too often are interpreted in this bipolar model, Wittgenstein's constantly evolving thought-process is too nuanced to split into neat chunks. Thus there is reason to doubt the “two Wittgensteins” story of a clean separation of his early and later philosophy.

However, at the same time, one cannot help but be struck by the seemingly irreconcilable differences between these two texts. After all, in the *Tractatus* he spends a great deal of time talking about things like logical analysis, and these themes are

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252 See Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?” op. cit., 246.

253 For an excellent discussion of many of the debates between these commentators see David Stern, “How Many Wittgensteins?” in *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works* ed. Alois Pichler and Simo Säätelä (Frankfort: Verlag, 2006), 205-229.

conspicuously absent from the *Philosophical Investigations*. Amongst other things, his later work is directly critical of this tendency “to sublime the logic of our language,” which often is taken to be the project of the *Tractatus* (PI §38). Thus not only do the two texts seem to be irreconcilable on their face, but many critics of the resolute reading point to several places in the *Investigations* where his analysis is directly critical of his early work.

What evidence is there to substantiate the resolute readers' claim that the *Tractatus* operates with a therapeutic methodology? One of the most prominent places such evidence exists is in 6.54, as discussed above. When one is careful to distinguish between the framing remarks and the rungs of the ladder, one will not be so easily led into the temptation to read Wittgenstein as endorsing the supposed doctrines of the text and to view that Wittgenstein's later work at odds with his earlier work. Likewise, in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein seems to explicitly downplay the differences between the two texts. He mentions that he would have liked to “publish those old thoughts [of the *Tractatus*] and the new ones [of the *Investigations*] together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.” It is clear from the last phrase “my old way of thinking” that the two methodologies are not identical, but certainly he does not seem to be saying here, as it is commonly thought, that his earlier philosophy is irreconcilable with his later thought. As Anscombe reports, “Wittgenstein used to say that the *Tractatus* was not *all* wrong: it was not like a bag of junk professing to be a clock, but like a clock that did not tell the right time.”<sup>254</sup> To keep with the analogy, perhaps some minor

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<sup>254</sup> Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 78.

adjustments to the gears are necessary; but that does not mean that the clock must be thrown away.

However, there are other problems in the attempt to connect the early and later philosophy. How is it then, one might wonder, that in so many places Wittgenstein corrected or criticized things that he had said in the *Tractatus*, if he actually intended to hold no philosophical positions in the text? One reason perhaps to deny the resolute reading's claim that Wittgenstein intended to put forth no genuine philosophical theories in the text, is the wealth of self-corrections made of his earlier position—not only in his notes and lectures in the 1930's, but also in the *Philosophical Investigations* itself. For example, consider his *reductio ad absurdum* argument in the *Tractatus* for the existence of logically simple objects (2.021-2.0212). This is directly contrary to his analysis in PI §46-64, where he rejects the idea that language can be reduced to simple parts. Here he tells us, “[t]o the *philosophical* question: 'Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its component parts?' the correct answer is 'That depends upon what you mean by “composite.”’ (And that is of course not an answer but a rejection of the question.)” (PI §47). Consider, also, the following lengthy passage from *Philosophical Grammar*:

The idea of constructing elementary propositions (as e.g. Carnap has tried to do) rests on a false notion of logical analysis. It is not the task of that analysis to discover a *theory* of elementary propositions, like discovering principles of mechanics.

My notion in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was wrong: 1) because I wasn't clear about the sense of the words "a logical product is hidden in a sentence" (and suchlike), 2) because I too thought that logical analysis had to bring to light what was hidden (as chemical and physical analysis does) . . . If you want to use the appellation "elementary proposition" as I did in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and as Russell used "atomic proposition", you may call the sentence "Here there is a red rose" an elementary proposition. . . . Formerly, I myself spoke of a 'complete analysis',

and I used to believe that philosophy had to give a definitive dissection of propositions so as to set out clearly all their connections and remove all possibilities of misunderstanding. I spoke as if there was a calculus in which such a dissection would be possible. I vaguely had in mind something like the definition that Russell had given for the definite article, and I used to think that in a similar way one would be able to use visual impressions etc. to define the concept say of a sphere, and thus exhibit once for all the connections between the concepts and lay bare the source of all misunderstandings, etc. At the root of all this there was a false and idealized picture of the use of language (PG 210-11).

Throughout this passage, Wittgenstein seems clearly to be criticizing genuine views concerning logical analysis that he held in the *Tractatus*. Not only does he refer to *his* “notions,” and what he “formerly *believed*,” but also his “*theory* of elementary propositions,” which he claims was mistaken. And this is by no means an isolated example. On the next page he discusses the *Bild* theory of meaning, where the notion of “agreement of form” is an “error” (PG 212).

Likewise, one can easily find places in his later published work where he seeks to correct other such errors, again which seems to indicate that PI §28 where, in criticizing “what logicians have said about the structure of language,” he parenthetically notes “[i]ncluding the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.” It might be objected, perhaps, that the cold, third person reference might indicate that he was resisting taking authorship of the doctrines expressed therein. But there are other places in his later work which are inconsistent with this defense. For instance at PI §46, at the beginning of his discussion on simples and composites—which is often taken to be an attempted refutation of his Tractarian position—he gives the examples of “Russell's 'individuals' and *my* 'objects'” as “such primary elements.” The first person pronoun is used, unlike the earlier



passage, which seems to be a clear sign of self-attribution. So was Wittgenstein being merely poetic in the first quote and did he in fact endorse his early thought, or was he merely being sloppy in the second?

A more prominent mention is made in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he says that the Investigations “could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of *my old way of thinking*.”<sup>255</sup> Additionally, he continues: “since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again . . . *I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book* [viz., the *Tractatus*].”<sup>256</sup> Again, in each case, he does seem to be rejecting the views laid out in the *Tractatus*—which, of course, implies that there *were* views that he *did* hold in the text. Each of these quotations on its own seems to indicate that Wittgenstein was in fact putting forth specific views in the *Tractatus*, which he later sought to amend; and when taken together, it is difficult to contend otherwise.

These passages certainly seem damning. However the proponent of the resolute reading might charge that using evidence from this late in Wittgenstein's career might be troublesome. For in the first place, with the exception of the quotes above from the *Philosophical Investigations*, most of the evidence is taken from notes of lectures and draft manuscripts, none of which were edited for publication. It might be the case that Wittgenstein was using shorthand by talking about “his” views. Secondly, and I think more convincingly, Conant argues that using such evidence is methodologically troubling:

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255 Emphasis mine.

256 Emphasis mine.

[M]any of [the critics of the resolute reading] look to evidence in Wittgenstein's later writings to bolster their case against the approach that resolute readers take to the early work. This is fair play, of course, if the proper interpretation of the evidence and its bearing on the debate is reasonably clear. If, however, putative refutations of the resolute readings proceed in part by looking to passages in Wittgenstein's later writings . . . [by] simply proposing their preferred understanding of the later philosophy (reading it in ways that it is open to resolute interpreters to contend rests upon a misunderstanding related to the original question under consideration), then such a procedure of refutation runs a serious risk of begging the original question.<sup>257</sup>

The reason for this is that, as Conant sees it, such critics are “drawn to view the *Tractatus* through the lens of the *Investigations*.”<sup>258</sup> That is, one presumes that Wittgenstein's early and later philosophy are irreconcilable because the philosophical intent of later work is to criticize the *Tractatus*—which is itself only possible if read in the light that the two *are* irreconcilable.

### §8 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have surveyed the evidence for and against the resolute reading. It is still unclear how history will adjudicate upon this understanding of the *Tractatus*—whether it will gain more traction and become the dominant reading of the text, or succumb to the objections put forth by its critics. But just as with the previous interpretations of the text, it is contextually situated within a given historical period. It is to the analysis of each interpretation, and the reasons for their emergence that I shall now turn in my concluding chapter.

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257 Conant, “Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism,” p. 35-6

258 Ibid., p. 82

## ***Concluding Thoughts***

### *§1 Three Wittgensteins Revisited*

In the past three chapters, I have presented the three major interpretations of the *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus* since its initial publication in 1921. The standard and the positivist readings, each in their own time, were widely accepted as the *definitive* interpretation of the text; and each, in turn, has been shown to create its own distinctive problems—whether internally consistent with itself, or externally consistent with the text. The Positivist interpretation was the commonly accepted interpretation in the 1930's and 1940's. The Vienna Circle understood Wittgenstein's text as a plea to put philosophy on the secure path of science, and to resist the urge to wax metaphysical when philosophizing. This interpretation is largely rejected today, primarily due to its inability to take a properly contextual view of Wittgenstein's thought. Instead, they read the *Tractatus* primarily through the lens of the logical and epistemic views of Russell, which gave them a skewed perspective on the text, as I have shown in Chapter 2. The positivists, themselves influenced by the phenomenalism of Mach and Schlick, mistakenly assumed that Wittgenstein's views were identical to their own—even, for example, when Wittgenstein was careful enough not to formulate any epistemic views. As a consequence of this confusion, they ended up reading Wittgenstein as a reductive

empiricist, which in turn led them to interpret Wittgenstein's "elementary propositions" as simple sense-data statements. Also due to their misunderstandings concerning Wittgenstein's supposed epistemology and the "verification" that seemed to be implied by the *Bild* theory of meaning, they were likewise unreceptive to the lesson of the "conclusion" of Wittgenstein's text—from 6.4 onwards. And as a consequence, the Vienna Circle ultimately ended up downplaying the role of ethics and metaphysics in the *Tractatus*.

The standard reading reacted to the inappropriately non-contextual reading of the Positivists by following what might be described as a 'hyper-contextual' path, re-interpreting the text based on evidence mined from posthumously published manuscripts, letters and memoirs of friends and colleagues. The standard readers realized the defect of the positivist reading, especially in regard to the role of ethics and metaphysics. Instead of relying on the nature of the proposition as the central thesis in the text, they rely upon the distinction between saying and showing in order to highlight the ethical, aesthetic and existential aspects of Wittgenstein's thought. That which was most important to Wittgenstein, they argue, is precisely that about which he needed to remain silent in the text. The *Tractatus* is, in this sense, a preparation for the reader to somehow grasp these insights which surpass the ability to be articulated, when she has finished surmounting the ladder. But this new generation of Wittgenstein scholars, mostly students and friends who were largely influenced by his later philosophy, ended up reading the *Tractatus* against the later work. According to them, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was too locked up in Russell's atomism and the methods of extensional logic to see the organic

character of language—and it is exactly this which he later came to understand in the 1930's and 40's. As a consequence the standard readers, captivated by the picture of language put forth in the latter work, interpreted the *Tractatus* in stark contrast to the *Philosophical Investigations*. This has led the *Tractatus* largely being ignored by commentators as philosophically dated or irrelevant—except, of course, as it relates to the later philosophy. The standard reading, however, is neither consistent with the text nor with itself. It opens itself up to perhaps the most common objection to Wittgenstein's “position” in *Tractatus*—that Wittgenstein does not need to speak about that, which by his own admission, is ineffable.

Finally, from the 1980's to the present, the resolute reading has sought to amend the contradiction left over by the standard reading, by instead throwing the ladder away. They take Wittgenstein seriously at 6.54 when he says that one who understands him realizes that his propositions are nonsense. That is, there is an understanding of the author which is independent of understanding the text. According to this interpretation, there is nothing “shown” by the *Tractatus*; rather nearly all of the text is literally nonsense. They have spawned a highly original, but highly volatile reading of the text—which has been charged by commentators as both opening up perhaps too perspectival a reading of Wittgenstein's early philosophy, and perhaps even undermining its own legitimacy.

What are we to make of all this? One has sympathy for the opinion of David Stern, who questions the possibility of ever coming to a consensus on how Wittgenstein's early philosophy is to be understood. “The conviction that it must be possible to give a single coherent exposition of the book's doctrines or its methods is, I believe, an illusion.”

he tells us.<sup>259</sup> This inability to ever get a synoptic view of what Wittgenstein 'really' meant is a consequence of what he sees as a creative tension in Wittgenstein's early philosophy, between “a metaphysical vision” and an “equally powerful anti-metaphysical drive.” Due to the pull of these two opposing forces, Stern thinks “one can only give a unified and systematic interpretation of the book if one carefully selects and construes the appropriate passages.”<sup>260</sup> In the previous three chapters I have discussed the strengths of each interpretation, in terms of the textual evidence which speaks in its favor. It seems as if each respective reading has secured its grasp on a few specific passages, and reading the rest of the text around a handful of cherry-picked remarks, while creatively interpreting—or ignoring entirely—contrary evidence to suit their needs. Whether it be the positivists, who regarded his discussion of the proposition and its relation to reality as the central lesson of the text, ignoring the remarks on mysticism and ethics; or whether it be the standard readers who interpreted the distinction between saying and showing as Wittgenstein's central thesis, ignoring his explicit avowal in 6.54 of the doctrines in the text as nonsense; or even the resolute reading, which takes 6.54 to be nearly the only line in the text that should be taken as literally meaningful—in each case, it seems that interpreters have set their gaze so intently upon a few selected passages that they have, so to speak, let the rest of the text recede into the background.

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259 Stern, “Methods of the *Tractatus*,” 126

260 *Ibid.*, 126

§2 *The Reification of History in the History of Philosophy*

One of the young Marx's more prevalent arguments against the laws of capitalism, like the good Hegelian he was, is that they tend to establish themselves as absolutes. Without a proper historical understanding of the way that economics has progressed, he thought, we fall prey to the tendency to reify our current form—viewing the laws of bourgeois economics as eternal 'laws of nature,' on par with those of physics. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, analytic philosophy has been practiced largely by disregarding history, and thus not taking account of the influence of history on the way we philosophize in the Anglo-American tradition.

I believe that a phenomenon similar to Marx's notion of reification is present in the analytic philosopher's hasty dismissal of historical research. Contained within the claim that our questions are the 'real' ones, is also implicit denial of the contingency of our own historical place—as if the way that we currently do philosophy is the only game in town.<sup>261</sup> While I do not endorse denying the privilege of our own philosophical position, I do believe that we should also have *a sense of humility* about it. By this I mean first that, although unsettling as it is to admit, we don't have it all figured out yet—philosophically, or otherwise. We only tend to think that history does not temper our understanding of texts, because our context is unobtrusive. This is merely a consequence of being the type of historical animals we are. However, just because our context is taken for granted does not mean it does not inform the way we understand philosophical issues. Secondly, humility also requires that we admit that the current status of analytic

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<sup>261</sup> I sometimes wonder if Leibniz had a similar opinion of the Cartesian tradition before Kant introduced a new paradigm.

philosophy is itself a development from a definite set of thinkers, who were in turn reacting to very different set of concerns than our own. That is to say, our own way of doing philosophy is as historically dependent for its existence and its development as philosophy has been in any other period of time.

Interesting conclusions follow from thinking through the lineage of these three interpretations. There are, as I see it, two main forces at play in each of the interpretations so far discussed. The initial reaction to the text was offered by Russell and the Vienna Circle, as outlined in Chapter 2. Early in the tradition of what would become analytic philosophy, the positivists sought to restructure the methods and aims of philosophy as a scientific enterprise. Applying the logic of *Principia Mathematica* and the empiricism of Mach, they put forth a powerful anti-metaphysical programme which largely worked along the same lines as Hume: trying, in effect, to awake philosophy from its dogmatic metaphysical slumber. Initially, it was the perceived similarity between certain views of Wittgenstein and those of the logical positivists that lead the Vienna Circle to read their own philosophy into the text.

They were followed by a new generation of commentators, who recoiled from the positivist interpretation: taking hold of just what they had missed, and elevating it to the centerpiece of the work itself. The standard readers, whose position was outlined in the third chapter, argue that Wittgenstein's intent was not only to show how the proposition directly *says* something about reality, but also how it indirectly *shows* us something about the structure of language. Even propositions which are nonsense—which do not say anything at all—have the ability to show, and be 'philosophically illuminating'



nonetheless. And in turn, the insistence of the standard readers on the centrality of the distinction between saying and showing, as well as the distinction between two categories of nonsense in the text, are exactly the theses being denied by the resolute readers. Each phase has flourished in its own time, and each in turn has subsequently been disregarded by a successor phase, by fixing what the later commentators saw as the defects of the earlier interpretation.

### *List of Abbreviations*

- LAM *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge 1932-5*. Edited by Alice Ambrose. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.
- LE "A Lecture on Ethics" *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965). Reprinted in PO, p. 29-35.
- NB *Notebooks 1914-1916*. Edited by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- NL "Notes on Logic" in NB.
- PI *Philosophical Investigations*. Edited by Rush Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.
- PG *Philosophical Grammar*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Anthony Kenny. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.
- PO *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*. Edited by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- PR *Philosophical Remarks*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Raymond Hargraves and Roger White. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975.
- TLP *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by David Pears and Brian McGuinness. New York: Routledge, 1961.
- WC *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911-1951*. Edited by Brian McGuinness. New York: Blackwell, 2008.
- WVC Waismann, Friedrich. *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*. Edited by Brian McGuinness and translated by Brian McGuinness and Joachim Schulte. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979.

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