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Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* deranged
A metaphilosophical story

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Dedicated to the memory of
my grandfather
João Esteves da Silva

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Abstract

Taking off from some the more recent discussions regarding the puzzling character of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, this dissertation aims at four main points, mostly negative ones, all closely related when considered from a Wittgensteinian angle: an exegetical, a metaphilosophical, a linguistic, and an ethical point.

[1] Serving as a background illuminating the remaining three, the exegetical point is concerned with the particular modes of philosophical criticism Wittgenstein's works ask for, favouring the idea that it is impossible to expound them as something finished, and so than even the *Tractatus* shall prove more profitable when taken as a collection of remarks, not as a system. [2] Arguably as pivotal, the metaphilosophical point expounds a non-metaphysical view of philosophy, aware of its own mutable, given its contiguity with all our other activities, and practical character: philosophy, we hold, following Wittgenstein, is the art of (dis)solving intellectual puzzles, a contribution to understanding, not to knowledge. [3] The linguistic point is somewhat made manifest by the former: the ways of doing philosophy here adopted, relying as much on hinting (often through the deliberate employment of figurative modes of expression or even nonsense) as on argument, end up indirectly drawing attention to the untenability of the idea that language might be a somewhat self-sufficient and clearly defined structure, asking for definitive explanations of its workings. [4] As for the ethical point, a complaint against prevailing contemporary approaches to ethics and aesthetics, and alongside the more or less subtle hints already provided by the other three, silence has been the chosen method to intimate it.

Though mostly focused on the *Tractatus*, the present dissertation, tendentially favourable to the spirit of the "New Wittgenstein", is meant to serve as a kind of window, even if a tiny one, to the *Philosophical Investigations* as well.

Keywords Ludwig Wittgenstein; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; nonsense; showing; metaphilosophy.

Resumo

Partindo de algumas das mais recentes discussões em torno do carácter enigmático do *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* de Ludwig Wittgenstein, esta dissertação procura desenvolver quatro pontos principais (exegético, metafilosófico, linguístico e ético), maioritariamente negativos, e de estreita relação entre si quando considerados de um ponto de vista wittgensteiniano.

[1] Funcionando como uma espécie de pano de fundo elucidativo dos restantes três, o ponto exegético visa as formas de crítica filosófica requeridas pela obra de Wittgenstein, privilegiando a ideia de que é impossível tratá-la como algo acabado, pelo que até o *Tractatus* se poderá revelar mais proveitoso quando tomado como um conjunto de observações, não como um sistema. [2] Não menos central, o ponto metafilosófico desenvolve uma visão não metafísica da filosofia, consciente da sua própria natureza mutável, dada a sua contiguidade com todas as nossas restantes actividades, e essencialmente prática: a filosofia, defendemos, na senda de Wittgenstein, é a arte de resolver (ou antes dissolver) enigmas do pensamento, uma contribuição para a compreensão, não para o conhecimento. [3] O ponto linguístico é de certa maneira tornado manifesto pelo anterior: recorrendo tanto a estratégias sugestivas (entre as quais o emprego deliberado de enunciados figurados ou até absurdos) como a argumentos, o modo de fazer filosofia aqui adoptado acaba por chamar indirectamente a atenção para a insustentabilidade da ideia de que a linguagem se trata de uma estrutura claramente definida e em larga medida auto-suficiente, cujo funcionamento seria passível de explicações definitivas. [4] Quanto ao ponto ético, uma queixa contra as abordagens à ética e à estética de maior prevalência nos nossos dias, e a par das pistas mais ou menos subtis já fornecidas pelos outros três pontos, optou-se pelo silêncio como forma de o insinuar.

Embora centrada sobretudo no *Tractatus*, a presente dissertação, tendencialmente favorável ao “Novo Wittgenstein”, procura também funcionar como uma espécie de janela, ainda que estreita, para as *Investigações Filosóficas*.

Palavras-chave Ludwig Wittgenstein; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; absurdo; mostrar; metafilosofia.

KING

How well he's read, to reason against reading!

DUMAINE

Proceeded well, to stop all good proceeding!

LONGAVILLE

He weeds the corn, and still lets grow the weeding.

BEROWNE

The spring is near, when green geese are a-breed-ing.

DUMAINE

How follows that?

BEROWNE

Fit in his place and time.

DUMAINE

In reason nothing.

BEROWNE

Something, then, in rime.

SHAKESPEARE, *Love's Labour's Lost*

Introduction

The *Tractatus* as it struck me

This dissertation owes a lot to the recent exegetical discussions concerning Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In fact, it has in several ways been shaped by them. However, and though it still engages with such discussions, its *main* purpose does not stop there. Rather, it is intended to explore a few issues into which these debates – which Wittgenstein himself would have regarded as intensely academic ones – have somehow managed to enlighten: among others, the nature of language, in particular that of sense and nonsense, the nature of ethics, and, perhaps above all, the very nature of philosophy. A further issue, about which little or nothing has been said within discussions of the *Tractatus*, has caught my attention along the way and will be crucial here too: the nature of the interpretation of a philosophical text. I shall thus aim at four main interdependent points: (1) an exegetical, (2) a metaphilosophical, (3) a linguistic, and (4) an ethical point. Each will be approached in considerably different ways, and with different degrees of explicitness.

The development of the *exegetical* point serves, so to speak, as the background against which everything else takes place. I begin by rejecting the idea that a correct exegesis of a text should coincide on *all* occasions with its author's intentions. If the intentions are realistic and the author manages to convey them just well enough, then we can unproblematically say that they virtually correspond to what the text means. If not, however, what the text means may be quite different from what its author had intended. So far, most exegetical work done on the *Tractatus* – in fact, most work done in so-called history of philosophy – has been informed by the presupposition I shall be dissenting from. Philosophers, Wittgenstein included, have thus often been treated as Humpty Dumpty-like characters, not quite as ordinary speakers like everybody else. As I see it, Wittgenstein's philosophy, mostly done in what Cora Diamond has called a *realistic spirit*¹, a though minded, *non*-metaphysical (not *anti*-metaphysical) approach to

¹ The notion of being realistic in philosophy, not to be confused with that of realism in its traditional philosophical sense, is best clarified if we are to look outside of philosophical jargon, i.e. among our everyday discourse: for instance, realism in this ordinary sense is what we have in mind when saying 'Be

philosophical thought, concerned with the character of philosophy itself, calls for modes of criticism other than the more standard ones. Considering that the *Tractatus* still displays certain unrealistic features which Wittgenstein would later go on to recognize as so and hence discard, reading it in a realistic spirit will often require us to distinguish between what it really means from what Wittgenstein had then meant.

Following – and expanding – a suggestion once made by Ryle, I shall take the book as consisting of a series of six main intertwined stories: an ontological, a picturing, a propositional, a metalogical, a metaphilosophical, and an ethical story. The first three are among what counts as unrealistic and on closer inspection shall be revealed as chimeras. As for the remaining ones, their value becomes evident once they are freed from the former, i.e. once we cease to look at them through the distorting glasses – an ideal language – we thought we had been provided at some point. And when we manage to take the glasses off, the initial systematic appearance of the *Tractatus* vanishes, as we are then left with a collection of remarks, nevertheless concerned with the nature of language and thought, of logic and philosophy, or of ethics. The first is illuminated through a procedure in a way comparable to negative theology: by having wore the glasses and been deceived by them for a while, our minds shall be made clearer about a variety of things which language is *not*, notably a self-sufficient and rigorously accountable structure, which in their turn may very well end up reminding us of what language might be – as competent linguistic users ourselves, it would have been rather odd if we had been at all missing something *essential* about it. As for the remaining, it is above all emphasized that they do not consist of any particular bodies of knowledge. Instead, we are reminded that logic and ethics *penetrate* all thought, talk and action, and that philosophy is, as we shall describe it, following Wittgenstein, an elucidatory *activity*.

The majority of our discussion will focus on showing why the ontological, picturing and propositional stories are chimeras and then on exploring the surviving remarks from the metaphilosophical story. The metalogical and ethical ones will only be marginally alluded to, which is to say that this is far from an exhaustive or even wide-ranging account of the *Tractatus*. Nevertheless, even if the latter were to be considered in detail too, the recognition of its non-systematic character entails that, just as is the case of a self-acknowledged collection “of sketches of landscapes” (Wittgenstein 2009, 3) such as the

realistic’ to someone who e.g. shows enthusiasm for some unreasonable plan or desire, or when referring to realistic fiction, i.e. (non-fantastic) fiction where things take place somewhat as they do in real life. See Diamond’s “Realism and the Realistic Spirit” (1991). This notion of realism – *elementary* realism, as we may call it – is thus closely connected with that of *reasonableness*, if not equivalent.

Philosophical Investigations, it is ultimately impossible to expound the *Tractatus* as a finished thing. Given the unrealistic features of Wittgenstein's initial plan, all we can do is to abandon it, though at the same time recovering a variety of its sketches, the remarks, each valuable on its own, independently of the whole chimerical enterprise they had at first been meant to be part of. A further pitfall of the aforementioned exegetical debates has hence rested upon the idea of there being such a thing as *the* correct reading of the *Tractatus*.

Far from ignoring Wittgenstein's earlier intentions (as we shall see, considering these is nonetheless a key part of the interpretative process, notably for us to understand why they cannot quite be matched all the way through), our reading seeks for an understanding of the *Tractatus* which renders it as philosophically viable as possible. For that purpose I have drawn from the work of both so-called standard and resolute readers, from Anscombe to Diamond, from Ryle to James Conant or Oskari Kuusela, among a few others which I believe to bring something valuable to the discussion.

So, apart from attempting to follow Ryle's advice of not being too desirous of taking sides in philosophy – as he put it, “[t]o be a ‘so-and-so-ist’ is to be philosophically frail” (Ryle 2009, 161) – and of not being proud of doing so when that is the case, the approach I advocate partly resonates with what Saul Kripke once remarked about his much debated *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*: “the present paper should be thought of as expounding neither ‘Wittgenstein’s’ argument nor ‘Kripke’s’: rather Wittgenstein’s argument *as it struck* Kripke, as it presented a problem for him” (Kripke 1982, 5; my emphasis). Kripkensteinian quarrels aside, what I shall here attempt is thus to present the *Tractatus* (or an important part of it) as it struck me, as I have grappled with it and see what looked like its main structure dissolve, and as I then tried to get hold of what I thought to be left afterwards, i.e. of what seemed to me to be its actual philosophical achievements. Above all I have tried to do some justice to the sort of wish expressed by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*' preface (as, despite some misunderstandings of “Wittgenstein’s argument”, Kripke certainly did) when he wrote: “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own” (Wittgenstein 2009, 4). And we should also not forget that already about the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had forewarned that it was not a textbook.

This brings us to the *metaphilosophical* point: throughout his entire work, Wittgenstein's purpose in doing philosophy was never that of teaching us things that we did not know, but rather to remind us of our harmless ignorance in cases we thought we

knew when in fact we did not, or to sharpen our awareness of everything we *already* knew, even if only tacitly. From a Wittgensteinian point of view, philosophy is thus not a contribution to our knowledge, but to our understanding: it is meant to bring light to where there had been darkness before, to render clear what was previously in a muddle, to make explicit what we were just tacitly aware of, not to *discover* any new empirical facts about the world, hence its contrast with the natural sciences. Also, while the latter aim at generality, at necessary features of reality not always laying open to view, philosophical elucidation will tend to seek for particularities, for subtle comparisons and distinctions which, more or less imaginatively, may help drawing attention to the given issue. In this sense, philosophy is more akin to e.g. art criticism than to science. It is also more akin to, say, music or tennis, or painting or chess (or even logic or mathematics), as its success has much more to do with practical proficiency, especially at (dis)solving puzzles, than with theoretical accuracy.

Moreover, it has to be stressed that in Wittgenstein's case his methods, views, and often stylistic options too, are virtually inseparable. To try to paraphrase his writings and present them in a systematic way – as so many have done, usually falling short – is already to distort them in a way or another. It is thus my conviction that the best way to do justice to his philosophy when expounding it is to do it while remaining as faithful as possible to his own methods, i.e. instead of compiling a list of topics and arguments and declaring 'Wittgenstein said such-and-such', to let the reader himself engage into the interpretative activity, side by side with the one writing. I hence offer no apologies for some of the methodological options here followed and which may strike some as loose or obscuring²: for sure, there will be argument, but there will often be more *hinting* than argument and many of the issues left partially unexplored. My method can thus be said to be a half-argumentative one and, as I said, springs from the very nature of the subject at hand. Straightforward argument would have perhaps been preferable on other occasions, not this one. What is essential, though, and this is another important part of the point, is that one pays deliberate attention to his own methods and subjects. By developing the exegetical point through both arguments and hints I shall already be very much demonstrating the metaphilosophical one, more explicitly formulated later on.

In its turn, the *linguistic* point, also negative, which is in fact a more general point about human behaviour broadly considered, will be above all hinted at through the very nature of the methods employed here, in particular by the oscillations between sense and

² Nonetheless, and for clarity's sake, an analytical table of contents has been included at the end.

nonsense. It runs somewhat as follows (and this is by far its most explicit formulation to be found throughout these pages): if language is to be taken as a clearly defined and self-sufficient structure, accountable on strictly logical grounds, which all language users share, not only utterances which fail to make sense but virtually all figurative modes of expression would have to be exempted from it and considered alongside forms of non-verbal behaviour; however, as we observe what goes on all the time in our daily exchanges, it shall be clear that all sorts of figures of speech – and even nonsense – play their part in communication, not to mention overtly non-linguistic factors such as tones of voice, facial expressions, or bodily reactions, and so that it is impossible to treat language separately from all these; hence, as we realize that what we share is rather a variety of intertwined activities, habits and institutions, both linguistic and non-linguistic, our initial idea of language goes by the board, and with it maybe the temptation to seek for anything like definitive explanations of how language works, too. This point's role here is subsidiary to that of the metaphilosophical one, serving as an *example* of the sort of outcomes, quite distinct from those of scientific enquiry, philosophy is supposed to achieve when done this way.

As for the *ethical* point, and though I could have here included a discussion of the ethical story, as well as of its clear-cut restatement on occasion of the “*extremely* ‘Tractatussy’” (Anscombe 2011, 177) 1929 *Lecture on Ethics*, a lecture about the very impossibility of there being lectures *on* ethics – i.e. about *absolute* value, what is *really* important, the meaning of life, etc. – I have decided, perhaps being even more Wittgensteinian than Wittgenstein had been back then, to remain (almost) silent about it all the way through. This option alone shall, however, show something about how I regard ethics, and in particular about how I regard much of the arguments exchanged between contemporary moral philosophers (or philosophers of art). For sure, there is a lot to be said about a variety of issues closely related to ethics, namely human life, mind, and action, but maybe not so much *about* ethics.

A final remark. Though focusing mostly on the *Tractatus*, this text could in a way be seen as consisting of a sort preamble, no matter how incomplete, to the study of the *Investigations*. Diamond or Conant have often been accused of reading too much of later Wittgenstein into the *Tractatus*. I agree that they do so but what has been taken by their detractors as an exegetically suspicious move has in fact worked out as a most welcome contribution to the interpretation of Wittgenstein's works: by looking at the *Tractatus* from the point of view of the *Investigations*, not only have they exposed the impossibility

of understanding the former when read in a standard way, but, and perhaps even more importantly, have shed new light onto the latter as well. This is to say that if one is to look at the *Tractatus* in the way I suggest he may very well find himself in a better position to make sense of the *Investigations*. He shall, for instance, take Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical remarks seriously and not be too tempted to find there theses as robust as e.g. a use theory of meaning, radical conventionalism or a behaviourist view of sensation language. He shall also be less tempted to look at its opening, the so-called Augustinian picture – a humdrum description of a particular situation of instruction (a leitmotiv running throughout the entire text) – as itself representing a certain conception of language standing in need of criticism and replacement. But, and though I am largely favourable to those writing in the spirit of the “New Wittgenstein”³, neither is this a ‘therapeutic’ reading, i.e. one denying that Wittgenstein did put forward *any* theses whatsoever, even if only implicitly.

This, I think, is the key question his readers should be asking today: if neither a system builder nor practicing a form of therapy, what is it, then, that Wittgenstein was doing or trying to do? And, analogously, this is what philosophers of the present time ought to ask themselves: if neither science nor poetry, what is it, then, that we are doing or trying to do? I suggest that an answer to the first question may very well help us find an answer to the second. Having tried to remain faithful to Wittgenstein's methods, and though having made various suggestions, some stronger than others, I have not managed to provide anything that should be taken as a decisive answer. I have, however, pointed out a road which I believe to be a viable one.

³ See Crary & Read (2000).

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* deranged

A metaphilosophical story

(§§ 1-30)

§ 1. I shall begin by glancing at a few issues involved in the controversy that has dominated Wittgensteinian research for the last couple of decades, now often referred to as “the *Tractatus* Wars” (Lavery & Read 2011, 1), which has its origins in the gradual emergence of what we could call unorthodox readings of the *Tractatus*, i.e. readings dissenting from the more usual ways of approaching it. Among its various contours it has been especially concerned with how to deal with what seems to be the book’s central puzzle: the fact that it at least *appears* to put forward a series of metaphysical claims⁴ while at the same time discarding them as nonsense and declaring (meaningful) metaphysics to be an impossible affair. Though differing in various respects between them, unorthodox readers have tended to share a general impression that the more orthodox ones have so far, in a way or another, failed to take such puzzle seriously enough. And it is indeed extraordinary that, despite such apparent inconsistency, some of the latter have so quickly taken the *Tractatus* as a cogent and, though maybe flawed here and there, valid philosophical *system*.

For a long time, the most widely accepted attempts to ‘solve’ the puzzle have somewhat agreed on ascribing to the early Wittgenstein the rather peculiar idea that, though *all* metaphysical discourse – and thus his own in the *Tractatus* – is nonsense (which is itself a metaphysical claim), there are at least two fundamentally distinct kinds of metaphysical discourse: (1) the more abundant one throughout the history of philosophy, ultimately amounting to, as Hume or the logical empiricists of the Vienna Circle would have put it, nothing but sophistry and illusion, and (2) one of a much rarer sort, which vainly *tries* to speak of metaphysical truths that cannot be said but which are shown, i.e. displayed *inter alia* through the forms of what can be said. On this view, the statements of the *Tractatus* are supposed to be of the second kind: they are nonsense

⁴ By ‘metaphysical claims’ I mean general unempirical claims about the alleged essential nature – or structure – of things.

because they try to *state* ineffable truths (about the alleged essence of logic, language, thought and reality), including the ones that purport all metaphysical statements to be nonsense, and while, of course, failing to do so, still somehow manage to convey them. That this account possibly matches the early Wittgenstein's intentions is far from being out of question and there is indeed some persuasive evidence supporting it, though perhaps not as conclusive as some might claim. However, if what one is looking for while reading the *Tractatus* is not only a faithful determination of authorial intentions but, and above all, philosophical viability, I cannot see how it could be satisfactory.

It is thus not surprising that the more careful 'orthodox' readers, from Elizabeth Anscombe to Peter Hacker, have had no problem in recognizing the untenability of such position: that the *Tractatus* as a whole is irreparably defective – “like a clock that did not tell the right time” (Anscombe 1971, 78) and could not be fixed – and that Wittgenstein himself would later go on to acknowledge so and thus reject many of its central tenets, is not a matter of much doubt for them. This is perhaps the point where the approach of some of the more unorthodox ones, notably the so-called *resolute* readers (now numerous enough to form a sort of alternative orthodoxy among Wittgensteinian scholars), most diverges from that of the former, as they seek to read the *Tractatus* in a way that tries to save it from collapsing into incoherence.

This resolute approach (a particular *stream* – or array of streams – among Tractarian unorthodoxy, not the only one) should be understood as a reasonably flexible program for reading the book, one that should not force us into *one* particular reading, as two of its leading proponents, Cora Diamond and James Conant, have maintained. In fact, they suggest that the acceptance of the following assumptions should be sufficient for a reading to be labelled 'resolute': (1) the self-proclaimed nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* do not convey ineffable truths, no matter of what kind, and (2) their nonsensicality is not a consequence of a theory of meaning put forward in the book. As we can see, “both of these features [...] say something about how the book ought *not* to be read, thereby still leaving much underdetermined about how the book ought to be read” (Conant & Diamond 2004, 43).

The very notion of a resolute reading of the *Tractatus* is best explained by contrasting it with the seeming irresoluteness of the more standard interpretations. To be resolute in this sense is to demand plausibility rather than inconsistency, to avoid unreasonable philosophical temptations such as that of attaining an illusory point of view external to language (or thought) and the world from which we could somehow grasp an

ineffable theory of meaning (the so-called *picture theory*), anchored on an equally ineffable metaphysics, that is nonsensical in its own terms. And at least not to be too comfortable in ascribing such irresoluteness to Wittgenstein. It is also a matter of trying to take his metaphilosophical remarks (from both his earlier and later writings), such as his insistence “that it is only through some confusion one is in about what one is doing that one could take oneself to be putting forward *philosophical* doctrines or theses at all” (Diamond 1991, 179; my emphasis), as seriously as possible.

To sum up, while most standard readings have taken the *Tractatus* as, despite its seemingly paradoxical nature, advancing robust metaphysical doctrines and theses, resolute ones find a different purpose in it: to help us out of philosophical puzzlement, one of the main aims (if not the main one) of Wittgenstein’s later work, which would thus seem to have been more significantly anticipated by the *Tractatus* than is usually supposed. As the former appear to be filled with paradox, the latter would by now seem, at least on such general grounds, to present themselves as having a better chance of satisfying our requirement for philosophical viability. Let us see what can be made out of this initial impression.

§ 2. Before moving forward, I must clarify a guiding principle to my entire approach. While it would be sheer carelessness to ignore what Wittgenstein might have intended when writing the *Tractatus*, we should not fail to consider the often overlooked but important distinction between authorial *intentions* and the actual *achievements* of a particular work, notably when the author fails to achieve what he had intended. That is to say that it is one thing to intend to put forward e.g. an ineffable theory of meaning as a valid philosophical hypothesis and a quite different one to achieve so.

Even when someone’s intentions are reasonable (or realistic), there can always be cases where things do not go according to plan, and, if the intentions go beyond not only what is reasonable but what is altogether *possible*, it could only be due to an illusion that one could think they could ever be achieved: e.g. when coming to the table with fourteen (not the total fifteen) reds remaining and without having been awarded a free ball, a snooker player cannot think of scoring a maximum break in that visit, unless he is confused about the number of red balls available. If Wittgenstein was trying to do what most standard readers believe he was, it seems implausible to think that he ever succeeded, for the fulfilment of such project would seem to depend on what there cannot

be: “cosmic exile, to use Quine’s phrase” (Williams 2004, 1), a point of view *beyond* all points of view.

The interpretative principle I am aiming at hence runs somewhat as follows: if an author’s intentions exceed the limits of reasonableness (or possibility), the interpreter cannot be forced to match them all the way through (he can, so to speak, go as far as it is reasonable – or possible – to go). If, despite its appearance, the aforementioned theory of meaning is nonsense, there can be no such thing as understanding it (as if it somehow made sense), even if Wittgenstein had once fallen prey to an illusion and believed it to be, though ineffable and consisting of nonsensical formulations, true. This is far from saying that a work springing from unreasonable intentions cannot still be reasonably interpreted. A composer can write e.g. a beautiful three movement piano sonata and add that each movement should be played in order to reflect the essence of, say, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory, but it is obvious that this does not imply that the sonata cannot still be played beautifully by an interpreter who decides to ignore these rather eccentric instructions and focus on nothing but the music itself.

When applied to the case of the *Tractatus*, this principle has the following consequence: it is possible for one to assign a standard reading of the book to the early Wittgenstein (thus operating with a variety of empty notions for a while) and nevertheless read it resolutely (by ultimately overcoming such notions), i.e. even if many of his intentions at the time were highly unrealistic (some even impossible to fulfil), one can still approach it in a more or less realistic way and try to extract something of genuine philosophical value out of it.

In addition, it has to be said that, independently of the chosen interpretative approach, reading the *Tractatus* with understanding will *always* involve, at least for some time, going through it as if it was advancing the doctrines and theses that resolute readers deny. One can only hope to overcome them and move on to the illuminating insights that after all remain if one begins by trying to understand them as doctrines and theses and then appreciate *why* they cannot be so, as well as what is then implied by their collapse. This to say that even the sternest of resolute readings (one that leaves almost no space – if any – for positive insights) will most probably depend, though only provisionally, on standard readings. One of the main strategies employed in the *Tractatus* according to most resolute interpreters consists of inviting the reader to enter a kind of imaginative activity involving a provisional and unselfconscious taking of nonsense as sense with the intention of eventually helping him recognize that very deception and thus stay away from

further philosophical entanglements. If that was what Wittgenstein was looking for from the beginning (which is far from clear), it should be considered a failure, as the prominence of standard readings attest, but from that it does not follow that it should be discarded. Now that, out of their unorthodox reading of the *Tractatus*, the likes of Diamond and Conant have made such strategy intelligible (or, perhaps, have developed it altogether), it stands out as an interesting and potentially powerful philosophical tool.

Hence, the two ‘rival parties’ of “the *Tractatus Wars*”, each with their own internal tensions and disagreements, can in fact be fruitfully brought up together in some respects. And I believe that it is precisely where that can happen that some of the most enlightening possibilities of Tractarian interpretation, as well as the best chances of moving beyond those squabbles, may actually lie. That said, such possibilities are not simply to be found *within* the work of interpreting the book in a conventional scholarly fashion, though that is nonetheless a necessary part of the process (as, despite the distinction between intentions and achievements sketched above, it is hard to see how we can appreciate the latter without at least some grasp of the former, in particular of what exactly went wrong there), but rather arise out of it.

§ 3. First presented in 2001, Warren Goldfarb’s “*Das Überwinden: Anti-Metaphysical Readings of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*”, a key paper among the rise of resolute readings, offers a historical survey of the origins of Tractarian unorthodoxy, tracing it back to “Use and Reference of Names”, a 1969 paper of Hidé Ishiguro, followed in the two subsequent decades by papers⁵ of Goldfarb himself, Brian McGuinness, Peter Winch and, finally, Cora Diamond’s classic “Throwing Away the Ladder”, published in 1988. The latter definitely established the possibility of approaching the book resolutely, advising us to take its metaphysical remarks as mere nonsense, “not as nonsense that somehow communicates” (Goldfarb 2011, 7). But before Diamond’s contribution the initial focus of disagreement, Goldfarb argues, rested upon the *Tractatus*’ alleged (philosophical) realism.

If Wittgenstein was at all putting forward a metaphysical theory, it has indeed the looks of a realist one. “The opening of the *Tractatus* unabashedly presents (or so it seems) a realist metaphysics, and the introduction of language only after facts and objects suggests that the ontology is prior. Of course those remarks are nonsense, by lights of the

⁵ See Goldfarb (2011): footnote 6 – p. 20

book, but somehow we can understand what they are getting at” (*ibid.*), or so we may be inclined to think. And, as we seem to be told later on, the very possibility of language, i.e. of propositional sense, depends on features of that prior ontology, notably the logical behaviour of its constituent objects. That our propositions have sense, that we can communicate anything at all, is granted by a sort of mirroring (or picturing, to use the Tractarian terminology) relation – the sharing of a common logical structure – between language (or thought) and reality.

We can now see a difficulty arising: if language is a kind of mirror of reality, it thus seems to be impossible for it to speak about that mirror, and of the mirrorable reality *as a whole*. In other words, there is no way for a mirror to mirror itself. This sort of tension, of paradoxical appearance, has led some readers of the *Tractatus* to become more and more dissatisfied with the standard ways of interpreting it, which usually see Wittgenstein as trying to elude the paradox – let us call it, for now, the *mirror paradox* – by holding, still paradoxically, that, though the general features of both the mirror and the mirrored are ineffable, they are nevertheless made manifest (or shown) by propositions, the mirror’s particular components, each working as a little mirror of states of affairs, and these, in their turn, amounting to the whole of the mirrorable reality.

Ishiguro and McGuinness have helped us to recognize an additional, subtler tension: a seemingly strong use of Frege’s context principle⁶, that “only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning” (TLP 3.3), plays a key role in the theory of meaning seemingly outlined in the *Tractatus*, clashing with the previous account of language as dependent upon metaphysical features of the world. A noticeable corollary of the context principle when taken as robustly is that one cannot look for the object a name stands for apart from the particular role played by that name within a particular proposition, and from this follows that “there cannot be anything prior to the use of names in propositions that fixes the referents of names [...], it is the use of propositions containing a name that fixes its referent” (Goldfarb 2011, 8). On this view, it thus seems that “there can be no pre-propositional “grasp” of objects; [...] no operation other than grasping or expressing propositions” (*ibid.*), which in its turn implies that it is rather language (or the mind), our conceptual scheme, that determines the ways in which we interpret reality, not the other way around.

⁶ Frege’s second anti-psychologist principle outlined in his introduction of *The Foundations of Arithmetic*: “never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition” (Frege 1960, xxii).

This, however, amounts to nothing but an inversion of priorities within a metaphysical framework: the mirroring thesis is left intact (the only difference being the source and direction of the lines of projection) and we remain entangled in a paradoxical position, craving for an external point of view from which to inspect the essence of language and reality and the chimerical mechanism that somehow ties them to each other. As Goldfarb writes, “there is no more a perspective from which such a “linguistic” (or “linguistic-idealist”) account can be given than there is from which a realist account can be given. The external stance is one to which [...] we ought not have access at all” (Goldfarb 2011, 11).

Hence, McGuinness and Goldfarb tried to look for alternative ways of reading the *Tractatus* that could by some means avoid such apparent incoherencies, suggesting that one of the initial keys for doing so was to explore the possibility of taking its opening as playing a role other than that of a realist ontology. Instead, McGuinness argues, Wittgenstein might have been presenting “a kind of ontological myth” (*apud* Goldfarb 2011, 11), with two interrelated purposes: (1) to draw attention to certain features of language, and (2) to help us reject that sort of myths by making us aware of such features. Wittgenstein’s method, he writes, “allows itself to use or feign to use a whole metaphysics in the task of getting rid of metaphysics” (*ibid.*). By engaging in such a method of *deterrence by example*, as McGuinness calls it, “when we end up having strictly thought through everything [...] we see that realism coincides with idealism” (*ibid.*), and that both are nonsense, as they arise out of the same kind of chimerical demands, which is also to say that in the end there may not even be any claim of an alleged ontological or conceptual priority within the book. Goldfarb, who had similarly intuited a sort of dialectic structure in it, complements this line of thought:

[T]he seemingly metaphysical remarks of the *Tractatus* are doing different work from that of suggesting an unsayable metaphysics. We are meant to come to see that they are myths. It is not that we are to “discount” the opening ontology because it turns out to be unsayable [...], but rather we are to think through the remarks, to see that what they present is not coherent. (Goldfarb 2011, 12)

Though the issue surrounding realism was soon to become a matter of secondary importance among these debates, a fertile ground for resolute readings to arise from had thus been set. But before coming to, among others, Diamond’s subsequent elaboration of

these propaedeutic inclinations, I would like to go back even further than Goldfarb does in his paper. I would like to draw attention to the fact that unorthodox readings of the *Tractatus*, in particular McGuinness' proposal about the role of the opening ontology, can be traced back at least to a couple of writings of one of Wittgenstein's most perceptive readers and arguably the most unfortunately neglected figure among recent discussions concerning his interpretation: Gilbert Ryle.

§ 4. The neglect of Ryle is, it seems to me, connected with an unfortunate tendency: from the fact that he did not publish much (explicitly) *about* Wittgenstein it is mistakenly inferred that he is not relevant enough among discussions on the subject, though having written a few interesting things that are in one way or another related to it. This is the exact same mistake people make when they rule out Wittgenstein as supposedly irrelevant in the 'fields' of e.g. ethics or aesthetics⁷ on the rather crude justification that his contributions amount to all but a relatively short number of unsystematic remarks scattered throughout his writings, which is nonetheless false.

I will on this occasion consider three texts only, which should be enough to support my claim that Ryle's interpretation of Wittgenstein is a most important one. Two of them are introductory accounts of his philosophy, an obituary from *Analysis* and a review for *Scientific American*, both published in the fifties, which, despite their generic character, still raise several points that, if properly expanded (sometimes perhaps even by going against some of Ryle's own readings), can cast light onto both his earlier and later writings, as well as on how they relate. The third is a short posthumously published paper found among his repository at Linacre College in Oxford, which, though by no means conclusive, offers some insightful suggestions already pointing towards the path later followed by McGuinness, a fellow Oxonian who had most certainly been aware of its content. I shall for now focus on the latter, entitled "Ontological and Logical Talk in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", which begins as follows:

At the opening of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is talking about objects and facts. He seems to be giving some sort of information about them, for example that an atomic fact is a combination of objects; that it is essential to a thing that it can be constituent of an atomic fact; that the object is simple; that

⁷ As if these were somehow autonomous (or even fields at all) and could be discussed independently of matters of e.g. the so-called philosophy of action or mind (or of psychology, to use Wittgenstein's preferred designation).

objects form the substance of the world, and so on. [...] So let us call this Wittgenstein's 'ontological story'.

He then moves on (at 2.1) to some considerations about what is involved in something being a picture, sketch, or plan of something else, and in particular what it is for something to be a *true* picture of something else. [...] let us call it the 'picturing story'.

At about 3.1 he starts to talk about sentences, statements and words; about their senses, often denotations; about propositions, their truth and falsehood, and so on. Let us [...] call this sketch the 'propositional story'. (Ryle 1999, 101)

After this exposition, Ryle asks himself the question of how do these 'stories' relate to each other and considers three possible options: (1) that the ontological story was either a complex premiss (a set of axioms) from which the propositional story would follow as a complex conclusion (a set of corollaries); (2) that it was, reversely, a complex truth subsequently grounded by the propositional story; or (3) that both the ontological and propositional stories amounted to the same story, the latter being a more literal restatement of the former, an allegorical version. He opts for the third option. This was already an important step away from the idea that, despite its systematic presentation, the structure of the *Tractatus* was an *argumentative* one and hence that the book was to be seen as comprising a sort of system.

However, Ryle then manifests some hesitation between whether "Wittgenstein was at least partially clear" (*ibid.*) about this or that he "was not completely clear about what he was doing and that he *half-thought*" (*ibid.*; my emphasis) of each of those three options as potentially being the case. This indicates two things: (1) that Ryle thought that Wittgenstein might have been somewhat confused while putting the *Tractatus* together, and (2) that Ryle himself was feeling at least slightly confused while reading it. A resolute reader would here suggest that this was a case of Ryle experiencing the book's dialectic effect: both author and reader seemed to be after something important but were having a hard time making their minds clear about it. I would like to add that, whether Wittgenstein was indeed confused (in the case standard readings are closer to his intentions) or self-consciously crafting it (as resolutists hold), this effect of so stunning the reader, of leading him to perplexity and doubt, to fall under a spell that can be as charming as it can be

terrifying, all part of the aforementioned imaginative activity, may very well be something inherent to the very features of the book.

A few paragraphs afterwards, now seemingly more clear-headed (and thus seeing Wittgenstein as more clear-headed too), Ryle attempts to elaborate his initial intuition regarding the nature of the ontological story by appealing to one of the most obvious tensions to be found within the *Tractatus* – a specific occurrence of the mirror paradox. From 4.126 to 4.1274, Wittgenstein is concerned with distinguishing formal concept-words (category words) from proper concept-words (ordinary concepts) by accounting for the former's logical nature. That something falls under a certain formal concept as one of its objects, we are told, is one of those allegedly ineffable truths, shown by the object's corresponding symbol, i.e. a name *shows* that it signifies an object, a numeral that it signifies a number, and so on. But statements such as 'A is an object' or '1 is a number' lack sense on the book's account of propositions, as they fail to conform to one of its key requirements: bipolarity, i.e. being true *or* false. Unlike a proper concept, a formal concept is said to be represented in a conceptual notation by a propositional variable (not a function), as its properties are expressed by a distinctive feature common to all symbols whose meanings fall under that particular concept (TLP 4.126). Hence, a proposition such as e.g. 'There are 2 objects which...' is represented as ' $(\exists x, y)...$ ', and whenever "it is used in a different way, that is as a proper concept-word, nonsensical pseudo-propositions are the result" (TLP 1.1272). "So one cannot say, for example, 'There are objects' as one might say, 'There are books'. And it is just as impossible to say, 'There are 100 objects' [...]. And it is nonsensical to speak of the *total number of objects*. The same applies to the words 'complex', 'fact', 'function', 'number', etc." (*ibid.*).

In light of this, Ryle concludes that there is no way that Wittgenstein could "have thought that the ontological story was a legitimate premiss or a legitimate conclusion in an inference to or from the propositional story" (Ryle 1999, 103), as he there employs formal concepts – such as 'facts', 'things', 'objects', 'substance', 'properties', and a few others – at will and in the ways that are strictly forbidden by the book's apparent theory of meaning. In fact, not a single one of all its constituent statements, from "The world is all that is the case" (TLP 1) up to "The sum-total of reality is the world" (TLP 2.063), escapes such self-condemnation. He continues as follows, trying to sketch a possible alternative:

He must therefore have left it for some other purpose, and I suggest it was at least partly for an expository purpose. He was deliberately saying something that would not do, as a lead in saying something that would do or nearly do. It is worth noticing that we hear progressively less and less of atomic facts, simples, complexes, etc., the further we read in the *Tractatus*. It was, I suggest, not his message, nor part of his message, but a sort of *prefatory parable*. (Ryle 1999, 104; my emphasis)

Again, we encounter several tensions in this passage. On the one hand, it is a clear sign of resoluteness on Ryle's part that he is not buying into the idea that the nonsensical statements forming the ontological story were somehow attempts to gesture at an ineffable metaphysics and that it seems to him unthinkable that Wittgenstein could have intended so. Could this "prefatory parable" – a formulation that, alongside that of "ontological story", reminds of McGuinness' "ontological myth" – thus been there as an example of the sort of nonsense that philosophers come up with when running up against the bounds of sense by trying to speak metaphysically? Ryle was indeed not far away from answering affirmatively. On the other, however, we shall see that his proposed 'solution' ends up being still irresolute, as the best it does is to delay the difficulties he had been grappling with.

It is also noticeable that Ryle was still in a way hesitating between what many resolute readers have been fond of calling a *substantial* conception of nonsense, i.e. that there can be nonsense that somehow communicates, though through a supposedly logically illegitimate combination of symbols, and an *austere* one, i.e. that all nonsense is just mere nonsense, that it cannot communicate anything at all and that there is no such thing as illegitimately combined symbols⁸. By saying that the ontological story would not do but that the propositional one would do or *nearly* do, he was leaving a back door open for the idea that among the various nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* some would be, so to speak, less nonsensical than others, i.e. that some would be closer to making sense, thus conflicting with an important warning Wittgenstein gives in the book's preface: that what lies beyond the bounds of sense is *simply* nonsense.

The whole problem with Ryle's proposal here amounts to him being under the illusion that there was nonetheless a significant *logical* difference between the formulations of the ontological and the propositional stories: he believes, quite rightly,

⁸ See § 22 for an account of these opposing views of nonsense.

that both intimate the same kind of insights (though certainly not ineffable metaphysical ones) but at the same time, and in this respect irresolutely, that only the latter at least partially succeeds. His remark that Wittgenstein applies less and less formal concepts as proper ones the further the *Tractatus* advances, as if the propositional story was somehow less guilty of such abuses than the ontological one, is beside the point. There the exact same kind of alleged logical violations occur, despite differences in jargon. Just think of e.g. all our previous talk of formal concepts, which follows Wittgenstein's own words very closely, which, though not being about the *world* as a whole, are still concerned with characterizing the features of its *mirror*, once again falling into the paradox. That is to say that, according to the supposed Tractarian theory of meaning, the propositional story equally amounts to nothing but a bunch of nonsensical pseudo-propositions. Same for the in-between picturing story. All three are logically equivalent for none of them actually means anything. However, it is obvious that they would have only been so *because* of violating the theory's principles *if* there was such a thing as a Tractarian theory of meaning and, of course, *if* such theory happened to be true. And that the statements purporting those principles are themselves statements which violate such principles – the so-called rules of logical syntax – should make us distrustful of such possibility, as we find ourselves on the verge of double-thinking.

What is remarkable about this paper is that it presents us one of Wittgenstein's cleverest readers lively engaged in a struggle with the *Tractatus*: oscillating between resoluteness and irresoluteness, often unsure about where to go, and above all showing dissatisfaction with some aspects of the standard ways of reading the book and looking for possible ways out of the incoherence generally attributed to it, hence giving a try at reading the early Wittgenstein with genuine charity. He elsewhere observed that due to its considerable technical intricacies the *Tractatus* is inaccessible to most: "Few people can read it without feeling that *something important* is happening; but few experts, even, can say *what* is happening" (Ryle 2009, 264; my emphases). This is certainly true, although it seems to me clear that the reason for it amounts to far more than technical matters. It is obvious that someone like Ryle did not lack any command of the required technical equipment but still faced, as we have seen, considerable (if not insuperable) difficulties. In fact, it might only be due to an illusion that one could think of reading the book without facing such difficulties, or at least similar ones.

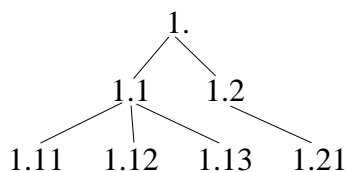
§ 5. Let me now attempt to revise and further explore the possibility of reading the *Tractatus* as a series of various intertwined ‘stories’. Ryle’s identification of an ontological, a picturing and a propositional story is spot on. Together, they form what appears to be the core structure of the book (its skeleton, so to speak), what gives it its systematic looks: the picture theory, which, at least as long as it stands in place, virtually pervades all the remaining parts of the *Tractatus*. As we have said, such theory seems to consist of a general account of language and its corresponding ontology. Due to the aforementioned essential logical structure we are told both share, they shall be treated as a single unit, i.e. though we can recognize three different chapters (Ryle’s three stories) those are chapters composing a single, unified story: first, we are told what the world is and hence what its constituents (*facts*) are; second what counts (and what does not) as a correct representation (*pictures*) of the world, i.e. of facts; and third, to a much greater length, how the medium of representation (*propositions*, i.e. language, or thought, which on this account amounts to the same) does it (or does not). Logic, which is the focus of a fourth story, running throughout all the remaining ones, is said to be what holds everything together; let me call this the *metalogical* story, i.e. on what sort of enquiry formal logic is. A fifth, and not less important one, is what I shall call the *metaphilosophical* story, i.e. on what sort of enquiry philosophy is, notably an activity of linguistic analysis and clarification. Both are sharply distinguished from scientific enquiries. Finally, a sixth story emerges already near the end of the book: the *ethical* story.

I will here consider the picture theory and the metaphilosophical story above all, though sometimes hinting at the other two along the way. Our account of the former, with which I shall begin, will be far from exhaustive, but just enough, or so I hope, for us to realize what kind of thing we have in our hands. For now, let us provisionally leave aside any talk regarding nonsense or logical violations as much as possible, i.e. let us not be afraid of double-thinking for a while, even forget that we might be falling into such trap. As Anscombe remarks, we shall understand the *Tractatus* best if we let ourselves succumb to its attractiveness, “assume its correctness, and follow up its consequences” (Anscombe 1971, 72) as we move on. This is exactly how the process of reading the book should be supposed to work, though, of course, there may be significant disagreements concerning what these consequences may amount to.

§ 6. Though a most perplexing and obscure book in many respects, the *Tractatus* possesses a relatively simple structure. It consists of seven main oracular-like statements, each of them (except the final one, which stands on its own) expanded by a net of commentary, forming a sort of tree structure. Each comment is numbered and the role of such numbers, at first potentially confusing, is clarified by Wittgenstein – who had told his editor Ludwig von Ficker that these were indispensable, as the book would be “an incomprehensible mess” (Kuusela 2015, 229) without them – in a footnote to the opening statement: each statement is assigned a decimal number specifying the *stress* laid on it, so that “statements n.1, n.2, n.3, etc. are comments on statement no. n; statements n.m.1, n.m.2, etc. are comments on statement no. n.m; and so on.” (Wittgenstein 2001, 5). It does not, therefore, follow a linear structure. Take the first statement and its respective net of commentary, the book’s shortest one, to give us an example:

- 1 The world is all that is the case.
- 1.1 The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
- 1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by their being *all* the facts.
- 1.12 For the totality of facts determines what is the case, and also whatever is not the case.
- 1.13 The facts in logical space are the world.
- 1.2 The world divides into facts.
- 1.21 Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.

Instead of this linear presentation, it should rather be taken as follows:



The numbering appears to be indeed vital, for otherwise there would be no way to recognize the tree structure, but we should not be too tempted to look further than this. One can sometimes find a few intriguing parallels throughout the book – e.g. “What

constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way” (TLP 2.14) and “What constitutes a propositional sign is that in it its elements (the words) stand in a determinate relation to one another” (TLP 3.14) – but those should be seen as rather accidental, not as the product of some form of Kabbalistic-like speculation.

§ 7. Let us look at a statement as puzzling as “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (TLP 1.1). Perhaps it may help to follow Ryle’s (still irresolute) suggestion that the propositional story often works as a “philosophically careful reformulation” (Ryle 1999, 104) of the ontological one. Key notions employed in the ontological story are often left unclear in it but somehow appear to be rendered intelligible by their propositional counterparts. If that is the case, 1.1 could hence be understood as playing a role parallel to that of a statement such as “Language is the totality of propositions, not of words.”, for, according to this account, propositions play a role parallel to that of facts, and words (more specifically, names) to that of objects.

Ray Monk argues that, if taken seriously, the ontological story presents “a conception of the world that removes at a single stroke a lot of traditional metaphysics” (Monk 2005, 37) and that it could be seen as overcoming the typical ‘realism vs. idealism’ quarrel such as that between Russell and Bradley regarding the nature of relations:

Bradley argued that, if relations existed, we would have to think of them as a kind of object. But since they are clearly not a kind of object, they do not, after all, exist. Russell countered by accepting Bradley’s initial premise (that, if relations existed, they would be a kind of object), but drawing the exact opposite conclusion. His argument was, since relations *do* exist, they must, indeed, be a kind of object. (Monk 2005, 37-38)

This was, for Wittgenstein, a classic example of the nonsensical chatter philosophers so often produce when, by trying to establish general claims about the essential nature of things, they illusorily station themselves outside the world as if they could look at it “from sideways on” (McDowell 2000, 44) or, to use a suggestive metaphor, with a pair of special glasses that would allow them to see beyond what one would ordinarily see (microscopes, telescopes and other devices employed in the natural sciences being among ordinary means for seeing). By conceiving the world as the totality of facts (*not* of things), he was at first sight ruling out such chatter: if we are to think of

facts, which are already *articulate* units (just like propositions are) as the minimum unit of the world capable of being meaningfully stated and thus grasped, all the talk about relations is therefore exiled beyond the bounds of sense.

Glory does not last for long, though: if that was his intention, Wittgenstein had not yet avoided *arguing* against metaphysicians and was hence still doing metaphysics. He was, just like Russell and Bradley, making claims about the world *as a whole*, from that illusory external point of view, presenting his own ontology. According to standard readers, Wittgenstein would have insisted that he was nevertheless aiming at something true but that could only be shown, i.e. that propositions, by standing for facts, somehow made manifest that the world was made out of the totality of facts, something that could not be said but that we were all already tacitly aware of by being able to talk sense. But there is a clear gap here, as it seems impossible for one to tell that such-and-such cannot be said but shows itself. Wittgenstein's saying-showing distinction, which is perplexing in several respects, is supposed to concern propositions (i.e. *meaningful* statements) and propositions only. Throughout the *Tractatus* (with the exception of, perhaps, one particular occasion which we shall come into later on) one does not find a single relevant sign of Wittgenstein having thought that nonsense could ever show anything, at least in *this* very particular sense of showing.

In the meantime, it should be clear enough why speaking as if it were possible to occupy the external point of view I have been mentioning leads into trouble. I have not, however, yet offered any argument supporting the claim that speaking metaphysically leads into this illusory point of view from which nonsense arises, though I have been talking as if that was the case. And, by considering what has gone so far, one may already be distrustful about the possibility of offering such an argument, at least if that is the *kind* of argument many professional philosophers would normally accept as an argument.

§ 8. It is important to note that, though it is, as we have seen, unlikely that the three stories composing the picture theory are linked by a genuine argumentative line, the way in which they are presented gives us a strong impression that each one contains, so to speak, the grounds of the following one, whatever they may be. In the previously discussed paper, Ryle writes that before “we can talk about caricatures and maps, we have to be able to talk about faces and terrains. So Wittgenstein had to produce some *seemingly* descriptive talk about things and facts before he could say anything about caricatures and maps being true or false” (Ryle 1999, 105; my emphasis). This is likely to be the initial

impression we get. “We picture facts ourselves” (TLP 2.1) is how the picturing story begins. “A picture is a model of reality” (TLP 2.12) and has a “logico-pictorial form in common with what it depicts” (TLP 2.2). “A logical picture of facts is a thought” (TLP 3) and a “thought is a proposition with a sense” (TLP 4), hence a “proposition is a picture or reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it” (TLP 4.01). “Propositions represent the existence or non-existence of states of affairs” (TLP 4.1) and the “sense of a proposition is its agreement and disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs” (TLP 4.2). We picture facts, i.e. *we think and talk sense*. Presented with apparent clock-like precision, the whole idea is quite attractive and, at least on surface, not too difficult to grasp.

Let us attempt to elaborate on this a little further. Facts are *logically* articulate. Otherwise, they would not at all be thinkable. “What is thinkable is possible too” (TLP 3.02), so all we can think of amounts to *possible facts*. “Thought can never be of anything illogical, since, if it were, we should have to think illogically” (TLP 3.03), and there cannot possibly be such a thing as illogical thinking: an illogical ‘thought’ is not a thought but a pseudo-thought, an illusion of a thought; e.g. an object cannot be other than itself, that would be unthinkable. Logic thus delimits the realm of what is possible and, so, of what is thinkable. All possible facts have a logical form, which corresponds to the way in which its constituting elements are articulated with each other in that possible situation. This logical (or logico-pictorial form), which cannot itself be depicted but belongs to what is shown – “A picture can depict any reality whose form it has” (TLP 2.171); it “cannot, however, depict its pictorial form: it *displays* it” (TLP 2.172) – is what allows a fact and a thought to match: the latter mirrors the former by mirroring its logical form; this is the famous *isomorphism* thesis. Our propositional acts establish the correlation between them – “The method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition” (TLP 3.11), but the possibility of sense is already granted by this sort of pre-established harmony between reality, thought and language. Thought and language are one and the same: a proposition expresses a thought by being *identical* with that thought.

So, except for tautologies and contradictions – senseless, i.e. non-representative propositions which nevertheless play a role in symbolism, and so are not yet nonsense (they lie, so to speak, somewhere *over* the mirror’s frame, not outside of it) – propositions themselves are pictures of reality, i.e. they represent possible facts. Their sense is *what* they depict. A proposition says how things are or, in the case of negation, how things are not. In addition, it is required to fulfil two further interrelated conditions, namely

bipolarity and definiteness of sense: it “must restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no. In order to do that, it must describe reality completely” (TLP 4.022), i.e. though a “proposition may well be an incomplete picture of a certain situation, [...] it is always a complete picture of *something*” (TLP 5.156). Anscombe explains this as follows: “a proposition may indeed leave a great deal open, but it is clear *what* it leaves open” (Anscombe 1971, 73). I prefer a reverse, though equivalent, formulation: a proposition may leave a great deal open, but it is clear what it does *not* leave open, which corresponds precisely to *what* it depicts. A proposition such as e.g. ‘Porto is north of Lisbon’ does leave a great deal open about the geography of Portugal (and everything else) apart from that Porto is north of Lisbon and, of course, that Lisbon is south of Porto (it is like a map which is wholly blank except for a compass rose and two dots signalling the relative positions of each Porto and Lisbon, the remaining blank area being what is left open). A definite sense is what allows a proposition to be bipolar: a proposition is true, if what it describes obtains, or false, if what it describes does not obtain, end of story. Sure, there are cases where it is not easy to tell whether a given proposition is true or false, but if it has at all a sense, i.e. if it is at all a proposition, it *must* be possible to determine its truth or falsity, which is a matter of empirical investigation. Otherwise it would be a nonsensical pseudo-proposition. And, as all matters of fact are contingent, i.e. they “can either be the case or not be the case” (TLP 1.21), a proposition *must* be bipolar.

Two other prominent features of the *Tractatus* are connected with this. One is the rejection of modality, springing from the requirement of definiteness of sense, as any “sense of ‘may’, ‘can’, ‘possible’, other than that of ‘logically possible’, would be unamenable to explanation in terms of the picture theory” (Anscombe 1971, 81), which “does not permit any functions of propositions other than truth-functions” (*ibid.*). The other is the rejection of *a priori* knowledge. “If a thought were correct *a priori*, it would be a thought whose possibility ensured its truth” (TLP 3.04). “A priori knowledge that a thought was true would be possible only if its truth were recognizable from the thought itself (without anything to compare it with)” (TLP 3.05), but, as we have seen, a thought has *always* to be compared with a fact in order to count as thought: a ‘thought’ true in virtue of its own components, independently of any corresponding components of a fact, would not be a picture of reality and, so, not a genuine thought. A statement is analytically true if and only if it is a tautology. In light of the *Tractatus*, then, all analytic statements are senseless. For instance, all mathematics is analytic, which is to say that there can be

no such thing as knowledge of ‘mathematical facts’, only the grasp of transformations of symbols into other symbols, an entirely formal affair.

Consider a sentence which seems to assert a necessary truth: ‘an object cannot occupy two different positions in space at the same time’. It is obvious that it does not depict any fact, as it purportedly refers to something impossible (physically impossible), in this case denying its possibility. That it is a negation is irrelevant here: any genuine negation is *always* a negation of something; ‘ p ’ and ‘ $\sim p$ ’ are the exact same picture of the exact same state of affairs, though the former asserts it and the latter denies it. In light of the picture theory, that it is impossible for an object to occupy two different positions simultaneously is something that is shown by all genuine propositions being pictures of *possible* situations, but, again, cannot be said. “There is only *logical* necessity” (TLP 6.37): we can now see that it is the picture theory itself which is forcing us into this sort of Humean dogma.

In addition, we are told that both propositions and facts respectively divide into elementary (or atomic) propositions and facts, the basic and irreducible (and mutually independent) components of the isomorphic structures of language and reality. “An atomic fact is a combination of objects” (TLP 2.01) and an elementary proposition “a connexion, a concatenation, of names” (TLP 4.22). We may then be tempted to think that decompositional analysis of complex propositions would allow us to ultimately exhibit those “undissectable bones” (Ryle 1999, 102), just as when in chemistry one decomposes a certain substance, and hence grasp the essence of those structures, finally being in command of a method capable of determining *exactly*, and in all possible situations, what it really means to say such-and-such. The whole picture theory seems to be connected with this form of logical atomism, as is suggested by one of its main theses: “Propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions” (TLP 5), the latter being “the truth-arguments of propositions” (TLP 5.01). “This is how things stand” (TLP 4.5), the most general propositional form, is thus said to be translatable into the quite peculiar formula $[\bar{p}, \bar{\xi}, N(\bar{\xi})]$, “the general form of truth-function” (TLP 6)⁹, and “every proposition is a result of successive applications to elementary propositions of the operation $N(\bar{\xi})$ ” (TLP 6.001). This has all the looks of an outstanding discovery.

However, we should pause back and remember that Tractarian objects are not of the sort of e.g. trees, books or tables (not even of atoms or grains of dust) – as Ishiguro

⁹ See “‘The General Form of Proposition’”, chapter 10 of Anscombe’s *Introduction* (1971), for a detailed explanation and discussion of the formula, uniquely used by Wittgenstein.

observes, they are “not like things (however simple) in the empirical world that can be individuated extensionally” (*apud* Goldfarb 2011, 8) – and realize that neither their corresponding names are of the sort of ordinary ones such as e.g. ‘tree’, ‘book’, or ‘table’. An ordinary name “has something about it that implies complexity” (Anscombe 1971, 36), while Tractarian names are supposed to be *absolutely* simple ones. Objects too are said to be absolutely simple: they cannot be composite, as “they make up the substance of the world” (TLP 2.021). This so-called substance, made out of the totality of simple objects, is necessary and immutable, independent of any contingent matters of fact, and thus cannot itself be pictured. Instead, that there must be such substance, which is beyond cognition, that there must be atomic facts and elementary propositions and that our propositions must in principle be analysable all the way up to these – though, “alas, we never come across these termini of our analyses” (Ryle 1999, 102) and not a single example of an elementary proposition can be offered – is allegedly shown in that language is able to depict reality. We are therefore left with supposed truth-functions whose arguments’ truth bearers are mysteries, and so could rightfully ask whether we could ever come to know that these are genuine truth-functions of anything. To that not a single answer is given. All we get is the dogmatic assumption that things *must* somehow be like this, for otherwise the correlation between language and reality would be lost: if the world had no substance “we could not sketch any picture of the world (true or false)” (TLP 2.0212).

Despite all its attractiveness, this account is, as we can see, built upon extremely shaky foundations. In fact, if that alleged substance (and all that is seemingly implied by it) turns out to be a chimera, it may very well be hanging in the air, and its doctrines be as fragile as a cluster of soap bubbles. Whether this last impression is correct is something that the next steps in reading the book should help to disclose: now that we have tried to make some sense of the picture theory, it is time to press it more firmly.

§ 9. One must indeed be struck by how far the given account seems to be from actual linguistic practices: by merely considering asserting premises and conclusions, truths and falsehoods, it rules out virtually all other recurring uses of language, such as e.g. advices, analogies, criticisms, inductions, jokes, metaphors, orders, parodies, promises, questions, warnings, and so on. Surely, all these play their part in communication and, though not all (if any) work like the kind of picturing that is said to be distinctive of propositions, it would look like madness to hold that, unlike these, they were all nonsensical for not being

so, as it is clear that we can *understand* them, i.e. recognize their target by being able to follow them, to grasp their intent. But, in light of the *Tractatus*, or so it appears, any use of language that is not a *description* of any possible reality is destined to be nonsense, the main task of the philosopher who adheres to its program being perhaps that of exposing linguistic constructions that may look like propositions but turn out to be empty on closer inspection.

While reading the book and trying to get hold of the doctrines seemingly presented to us, one is often assaulted by the feeling that there is no way the picture theory can be a *general* account of language, but at best a general account, though eccentric, of a particular kind of linguistic usage; in this case of propositional (or, in Austinian jargon, constative) usage, which is concerned with describing the world, being it clear that we use words intelligibly with many purposes other than that. And yet such expectations, born not just out of interpretative charity but of a demand for reasonableness, are soon to be frustrated by an emphatic pronouncement such as “The totality of propositions *is* language” (TLP 4.001; my emphasis), which seems to rule out every sort of so-called performative utterances from the realm of intelligible discourse. If that is so, it is clear that the boat is being pushed way too far.

Astonishment increases when we are told that “The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science” (TLP 4.11). Anscombe’s comment on this says it all: “I really do have the impression, as nowhere else in the book, that his feet have left the ground” (Anscombe 2011, 176), i.e. that Wittgenstein was under the illusion of viewing the world from out of cosmic exile. Still, this is a thesis whose popularity has kept growing ever since: that the empirical sciences are the sole responsible for determining the truth or falsehood of any given propositions, which is not different from claiming that *all* truth that there can be amounts to so-called ‘scientific’ truth, whatever that may mean. This is a paradoxical position, though. For how can it itself be a truth of the sciences? Even if all the remaining truths happened to be scientific truths, which is in any case false (though we shall not discuss this here), there would still have to be at least *one* truth, *this* one, which eludes their scope of investigation, for we would have to stand outside of science (and engage in e.g. philosophy of science) in order to draw the limits of its applicability. So, it would not at all be a scientific hypothesis but, rather, a metaphysical pronouncement, and not even a coherent one, as one cannot accept it as true while simultaneously holding that there can *only* be scientific truths. Again, this is a case of double-think, and notice that not a single allusion to alleged violations of logical syntax

has been required for us to recognize this and hence that we were dealing with a claim that misfires.

Nevertheless, both these statements ‘about’ the totality of propositions would be nonsensical according to the picture theory, which is yet another case of double-think. Same for statements denying them: e.g. ‘The totality of true propositions is *not* the whole of natural science’ would be as nonsensical. But, picture theory aside, it sounds like a perfectly intelligible one, as long as one does not take it as a description of something. We are here depending on a distinction between *informative* statements, those that would count as pictures within the account of the *Tractatus*, and *illuminating* statements, which would not count as pictures and thus be ruled out as nonsense by it. An informative statement conveys a *propositional content*, an illuminating one an *insight*. Anscombe illustrates this distinction with the following example: a rather trivial statement like “‘Someone’ is not the name of someone’ [...] is obviously true. But it does not have the bipolarity Wittgenstein’s ‘significant propositions’” (Anscombe 1971, 85). “What then are we intending to deny? Only a piece of confusion (*ibid.*), i.e. that ‘someone’, or ‘somebody’, unlike ‘nobody’, refers to *a* person in particular. “‘Someone’ is not the name of someone’ hence does not seem to interfere within the scope of information, as its contradictory, “‘Someone’ is the name of someone’, is not a false informative statement but a meaningless one, and yet it seems obvious that it can still be used illuminatingly, as the expression of an insight intended to clear up a particular conceptual confusion.

In this sense, it works much like a pointing gesture: though itself devoid of cognitive content (at least if we take cognitive contents as purely propositional, i.e. as contents of literal descriptions), it is a sentence which still manages to draw *direct* attention to a muddled formulation and contribute to the recognition of its emptiness. And if it does that it cannot really count as nonsensical. Within the framework of the picture theory, however, it would be nonetheless seen as a piece of nonsense, one which vainly attempts to express something which shows itself in the very applications of the words ‘someone’ or ‘somebody’. “This partly accounts for the comical frequency with which, in expounding the *Tractatus*, one is tempted to say things and then say that they cannot be said” (Anscombe 1971, 86), Anscombe observes. But, of course, we are here dealing with a very particular (and quite restricted) notion of *saying*. On these grounds, to say something is to describe a possible fact, and nothing more.

§ 10. So far, we have been presenting the picture theory as what it is usually thought to be: a correspondence theory. Thought and language do overlap but there appears to be a gap between these and reality, logical form being what is said to bridge such gap. In any case, it looks as if propositions and facts are treated as entities of a different kind and playing different roles, the former that of truth bearers, the latter of truth makers, thus conforming with the standard form of correspondence theories: for a proposition p to be true, there must exist some entity, distinct from p , whose being so entails that p is true. In the *Tractatus*, this entity is precisely a fact.

However, there is a statement which may raise some grounds for doubt and sound puzzling in the context of the picture theory when understood as a correspondence theory: “A picture *is* a fact” (TLP 2.141; my emphasis). What does this suggest? Perhaps that the picture theory may after all be an identity theory, that according to it a fact is simply *identical* with a true proposition (or thought). This is actually one of the possible directions to which Ryle was heading when sketching the possibility of an identity of content between the ontological and propositional stories, the differences between them amounting to nothing but matters of presentation. If the world is the totality of facts and propositions themselves are said to be facts, then propositions too appear to be part of the world and thus there would be no gap to be closed between what is the case and what can be said. In addition, that they all share the same essence, i.e. logical form, may be another indication that they are all part of the same substance. Perhaps we got a few things wrong in our previous account. That is far from clear yet, but some reconsideration of the main doctrines is in order.

Now, it is true that in his later writings Wittgenstein does not cancel the possibility of being read as hinting at what could be seen as a kind of identity theory. Though it is clear that he would have then repudiated any theoretical formulations such as “*there is no ontological gap* between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case” (McDowell 1996, 27; my emphasis), it seems plausible to think that his views were somewhat compatible with this. As John McDowell puts it, “to say there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world is just to dress up a truism in high-flown language” (*ibid.*). Whether this is at all a truism would be a matter of some discussion, but if what is meant amounts to not more than the following attempted paraphrase of §95 of the *Investigations*, McDowell may very well be right: “when we see that such-and-such is the case, we, and our seeing, do not stop anywhere short of the fact. What we see is: that such-and-such is the case” (McDowell

1996, 29). Unlike the previous formulation, Wittgenstein would have most likely approved of this, a reminder of something quite humdrum but which could nevertheless help to bring us down to earth and stay away from high-flown metaphysical speculation about how the mind (and, therefore, language) and reality relate to each other. To call him an identity *theorist* seems to me excessive, but this is not to say that his remarks on such matters cannot stimulate identity theorists such as McDowell, as if allowing them to step into the grounds he had cleared and even at times providing the required supplies for them to develop what he himself, out of concern for not unwittingly reopening a door through which metaphysics could make a comeback, had refused: a theory of some sort.

So, if we were to explore the possibility of reading the *Tractatus* as propounding an identity theory instead of a correspondence one, we would thence be exploring an interesting development in Wittgenstein's thought: a continuity partially masked by a shift in tone and some adjustments amounting to a gradual purge of as much dogmatic commitments as possible, notably metaphysical ones. However, it has to be said that even if we are more sympathetic towards identity theories and find it potentially plausible to look for one in the *Tractatus*, such move would be more or less irrelevant to what concerns the main goal of our quest for philosophical viability in reading the book. If it ever attempted to put forward an identity theory instead of a correspondence one, there is no way it could have succeeded, for it would have still been a theory dependent on cosmic exile, just as the correspondence one we have just sketched. Apart from the advantage of dissolving the question of whether it is the ontology or the conceptual scheme that is prior, it would still suffer from more or less the same difficulties, such as the requirement for an atomistic structure grounded on simples which are beyond cognition, the almost comical restrictions on what can be said, the insistence on ineffable truths which are shown, the mirror paradox, and so on. That we were at all concerned with what *kind* of theory did the *Tractatus* develop is a clear indication that, somewhat like Ryle, we were still experiencing the book's dialectic effect: in this case, oscillating between two different but equally tempting pictures, one staring at us right in the face, the other whispering from a less clear angle. Nevertheless, all this was most probably essential for us to come to understand what I shall next attempt to make clearer: that the picture theory is all but an *illusion* of a theory, at least if taken as a *general* theory of language.

§ 11. It is now time to subject a notion as crucial here as that of 'fact' to some further inspection. As an ordinary notion it should be more or less clear to all of us: a fact is

simply what happens to be the case, i.e. what is true; it as fact that e.g. Wittgenstein was born in 1889. All this is humdrum and thus unproblematic. In the *Tractatus*, however, it is a somewhat technical notion: “What is the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs” (TLP 2). At first sight, ‘state of affairs’ (from Pears and McGuinness’ translation) may also sound unproblematic, as when used in a sentence like e.g. ‘still life paintings depict states of affairs’, but only until we realize that its German counterpart, ‘*Sachverhalt*’, is used not as standing for regular states of affairs, depictable by regular propositions, but to the aforementioned combinations of simple objects mirrored by elementary propositions. The use of ‘atomic facts’ instead in Ogden’s translation makes this even clearer. This is to say that throughout the *Tractatus*, the notion of fact has been forced out of its ordinary usage and given a new, metaphysical one. And so we realize that what a fact is, too, cannot be said. Same with propositions, and virtually everything else that had been seemingly said in the book.

One who is still under the spell of the picture theory may insist that, though we have no idea of what atomic facts and elementary propositions are, they must nevertheless exist, for otherwise we could not talk sense at all. Against this, the best one can do is to adopt a Socratic position, something Wittgenstein was himself masterful at. In a dialogue between, for instance, T (from Tractarian) and S (from Socratic), S would probably begin to ask for conceptual clarifications and, as expected, T would fail to provide them: he would start perhaps by saying that elementary propositions are concatenations of simple names, that simple names are names standing for simple objects, and that simple objects form the substance of the world; then pause for a while, retreat slightly and say that the substance of the world is what allows us to talk sense, until eventually stopping, perhaps remaining silent and motionless, perhaps making inarticulate noises while gesturing at the void. S, having waited for this weakness in his fellow speaker to become patent, would then deliver a fatal blow by asking: *What would it be, then, if the world had no such substance?* After a more or less prolonged silence, T would hopefully come to feel the ground under his feet again and recognize that he had not assigned any meaning to the relevant concepts in his sentences. *This* is when we recognize that there is no way that the picture theory can stand.

Another way to put it is to recall the mirror paradox and press it all the way through to its own dissolution. As we saw earlier, virtually every sentence forming the picture theory violates the conditions of representation (or rules of logical syntax) which the theory itself purportedly puts forward, as they either employ formal concepts as if playing

the logical role of proper ones or are used as ascribing internal properties to something and so fail to conform with the compulsory bipolarity of propositions, as “a property is internal if it is unthinkable that its object should not possess it” (TLP 4.123), which is to say that the conditions of representation themselves are nonsense in their own terms. This leaves us in the following situation: if the picture theory is true, it follows that it is itself nonsense, and, as it is impossible for any bit of language to be both true and nonsensical at the same time, it follows that the picture theory *cannot* be true. If it happened to be false, however, it would still have to be possible to conceive it as being true in such-and-such possible cases, but, as we have seen, it is unthinkable that it could somehow be true; that would *always* lead us into double-think. Hence, it cannot be false either. In other words, if it was just false it still had to make sense in some way or another, i.e. some meaning *had* to have been assigned to its key concepts. If it can neither be true nor false, whatever the case may be, all we can do is conclude that it is nonsense, a house of cards collapsing in front of us.

This collapse may indeed look like following from a rather odd sort of *reductio ad absurdum* argument, embodied in the very sentences of the book: adopted as hypothesis, the picture theory turns out to imply not its own falsehood but its nonsensicality, not due to any alleged violations of logical syntax, but as a corollary of the paradox. The idea here is that these sentences are paradoxically put together and thus work as their own *reductio*. That would still be a sign of irresoluteness, though. If the sentences are nonsense, there is no way for them to be put together in order to *work* (logically) in any way or another. Nothing follows from or contradicts anything. There is no argument, not even a paradox. Nothing. It was, however, crucial that, up to a certain point in our process of reading the *Tractatus*, it *looked* as if there were genuine trains of thought and at least a paradox among them. Without such paradoxical appearance our recognition of the nonsensicality of the purported theory – or system – would have taken much longer. For some, it may have even gone unnoticed.

The question whether it was Wittgenstein’s intention to construct such a puzzle and let us fall into it in order to help us out of further ones or that it was rather his own chimerical demands that led him to entanglement, though far from irrelevant, shall not be essential to our present concerns. This is a simple enough point, and much less controversial than what some may suppose. So far, there have been above all two main ways of looking at the motivations behind the picture theory: (1) Wittgenstein constructed it as an attempt to draw the bounds of sense and hence clear up philosophy from its

characteristic metaphysical nonsense, though at the same time running into paradox and so recognizing the impossibility of such project (at least through regular means), but nevertheless, out of despair, looking for some special means that would somehow allow him to complete it. (2) Wittgenstein deliberately constructed it as what he later called “an *object of comparison*” (PI §131; my emphasis)¹⁰, with the intent of letting the reader try it out, provisionally succumb to its powers, and eventually recognize the absurd nature of his own demands and give up on the sort of philosophical theorizing that leads into these bumpy roads; among such demands were metaphysical speculation in general, but more specifically the very idea of drawing a sharp line between sense and nonsense by means of a theory of meaning.

Now, my point is this: if (1) is true, then it should be obvious that Wittgenstein failed to construct such a theory, for, unless by way of some magic trick one finds the special means for rendering nonsense – or anything else – into a vehicle of ineffable messages, it collapses into emptiness for the aforementioned reasons. Hence, even if (1) happened to be true, and unless we deceive ourselves and mix-up nonsense for sense, there is not much more to do apart from treating the picture theory such as in (2), i.e. as a particular kind of object of comparison we can explore as a way of *experiencing* the bounds of sense and of sharpening our awareness of the nature of philosophical puzzlement, which is something that can be done in many different ways. This is what I have been trying to do here and exactly what Wittgenstein himself did in his later work, even emphasizing that the *Investigations* ought to be read directly after and against the background of the *Tractatus*, an object of comparison consisting of both a forerunner of some of his later views – ‘view’ here not much in the sense of ‘theory’, ‘position’, or ‘belief’, as in that of «*way of looking* [...]. An “angle” from which to look thereat» (Read & Deans 2011, 151) – and a reminder of the sort of things *not* to attempt in philosophy. To sum up, what should here matter the most is, more than being concerned with whether Wittgenstein was being resolute or irresolute when he wrote the *Tractatus*, to look at it resolutely. Or, perhaps better put, reasonably, or realistically.

¹⁰ “For we can avoid unfairness and vacuity in our assertions only by presenting the model as what it is, an object of comparison – as a sort of yardstick; not as a preconception to which reality *must* correspond. (The dogmatism into which we fall so easily in doing philosophy.)” (PI §131). Wittgenstein is here emphasizing that the role of an object of comparison is, unlike that of an alleged account of what actually happens, the *only* genuine role one can ascribe to a working-model (the picture theory being an example of one), at best a rough *approximation*, a complement to our understanding. His point is that, as long as we conform with this, the construction of working-models can be fruitful; not when we decide to go further and try to force them onto reality, though.

§ 12. A frequent criticism resolute approaches receive is that they tend to trivialize Wittgenstein's early work. Many find it astonishing that such seemingly hard won insights on the nature of logic, language, thought and reality could end up being nothing but a matter of illusion. Roger White, for example, writes that "the book, viewed this way, would no longer be the major work of philosophy I have always believed it to be, but just an eccentric sport" (White 2011, 47). In fact, I find the exact opposite to be true. For this sort of criticisms are based on some crucial misunderstandings of what it can be to read the *Tractatus* resolutely.

It is wrong, for instance, to hold that a resolute reading *must* deny that the book shows us anything, that it conveys any illuminating insights. I do think it shows us a great deal. What a resolute reading must deny is that a certain kind of *ineffable* truths (amounting to what the book's nonsensical sentences, such as those forming the picture theory, *appear* to be saying) are shown or conveyed. But apart from that, much is left in the open, including numerous insights (though not doctrines) on all the matters the *Tractatus* is thought to be concerned with. It is also wrong, as we have seen, to think that resolute readers can allow themselves to renounce to the task of trying to understand the book's apparent doctrines. This is as much part of any resolute reading as of any other kind of reading. To think that one can push a button that makes the system collapse instantaneously would be as great an illusion as to think that one shall find the key to render the picture theory coherent. And, above all, to believe that a doctrine such as the picture theory is, though wrong in several respects, more valuable as a theory than as an object of comparison is to be as irresolute, as unreasonable, as it gets.

Regarding matters of matching Wittgenstein's intentions, it seems to me that, overall, resolute readers have stood well enough in discussions concerning internal evidence of the *Tractatus* text. Despite certain difficulties their readings nevertheless encounter, Diamond, Conant, or Goldfarb, among others, have done well at, for instance, identifying tensions within the body of the book which support the idea of a dialectic structure one is expected to overcome. Its apparent oscillations between, as we have seen, realist and idealist metaphysics, correspondence and identity theories, seemingly incompatible versions of the context principle and that of compositionality (and thus austere and substantial conceptions of nonsense)¹¹, or, especially, the general conflict of doing metaphysics while denying it, often give the *Tractatus* the look of a self-

¹¹ The 'seemingly' is quite deliberate here. Silver Bronzo (2011), for instance, offers strong support for the claim that the *Tractatus* treats both principles in a way that does not render them mutually exclusive.

consciously prepared philosophical salad meant as a devastating killing joke, a kind of Trojan Horse in the history of philosophy. That is to say that as long as the discussion remains only *within* the boundaries of the text, it is hard to see how standard readers could reach a conclusive refutation of resolute ones. In fact, as the debate goes, the latter may even be slightly gaining the upper hand. The case is altogether different, though, in what concerns external evidence, i.e. consideration of “what Wittgenstein wrote and said to others about his work both before, during and after the composition of the book” (Hacker 2000, 360), as here standard readers seem to have a clear advantage, often not even having to engage in much philosophical argument.

For instance, resolute readers concerned with faithfulness to Wittgenstein’s intentions have a hard time in responding to the fact that, on occasion to his return to Cambridge in 1929, he first attempted to modify and repair the picture theory, on the pretext that it did not correctly account for the inferential relations between propositions, before eventually recognizing its untenability¹². Unless he was himself still under the illusion of having constructed a theory, it seems almost impossible to make sense of this move. The idea of him wanting to fix an illusory theory, thinking that his nonsensical formulations were calling for some kind of improvement, is a most odd one. Though resoluteness is often to be linked with reasonableness, here I do not quite see how resolute readers can avoid being themselves unreasonable, and demand what is unlikely. It shall thus not surprise us that little (if any) convincing attempts to meet this challenge have so far arisen from the resolute camp. The most one gets usually amounts to barely argued suggestions that Wittgenstein was somehow being ‘ironical’ or ‘too harsh on his earlier self’. This is not to say that these are absurd suggestions or that the challenge itself cannot be met, only that they will remain rather weak and unconvincing without further elaboration and that it seems to me doubtful that this could ever be done without one having to embrace somewhat unsteady tasks such as trying to *guess* without much support what Wittgenstein may have had in mind on such-and-such occasions. In addition, though irony was indeed an important tool among his vast anti-dogmatism apparatus, there is a risk with generalizing its ascription as a strategy to get round of certain interpretative difficulties, for it could lead to a scenario where it would be virtually impossible to discern between ironical and non-ironical remarks.

I must confess, however, that, though determining intentions may not here be my priority, the idea of attributing, as standard readers do, unashamed irresoluteness to the

¹² See Hacker (2000): p. 377.

early Wittgenstein, of thinking that he once believed the picture theory to be a convincing general account of language, leaves me with a certain sense of intellectual discomfort. Exactly as opposed to White, I think this would in a way diminish the nevertheless undisputed greatness of the *Tractatus*. And this is in part why I find Oskari Kuusela's proposal of an 'intermediate' reading most welcome, one which can at the same time do better at accommodating the contextual challenges and at least partially exempt Wittgenstein from the full-blooded irresoluteness of standard readings. Anscombe once suggested that the picture theory could perhaps be salvaged "if one could dispense with 'simples' and draw the limits of its applicability" (Anscombe 1971, 77) and it is in this direction that Kuusela's reading heads: on his view, simples are not meant to have a metaphysical character and the picture theory is not intended as an all-encompassing account of language.

§ 13. Kuusela argues that, instead of attempting to gesture at an ineffable theory of language full of metaphysical implications by means of nonsense, "Wittgenstein's goal in the *Tractatus* is to introduce a particular logical notation, a concept-script – or at least an outline of (some of the central principles governing) such a notation" (Kuusela 2011, 134) –, the picture theory being nothing more than this very notation, a scheme for the logical analysis of propositions (constative uses of language), where these are *treated as* pictures of facts and truth-functions of elementary propositions, which is not quite the same as claiming that propositions *are* so. The notation was thus intended above all as a tool, a particular angle from which to look at language, not a theory pretending to account for it as a whole. As for its criterion of correctness, it was not "a matter of the notation corresponding to facts about language and the world" (Kuusela 2011, 136) but rather of being logically sound, i.e. of not giving rise to paradoxes and other difficulties, hence being capable of dissolving specific logical and philosophical puzzles. And so the requirement of simples was only a technical requirement within the notation's framework, a condition for such logical soundness, not a postulation of any ungraspable metaphysical entities on which the possibility of sense depended. This allows Kuusela to explain Wittgenstein's attempts to modify the picture 'theory' in the early 1930s without having to treat it as a theory: having found that, unlike what he had thought before, his notation did in fact give rise to certain logical difficulties, he attempted to fix it.

If that is so, then 'nonsense' may very well seem to have a connotation other than that of mere gibberish on this view. A nonsensical sentence may simply be a sentence

which cannot be treated as a picture and hence cannot have a systematic place within the notation; everyday language, which is clearly not logically perfect as the ideal language of the notation was intended to be, being full of such sentences. Among these are what I have called, following Anscombe, illuminating sentences, non-descriptive expressions of insights. Already in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein recognized that the “tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated” (TLP 4.002) and it is clear that his notation had not been designed to account for all these conventions. He nevertheless sought, following Frege’s first anti-psychologist principle¹³, to distinguish sharply between genuinely descriptive sentences, supposed to be manageable on purely logical grounds, the object of analysis of his notation, and those which, despite sharing similar grammatical forms, did not actually work as descriptions of reality and whose understanding so often depended on psychological implications, as is the case with figurative modes of expression. He did not see any problem with these non-descriptive sentences *per se*, only that philosophers (especially metaphysicians) tended to misuse them, muddling them for descriptive ones and hence producing illusory descriptions of chimerical features of the world. What amounted to gibberish were not *all* illuminating sentences like “‘Someone’ is not the name of someone”, as these can still be given an intelligible *use*, but the pseudo-illuminating or pseudo-descriptive sentences arising out of such muddles. Muddles which in their turn consisted of a mistaken employment of *whole sentences*, not of particular words, unlike what the talk of formal and proper concepts seemed to imply when taken as theoretical formulations rather than as insights into rules governing the notation. This is what he most likely had in mind when he wrote:

Most of the statements and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answers to questions of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical. Most of the sentences and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language. (TLP 4.003)

To point out that these sentences are nonsensical is to demonstrate, by means of logical analysis in terms of the notation’s standards, that the utterer had failed to assign meaning to certain signs in them, not by having put these signs together in a logically

¹³ “[...] always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective” (Frege 1960, xxii).

illegitimate way (for Wittgenstein, as for Frege already, there was no such thing as doing so), an idea in tension with the Tractarian treatment of the context principle, but by having confusedly used these sentences, i.e. as if playing the role of a description when in fact nothing at all was being described. This is more likely to be what he meant by misunderstanding the logic of language.

This reading also appears to free the *Tractatus* from the mirror paradox, as its ‘nonsensical’ sentences would cease to be seen as attempts to gesture at ineffable features of reality, but as insights used in outlining some of the notation’s principles, including distinctions of logical category which cannot be described by means of sentences translatable into the notation but which are nevertheless “reflected in distinctions between the signs for what is in one category and the signs for what is in the other” (Diamond 1991, 180). Showing thus seemingly loses its esoteric character: it is not concerned with ineffable features of reality, but with such distinctions within the notation. Now, if, unlike cases when it is used in the strong sense of ‘inexpressible’, ‘ineffable’ is taken in a weaker sense, as meaning ‘(literally) indescribable’, it becomes a more or less innocent notion. It is impossible to *describe* e.g. the sound of a clarinet, the smell of baking bread, the taste of roasted chicken, or the pain of a toothache (which are all, in this particular respect, on a par with the aforementioned logical distinctions), in the sense one describes the visual features of e.g. a clarinet, a piece of bread, a chicken, or a person’s teeth. Only the latter are, as it were, picturable. But there are, of course, various means to convey all sorts of (no)things like the former as effectively as literal descriptions (‘pictures’) convey the latter. We use them all the time in everyday discourse and in an intelligible way. They should not then even count as ineffable, as the employment of such a word, fully psychologically charged with the implications of its stronger sense, could often lead to misunderstandings, notably that there was at all *something* to be described (in the sense of ‘pictured’) about sounds, smells, tastes or pains and which somehow eluded us.

It should be noticed that when talking about descriptions I have here been using, just like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, the notion of picture metaphorically with the intent of illuminating what kind of linguistic use a description is. “A proposition is a picture of reality” (TLP 4.01), which is of course not a picture of any reality, is precisely a metaphor: it is not describing any feature of propositions, neither stating that propositions *are* pictures, but, as metaphors do, leading us to *see* propositions *as* pictures in order to throw light into how propositions work, i.e. as descriptions of a particular sort. And, unlike propositions, metaphors do not, so to speak, carry a content (definite or indefinite) but do

their job by letting us see something as another by way of a seemingly false or absurd literal statement which prompts a particular insight or set of insights¹⁴. They are what we could call *transitional* remarks, i.e. a sort of linguistic ladders, as it were, to borrow a metaphor Wittgenstein himself made famous and which we shall further consider in detail. Though they cannot fit the *Tractatus*' notation, metaphors are, nevertheless, part of our ordinary means of communicating and there is nothing odd in relying upon them while outlining the notation's principles. Before Wittgenstein, Frege had gone through a virtually identical process, which Diamond explains as follows:

We are left after the transition with a logical notation that in a sense has to speak for itself. If we try afterwards to say why it is a good notation, we know that we shall find ourselves saying things which may help our listeners, but which we ourselves cannot regard as the expression of any true thought, speakable or unspeakable. When we say that the notation is a good one, when we explain what logical distinctions and similarities it makes perspicuous, we are in a sense going backwards, back to the stage at which we had been when grasping the point of the transition. (Diamond 1991, 183)

§ 14. Take, for instance, Frege's attempt to distinguish the notion of concept from that of object in their strictly logical senses, i.e. leaving aside any possible psychological associations that these words may suggest. With this he was trying to clarify his third anti-psychologist principle: "never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object" (Frege 1960, xxii). He starts by reminding that such notions, being logically *simple*, cannot be *defined*, and hence the best we can do when introducing these logically simple notions, he admits, is to "lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the word as is intended" (Frege 1984, 183), including the use of metaphorical expressions such as speaking of concepts as being 'unsaturated' and of objects as 'saturated'. Of course, such modes of speech were not meant to fit his notation (the Fregean *Begriffsschrift*), nor could they. He was simply, in his own words, giving propaedeutic *elucidations* in order to make the distinction perspicuous within his notation, relying for that on allegedly unprecise ordinary words that, though having "no place in the system of a science" (Frege 1984, 300), which requires technical terms with fixed meanings, were

¹⁴ See § 24 for some additional considerations on metaphor.

nevertheless necessary as a transitional stage towards the outlining of his notation, just as Wittgenstein later did with his own.

For a thinker as rigorous as Frege all this was above all a matter of necessity, not of option, something he thought to be imposed on him by the very (imprecise) nature of language: “on thorough investigation it will be found that the obstacle is essential, and *founded on the nature of our language*; that we cannot avoid a certain inappropriateness of linguistic expression; and there is nothing for it but to realize this and always take it into account” (Frege 1984, 194; my emphasis). His point runs somewhat like this: there is no way for us to avoid imprecise formulations from time to time, which is to say that, outside the notation, it is not quite possible to keep the distinction between logic and psychology in place as sharply as one would have wished, as the construction and clarification of the notation itself requires us to make some concessions to the inaccuracy of ordinary language; this is tolerable, though, as long as one is aware of what one is doing, notably when using such formulations, and willing to make it as clear as possible to others. Hence he elsewhere wrote that “a great part of the work of the philosopher consists in [...] a struggle with language” (Frege 1979, 270).

The idea of a struggle with language is connected with another aspect of Frege’s views: for him, thought and language were not one and the same. Unlike language, thought was logically faultless, i.e. we think *by* the laws of logic, therefore being no such thing as illogical thoughts. And so he saw thought, not language, as the true subject of his investigations. However, as thoughts are expressed in language (are made perceptible to the senses by it, to use a Tractarian formulation), he found himself forced to recognize that any philosophical investigation of thought depended necessarily on a philosophical investigation of language, thus playing a crucial role in the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy. So, for him, linguistic analysis, though indispensable up to a certain point, was not an end in itself but only a means to explain thought. Unfortunately, though language was generally capable of matching thought, there were cases where it fell short, often distorting it or even missing it altogether. In fact, he seemed to believe that there were certain thoughts that could not be apprehended through the standard (propositional) means of linguistic expression, as was the case with logically simple notions. He had indeed developed an extensive account of how a thought expressed by a proposition is grasped, but was now left in a rather uncomfortable position. The following passage, still regarding the distinction between concept and object, gives us a good indication of this sort of tension:

I admit that there is a quite peculiar obstacle in the way of an understanding with the reader. By kind of a necessity of language, *my expressions, taken literally, miss my thought*; I mention an object, when what I intend is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me half-way – who does not begrudge a pinch of salt. (Frege 1984, 193; my emphasis)

It is clear that, for Frege, anything that could at all be thought was made perspicuous by a proper logical notation. Unlike everyday language, the ideal language of the notation was supposed to do full justice to thought. Rather, the difficulty had to do with the intermediate stage of introducing the notation, the transitional steps to move from a logically defective medium such as everyday language to one where all these problems had been overcome. It was also clear to him that the hinting strategies he relied upon to clarify the notions and distinctions that eluded language did not work as *expressions* of any thoughts. They were just hints. A distinction such as that between concept and object could only be grasped, so to speak, in its nakedness, i.e. without linguistic clothing. The hints were meant to draw attention to that, though the distinction could not itself be properly put into words, it was nevertheless reflected in features of language, features which the notation sought to render even clearer. And, of course, one who was *already* in command of the notation could well dispense such hints.

Now, Wittgenstein, who seemed to be proceeding very similarly, tried to dissolve this tension, which he saw as springing from Frege's general view of logic. Unlike Russell, who regarded logic as being concerned with the most general facts in the universe (underpinning, so to speak, all empirical facts), Frege understood logic as having a strictly normative character and hence being purely formal, one of the most important things Wittgenstein owed to him. However, he somehow felt that logical necessity was still in need of some ulterior foundation, which led him to postulate a kind of Platonic realm where logical laws were to be grounded. Having rejected the idea of logic relating to the empirical world, he nevertheless acknowledged a certain notion of logical truth, i.e. that logical laws, being necessary, were a sort of eternal, abstract truths. This led him further to accept, for instance, that logical connectives were names of functions, and so that in a way they were still concepts of a certain kind, or that logical propositions described relations between abstract (logical) entities. And so he nevertheless regarded it as being a subject of some sort, one that, though abstract, could still somehow be a content of

(propositional) thoughts, a step away from his own recognition of logic's purely formal nature.

But given its purely formal nature, the very idea of thinking *about* logic is rendered vulnerable, if not untenable. For if the rules of logic are the rules of thought, of our reasoning apparatus, it seems hard to think of someone thinking (in the sense of articulating a propositional content) about the very rules that govern our thought. We can of course say that we come into direct acquaintance of such rules *by* thinking, even give hints of them in ordinary speech (which can only succeed because everybody is already acquainted with them, even if only tacitly), or clarify them by means of formalizations, but to think and talk about them, in the sense one thinks and talks about ordinary matters of fact, would seem to require an unconceivable position outside of logic, i.e. outside of thought. And so, against Russell and partly against Frege, Wittgenstein sought to make clear that “in logic we are not dealing with truths or facts, ineffable or otherwise. [...] a logical distinction might be said to be genuine insofar as its recognition solves a philosophical or logical difficulty or difficulties, but one need not maintain that there are therefore some kinds of truths about it, or that we could speak of it as if about a fact or truth” (Kuusela 2011, 133). On his view, logic is not a content of our thoughts but their very structure, not a matter of *thinking that p* but of thinking *tout court*. This is what he meant by logic being transcendental (TLP 6.13). Hence, there can be no such thing as thinking *about* logically simple notions (e.g. thinking that a concept is such-and-such), and distinctions of logical category such as that between concept and object require elucidation simply because they are not a subject of any thought, effable or ineffable. Frege had been under an illusion, Wittgenstein assumed, in having the impression that there was anything at all behind his elucidatory hints, *something* that propositions proper failed to express.

Being transcendental, in this sense of purely formal, of not relating to the empirical world, logic cannot thus be subject of any doctrine or theory. “The idea of a science of logic is, on Wittgenstein's account, nothing but illusion” (Diamond 1991, 201). By outlining his logical notation he was not at all (or so he thought) committed to any theory or doctrine about logic, but expressing logical insights which were, as it were, embodied¹⁵

¹⁵ Kuusela explains this as follows: “What it means for general logic insights, such as the insight that the negation sign is not a name and that propositions are (re)presentations of states of affairs, to be *embodied* (to find their expression) in Wittgenstein's concept-script, is simply that this notation treats certain expressions as analyzable in certain (but not other) ways. This is, briefly, a matter of there being certain rules of translation that govern the codification of expressions (signs with use) into the concept-script, and that not just anything counts as such a translation.” (Kuusela 2011, 137; my emphasis)

in the notation itself, not asserted by any theoretical formulations. Such insights were not meant to provide any new piece of information about logic (there was no such thing for him) but simply to target at and hopefully help to dissolve particular conceptual confusions regarding the nature of logic, notably that logical connectives were somehow representative. As he put it in a 1929 manuscript, in the notation “an entire *way of looking* at the object is expressed; the *angle* from which I now regard the thing. The notation is the last expression of a philosophical *view*” (*apud* Kuusela 2011, 134; my emphases). Kuusela adds:

Essentially, what is at stake is the reader’s recognition of the dissolution of logical or philosophical problems on the basis of that very same non-theoretical linguistic [and logical] capacity that allows her to recognize something as philosophically or logically problematic (e.g. paradoxical) in the first place. In this sense, Wittgenstein only needs to appeal, in introducing his concept-script, to what the reader already knows as a language user. This non-theoretical comprehension is the justificatory ground of Wittgenstein’s notation. (Kuusela 2011, 137)

§ 15. It is now time, however, to distinguish intentions from achievements once again. As Kuusela points out, there was nevertheless at least one clear dogmatic commitment in the *Tractatus*: the idea of there being *a* strictly correct method in philosophy, i.e. the method of logical analysis of language in terms of the notation’s own standards, aimed at a comprehensive dissolution of logical and philosophical problems. Now, accepting Wittgenstein’s notation as *one* among many other valid tools for philosophical clarification would be one thing. To take it as *the* correct tool, as a canonical notation, quite another.

By the standards of his later works this was a most unwittgensteinian thing to do: instead of seeking a genuine *Übersicht* of things, resulting from an overlapping of different angles or points of view (from quite contrasting to subtly diverging ones), to privilege, above all others, a single angle or point of view and dogmatically accept it as the correct one. Indeed, in the remark quoted above, he speaks of *a* way of looking, *the* angle, and *a* philosophical view. This brings out at once a very significant contrast but also a quite striking continuity between the *Tractatus* and a later text like the *Investigations*: on the one hand, and as for the continuity, in neither of them, the notion

of view is to be understood as theoretically charged, which is also to say that in neither did Wittgenstein intend to construct doctrines or theories (this is a guiding principle in all his philosophical work); on the other, and here does the contrast lie, while the *Investigations*, and in a way as a reaction to the mistake(s) of the *Tractatus*, sought for as wide a variety of perspectives as likely, in the *Tractatus* he limited his enquiry to a single one, i.e. “the perforated screen of logic” (Ryle 2009, 275), by means of his canonical notation, which turned out to be somewhat “like the shoes of Chinese ladies, which deformed their feet and prevented them from walking on them” (Ryle 2009, 264).

As we have observed, the mere construction of a notation does not *per se* entail any theoretical commitments, and its prime criterion of correction is mostly a matter of logical reliability and effectiveness, not of being an accurate model of any features of reality. Though it is still a kind of mirror (or screen, to use Ryle’s word), it is a self-acknowledged restricted and artificial one, a set of tools. However, this only remains so as long as its range of applicability is kept limited up to a certain point, and, clearly, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein crosses these limits and by quite a long margin, ending up betraying his own intents. So, though a notation’s correctness need not be a matter of it corresponding to features of reality, when promoted to a canonical status such as here it follows that it must have something in common with its object of analysis in order to fulfil its task. While he did not seek to put forward any theory of meaning, just a notation, his abusive use of it as the sole and whole correct method of philosophical analysis commits him, though largely unwittingly, to such a theory. Kuusela is spot on here. He puts it as follows:

For although one isn’t committed to any doctrines about language by simply constructing a notation, to maintain that *all* logical unclarities can be settled through analysis in terms of a particular logical notation is to commit oneself to a thesis about language. This is how a thesis about the essence of language sneaks into the *Tractatus*. The back door through which metaphysics enters Wittgenstein’s early philosophy is his [...] assumption that there should be something like *the* correct method of philosophy, and the dogmatic imposition of a particular framework of analysis onto language as the one to be adopted. (Kuusela 2011, 140)

And he continues: “to impose a mode of presentation onto the phenomena and assume that they all *must* fit, comes to exactly the same as putting forward a philosophical thesis about the necessary characteristics of things” (Kuusela 2011, 141). So, details

aside, the most substantial differences between Kuusela's reading and that of the most prominent so-called standard readers are a matter of intentions ascribed to the early Wittgenstein. These are important differences. In fact, Kuusela's contribution to Tractarian interpretation, a "dialectical synthesis" (Read & Deans 2011, 149) breaking through the "Wars" of the last couple of decades, may so far be arguably the most significant one since the definite establishment of the resolute interpretative program with *The New Wittgenstein's* first appearance in 2000. And given the principle of charity, assuming, as Goldfarb, "that we should like to understand the *Tractatus* in a way that renders it as coherent as possible" (Goldfarb 2011, 14), and that Kuusela's proposal seems to have a stronger chance to stand as a faithful one in light of the challenges presented by pieces of external evidence, factors about which he is quite thoughtful, I shall for now assume that, at least in general outline, he may very well be right¹⁶. In what concerns determination of authorial intentions, a viable 'third way' has been developed out of "the *Tractatus* Wars", one which deserves to be become as widespread as the other two.

As of a matter of the book's actual achievements, though, my main concern here, the difference is not great, if any. By unreasonably promoting his notation to a canonical status, Wittgenstein ended up converting it into the picture theory along the lines that we have sketched above. Unlike what standard readings tell us, this was above all an accident, which gives us a much more sane picture of the early Wittgenstein. Intentions aside, however, the result is virtually the same. The notation turns into a theory and everything collapses just as we have tried to exemplify before considering Kuusela's reading, though a variety of significant non-systematic insights shall nevertheless remain intact after the system's collapse. In addition, this new reading also ends up drawing attention to that one does not need to be as patently unrealistic as the Wittgenstein of standard readings of the *Tractatus* in order to fall prey to illusions, to become entangled in paradoxes, and end up speaking nothing but nonsense. It shows that one must indeed be extremely careful about what one is doing when doing philosophy. Take, for instance, the following image (let me call it, somewhat following Ryle's 'prefatory parable', an *elucidatory tale*):

The young and brilliant Ludwig built a pair of specially designed glasses that would help him to see *certain* things in a more precise way. This was the intended plan and at first he knew he was not meant to put them on *all* the

¹⁶ Some further tests still await it, though. It may, for instance, have a hard time dealing with the claim that the totality of propositions is language.

time. However, the experience of wearing the glasses was striking. His vision acquired a crystalline purity, he had the impression that his eyes could penetrate everything, right up to the ultimate structure of things. He soon got addicted to the glasses and never took them out, now looking at *everything* through them. He kept them even when he went to bed. At night, he dreamed of being stationed outside the world, staring at it right in the face, contemplating the essence of its structure. Later on, he even forgot that he was at all wearing glasses. They had not at all been designed for such intensive use, though, neither could have they. His vision started suffering: the crystalline purity was still there, but there were now clouded areas too. With time, the clouded areas became more and more numerous. He nearly went blind. One afternoon, barely being able to see, he climbed to the top of a tree, hoping that a higher point of view would somehow help his vision. By the time he finished climbing he had gone completely blind. He tried to look inside himself, recalling the visions of his dreams. For a moment he thought he may have had regained sight. He suddenly slipped, falling right back to the ground, the rough ground of his garden. The glasses fell too and got scattered into pieces. He bumped his head with some force and for a while still saw all the matching little forms he used to see before. When recovered, he took a deep breath, stayed silent for a while, in awe of what had happened, and eventually made up his mind. Luckily he was not hurt, luckily he had not gone blind (nor mad), he had regained the vision he used to have before ever trying the glasses. It had *all* been a monumental illusion. Something was different, though. The world was exactly as he had left it, but he still perceived a slight change, though he could not quite tell what it was. Then he saw the glasses' wrecks: now he knew! Or, rather, he *understood* he did not quite know. He picked them up and, instead of throwing them out in the garbage bin, kept them in a little box.

My point is as simple as this: even if the first few lines of the story had been different, i.e. if Ludwig had designed his glasses with the purpose of wearing them *all* the time and seeing *everything* through them, all the rest would have remained identical, the only difference being that readers would above all see it, on the version here told, as an audacious experience gone wrong, on the alternative one as a case of near madness. Either

way, though, the moral of the story, including what Ludwig came to understand in the end, would remain the same.

§ 16. I can now, at last, turn to Diamond, and in particular to two central features of her interpretation of the *Tractatus*, a standard setter among resolute readings: the alleged *frame-body* distinction within the book's structure, and the so-called austere conception of nonsense. When first introduced among Tractarian discussions, the frame was said to consist of its preface and closing remarks (6.54 and 7) and to contain "instructions, as it were, for us as readers of it. Read it in light of what it says at the beginning about its aim, and what it says at the end about how you are meant to take what it contains" (Diamond 2000, 151). The so-called body, in its turn, is what is supposed to be simply nonsense, in this case deliberately framed nonsense which the reader should be able to recognize as so with the help of the frame's instructions. It has since been a widely adopted notion by resolute readers, though not without some controversy: for instance, some still accept its initial formulation, others have suggested an expansion meant to include at least some of the metaphilosophical remarks to be found among the 4s, which they see as equally instructive, and others have not quite bought into it, considering it rather misleading, even from a resolute point of view.

As I shall look into the metaphilosophical story more closely later on, I will for now limit my attention to the preface and the closing remarks. I too tend to find the notion of a frame misleading, for various reasons, but especially for that passages such as the preface and 7 are, as I see them, still among the not so reasonable (if at all intelligible) parts of the book, i.e. they are still part of what I think one should overcome. It is thus quite deliberately that I have until now avoided mentioning any of these passages, and so I think I have already made one of my points clear: one does not at all require a frame, a set of instructions of any kind, in order to recognize that the apparent doctrines of the *Tractatus* are illusory ones, i.e. that they collapse into nonsense, and that such recognition, after we had tried to make sense of them, can teach us quite a lot. In fact, Diamond herself agrees that "in the end nothing important for the resolute reading *depends* on the frame-body distinction" (Kuusela 2015, 231; my emphasis). And so my aim in discussing the 'frame' here will not be to discuss it *as* a frame, as a set of instructions distinct from the rest, but to try to look at these particular passages afresh and rethink their roles within the context of the book.

§ 17. Let me begin with the preface. I shall do no more than locate its key claims and attempt to sketch possible interpretations of them, often more than one:

(1) “Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts. – So it is not a textbook” (Wittgenstein 2001, 3). About this, Diamond observes that his “intention is not that the book should teach us things that we did not know; it does not address itself to our ignorance” (Diamond 2000, 149). This should be a rather uncontroversial point: whether we opt for a standard or resolute reading, or for an intermediate one such as Kuusela’s, it should be clear that in neither case did Wittgenstein intend to present us with any new *information*. His insistence that philosophy is *not* a science, that it cannot yield doctrines or theories, is quite conclusive. There is nonetheless a further distinction to be made: when distinguishing philosophy from the empirical sciences, he puts equal emphasis on its inherently *practical* character – it “is not a body of doctrine but an activity” (TLP 4.112) –, i.e. that philosophy (like logic) is not a matter of *knowing that* but of *knowing how*, and that the latter is not quite reducible to the former. Ryle, who was well aware of it, puts it: though not being concerned with a theoretical body of knowledge, such as in the sciences, one can still be “skilful or unskilful, successful or unsuccessful [in philosophy]. It is in pursuing the activity itself that we see what we need to see” (Ryle 2009, 262). Moreover, what is being suggested in this initial comment is that perhaps only reasonably advanced ‘players of the game’, i.e. people who had already learned some of the activity’s crucial skills and been grappling with the same kind of issues (the nature of logic and philosophy, of the bounds of sense, and so on), may have a chance to understand what is at stake in the book. He most probably had Frege and Russell in mind, to whom he recognized a considerable intellectual debt. And that, despite their extraordinarily advanced skills, they both failed to understand the *Tractatus*’ fundamental aim may have very well had to do with their failure to understand that philosophical (and logical) investigation could *not* be a sort of science.

(2) The reason why the problems of philosophy “are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood” (*ibid.*). To misunderstand the logic of language is not, for instance, to run over a set of previously fixed rules allegedly governing the uses of words in sentences – what has been fondly called logical syntax – but to (a) fail to distinguish what is logical from what is psychological, (b) use sentences while failing to assign them a meaning, and (c) confusedly mix-up distinct uses of language such as descriptive (or constative) and illuminating (or elucidatory) ones. These three features are inseparable

from each other: by being under the illusion that the psychological accompaniments prompted by certain signs or sentences already count as meanings, independently of their logical roles, one often fails to assign meaning, i.e. a logical role, to them and hence speak as if saying something when in fact nothing at all is being said. On standard readings, one is supposed to disclose this kind of confusions by following the method of logical analysis outlined in the *Tractatus*, on resolute ones all that is required for us to recognize them is nothing but our ordinary (though hopefully sharp) linguistic and logical capacities. I have tried to exemplify the latter when discussing the picture theory above.

(3) “The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence” (*ibid.*). Now, this may well look as if a distinction between two fundamental categories of things is being implied: “things speakable about and things not speakable about, and the suggestion appears to be that Wittgenstein is going to draw the line between them: what words can reach and what they cannot” (Diamond 2000, 149). And, at first, one may even believe oneself able to identify such categories: on the speakable side we have ordinary matters of fact, the subject of empirical sciences; on the unspeakable we have above all formal matters and matters of (absolute) value, the alleged subjects of e.g. logic, mathematics, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, or religion. The former are concerned with contingent features of reality, the latter with necessary ones. This is to say that though scientists may inductively infer necessary laws of nature from the inspection of contingent matters of fact and subsequent recognition of certain regular patterns among them, they are deprived from stating such laws.

However, if one follows the *Tractatus* carefully enough, either resolutely or irresolutely, one should notice that this supposed second category of unspeakable things is not quite a category, as it does not have *things* of any sort as its subjects. As Diamond puts it, “just as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any thought or talk” (Diamond 2000, 153). Though for quite different reasons, the early Wittgenstein would have then agreed with Neurath’s remark that “one should indeed be silent, but not *about* anything” (*apud* Hacker 2000, 355). He saw the philosophical chatter about logic or ethics as empty not because it tried to say something that could not be said, but because there was *nothing* which logic or ethics could be about. Take again, for instance, the case of laws of nature: when we say that there are laws of nature we are not trying to say

something that cannot be said but that is shown by a set of patterns of observed regularities in nature (as if we could infer that, though we cannot see or grab them, they would still have to be somewhere), but using a certain mode of expression to refer to those patterns; laws of nature “are not descriptions of nature, but *forms of description*” (Hacker 2000, 354; my emphasis). Resolute readers have been keen to emphasize this point, but even when one is still under the illusion that the picture theory may be intelligible *qua* theory, it should be clear that *what* is said to be shown is not *something*. Rather, what is shown is what penetrates everything, and so it cannot itself *be* anything, at least in the ordinary sense of ‘to be’ (or ‘to exist’).

And, now, very much like Frege, I could well feel tempted to complain that language forces me to misleadingly employ e.g. ‘what’ in cases when there is nothing corresponding to it. In fact, I have been using quite curious expressions all the way through the last couple of paragraphs, and it should now be clear that this may be inevitable as long as one is willing to draw sharp distinctions between, so to speak, full and empty sentences, no matter whether that alleged emptiness springs from these sentences trying to gesture at what cannot be said or from there being nothing at all behind them apart from confusion, or between genuine and chimerical subjects. This is not to say that we do not often come up with meaningless talk and pursue illusory enterprises, but rather that this is not something that can be settled in abstract, i.e. by identifying a range of hypothetical pseudo-subjects whose sentences *per se* end up being nonsensical. These are matters which are to be decided piecemeal, and that itself should be enough for us to see that the kind of enquiry we have in our hands cannot be a scientific one. I will come back to this, but for now what I would like to suggest is that the very words that are said to sum up the whole sense of the book seem to be highly unreasonable. At best, these words should themselves be nothing but elucidatory hints that we could well dispense after having understood the book’s point, or at least not to be taken as the expression of any truths. If that is so, and I do not quite see how it could be otherwise, the idea of a frame becomes problematic.

(4) “[T]he *truth* of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe to have found, on all essential points, the final solution to the problems” (Wittgenstein 2001, 4). This is indeed, given the rest of the preface (and the rest of the book), a most puzzling remark, as the idea that the *Tractatus* communicates *true thoughts*, i.e. true propositions, does not seem compatible with its self-acknowledged practical character and its refusal to convey any kind of factual

information. Juliet Floyd, for instance, suggests that, as the rest of the preface, this remark is “ironic” (Hacker 2000, 383). This would be an easy way out of trouble. Probably too easy. My own proposal to dissolve the puzzle may in fact suffer from similar problems but it still seems to me to be a more tenable one: it consists in assuming that the notion of thought here employed may not necessarily correspond to the notion of thought which the *Tractatus* seems to account for, i.e. of thought in a strictly logical sense, as amounting to nothing else than *thinking that p*. Being a relatively fluid notion overall, this may not be implausible. And so my proposal is to read this remark as no more than an expression of the early Wittgenstein’s somewhat unrealistic faith in the method (either an irresolute one of logical analysis or a resolute one of deterrence by example) he had just developed, i.e. that he was now equipped, as no one had been before, to bring metaphysics to a close, which squares fairly well with his later recognition, already by the early 1930s, that in the *Tractatus* he had “still proceeded dogmatically” (*apud* Kuusela 2011, 140), even if not intending to construct doctrines of any sort, and that in philosophy there can be no such thing as *the* correct method, but rather that one should be able “to tailor methods to particular problems” (Kuusela 2011, 142).

(5) “[T]he value of this work consists in that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved” (*ibid.*). After such emphatic announcements of definitive truths and final solutions the final assessment of the book’s value is a most anti-climactic ending to it. This has two main implications: (1) that philosophical (or metaphysical) problems and theories were really nothing but houses of cards – after we expose their nonsensicality and see them collapse, which requires significant effort, the world is left *exactly* as it had ever been, as *all* we had been doing was a matter of dissolving illusions; and (2) that, more importantly, what most mattered to us human beings, ethics, i.e. the ethical spirit, the meaning of life, was left untouched by all this seemingly titanic enterprise. We can here notice a further tension in Wittgenstein’s thought, one which, despite some back and forths, he never quite settled throughout his life: while firmly denying that ethics may be about *something* and hence rejecting the idea of ethical questions or truths, he still held, at least as firmly, that ethics (in a wide sense, comprising all absolute value) was *the* single most important (no)thing to concern us.

(6) Finally, I have decided to leave the following passage as a conclusion to our account of the preface:

“[T]he aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.” (Wittgenstein 2001, 3-4)

It is true that, as Diamond suggests, the use of ‘will *simply* be nonsense’ seems to imply, in contrast with the previous remark about one having to seemingly remain silent about something, that in light of the *Tractatus* there are no unspeakable things or truths and that all nonsense is just plain nonsense – this would be another sign of the book’s internal dialectic. But what is most striking about this passage, however, is its doubly paradoxical nature. Wittgenstein begins by self-consciously offering an incoherent formulation and appears to correct himself immediately afterwards. For the first few seconds, the reader may even have the impression that the proposed reformulation will do but should soon realize that the initial difficulty had only been delayed, as the exact same incoherence remains in place. Just as he had done regarding the idea of drawing a limit to thought, Wittgenstein could well have said “not to language (the expression of thoughts): for in order to be able to draw a limit to language we should have to be able to find both sides of the limit sayable (i.e. we should have to be able to say what cannot be said). And then, of course, there would be no third alternative, one that could make sense, no funny dance or whistling. So, this passage is at best a deliberate piece of transitional nonsense, which, again, seems to weaken the idea of a frame (unless one is to allow that the preface itself contains bits of framed nonsense), at worse evidence of confusion on Wittgenstein’s part. But what should really matter is that in either case it pretty much sums up the kind of difficulties one is to encounter within the body of the book, as we cannot now fail to recognize that the “frustrating conclusion” (Ryle 2009, 262) that to “try to tell what makes the difference between significant and nonsensical talk is itself to cross the divide between significant and nonsensical talk” (*ibid.*), one of the most important lessons (if not the most important) one is to learn from the *Tractatus*, was already in full display here.

§ 18. Before closing the book by repeating that “[w]hereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (TLP 7), Wittgenstein introduces what has arguably been its most often quoted and discussed passage throughout “the *Tractatus* Wars”: 6.54. It has been translated in different ways and we should indeed keep an eye on the interpretative differences that come out in the different translations. I shall compare at least three. The still canonical translation by Pears and McGuinness, for instance, reads as follows:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, 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.
(Wittgenstein 2001, 89)

And here is what we find in Ogden’s initial translation:

“My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when 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.
(Wittgenstein 2016, 108)

In addition, I have decided to include the following one by Anscombe, which, though slightly freer, I find to be perhaps the most reliable among the three:

My sentences are illuminating in the following way: one who understands me rejects them as nonsensical if, using them as steps, he has climbed out over them. He must as it were throw away the ladder after he has climbed it. Then he sees the world rightly. (Anscombe 2011, 175)

Apart from Ogden’s misleading use of ‘senseless’, the word corresponding to ‘*sinnlos*’, characteristic of tautologies and contradictions, instead of ‘nonsensical’, the counterpart of ‘*unsinnig*’, characteristic of pseudo-propositions, a contrast explicitly marked throughout the text, the remaining differences amount to a matter of detail. For

instance, White agrees, as I do, with Anscombe's translation of 'Sätze' as 'sentences', instead of the customary 'propositions', remarking that "there is an oddity to my ear in describing something which is nonsense as a proposition" (White 2011, 59). In fact, if we take 'proposition' in its technical sense, i.e. as referring to a compulsorily meaningful assertion (either true or false), to talk of a 'nonsensical proposition' would itself be a contradiction in terms. Wittgenstein makes clear that a nonsensical sentence with the grammatical form of a proposition is not a proposition but a *pseudo*-proposition.

A further issue is concerned with the translation of 'erläutern'. The most direct one would arguably be 'elucidate', i.e. 'My sentences *elucidate* in the following way: [...]', which is not too different from Ogden's 'are elucidatory'. Now, though a notion such as 'Erläuterung', i.e. 'elucidation', in the sense of 'making (something) clear' or 'throwing light into (something)' is a commonplace one in the German language, there have been suggestions that in Frege or Wittgenstein it plays a somewhat technical role, something to which the Pears and McGuinness translation 'serve as elucidations' may contribute. Conant, for example, in a paper entitled "Elucidation and nonsense in Frege and early Wittgenstein" (2000), emphasizes the relation between Frege's use of elucidations, in the sense of the preliminary hints we have mentioned, and Wittgenstein's, as in a way modifying Frege's and using his own hints as a means to draw attention to the very absurdity of the task at hand and so to the limits of thought and philosophy, not to any features of a theory or notation. This leads him to the conclusion that the exact same notion of elucidation is employed both in 6.54 and when, after having described philosophy as an activity, not a body of doctrine, Wittgenstein asserts that a "a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations" (TLP 4.112). Conant is here taking 'elucidations' in the sense of 'deliberately employed nonsensical sentences' which might appear to make sense at first look and are meant to lead the reader into the aforementioned imaginative activity that may end up freeing him from philosophical illusion after he is able to recognize the elucidations' own nonsensicality. And so he takes this sentence, as its adjacent ones, as part of the frame, in a way complementing 6.54 and providing further evidence of the idea that the body of the book is essentially composed of nonsensical sentences which are to be resolutely thrown away after having served their elucidatory purpose.

I find this assumption problematic and, again, just as I think of the idea of a frame, I do not think that the possibility of a resolute reading may in any way depend crucially on it. White may very well be right in observing that when "an innocent word like

“*Erläuterung*” suddenly becomes a quasi-technical term” (White 2011, 50) the boat is being pushed out just a little too far. Nowhere in the *Tractatus* a definition of elucidation as meaning what Conant takes it to mean is given (and, apart from 6.54, not even intimated), though in the end I do certainly agree with him about how the book’s nonsensical sentences may elucidate us. And notice that immediately after saying that a philosophical work consists of elucidations, Wittgenstein appears to explain this very notion of elucidation (as used in 4.112): “Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions’, but rather in *clarifications of propositions*” (TLP 4.112; my emphasis)¹⁷. Elucidations, then, the main task of a philosophical work, are clarifications of propositions, of thoughts, which would otherwise be “cloudy and indistinct” (*ibid.*). And so, in this sense, an elucidation is not itself to be taken as a sentence but as a particular exercise of analysis, most probably to be employed with the tools of Wittgenstein’s notation. This is to say that, in each of its three occurrences (3.263, 4.112 and 6.54) throughout the *Tractatus*, ‘*Erläuterung*’ is used with three different meanings (in case we take them as meaningful): elucidation in a Fregean or quasi-Fregean sense of metaphorical (or even nonsensical) hint – 6.54; elucidation as logical analysis of language – 4.112; and elucidation as a proposition which contains a name “and ‘elucidates’ that name for a person acquainted with its reference” (Anscombe 1971, 27) – 3.263. And so with her ‘illuminating’, a viable translation of this non-technical notion, and quite suited to the sense intended in 6.54, Anscombe virtually dissolves the issue.

How are we, then, supposed to read this passage? Again, it would be mistaken to think, as many do, that we *need* Wittgenstein’s warning in it in order to recognize that we had so far been dealing with nonsensical sentences. In fact, when reaching 6.54, anyone who had been reading the book with ‘understanding’ (no matter if resolutely or irresolutely) should have the following reaction: of course! Rather, what may surprise us is his avowal that, though nonsensical, these sentences are illuminating, i.e. that they somehow throw light into something, that, if taken rightly, they were helping us along the way. The genuine issue concerning Wittgenstein’s acknowledgement of his sentences’ nonsensicality is that of understanding the reason why they are nonsense. And, even more importantly, there is also the question of understanding what does he mean by these nonsensical sentences being illuminating. One thing is for certain: though transitional, the

¹⁷ And just before “Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity” (TLP 4.112), it is said that “Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts” (*ibid.*), a further reason for us to think that it would be rather odd if the sentence speaking of elucidations were not as tightly linked to its adjacent ones as it seems to be.

ladder climbing is *necessary*. They cannot be illuminating for one who does no more than throwing them out as nonsense, without first having tried to do considerable work with them, i.e. they can only be recognized and thus rejected as nonsensical *if* one has climbed out over them, i.e. if one has *tried* to understand them. Then, of course, he will recognize that there can be no such thing as understanding *them*, and so it is never too much to emphasize that Wittgenstein “chooses his words to draw attention to a contrast between understanding a person and understanding what the person says” (Diamond 2001,150), hence speaking of ‘one who understands *me*’ (him, Wittgenstein), not them (his nonsensical sentences): we are meant to understand what he was trying to *do* with those sentences, not what they were seemingly saying or trying to say.

§ 19. Four notions present themselves as key for us to understand Wittgenstein, to grasp what he had been here willing to show us: (i) *nonsense*, (ii) nonsense being *illuminating* (or elucidatory), (iii) *transition* (encompassing the whole idea of climbing a ladder which can be dispensed after fulfilling its role), and (iv) *seeing the world rightly* (what we are supposed to achieve by grasping Wittgenstein’s intent). Based on the different ways readers of the *Tractatus* usually look at this passage, I will sketch three different interpretations, each giving a different look to each of these four key notions. The first will be a standard reading, roughly in Hacker’s lines, the second one inspired by Kuusela’s interpretation, and the third a resolute one more or less corresponding to those of Diamond or Conant. More than trying to expound their readings, I am here interested in assembling three different *kinds* of reading from which a revealing *Übersicht* of the passage may emerge. This will also help us to recap various things that have been discussed so far. Moreover, let us assume for now that when we refer to the *Tractatus*’ nonsensical sentences we are virtually referring to the totality of the book, from 1 right up to 6.53, as “6.54 seems to suggest that there was something nonsensical about *everything* that has led up to that point” (White 2011, 48).

(1) The sentences of the *Tractatus*, apparently forming a tight system with the picture theory at its heart, are nonsense because, by trying to state ineffable features of reality, such as its logical form, they run over the rules of logical syntax that this ineffable form itself fixes. However, by understanding why these features cannot be said (or even thought, as thought and language are one and the same), and why every attempt to put them into words generates nonsense, we end up realizing that in fact we did not at all need to say or think them, as they can be apprehended by our grasp of the *forms* of our

meaningful expressions about what can be said, i.e. propositions standing for contingent matters of fact: it is in this sense that propositions are said to *show* e.g. the logical form of reality. So, the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* are said to be illuminating for, despite failing to say anything, they may nevertheless manage to draw our attention to those ineffable features which make themselves manifest (notice that this is the *only* time throughout the book in which the idea of nonsense being capable of gesturing at ineffable features may seem to be implied). And they do so because, though they are nonsense, what they try to say is indeed quite correct and so they still somehow manage to gesture¹⁸ at what they *would* say if they had a sense, i.e. if what they were trying to say *could* be said.

This, of course, is not the strictly correct method of philosophy sketched above: “to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science [...] and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to certain signs in his sentences (TLP 6.53). Still, it is a necessary transitional method in order to establish the strictly correct one, for we can only start employing the latter after the bounds of sense have been recognized. Before we can end any metaphysical speculation, we must first be aware of the only correct metaphysics, which is itself what governs the sense that we talk, and understand that we cannot say anything about it. Hence, to climb up the ladder is to go through this transitional method and once its task is complete, i.e. once we have grasped those ineffable features of reality, which was only made possible by our previous tacit awareness of them (shown by our ability to use language meaningfully), and at the same time given up the idea of trying to state them, we may well dispense it and adhere to the correct one, which can only work after one has come to see the world rightly, i.e. from the correct logical point of view. And it is also from this point of view that we may finally come to grasp the essence of ethics and understand why we *must* remain silent about it. (It is not clear, however, what the sentences of these last two paragraphs might mean.)

(2) If we take the self-acknowledged nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* as outlining a notation rather than an ineffable metaphysical system, things seem to change considerably. On this account, ‘nonsense’ is not necessarily taken as ‘absurd’ or ‘meaningless’ but simply as ‘untranslatable’ into a logically perspicuous language. And so we can see most of these sentences as being illuminating in the way metaphors and

¹⁸ In a sense not to be equated with the Tractarian sense of ‘showing’, though it is not clear what this other sense might be.

other figurative modes of expressions are. In this, as we have seen, there is a definite parallel with Frege's preliminary hints meant to introduce some key terms of his notation that eluded definition. We climb the ladder by grasping what these metaphors and similar devices are drawing attention to – e.g. that propositions work somewhat *like* pictures, and so on – and in the end we should be in command of the notation, not needing to rely upon these supplementary aids anymore.

To say that one who is in command of the notation comes to see the *world* rightly should make us suspicious about Wittgenstein's intents, though, as it appears that he may very well be overestimating its powers. We could still give him the benefit of the doubt and accept that as the role of propositions is that of describing the world, the notation would be supposed to allow us to sharpen our view of the world through a clarification of our linguistic descriptions of it. But as we know the rest of the story, it might have been already a sign of the aforementioned dogmatic commitment which would lead his project to collapse into something analogous to (1), i.e. paradox and absurdity, and, eventually, nothingness.

(3) From a resolute point of view, to throw the ladder away is to throw all the nonsense, *mere* nonsense, away, including the very idea “that there is something or other in reality that we gesture at, however badly, when we speak of the ‘logical form of reality’, so that *it, what* we were gesturing at, is there but cannot be expressed in words” (Diamond 1991, 181)¹⁹. To pretend to throw away the ladder while preserving the saying-showing distinction as is presented in the *Tractatus* – what appears to allow ineffability interpretations a chance, despite, again, no explicit allusions to nonsensical sentences ‘showing’ something other than their own nonsensicality being found throughout the book – is to pretend to throw it away “while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it” (Diamond 1991, 194), which can only correspond to an illusion. The nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* do indeed play a transitional role, while in the case of standard readings what we have is no more than an illusory transition, as only in dreams could one be sent by the *Tractatus* into cosmic exile). Their content is only apparent, but they are nonetheless useful, or even necessary, in fulfilling Wittgenstein's alleged aim. They are used as a means to stimulate the reader's imagination, and it is in this sense that we can

¹⁹ The very notion of a *resolute* reading is thus connected with the act of throwing away the ladder with determination, without “chickening out” (Diamond 1991, 181), i.e. without fearing to let something go that, despite not being at all clear to us, still gives us the impression of being important.

say that they are illuminating, through a process we could more or less summarize as follows:

(i) Taken at first by certain philosophical anxieties, such as those related to the limits of thought and language and to how they relate to logic and the world, the reader begins by believing that the *Tractatus* might provide him answers to at least some of the questions that intrigue him. He is thus convinced that what he has in front of him makes sense and so, despite severe difficulties, tries as hard as possible to understand it. (ii) At a certain stage, which may vary depending on the reader's own dispositions, he comes to see what he is in fact facing – a set of seemingly paradoxical metaphysical doctrines and theses that collapse into absurdity and are so revealed as not being doctrines and theses at all – and therefore becomes self-conscious of the illusion that he had fallen into. (iii) And with this, he should at last go on to understand that the very problems and questions that had once tormented him had equally been the product of an illusion, as every attempt to answer them results in nonsensical formulations, which, in their turn, exhibit the nonsensicality of the original questions (e.g. Q: 'What is the meaning of a word?'; A: 'The meaning of a word is an essence shared between a word and the object it refers to'). He would then be able to see the world rightly, i.e. the world seen without the aid of some special pair of metaphysician's glasses that would misleadingly suggest that one could somehow search, either by digging under trees or rocks or looking at the starry sky, for a logical structure that determined how language should be used, without misidentifying the former as a kind of more or less accurate mirror or filter of reality, and without the illusory trust in the idea that certain ladders would possibly lead to a privileged external point of view from where the nature of all such cryptic matters could be apprehended.

The aim of the book would have thus consisted of dissuading the reader from doing philosophy in certain ways (or at least making him aware of what was being done), which could be compared to the attempt of solving impossible puzzles, of answering impossible questions. In fact, the method of the *Tractatus* as understood by Diamond or Conant is in many ways analogous to the following: if one is convinced that some impossible puzzles can be solved (which means, of course, that he has not yet recognized their impossibility), give him one of these (one where some of the pieces do not fit and so cannot by any means be completed) and let him try as many times as he is willing to until he realizes that there is no conceivable way to do it; and at the moment he decides to give up, it should be clear in his mind that unsolvable puzzles are indeed *not* genuine puzzles at all. It would be like provisionally putting someone in the place of a Tantalus or a Sisyphus

until he convinces himself that, no matter how hard he tried, he would end up in the same frustrating positions over and over again. In their view of the *Tractatus*, one sees Wittgenstein deliberately putting himself in such positions and thus showing the consequences that usually (if not always) follow from them.

§ 20. Now, from comparing these three accounts, and considering what had been said before about (1) the intelligibility of the picture theory *qua* theory or the very idea of whistling the ineffable by way of nonsense, to use Ramsey's famous expression²⁰, or (2) the consequences of taking the notation dogmatically, it should be clear that, though it may not be the most faithful to Wittgenstein's earlier intentions, (3) is by far the most (if not the only) philosophically viable one. And so, for our present purpose, it is the one we shall embrace, as it has already been argued. To read the *Tractatus* resolutely, or realistically, is surely the best thing we can do if we are to understand its actual achievements, and if we are to extract something illuminating out of it. I have already suggested that, in fact, by prompting us to read the *Investigations* against the background of the *Tractatus*, and having acknowledged the latter's achievements (including what it had failed to achieve), Wittgenstein was in a sense already giving us permission to do just that. Back in 1930, shortly after his return to Cambridge, he wrote:

I might say: if the place I want to get to could only be reached by way of a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now.

Anything that I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me.
(Wittgenstein 1984, 7)

This is a crucial remark for our account of the *Tractatus*. On what exegetical quarrels are concerned, given its ambiguity, it may seem to serve standard and resolute readers equally well. On the one hand, Hacker, for instance, takes it as evidence of Wittgenstein's rejection of the ladder metaphor and so of his rejection of the method of the *Tractatus*, despite wishing to preserve and often reinterpret some of the book's key insights. This would seem to contradict the resolute suggestion of a significant methodological continuity in all Wittgenstein's work. On the other, however, it could also

²⁰ "But what we can't say, we can't say, and we can't whistle it either" (*apud* Hacker 2000, 355). Ramsey was right.

be seen as supportive of the resolute agenda instead by providing a supplementary clarification of the ladder's role: on a resolute reading, one does not end, of course, on top of the ladder or in some higher place reached by way of it, but exactly where one had left off, the place we must all (not just Wittgenstein) already be at now, i.e. our humble place on Earth. In fact, there is no real ladder climbing in the *Tractatus* but at best an illusion of ladder climbing. Just as, for example, an Escher print presents us with a spatial (or visual) illusion, the *Tractatus* presents us with an illusion of sense, and so its ladder, if it exists at all, is just like an Escherian ladder or staircase, for, as Rupert Read and Rob Deans observe:

[I]t probably never ends—and if ascending it could ever be said to get its climbers anywhere it would only be to return them to where they had “begun”, and for them then in a certain sense to know the place (the only place that could really have interested them anyway) for the first time. . . . However, if it has done its elucidatory work it “returns” them/one there with the realization that one is prone to confusion and needs to continually subject one's thoughts and words to scrutiny. (Read & Deans 2011, 155)

In the end, this is what should really matter, as even if the early Wittgenstein could have once thought that it was something else, *this* is what the ladder amounts to, what it has *always* been. If someone intends e.g. to offer us a glass of Scotch whisky but, out of ignorance or mere distraction, brings one of Irish instead, we cannot hold, unless we are equally mistaken, that what we are drinking is Scotch. Now, that the Tractarian ladder does not transport us to cosmic exile but leaves us exactly where we have always been should be *as* obvious as this. And, of course, sober standard readers do not think that the *Tractatus* does transport us to cosmic exile, but simply that the early Wittgenstein may have confusedly thought so. I thus find it astonishing to come across so many attempts to allegedly debunk resolute readings, which, though maybe wrong about what Wittgenstein may have thought back then, are certainly closer, at least in the case of the more insightful ones, to make genuine sense of the book and bring out what it can teach us, being it clear that it does *not* teach us that out there lies the ineffable logical form of reality. Just think of someone acknowledging “Of course, I *know* that this is Irish” but then angrily screaming “But he genuinely *thought* that it was Scotch!”.

Except perhaps for the use of ‘deliberately’ in the last sentence of our sketch of the resolute position (3), the rest is quite correct. And, above all, unlike (1) and (2), seemingly

reasonable. Moreover, one can find further evidence for claiming that later Wittgenstein would have not himself entirely disapproved of this way of looking at the *Tractatus*, if not embraced it altogether, as is the case of this passage of the *Investigations*, a perfect match to the aphorism quoted above (and to a resolute view of 6.54 as well):

The more closely we examine actual language, the greater becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not something I had *discovered*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming vacuous. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! (PI §107)

Ryle's no less appropriate image of the shoes of Chinese ladies comes to mind. The rough ground is, of course, the place we must all already be at. The seemingly ideal conditions were those of the notation (perhaps of the picture theory). And the more one examines actual language the more one gets to understand that the notation may indeed be of little help: for we either try to force everything into it, and so end up with nothing but an artificial construction that tells us little about how things really work, or limit our enquiry to a very specific kind of language use and hence lose touch with the actual complexity and richness out there. As for simples, the general propositional form, etc. they were all but vacuous requirements of such illusory crystalline purity. "It's all *more complicated* than that" (Anscombe 2011, 179), Wittgenstein later came to realize. But from it being more complicated does not follow that we need more complicated theories.

§ 21. In a paraphrase of the *Tractatus*' final remark, Anscombe helps to bring out its implications more clearly: "What there cannot be significant propositions about we should not discourse about" (Anscombe 2011, 177). Now, some resolute readers have tended to sympathize with it, arguing that after one throws away the ladder and is freed from the illusion into which he had fallen, one realizes that we should keep silent about a number of chimerical matters that may have attracted us before and led us into nonsense. We realize e.g. that there cannot be significant propositions of ethics and so we simply stop talking as if it was possible to talk about ethics. I find this unfair. In fact, I do not think 7, at least when taken literally, can be altogether separated from the *Tractatus*'

irresolute conception of the significant proposition (as we have emphasized, even if its initial aim was no more than the outline of a notation, it ended up, by a perhaps unwitting and certainly unreasonable expansion of its scope, to fall back into such a conception) and so it is itself something which is to be overcome, to be thrown away with the rest of the ladder. If, for instance, we follow the tree presentation of the book, not the linear one which the usual printed editions force us into, we should be less tempted to see it as any sort of final corollary. It's transitional role was that of making us feel the aforementioned conflict as deeply as possible, up to a point when, after so much nonsensical chatter, we felt that in the end we were altogether deprived from talking about anything whatsoever, the climax of the book's dialectic. And at this point the conflict was arguably as intolerable as it had ever been.

Instead of forcing us to remain silent apart from ordinary or scientific matters of fact, what a genuinely realistic reading should do is to increase our awareness that we may very well be inevitably prone to confusion and so that, as Read and Deans put it, we ought to subject our thoughts and words to scrutiny. We ought to be aware when we are describing something and when we are not, when we are speaking literally or figuratively, also, and very importantly, when we are not quite sure about what we are doing, and so on, and for all that our regular capacities will do. In fact, in case we suspect that we are going to come out with nonsense, it may at times be better to just spit it out and then subject it to inspection, though, of course, silence may be preferable in other circumstances. Again, this has to be decided case by case, and any general decree, whether for or against silence, should be avoided.

Anyhow, somewhat like Stanley Cavell²¹ would have had it, to demand that we only speak about what is absolutely true or false, that about that which we cannot speak with certainty, we must be silent, is in fact to demand that we do not speak at all. And yet it is essential that one tries to avoid being careless with one's words, to be aware of possible entanglements. As Diamond suggests, if we come to understand ourselves, the utterers of nonsense, we shall not come out with nonsensical sentences under the illusion that they make sense but, as it will be almost inevitable in some cases to utter them anyway, we may explicitly frame our sentences such as when saying e.g. '*I am inclined to say* (or think) that such-and-such' – 'I am inclined to say' being the framing technique with which we show ourselves to be self-conscious about our own nonsense, while at the same time still uttering it (maybe half-thinking that it may express the sense we somehow want it to

²¹ See "Must we mean what we say?" (2015).

make). In a 1947 remark, Wittgenstein summed up the entire issue, and in the most reasonable of ways: “Don’t *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense” (Wittgenstein 1984, 56).

§ 22. Nonsense has indeed been a key term in our discussion, and by now some may feel inclined to ask for a further clarification of it. In the terms here put, the claim that e.g. the picture theory is nonsense, plain nonsense, may resonate uncomfortably. It should be noticed that I have been using ‘nonsense’ in a most commonplace way. There is little, if anything, technical about it. And that is what may leave a feeling of incompleteness, of lack of rigor in the air. I shall argue, however, that this would still be a sign of irresoluteness, an inconsistent demand, for the only rigorous way to deal with nonsense is simply to make clear that it is nonsense, not to muddle it with sense. I can offer no better definition than Peter Sullivan’s: “Taken straight, as it were, nonsense is simply, and open-endedly, a failure to make sense” (Sullivan 2004, 34). This is so nearly circular that it cannot be wrong. And, indeed, if we are to make such a notion at all clear to us, there is no other way to go other than taking it straight. “The idea that a [technical] definition of nonsense can be given [...] is again another manifestation of a philosophical impulse that needs to be overcome, as it implies that there are hidden necessities and possibilities that determine the limits of application of signs” (Read & Deans 2011, 158), Read and Deans observe. To fail to make sense is *simply* that, i.e. fail to make sense; there are no *rules* (no transgression of any supposed rules) that engender such a failure. In fact, the very idea of a theoretical account of nonsense is itself contradictory: for if nonsense is what shows on its symbol’s face, i.e. *nonsense*, there can be no such thing as accounting for it in any possible way, unless, of course, one forgets to separate logic from psychology. Let me attempt to qualify these claims.

If we are to hold the distinction between logic and psychology in place, it follows that “the primary vehicle of meaning is not the term but the statement” (Diamond 1991, 108). This is illustrated by Frege’s first two principles. As Diamond puts it, “if we disobey the second principle and ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, we shall almost certainly look for an answer in the realm of the psychological – we shall explain what it is for a term to have a meaning in terms of the mental images or mental acts, and that will be a violation of the first principle” (Diamond 1991, 97). Wittgenstein thus recalls that “[e]very proposition must *already* have a sense” (TLP 4.064), and so that *every* proposition is well-formed. If a sentence is nonsense that can only be because it lacks a

sense, not because it somehow happens to have a sense which is ill-formed, whatever ‘ill-formed sense’ may mean. It is therefore impossible for a sentence to be nonsense by means of a violation of some rules allegedly governing sense formation. Again, there can only be, on non-psychological grounds, one reason for a sentence to be nonsensical: its utterer failed to make sense, to mean anything with it.

Take, for instance, a key sentence from the *Tractatus* which we have considered above, say, “A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions” (TLP 5). Just as Frege stressed that one should not look for the meaning of a word in isolation but only the context of a sentence, we could well extend the principle and advise one not to look for the meaning of a sentence in isolation but within a larger context of discourse²². We cannot quite know what a sentence such as the one quoted above means when taken in isolation, or even whether it means anything at all or not, for, even if we are familiar with this kind of jargon, we need further clues in order to know what is the reference of its key terms. They could all mean different things in different contexts. Same for e.g. “A proposition is a picture of reality”, which may arouse all sorts of mental images in us. And when considered in its particular context of use, we have come to realize that a sentence such as that of 5 is meaningless. As we saw when inspecting it, one of its key terms, ‘elementary propositions’ is inscrutable. It may at first seem like we can figure out the idea, but then we realize that not a single example of one can be given, and so that there is no way to tell what an elementary proposition might be. Though *looking* like a meaningful term, it is in fact logically indistinguishable from a blank space or an arbitrary scribble.

According to the *Tractatus*, ‘elementary proposition’ = ‘concatenation of simple names’, ‘simple name’ = ‘name standing for a simple object’, ‘simple object’ = ‘primary component of the substance of the world’, ‘substance of the world’ = ‘all that, within the world, is necessary and immutable’. But then if we are to ask about what is it that is necessary and immutable, no answer other than the circular ‘Well, the substance of the world’ shall be provided. We thus realize that ‘substance of the world’ = ~~nothing~~ and that this whole sequence of identities was an illusion, not because the introduction of a single meaningless term such as ‘substance of the world’ sends it automatically tumbling down, but as a result of *none* of these expressions having been assigned any meaning. We have here exploited a hole in ‘substance of the world’ but all the others would have served this

²² Which is not to claim that sentences *only* have meaning within a larger context of discourse. The claim – a descriptive, non-theoretical one – is, rather, that attention to a larger context is often essential for one to be sure about what a given sentence means.

purpose equally well. Hence, “A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions” = “A proposition is a truth-function of ~~☹~~”, which is to say that, from a logical point of view, and in the context of the *Tractatus*, the whole sentence is itself no different from simply ~~☹~~ or, say, “abracadabra”, though, of course, it *could* mean something somewhere else.

Now, we might be tempted to think that we can identify a specific process, consisting of certain mistakes – violations of certain rules – which entails this. Let us assume, given that we are considering this sentence within a wider context, that no doubts remain about what ‘proposition’ and ‘truth-function’ mean, i.e. ‘assertion’ or ‘statement’ and ‘a function that accepts truth values as input and produces a truth value as output’, respectively. We then realize that, unlike the former two, the third term, ‘elementary propositions’, is meaningless, and so that the sentence is cut short, that it is as if we had no more than the grammarless “A proposition is a truth-function of”, seemingly of the same of kind of, say, “Peter is a son of”. Our initial conclusion may then be: the sentence “A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions” is nonsense *because* one of its key terms, ‘elementary propositions’ is meaningless, the predicate is thus bruised and the sentence ends up falling short of meaning anything. Let us call this violation *P*: a sentence *s* is nonsense given that one of its predicate’s key terms is not symbolizing. And so the rest of the sentence – though its remaining terms seem to be symbolizing (or at least *would* have been symbolizing had the former been too) – is left, so to speak, hanging in the air. As a whole, it is not symbolizing or is at least doing so incoherently.

The problem with this view is that it is being assumed that one can somehow reconstruct something out of a string of words which he himself recognizes as nonsensical. For if a string of words is nonsense, in the way we have defined ‘nonsense’, *nothing* at all can be said to be symbolizing in it, no matter how incoherently. If we are to hold that “A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions” is really nonsense, i.e. that it is equivalent to ~~☹~~ or “abracadabra”, then there can be no way to tell what kind of mistake was made by its utterer apart from the obvious one of failing to make sense. Surely, no one would ever dream of being able to reconstruct the logical or grammatical steps leading to such failure out of an arbitrary scribble.

We now seemingly face two options: (1) to assume, as we have been doing right from the start, that all nonsense is logically equivalent, which is to say that, contrary to what its *appearance* would have suggested, “A proposition is a truth-function of” is no more similar to “Peter is a son of” than it is to “abracadabra” or *any* other piece of

nonsense; or (2) to concede that, rather, it is possible to reconstruct the aforementioned steps and thus identify the violation that engendered a given piece of nonsense, which is also to say that not *all* nonsense is logically equivalent: there is, on the one hand, cases of nonsense in which a flawed syntax is discernible and, on the other, ones in which no syntax whatsoever, no matter how flawed, can be discerned. We shall see that option (2) is untenable and so that, though perhaps counterintuitively, we can do no other than to keep sticking to (1). In fact, it is not even necessary to argue against the idea of there being different *kinds* of logical mistakes such as, among others, violation *P*. All we need to do is show that it is incoherent to hold that a given sentence can be nonsense while still working as a symbol, even if a defective one.

Conant, for instance, distinguishes the so-called substantial conception of nonsense from the austere view we have been here embracing as follows: the substantial conception “holds that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense: *substantial nonsense* and *mere nonsense*” (Conant 2000, 191), a case of substantial nonsense being that of “a proposition composed of signs which symbolize, but which has a logically flawed syntax due to a clash in the logical category of its symbols” (*ibid.*); on the contrary, the austere view sees all nonsense as mere nonsense – “a string of signs in which no symbol can be perceived” (*ibid.*) – and so as logically equivalent, i.e. simply *null*. No further distinction is made between different kinds of substantial nonsense, i.e. kinds of nonsense allegedly arising out of different kinds of violations, category mistakes or others. Given this broad definition, many philosophers and linguists, from Carnap²³ to Michael Dummett²⁴, can thus be said to have embraced a substantial conception of nonsense. The belief that nonsense is a matter of a sentence failing to conform with some fixed rules governing categories of expression, i.e. a matter of the sentences’ words having certain meanings that cannot coherently fit together according to such rules, is a quite commonplace one. But, again, there seems to be something odd in the very idea of a sentence being meaningless while its constituting words are not so.

One of the reasons why attention to a larger context of discourse is often crucial for one to know what a particular sentence means is that any possible combination of linguistic units can, at least in principle, make sense or fail to do so. There can be no such thing, for instance, as a prior list of meaningful and nonsensical sentences, or even of kinds of meaningful and nonsensical sentences. Language is governed by a variety of

²³ See “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” (1959).

²⁴ See *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (1973): p. 62; also p. 32.

rules that ensure levels of regularity (and, therefore, of predictability) that make our job as linguistic users much simpler, but none of these rules alone, however, can be necessary nor sufficient for successful communication. A good example for attesting this point is that of apparently bizarre or ill-formed expressions that, even sometimes against the odds, are nevertheless understood just as they were intended, which shall already suggest that *many* other factors apart from the utterances' meanings are relevant to communication, if not inherently part of it. It is *always* possible to imagine a certain context where a given expression, no matter how peculiar, can be used in an intelligible way, and it is equally possible to imagine a context where the most common expression among ordinary discourse is nonsense, which is to say that it is also possible for a whole text to be composed of sentences *seemingly* well-formed on all conceivable standards of correctness and still be plain nonsense if it happens that one has failed to assign meaning to them.

For instance, 'Peter is a son of a truth-function' could be used intelligibly within e.g. the context of a group of friends who are used to talk in certain curious ways and sometimes call themselves sons of truth-functions: 'You, son of a truth-function!', which, though eccentric, is certainly not as impolite. No category mistake can be said to occur here. But, of course, either 'truth-function' is not being used here with its first meaning²⁵, or, in case it is, what we have is a metaphor, drawing attention to that a given person called Peter is particularly fond of logic. Just think of a scenario in which this group of friends goes for a night out on a Friday and, still relatively early, Peter announces: 'I have to go home, for I have to get up at 7:00 to read some Frege in the morning'. 'I told you, this guy is such a son of a truth-function...', one of his friends may comment, in this case looking to stress more than just Peter's fondness for logic.

This example alone does not yet rule out the substantial conception. Their proponents are not as naïve as I was apparently taking them to be: what they claim is that it is nonsense to say 'Peter is a son of a truth-function' in case 'truth-function' is taken to mean, as usual, 'a function that accepts truth values as input and produces a truth value as output' or equivalent, and, above all, in case the sentence is *intended* as a proposition. In other words, the sentence collapses into nonsense when someone attempts to use it literally, as its constituent terms' first meanings cannot, according to an alleged set of

²⁵ Introduced by Donald Davidson, the notion of *first meaning* is analogous to what is sometimes called literal meaning but more straightforward: it "applies to words and sentences uttered by a particular speaker on a particular occasion. But if the occasion, the speaker, and the audience are 'normal' or 'standard' [...], then the first meaning of an utterance will be what should be found by consulting a dictionary based on actual usage [...]. Roughly speaking, first meaning comes first in the order of interpretation" (Davidson 2005, 91).

rules fixed prior to the sentence's construction, fit coherently together in order to engender a genuine proposition. There are several difficulties with this view, though.

Now, it is true that 'Peter is a son of a truth-function' cannot be a proposition when its terms are used with their first meaning (though it can be, as we have seen, a metaphor), but the case is that it is only possible to (apparently) recognize this when considering them *already* as a part of a given string of words. For, when taken independently of any situation in which linguistic acts are performed, 'Peter', 'son' or 'truth-function' alone have yet to have been put to use in language and so, though we may *guess* what they are most likely to mean when employed in standard situations (or even imagine what they could mean in less standard ones), its meanings have yet to have been specified. In fact, at the very moment we recognize a given sign as a symbol, even if mistakenly, we are already considering it within an at least hypothetical context of a larger string of symbols, in which logical relations are perceivable, not simply on its own. As soon as I take 'Peter' as more than a mere mark or noise, I am already *imagining* situations, quite possibly in which someone called Peter figures, which can be described by propositions. Even the image of Peter surrounded by a blank area is still one of such situations, and even if I simply describe it by no more than 'Peter' what we have is an abbreviated proposition, just as e.g. 'Fire!', which is not just a performative utterance but an abbreviation of, say, 'There is fire in the kitchen!'. And notice that what we are imagining when taking 'Peter' in isolation is not yet what 'Peter' means. In order to know what it means we need something *articulate*, such as a proposition.

The point I tried to make is this: even when taking a word in isolation and hence looking for its meaning in the psychological realm, there can be no such thing as a grasp of anything that may have at least a physiognomy of meaning within the individual word when considered on its own. In other words, nothing less than an illusory proposition can serve as an illusion of meaning. And then, of course, nothing less than a proposition – or, rather, “a complete linguistic act” (Bronzo 2011, 102), as Silver Bronzo puts it, “in order to do justice to, among other things, non-constative uses of language”, unlike the picture theory – can be recognized as meaningful. All we can do is thus conclude that the context principle is true, and that we did not require any particular theory of meaning in order to recognize this. And if the context principle is true – and if we commit ourselves to a sufficiently strong version of it – then all we can say about a sentence which is recognized

as nonsensical is that it is an illusory symbol²⁶. No matter what its word's first meanings may be, the case is simply that its utterer failed to put them to work in *that* sentence. Its physiognomy may indeed give us the idea of certain rules somehow being violated, but that is no more than a further illusion springing from our acquaintance with the first meaning of the words, being it clear that even the first meaning can only be grasped within a complete linguistic act. As for the question whether this sentence which we fail to make sense of had been intended as a proposition (or anything else) or not, it is a merely psychological matter, and so virtually irrelevant for an intersubjective phenomena such as that of meaning.

Proponents of substantial nonsense are hence incurring into double-think, for if 'Peter is a son of a truth-function' is meaningless, *no* part of it can be said to mean anything either. It is incoherent to hold that the sentence is itself meaningless while *in* it 'Peter' is being used as if referring to a person (though an unknown one) who is said to be a son of someone and 'truth-function' as if having its standard meaning from classical logic, as if only in the context of a complete linguistic act – such as a proposition – does a word have meaning, it cannot have meaning in the context of, say, a pseudo-proposition. The most that can be conceded is that the sentence's physiognomy *reminds* us of the terms 'Peter' or 'truth-function' as when used in sentences such as e.g. 'Peter is a son of Mary and Charles' or 'a logical connective is a truth-function', respectively, and that it is obvious that these cannot fit together coherently in a sentence of that form. What cannot be conceded, though, is that, in a regular context, 'Peter is a son of a truth-function' *says* something, something which is taken as illogical.

As for Wittgenstein himself, who has often been mistakenly taken as either a radical contextualist or as allowing room for substantial nonsense²⁷, he seems to have consistently

²⁶ In order to hold this, we need not even go as far as contextualists do and hold that the meaning and understanding of a sentence are conceptually prior to that of the meaning and understanding of its constituent words, i.e. that the context principle is prior to that of compositionality. This is a robust philosophical assumption, and a questionable one, as is, for instance, its exact opposite, i.e. the view that the meaning and understanding of a sentence's individual words precede those of the whole sentence. One can hold that neither the meaning of the whole sentence nor that of its constituent words has conceptual priority over the other and still retain an austere view of nonsense: though *there can only be meaning where there is articulation*, a genuine articulation can only be an articulation of meanings, and so the relation between a sentence and its parts is one of interdependence, like that of two balanced forces, which still entails the austere view. To ask, for instance, which comes first in the order of interpretation would once again constitute a step back towards psychologism. As for a nonsensical string of signs, what we have is no more than an illusion of articulation, not a somehow flawed articulation. See Bronzo's "Context, Compositionality, and Nonsense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*" (2011) for a comprehensive account of these matters.

²⁷ Again, see Bronzo (2011), who criticizes both these views.

held a view of nonsense which can be labelled as austere, another thing which he greatly inherited from Frege, as attested by, among several others, the following remarks pointed out by Diamond, from three distinct occasions and with a considerable temporal gap between them, which somewhat sum up our position:

When a sentence is called senseless [or nonsensical] it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation. [...] they are excluded from our language like some arbitrary noise, and the reason for their *explicit* exclusion can only be that *we are tempted* to confuse them with a sentence of our language. [...] “I feel his pain” [...] “abracadabra”... [...] there is in fact no difference between these two cases of nonsense, though there is a psychological distinction in that we are inclined to say the one and be puzzled by it and not the other. We constantly hover between regarding it as sense and nonsense, and hence the trouble arises. (*apud* Diamond 1991, 106-107)²⁸

§ 23. Apart from being intended to throw some extra light into what nonsense might be, this discussion had an additional (though connected) purpose: to further expound the transitional imaginative activity of taking nonsense as sense on which the understanding of the *Tractatus* depends. For proponents of a substantial conception of nonsense are under an illusion analogous to it: by claiming that nonsense is generated by an illegitimate combination of words, they are falling prey to the illusion that a nonsensical sentence still has a kind of sense, though a flawed one, as a result of the mental associations that this sentence’s meaningless words arise in them. In a way, just as resolute readers depend of going through a transitional stage of reading the book irresolutely, any recognition of a string of words as nonsensical depends on one provisionally going through such an illusion, for otherwise we would not even be talking of nonsense, but of arbitrary marks or noises. Of course, from a logical point of view, nonsense is no different from these (the difference is only a physiognomic one; one of *external features*, as Diamond would say), but if this happened to be immediately perceivable in all situations, there would be no confusions of the sort we have been here considering; confusions which above all result from our virtually irredeemable, almost instinctive, tendency to muddle logical and

²⁸ These are, respectively, from the *Investigations* (§500), *Philosophical Grammar* (p. 130), and a 1935 lecture. One also finds supportive evidence of this view in the *Tractatus*, such as the suggestion that there can be no such thing as an ill-formed proposition.

psychological matters while using language (hence the need, alluded to by Wittgenstein, to *explicitly* identify nonsensical formulations). And so, again, as in the case of paying attention to our nonsense, we should not hopelessly try to prevent ourselves from making such confusions (it would be an illusion to think we could definitely manage to do so), but to be aware of the distinction between logic and psychology and hence be capable of escaping them when needed.

This is how we recognize a sentence as nonsense: even if this takes place in a matter of seconds, as it does in the more obvious cases (certainly not in the case of the *Tractatus*), we begin by trying to understand it, and so we imaginatively engage with the mental images aroused by it until we realize, first, that these images are incoherent, and, at last, that it was all but an illusion and the sentence was no different from an arbitrary string of marks or noises. And so, just as resolute readers of the *Tractatus* depend transitionally on standard readings (to put it as abridgedly as possible, we begin by trying to understand the picture theory *qua* theory, we then see it as paradoxical, and finally that it was nothing but a house of cards, and so not even a paradoxical theory implying its own falsehood), an austere view of nonsense depends transitionally on a substantial one, the major difference among them being that while those who accept the former come to recognize the illusion and move on, proponents of the latter remain unwittingly under it, hence their tendency to double-think, to make inconsistent claims such as when denying that a piece of nonsense means anything while still holding that it is so because of the meanings its words *do* have.

By *extending*, as it were, this transitional stage in the process of recognition of nonsense considerably beyond what we would expect, the experience of reading the *Tractatus* is thus found to be greatly illuminating as for what concerns our understanding of the very nature of nonsense, which may very well be as inherent to us as language itself.

§ 24. Though denying the possibility of there being such a thing as substantial, or ‘positive’, nonsense, we have not denied “*that it is possible to communicate philosophical insights by the use of sentences that are nonsense*” (White 2011, 37). Let me explain this. It should, first of all, be made clear that ‘to communicate’ is not by any means to be here taken to mean that a propositional (or cognitive) content, and certainly not a special kind of content such as an ineffable one, is conveyed. I hope to have already said enough in order to reject both of these. My suggestion, rather, is that one can deliberately employ

nonsense with a purpose which is to an extent akin to that of expressions of insights such as “‘Someone’ is not the name of someone’ or certain metaphors, i.e. that of *drawing attention* to something. In the particular case of nonsense, usually to draw attention to particular pieces of confusion whose disclosure may lead to their dissolution.

And so the nonsense of the *Tractatus* can work not only as a way of drawing attention to the very character of nonsense itself, but to numerous other philosophical issues as well. If taken seriously, as I think it ought to be taken, it should make us at least suspicious of the possibility (or plausibility) of e.g. (1) traditional metaphysical speculation in general, notably ontology and its typical realism vs. anti-realism debates (2) purportedly *all-encompassing* theories of language, or (3) a genuine translatability of *all* our linguistic behaviour into allegedly flawless formalized languages, and more. This is far from saying that we ought not to do (or *try* to do) these things, but at least that we should pay scrupulous attention to what we are doing while doing them, and not to be overconfident about their supposed results. For instance, that nonsense is both unaccountable and prone to be put to use in communication is at odds with the possibility of one developing a *general* theory of language. Unless, of course, one decides to rule out nonsense from language, which would be compatible with what we have so far said about it. But then, if one rules out nonsense from language while at the same time acknowledging that it can nevertheless play a part in communication, the very idea of language, or at least a certain idea of language, common among countless philosophers and linguists, is in jeopardy. And that may very well be the point.

In the meantime, consideration of a somewhat close case such as that of metaphor might be of help here. Metaphor shares a crucial feature with nonsense; as Donald Davidson put it in his essay “What Metaphors Mean”: “Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing that fact” (Davidson 1984, 262). Reading the *Tractatus* could then be compared with a massive bump, one such as Ludwig’s when falling from the tree in our tale, which may lead us to appreciate a variety of things, not to mention what its meaningful sentences (there are quite a few, as we shall see, if looked at from the right angle) teach us. Now, as White observes, Davidson’s remark about bumps disconcerted many of his readers, as it “seemed to minimize the difference between metaphor *as a use of language* and non-verbal communication” (White 2011, 39). In fact, I think that *that* is

perhaps the main lesson to be taken from Davidson's essay²⁹, which is also one of the key lessons of the *Tractatus* and of Wittgenstein's entire philosophy, and that the perplexity of its readers had above all to do with their assumption of some unbridgeable gap between language and human action in general. And while a case such as that of metaphor would be enough to show that it is an illusory gap, that of nonsense does it perhaps even more forcefully. But let us first have a quick look at Davidson.

It should first of all be noticed that he is careful in keeping the distinction between logical and psychological matters in place. His notion of meaning is thus one which is accountable on strictly logical grounds: "a form of cognitive content, which is in turn analyzed in terms of conditions for truth or satisfaction" (Camp 2013, 372). And so on his account there is no place for any notion of meaning other than propositional meaning. Moreover, he recognizes that unless we are familiar with the first meaning of the words which occur in the metaphor when taken literally, there is no way to grasp the utterer's intent, i.e. the first meaning (or literal meaning, as he still named it back then) of the words is essential for the metaphor to do its work, and that a key part of this work has to do with the effect of leading one to *see* something *as* another (e.g. 'the lake is a sapphire' in a way leads us to see the lake as a sapphire). However, he also recognizes that there are *no clear rules* governing this process whatsoever and that what a metaphor leads us to see is irreducible to a propositional content or a set of propositional contents. Hence his own metaphor: "*Metaphor is the dreamwork of language* and, like all dreamwork, its interpretation reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator. [...] understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules." (Davidson 1984, 246; my emphasis).

It is thus not difficult to understand what forces Davidson into his central thesis that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more" (*ibid.*), a metaphor "*says only what shows on its face – usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth*" (Davidson 1984, 259)³⁰, with which he abolishes the usual distinction between literal and figurative, or metaphorical, meaning³¹: if meaning is taken as strictly

²⁹ In a way already foreseeing the conclusion of his later "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs": "we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally" (Davidson 2005, 107).

³⁰ By a bizarre notion such as that of 'absurd truth' Davidson is most certainly, and unproblematically, referring to metaphorical expressions of the kind of e.g. 'No man is an island'.

³¹ For Davidson the only plausible distinction to be drawn here is a pragmatic one, i.e. between literal and metaphorical *use*. And so he also discards notions such as those of metaphorical truth or falsity: rather, a

propositional (and so if only literal meaning can effectively count as meaning), i.e. if a meaningful declarative sentence *must* have a determinate content and be either true or false, then most metaphors are quite simply false declarative sentences, as what is usually taken (wrongly, Davidson argues) as their content is in most cases indeterminate and cannot quite be pinned down in terms of truth and falsity. What makes them an interesting case is the seemingly peculiar role that they nevertheless play in communication.

But, as Cavell remarks, metaphors cannot simply be false. Rather, they are “*wildly false*” (Cavell 2015, 74; my emphasis) and that is why they play such role (why they produce the effects they do), thus differing from standard false statements. Cavell, who, unlike Davidson, does not mind referring to metaphorical meanings and contents, even goes on by saying that *this* “is part of the fact that if we are to suggest that what the metaphor says is true, we shall have to say it is wildly true – mythically or magically or primitively true” (*ibid.*). It seems to me that despite the fundamental differences in terms of expression and emphasis, Cavell and Davidson do not diverge that fundamentally: by using terms such as ‘wild’, ‘mythical’ or ‘magical’, Cavell is basically agreeing with Davidson in that what a metaphor calls our attention to is frequently, unlike other perlocutionary effects, not propositional in character nor clearly calculable.

We could even reconcile, for instance, most of William Empson’s ingenious interpretations of metaphors with Davidson’s view by doing no more than inverting the Empsonian idea that metaphors are, so to speak, *pregnant*, i.e. by admitting that it is rather our imagination which is pregnant, especially when a well-crafted metaphor stimulates it. The aforementioned metaphor which opens Davidson’s essay does indeed *hint* in that direction: most accounts of metaphor are much like Freudian interpretations of dreams, i.e. they fall prey to the illusion of taking free psychological associations as contents of the metaphors themselves and often even attempt to draw theories from there. Such associations can be of great interest and use, and the main point of metaphors is precisely to provoke them. They are, however, often too diverse, variable and indeterminate to fit into a proper systematic theory of meaning: “there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention [...]. When we try to say what a metaphor ‘means’, we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention” (Davidson 1984, 263).

This explains our earlier (and only marginal) treatment of metaphor as an illuminating (or elucidatory) use of language, not a constative one, whose first meaning

metaphor can be said to be useful or useless, effective or ineffective, appropriate or inappropriate, well or poorly constructed, and so on.

(its *only* meaning, according to Davidson) plays the role of a transitional way of talking: it is essential to lead the metaphor interpreter to more or less where the originator intended, but once he gets there he should not muddle what he is now seeing with the wildly false statement that allowed him to make the transition. Of course, most of the time one is able to say something (often many things) about what the metaphor led him to see, just as one can say many things about a dream. The issue does not lie here but in that usually there are no clear limits to what one can say and certainly no clear rules to determine exactly what to say. Just think of someone pointing to a starry sky with a finger, trying to show a particular star or constellation: one can get it immediately, especially if the area to where the finger points is not too crowded with other stars or constellations, but there are also occasions when, unless some further information is given (or more gestures are made), it is almost impossible to tell *exactly* what the other intends to show us. And in either case no one would ever think of the sky, star or constellation as a part of the finger that led him to see it, not even metaphorically.

So, in light of this Davidsonian account, metaphors, though clearly a commonplace use of language, running “on the same familiar linguistic tracks that the plainest sentences do” (Davidson 1984, 259), are indeed somewhat on a par with forms of non-verbal communication (like gestures such as our pointing finger, all sorts of nudges, or, of course, bumps on the head), not so much with propositions, though their appearance – words grouped together often in the form of a declarative sentence – would probably suggest the opposite. In a certain sense, understanding a metaphor is more like understanding a facial expression than understanding a proposition. As one does not infer that a person is sad by looking at her sad face but recognizes it spontaneously, one does not infer a second (metaphorical) meaning from the first (literal) meaning but grasps a certain insight or set of insights through a process which, despite being dependent on the transitional role played by the literal meaning, goes beyond what we recognize as linguistic rules, though not beyond common patterns of human behaviour in general.

By considering a device (or set of devices) we all take for granted but which is not that radically distinct from nonsense, this detour may have helped us to sharpen our understanding of the latter, in particular of how it can be deliberately employed as a legitimate means of drawing attention to something. For instance, both metaphors and nonsense, being void of content, of what some have been fond of calling a ‘message’, do their job through their external features, and so the understanding of both is an essentially psychological affair. What distinguishes them is that while the metaphor maker achieves

his aim by means of the familiar meanings his words have when used in standard propositions, the purpose of the self-conscious utterer of nonsense is achieved as his words are recognized as meaningless.

If, for instance, we make transitional use of Tractarian jargon again, and recover the notion of language as a kind of picturing, we could say, metaphorically, that while propositions are realistic descriptions, metaphors are somewhat surrealistic pictures (pictures of dreamwork, as it were), and pieces of nonsense at best pictures of Escherian-like geometrically impossible objects or situations in space. Unlike the latter, surrealistic pictures, though blatantly unrealistic, do not necessarily run over the laws of geometry and so are not excluded from all possible worlds. This is all transitional talk, though, out of sheer psychological associations. When back to logical grounds all we have is, in the case of nonsense, a void, and usually an almost laughable falsehood in the case of metaphor. Take the following table as a summary:

	METAPHOR	NONSENSE
Physiognomy (or external features)	The lake is a sapphire.	The world is the totality of facts, not of things.
Meaning (or sense)	The lake is a sapphire.	None.
Cognitive content (or 'message')	None.	None.
Imaginative activity (transitional)	<i>Seeing</i> (or rather, <i>imagining</i>) the lake <i>as a sapphire</i> .	The mental acts and images provoked by words such as 'world', 'facts' or 'things' keep us guessing about what the sentence might mean for a while.
Effect (intentional, though not rigorously calculable)	Attention brought to matters of colour, light reflection, etc., i.e. that the lake is sapphire blue, that it is shining like a sapphire, <i>and so on</i> .	Recognition of the sentence's meaninglessness. Attention brought to the limits of metaphysics, i.e. that it depends on an illusory external standpoint, <i>and so on</i> .

This is also to say that the possibilities of metaphor are considerably greater and more varied: while metaphor can serve to stimulate all kinds of insights, including ‘positive’ ones, nonsense can do little (if anything) more than play a ‘negative’ role, a device to detect and dissolve confusions. However, given the massive variety of confusions out there, it should be clear that its employment as such could indeed play a quite substantial factor. And, of course, “no detailed general account of *what happens* when we use nonsense to communicate is possible” (White 2011, 39; my emphasis). But, as we saw, neither a general account of *what happens* when we use metaphors seems to be, and, as for these, few would wish to dispute their effectiveness, i.e. that, when properly used, they *do* make us appreciate certain facts, though *not* by standing for them in any direct or indirect way.

What is here at stake is a reorientation of the role and importance of our key questions concerning the interpretation of both metaphor and nonsense. First, we have the question we all ask when facing any kind of relatively tricky utterance: *What does this mean?* The point is that, in cases such as that of metaphor and nonsense, though this is a necessary question within the process of interpreting what we are facing (it is, so to speak, what activates interpretation, its indispensable point of departure), its role is a transitional one and hence that if we treat it as *the* definitive question we are to answer, i.e. if we remain attached to it without moving forward to the next interpretative stage, we shall go nowhere. Rather, after having gone through the initial transitional stage, the key question that arises is: *What does this show?*, i.e. what does this draw attention to? This, for instance, is the key question one is to ask when faced with a work such as the *Tractatus*, after having first asked what it meant and realized that, exceptions aside, it did not mean anything.

§ 25. One thing I have tried to make clear from the beginning is that there can be several different kinds of resolute readings of the *Tractatus*, as long as they stick to the two *sine qua non* conditions emphasized by Diamond and Conant, i.e. that the book does not convey ineffable truths and neither puts forward a theory of meaning. Now, though the consequences of these conditions are massive, there is an awful lot about it which is nonetheless left open to further inquiry. So far, my task has been that of establishing these two conditions on firm grounds, i.e. I have above all tried to show that the *Tractatus* does *not* contain a theory of meaning, even in case Wittgenstein had *tried* to construct one, and that no ineffable truths are communicated by it. We have resolutely thrown away the

ladder and recognized both of these ideas as nonsense, mere nonsense. Furthermore, I have tried to stress that, despite there being no logical distinctions among types of nonsense, there are still all imaginable psychological distinctions among nonsensical sentences, thus producing all sorts of different illusions of sense, and so that nonsense itself can be used in an insightful way, though with a largely ‘negative’ purpose, through exploration of these different illusions. I could then make mine the following words from Alice Crary’s introduction to *The New Wittgenstein*, which pretty much sum up what I have been here trying to *exemplify*:

[The] sentences [of the *Tractatus*] serve as a sort of metaphysical lure – first encouraging the reader to envision herself occupying an external standpoint and then, by inviting her fully to articulate the things she imagines she can say once she has occupied it, placing her in a position in which she can recognize that she is putting inconsistent pressures on her words and that no rendering of them will satisfy her. Thus the *Tractatus* delivers us from the illusion that we can do philosophy in a traditional vein through its presentation of nonsensical sentences which, to the extent that they seduce us, equip us to lead ourselves out of our state of illusion. (Crary & Read 2000, 13)

Now, many resolute readers would agree that *this is the* moral of the *Tractatus*, that its achievements amount to nothing more than this deliverance from philosophical illusion. I shall dissent from this latest assumption, as though I agree that that is indeed the key feature of the book, there is quite a lot more to it. And so my next step will be to show that nonsense is far from being all that one finds within the *Tractatus*, which is to say that one might be resolute about it and still preserve some of its insights. I do agree with Hacker that there is much that it has taught us (apart from what is arguably its main lesson, which Hacker himself fails to recognize) and I do not mind to be accused of irresoluteness in this respect. This, however, is something which can only be recognized *after* the ladder has been resolutely thrown away, i.e. after we have discarded that something like the picture theory was at all standing there. In addition, I shall argue that, ironically, someone who holds that *all* sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense will be in a way, even if unwittingly, making a step back towards a certain kind of substantial conception of nonsense.

My main point runs as follows: after throwing away the ladder, i.e. after recognizing the collapse of the picture theory, which was seemingly holding everything together while we were still under the illusion that, though most probably wrong in several respects, it made sense, there is no possible way of looking at the book as consisting of a sort of system anymore. Rather, what will remain after we recognize such collapse is, as in so many other of Wittgenstein's writings, an immensely rich and stimulating collection of unsystematic philosophical remarks, each valuable on its own. This will also, for instance, exempt resolute readers such as Diamond or Conant from double-think accusations for using passages of the body of the book as support of some of their contentions. But is this then to say that the ladder is all but the picture theory, i.e. that only a *part* of the *Tractatus* is to be thrown away? Not quite. As paradoxical as it may sound at first, one can (in fact, one ought to do so) throw every single bit of the book away as part of the ladder and then *recover* a variety of its fragments afterwards. And so it could be said that a comprehensive reading of the *Tractatus* should essentially consist of three main stages: (1) Imaginatively reading it as a system (the picture theory being the core of the system), (2) throwing away the ladder, i.e. seeing the picture theory collapse into nothingness and so seeing the whole system tumbling down, (3) going through the system's wrecks, after the picture theory has vanished, looking for what may nevertheless remain.

After our attempts to account for how one may go through stages (1) and (2), it is now time to focus on stage (3), notably to contend that without it the process of reading the *Tractatus* shall most probably remain incomplete. This, however, is not to suggest that there can be such a thing as a complete, i.e. definitive reading of the book, as if discussions of it could ever be put to rest for once and for all, but simply a way of emphasizing the significance of this so often overlooked stage. And so I shall not in any way attempt to determine *exactly* what remains after the ladder is thrown away, but only provide a few examples to give us an idea of the kind of thing one is supposed to do at this stage. There will, of course, be disagreements among readers about what remains and what one is supposed to do with it: some will contend that *nothing* remains, others may, for instance, want to preserve logical insights or a certain conception of philosophy, others, even, the saying-showing distinction, others all this and more, and so on. Nonetheless, that one engages into this sort of discussion is an indication that, even if unaware of it, he is *already* at stage (3), though the process of going through these three stages may not necessarily be a linear one: given the nature of the book, it is quite

conceivable that one may keep on moving back and forth. I am thus largely in accord with Read and Deans when they write that reading the *Tractatus* should not:

[...] put any limit on the liberating potential of the dialectical process that the reader begins when engaging with the text. It does not limit the philosophical problems that it treats, as if it were possible to have an overview of the text that is divorced from one's own involvement with it. [...] The overcoming goes on and on; there's nowhere stable to stand and utter theses, no words that settle things. [...] it is not possible to know when the dialectic at work in the *Tractatus* is finally exhausted [...] it is not possible for readers to know or even rationally believe that they have been completely cured (for all time) from the confusions that philosophical problems generate. (Read and Deans 2011, 164)

The very idea that there could be such a thing as a linear progress of dissolving philosophical illusions such as that one could eventually reach a state of complete clarity, a view sometimes wrongly attributed to Wittgenstein, and for a time often labelled 'therapeutic positivism', is itself a major illusion in need of overcoming. And so I must admit that while I am here writing these lines I am *still* very much involved in such dialectical process. It would thus be an illusion, too, to think that one could somehow finish the book and then recite what it contains, as is often done with major works of philosophy. What I am here trying to do is above all to invite the reader himself to engage in the process as I keep meandering through. This is in fact a method Wittgenstein practiced as well as anyone: when reading a text such as the *Investigations* one must be struck by his quasi-Socratic demeanour, never that of a master who solemnly addresses his disciples but of someone who walks the same paths as those he tries to lead out of conceptual entanglement, often allowing them to proceed on their own, every now and then suggesting some relevant clues, and on a few occasions interceding more vehemently; all this, of course, depending on the particular circumstances of the investigation at hand. And so what I am here trying to do is above all to point out possible ways, to draw attention to certain angles from which we might look profitably at things. But despite the aforementioned indeterminacy, the impossibility of definitely settling matters, one should not be taken by the exact opposite illusion to that of those who crave for theories and systems: from theories and systems being frail, perhaps even impossible, and quite possibly ill-advised (unless when treated as objects of comparison), it does not

by any means follow that *all* enquiry is aimless, that it is nothing but “a wild goose chase” (White 2011, 46).

§ 26. Coming back to our preambular account of what I have called stage (3), we will finally say some more about the *Tractatus*' metaphilosophical story, which in my view contains, as do the metalogical and ethical ones, a lot of valuable insights I am willing to preserve. But before let me explain how do we reach a stage where the book is recognized as a collection of remarks, not necessarily entrenched with each other. Someone like White, for instance, who argues for the possibility of keeping the *Tractatus* intact as a coherent system, observes, and I think correctly, that if one is to erect a line between frame and body, sense and nonsense, within the book, as most resolute readers have somehow tried, one ends up with “sentences whose status is utterly different jumbled randomly together: significant claims being apparently commented on by nonsense sentences and vice versa. The book is now radically disorganized, with the crucial methodological remarks appearing scattered without rhyme and reason” (White 2011, 48-49). He then quotes what is arguably the most significant extract of the metaphilosophical story, which he takes to be intended as *a continuous train of thought* and so as evidence that “there are complex relations of dependence between propositions of the *Tractatus* that explain their position within the structure” (White 2011, 49):

- 4.1 A proposition represents the existence or non-existence of states of affairs.
- 4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or, the totality of the natural sciences).
- 4.111 Philosophy is not a natural science.
(The word “philosophy” must mean something, which stands above or below, but not alongside the natural sciences.)
- 4.112 The aim of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.
Philosophy is not a [body of] doctrine, but an activity.
A work of philosophy consists essentially in elucidations.
The result of philosophy is not “philosophical propositions”, but the clarification of propositions.

Philosophy is to make clear and sharply to delimit propositions which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.³²

This is how White paraphrases it:

[E]very significant proposition is concerned with contingent matters of fact – which states of affairs exist and which do not – something that is the business of the natural sciences to find out. Hence if we are not to confuse the task of philosophy with something that is properly speaking the business of the natural sciences, we see that philosophy cannot be seen as having a domain of propositions that belong especially to it – since *all* propositions are the business of the natural scientist. Hence we have to see the philosophical task differently – as not establishing propositions at all, but as clarifying what is going on when people put forward propositions. (White 2011, 49)

Now, if we are at all to follow White's account of this particular passage, which I think is faithful enough in reproducing what Wittgenstein may have thought at the time (it is, for instance, compatible with a reading such as Kuusela's), then all this has to be taken within an even larger train of thought (or at least what *looks* like one), which is that of the picture theory (or picture notation). Hence, if we *imagine* that the picture theory makes sense, even if false, 4.1, from which the remaining remarks seemingly follow, in its turn condenses a whole lot of premises about picturing the world, the logical form of reality, and so on. And so, *if* (and *only* if) the picture theory happened to make sense (which is not the case), this would have ran somewhat as follows:

- 4.1 [According to the Tractarian account of the significant proposition, which amounts to the same as the outline of its canonical notation] A proposition represents the existence or non-existence of states of affairs.
- 4.11 The totality of true propositions [according to that very account, i.e. propositions which are translatable into the notation] is the whole of natural science [which deals with the totality of facts]...
- 4.111 Philosophy is not a natural science [as it is not concerned with discovering new information concerning matters of fact]...

³² This is White's own translation of the passage.

4.112 The aim of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts [*through logical analysis of propositions in terms of the notation*].

Philosophy is not a body of doctrine [*as, unlike the sciences, it does not have its own subject matter*], but an activity [*of logical analysis of language by means of a canonical notation*]...

The result of philosophy is not “philosophical propositions” [*as, again, philosophy is not a sort of science*], but the clarification of propositions [*or elucidations, i.e. logical analyses which render propositions perspicuous*]...

Philosophy is to make clear and sharply to delimit propositions which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred [*and so determine what it really means to say such-and-such, drawing the limit between sense and nonsense, which corresponds to the limits of language – or thought*].

But as we saw before *this* is *all* nonsense, nothing but an illusory train of thought, as the Tractarian account of the significant proposition, with the very aim of drawing the limit to thought (or the expression of thoughts, whatever), of determining what it really means to say such-and-such, is all but plain nonsense. With this in mind, some resolute readers will argue that, as the picture theory (or the outline of the picture notation, which in the end does not make any difference) virtually pervades the totality of the *Tractatus*, then the totality of the *Tractatus* is nonsense, that there is not a single ‘positive’ insight in it. All we have on this view is a ‘therapeutic’, to use their own word, employment of nonsense that frees us from illusion. This, however, is itself an illusion, for the resolute reader who holds that not a single bit of the ladder can be preserved is forced to hold that, even if some passages of the *Tractatus* appear to make sense (such as e.g. ‘Philosophy is not a body of doctrine, but an activity’) on their own, the fact that they are intertwined with nonsensical sentences implies that they are nonsense too, as there is no way to articulate them coherently with it. But this is mistaken, as it incurs in a confusion parallel to that of proponents of combinatorial (and so, substantial) nonsense: even if inadvertently, they are relying on the absurd idea that the *whole* text is nonsense because *some* of its sentences are.

As we saw earlier, “although we can put together words so that they make no sense, there is no such thing as putting together words with a certain logical role in language, or with certain logical powers, so that on the account of these roles or these powers, the

whole is nonsense” (Diamond 1991, 91), and the exact same holds for sentences. To claim that an entire text is nonsense because some of its key sentences are so, and that somehow by a kind of magic touch these end up pervading everything else around, as a highly infectious virus, is yet another case of double-think. If we assume that these sentences are plain nonsense, all we can then say is that it is as if *nothing* at all was there, which means that the remaining sentences are, so to speak, to be found against a blank background, which therefore does *not* logically interfere with them. For these sentences there is simply no whole to fit *there*. They alone have their own micro-context, some larger than others, just like individual aphorisms, ready to be picked up and used in all sorts of related contexts alongside other meaningful expressions.

And so, perhaps we could even say that there is a certain sense in which, against his own initial intentions, Wittgenstein did not exactly write the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, though that certainly *appears* to have been the case, but a considerably different book³³, *The Tractatus’ Wrecks*, as we may call it. Or, better, *Logico-Philosophical Remarks*. And in this ‘new’ book we find indeed very different remarks jumbled more or less randomly together, though there are nonetheless significant connections between them: for instance, none is meant to tell us something which we did not already know in a way or another; they serve at best as reminders of things we had somehow forgotten about.

§ 27. The 4.1-4.112 sequence would now look different. 4.1 and 4.11 would have probably vanished, unless one is able to turn them around up to the point of not relying on absurd dogmas such as that of the picture theory or similar ones anymore: perhaps 4.1 could be salvaged if taken as meaning simply ‘propositions describe the world, truly or falsely’ in its most ordinary sense; as for 4.11 it is at very best false, and so we have nothing to do with it – well, unless one is to take ‘natural science’ as nothing but ‘human experience’, in the broadest possible sense of ‘experience’, but then it would cease to make any sense to refer to it as natural *science*. As for the rest, what remains is a quite viable metaphilosophical view, which is compatible with that of Wittgenstein’s later writings. Let me try to paraphrase it.

³³ On the other hand, it could be said that Wittgenstein *did* write the *Tractatus* but that what we have in our hands is not as much a work of philosophy as it is a poem of some kind. A long, beautiful and immensely interesting poem.

Philosophy is not a natural science (4.111) as it cannot yield doctrines or theories. There is a sense in which it may be misleading to say that it cannot be placed alongside the sciences, as this may suggest a view of philosophy as some kind of a privileged activity, a sort of examiner of every essential foundation or legislator of all kinds of discourse, capable, as it were, of rising above our everyday practices, but I do not think this is how we should take this remark. Rather, what it suggests is that it is a mistake to think of philosophy as a kind of pre-science or governess science; philosophy has no more connection with the sciences than it has with any other human activity, philosophy itself, being, of course, one of such activities. And also that philosophy does not really have its own subject matter, apart from, perhaps, that of its own methods, but virtually pervades every possible subject matter. For instance, one does not go about the philosophy of action *in abstract*, but *through* all sorts of examples of real or fictional people doing or trying to do certain things in such-and-such situations. Philosophy has, so to speak, to be *filled* with something in order to do anything at all, it cannot simply stand on its own wandering over chimeras, either waiting for science to attest or debunk such speculations or, on the contrary, claiming to be inspecting an independent realm of abstract essences. It is, of course, contiguous with science, as it is with anything else, say e.g. law, cookery, horse riding, architecture, gambling, and so on.

In addition, gone the canonical notation or the commitment to a single method, the notion of logical clarification of thoughts becomes a harmless one: it is not anymore to be strictly taken as logical analysis of language (though logical analysis can still be one among various tools we might use), but as clarification broadly conceived, a matter of paying genuine attention to what we say and think, something for which sharp reasoning (or logical) capacities are most welcome. And so by paying such attention we hopefully make our minds clearer about a variety of things, i.e. we *elucidate* our thoughts. By thinking through all sorts of subjects, philosophy throws light into them along the way. Not being a body of doctrine, with its very *own* theses and truths, it can nevertheless contribute, above all by means of careful conceptual clarification (which can be done in numerous ways), to disclose truths, as well as falsities and confusions, virtually everywhere. This shall be made clearer through some sort of example.

Let us think, for instance, of a notion such as that of *meaning*, and in particular of a question which has often been asked throughout the history of philosophy such as ‘What is the meaning of a word?’. Many have indeed thought that this is a question of paramount importance, for it has to be answered somehow if we are to understand the workings of

our language. Moreover, it has often been supposed that not only we need an answer to it, but that this answer has to come under the form of a theory, i.e. a theory of meaning. Countless theories have thus been developed, from representationalist to pragmatic ones, and so various answers have been provided. For instance, the meaning of a word is the object it stands for, some have said. Others, seemingly with more finesse, have observed that as many words do not stand for anything, such as connectives, or at least do not stand for anything *in particular*, such as certain wide ranging concepts, the meaning of a word is rather its use in language, which, among several others, can be that of standing for some object, as is the case with ordinary names. Many of these theories are extraordinarily sophisticated and would deserve to be discussed in detail, but I must leave this for another occasion. What I can do for now, though, is to point out that there seems to be something problematic about the very question lying behind such theories.

J. L. Austin once remarked that, at least in the hands of certain philosophers, “the phrase ‘the meaning of a word’ is, in general, if not always, a dangerous nonsense-phrase” (Austin 1979, 56). Just as the use of ‘in general, if not always’ and ‘dangerous’ indicates, he takes it to be, as the earlier Ryle would have put it, a systematically misleading expression. Wittgenstein would have not disagreed. But, surely, few today would be misled by its grammatical form into thinking that ‘meaning’ consists of a name standing for something (some bizarre entity or class of entities) which in its turn would constitute a property of ‘a word’, i.e. that each word possesses a property entitled ‘meaning’. Rather, its misleadingness lies in its utmost generality, up to the point of abstractness.

Confusion hence arises when philosophers decide to go beyond legitimate questions such as ‘What is the meaning of x ?’, to which unproblematic answers can be given, and ask the aforementioned general question, which is equivalent of asking ‘What is the meaning of a word in general?’ or ‘What is the meaning of *any* word?’. Now, as a question of the ‘What is the meaning of x ?’ form is answerable if and only if ‘ x ’ happens to be a *particular* word one is asking about, we have, as Austin calls it, a case of “the fallacy of asking about Nothing-in-particular, which is a practice deprived by the plain man, but by the philosopher called ‘generalizing’ and regarded with some complacency” (Austin 1979, 58). Asking ‘What is the meaning of a word?’ is the same as asking ‘What *is* meaning?’, from the same species of nonsense questions such as ‘What *is* truth?’ (at least in any sense other than a theological one) or ‘What *is* being?’, and so on. Quite different would be to ask instead ‘What does the word ‘meaning’ [or ‘truth’, ‘being’, etc.] mean

[*in such-and-such contexts*]', which are all legitimate questions as long as one does not crave for *definitions* of these terms.

Having jettisoned our quest for definitions, which would have allowed abstract questions to return, we have to expect a different kind of answer to these questions, an answer that may not even count as an answer in the usual sense (Q: 'What *is* X?'; A: 'X *is* such-and-such'). Austin would say that we can either elucidate the meaning of e.g. 'meaning' or 'truth' by giving examples of sentences where such terms could or could not occur or, analogously, by "getting the questioner to *imagine*, or even actually to *experience* situations" (Austin 1979, 57) which could be adequately described by means of sentences containing 'x' or akin words and also "other situations where we should *not* use these words" (*ibid.*). The later Wittgenstein would have answered in similar lines: *look* at how these words are being used, as well as to what is going on around them, and, if they are at all being used meaningfully, you will grasp what they mean.

From this kind of observation, many have inferred that Wittgenstein was outlining some pragmatic theory of meaning, summarized by the following adagio: 'meaning is use'. This is odd, given that Wittgenstein himself often reiterates that he is not putting forward any theory whatsoever, and that it could only be through some confusion about what one was doing that one could think of putting forward a philosophical theory, notably a theory of meaning. As I see it, the mistake here springs from the following philosophical prejudice: Wittgenstein is dealing with the question 'What is the meaning of a word?', a typical philosophical question; philosophers provide philosophical answers to these questions and so Wittgenstein, being a philosopher, is doing precisely that, in this case holding that the meaning of a word is its use in language. Sure, he is dealing with the question, i.e. *doing* something about it. He is not, however, doing what philosophers are supposed to do about such questions.

"What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (PI §116). Again, this may be seen as a rejection of a metaphysically charged theory of meaning such as the picture theory for the sake of a pragmatic one, a though-minded theory concerned with the ordinary use of words. The claim is more radical than that, though. For a pragmatic theory is still a *philosophical* theory, 'meaning is use' is still a statement of utmost generality, asserting an alleged necessary characteristic of language, and in it 'meaning' and 'use' are *still* being used metaphysically. It is not a truism such as, for instance, 'language is an inherently intersubjective phenomena', but a far from straightforward thesis. ("If someone were to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never

be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree with them” (PI §128).) By bringing ‘What is the meaning of a word?’ back to its everyday use, what Wittgenstein was doing was to *dissolve* it as a philosophical question, i.e. a question standing in need for general and necessary explanations.

When advising us to look for the uses of words instead of some odd property called ‘meaning’, he was not putting forward any theoretical formulation implying an identity between use and meaning, but reminding us of a truism that certain speculative theories of language have tended to obscure: that if we are to understand what a word (or string of words) means (and taking ‘meaning’ in a most ordinary sense) we should better pay attention to how it is being used in the given situation. He was above all exposing a particular *misorientation in perspective* and providing the right *clues* about where (and, with some further elaboration, how) to look if we are to understand that such-and-such means thus-and-so, i.e. at language *at work* in our everyday lives, not at some lifeless, as it were, and hence distorting allegedly all-encompassing theory. And with this, he was hopefully achieving some clarification of our thought and talk about meaning, which might have otherwise been muddled by our deceptive fascination with working-models, or by our temptation to consider words such as ‘meaning’ or ‘truth’ apart from examples of, say, meaningful expressions or true or false sentences, as if we needed a glimpse from outside of them in order to check whether we were legitimately employing such terms or not.

Of course, the whole issue cannot be put as abruptly as I have along these lines. Still, my purpose here was nothing more than that of providing some kind of illustration, complementing the previous sketch, of the sort of outcome, the sort of clarification, one is supposed to achieve when doing philosophy in the way implied by the description ‘philosophy is not a body of doctrine, but an activity’ when salvaged from the requirements of an ideal language.

§ 28. Back in the aforementioned obituary, Ryle, who had been well aware of how central the metaphilosophical story was to the *Tractatus*, emphasizes that, though having concluded that “we cannot talk sense about the sense that we talk” (Ryle 2009, 273) and that it is thus impossible to construct a theory establishing the conditions of senseful talk, Wittgenstein still seemed to hold that philosophy could somehow *open our eyes* to the principles which govern sense but cannot be intelligibly stated, and so that “like learning music or tennis, learning philosophy does not result in our being able to *tell* what we have

learned; though, as in music and tennis, we can *show* what we have learned” (Ryle 2009, 262; my emphases). Despite seemingly following a standard reading in this ascription of a belief in ineffable *principles*, Ryle also manifests some signs or resoluteness in rejecting that the *Tractatus* may be seen as putting forward any doctrines or theses, effable or ineffable, as these ought to be meaningfully stated in order to count as such. The case is made even more interesting when comparing this view of the *Tractatus* with what he then writes about the *Investigations*.

About the later works, he observes that, though Wittgenstein now explored “all the things that all of us say” (Ryle 2009, 264), not only what seemed to fit the narrow rubrics of his notation, and was no longer convinced that philosophers were condemned to trying to say the unsayable, he avoided to do what most philosophers did, i.e. to propound general claims about the world, language, logic, and so on, as he now saw them as, typically, if not always, resulting in unclarifications, and that despite such changes his chief problem was still “that of the nature, tasks and methods of the philosophical activity” (*ibid.*). I quote a couple of subsequent passages, both summarizing some of these methods:

Wittgenstein would rove, apparently aimlessly because without any statement of aim, from one concrete puzzle to its brothers, its cousins, its parents and its associates, demonstrating both what makes them puzzling and how to resolve them – *demonstrating but not telling*; going through the moves; but *not compiling a manual* of them; *teaching a skill, not dictating a doctrine.* (*ibid.*; my emphases)

He then compares one of such strategies to tea tasting (and he could have equally used the example of wine tasting, chocolate tasting, art criticism, and many other activities that require *fine distinctions*). Similarly to tea tasters, who do not place their samples under a couple of general categories but rather “savour each sample and try to place it next door to its closest neighbours [...] along the lengths of various lines of qualities” (Ryle 2009, 265):

Wittgenstein would exhibit the characteristic manner of working of a particular expression progressively diverging from it in various respects and directions. He would show how striking similarities may go with important but ordinarily unremarked differences, and how we are tempted to lean too

heavily on their similarities and hence to be tripped up by their latent differences. (*ibid.*)

An enormous amount of Wittgenstein's philosophy is condensed in this text of Ryle. And perhaps the most striking thing about it is that, despite the contrast drawn between the *Tractatus* and the later writings, it also suggests often neglected continuities. First, both are said *not* to consist of philosophical doctrines: for the early Wittgenstein, because such doctrines were nonsensical, as their formulations could not fit his notation; for the later, because they were usually obscuring, to say the least (their ruthless craving for generality leads them away from countless relevant particularities, like the ones that the aforementioned subtle distinctions seek to bring into focus). Second, with the tennis and music practice analogy, he is alluding to the saying-showing distinction, but most of what he says about it seems to hold equally for the *Investigations*, as the remark 'demonstrating but *not* telling' indicates: there, we see Wittgenstein himself often in the position of the music teacher or the tennis coach, teaching certain skills through various procedures, including, of course, demonstrations of how to do such-and-such, and the claim that it is *while* doing philosophy that we see what we need to see seems now, with the reference to his wanderings in search of elucidation, made even clearer.

If Ryle is right, then, the two contrasted scenarios, both with metaphilosophical concerns at their heart, have more in common than is generally supposed. The tea tasting method can work the other way around as well: exposing that some striking differences may go with important but ordinarily unremarked similarities, and that by leaning too heavily on the differences we often forget about the similarities and are thus deceived about the whole. It seems to me that this sort of mistake has been frequent among Wittgenstein's readers in what concerns how the *Tractatus* relates to the later writings. The absence of theoretical commitments already played a crucial role in the former, while there seems to be a sense in which the saying-showing distinction, though certainly not the one seemingly implied by a formulation as rigid as "What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said" (TLP 4.1212), survives in the latter as a key expression of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical views. Though he insists in the *Investigations* that it is an illusion to think that there is *something* out there that cannot be said (resolute readers would hold the same about the *Tractatus*), or at least that there is nothing to be said about what may strike us as unsayable, as is the case with e.g. sense data (I cannot describe what I experience when I see yellow, but it should be clear that that is only so because there is nothing to be described there), his whole approach unmistakably suggests that in

philosophy, just as in music or tennis, some things are made clearer when *shown*, when attention is drawn to them in certain ways.

Some readers, notably those used to little more than regular exposition and argument, are puzzled by this, if not suspicious of it, regarding it as an obstacle to the clarity and rigour one would desire when doing philosophy. We may, for instance, consider a straightforward distinction such as that between a statement or a question and what is shown by this statement or question: e.g. to utter with a certain tone of voice ‘I need some water to drink’ shows that the speaker is thirsty, or to ask ‘Where is the dining room?’ shows that he is not yet familiar with that place. But because one could have equally said ‘I am thirsty’ or ‘I do not know this place very well’ without any difficulty, Wittgenstein’s methodological options, often inseparable from matters of composition, may at first seem puzzling. The following question hence arises: if complete clarity is what we are looking for, wouldn’t it be more effective to go straight to the point and say it without hesitation?

However, if we think of activities where certain abilities (or techniques) are taught, we soon realize how crucial a role demonstration (in the sense of ‘showing *how*’) plays within them. This is not to say that it is impossible to offer comprehensive verbal descriptions of e.g. how to play a scale on a piano or of how to serve in tennis, but consider how unpractical, if not altogether unmanageable, it would be to follow a teaching method solely based on descriptions. If Wittgenstein’s continuous insistence that philosophy is a practice, an activity contiguous with so many others, that it is by *doing* it that we come to understand what matters to it, and that it is an illusion to think otherwise, is taken seriously enough we should soon find out how to deal with the previous question. Just think of what it is for a piano teacher or a tennis coach to convey his instructions in a clear way and in what we mean by ‘going straight to the point’ in the context of tennis or piano lessons. In most cases, the clearest possible way would consist of showing (which, of course, may also involve saying certain things along the way) *how* to do it and let the apprentice try each step out, often here and there providing further instructions, until he is able to do it by himself.

Indeed, if philosophy is seen as consisting not of a body of theoretical knowledge but of an activity meant to deal with certain kinds of perplexity in virtually every area of knowledge, it should thus not surprise us that to learn to do philosophy should above all consist in learning a variety of techniques, not a particular set of information: to deal with philosophical perplexity in any given subject presupposes knowledge of that subject but

that itself is not yet part of philosophy; rather, philosophy consists of knowing *how* to deal with such perplexity. Of course, there can be philosophy textbooks, just as there are music or tennis textbooks: sets of instructions on how to deal with certain philosophical problems. But (1) just as in music or tennis, or, say, sculpture or chess (and, of course, logic or mathematics too), knowledge of the information contained in a textbook is on its own worthless without intensive practice, at least if what we look for is to reach a certain standard of proficiency at *doing* such things; (2) the variety of things that we end up doing in practice is such, especially at higher levels, that it would be virtually impossible to make it all fit into a textbook (not impossible *in principle*, but a rather herculean and not necessarily useful task); and (3) as, unlike the aforementioned activities, philosophy does not have fixed subjects, one will usually have to develop new methods or at least variations of pre-conceived ones given the particular subjects (where, usually out of some conceptual confusion, Wittgenstein would say, a certain problem arises) one encounters along the way.

This is what I meant earlier when saying that in philosophy, at least when considered from a Wittgensteinian point of view, knowing how is ultimately irreducible to knowing that, in the sense of not being wholly translatable into a theoretical body of knowledge, which is also to say that there is in fact a sense in which showing is not quite reducible to saying³⁴ either, though certainly not implying the *existence* of *something* ineffable. And, in the end, saying and showing should not really be considered as the opposed units of any dichotomy but as complementary instead, as clearly comes out when we pay attention to what goes on in our everyday activities. Just think, again, of music or tennis lessons, or of our uses of nonsense or metaphor, somewhere in between our assertions and gestures. This should all be humdrum, a mere description of what goes on all the time.

We have reached an important point: Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy, to which the saying-showing distinction – or, rather, the saying-showing symbiosis – is key, is itself elucidatory of his later views on the very nature of language and action, at which he constantly hints but never quite explicitly formulates, i.e. that language and action are not only interdependent but ultimately indissociable (that, at least, there is no sharp boundary between them). Now, this sounds like a philosophical thesis. Maybe it is one. But let me put it in another way, perhaps clearer: *speaking* is one of the many things that we *do*.

³⁴ That is what Wittgenstein had in mind with the following remark from MS 169: “The experience is this passage played like *this* (that is, as I am demonstrating, for instance; a description could only *hint* at it). (Wittgenstein 2009, 192).

Usually we speak in order to communicate and, when we communicate, speaking is not the only thing that we do (there is also the tone of voice, facial expressions, bodily movements, gestures, and so on, which are all contiguous to talk and play their part in communication). Surely, this is, again, a humdrum description. It does, nevertheless, paraphrase the preceding claim and make its truth manifest, a claim which goes against numerous contemporary theories in which language is treated as a somewhat self-sufficient structure (and so linguistics or the philosophy of language are treated as autonomous fields). And it seems to me, for instance, compatible with one of the *Investigations*' most controversial metaphilosophical remarks: "Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden is of no interest to us" (PI §126). It is indeed something which lies open to view, and that perhaps may have gone unnoticed to the eyes of some because they went chasing for some purportedly hidden necessities of language, something that could somehow justify it theoretically, as if it stood in need of any justification whatsoever.

§ 29. Consideration of Ryle's own metaphilosophical views, well aware of and to a large extent sympathetic towards Wittgenstein's, may contribute to complement the present sketch:

Philosophers do not make known matters of fact which were unknown before. The sense in which they throw light is that they make clear what was unclear before, or make obvious things which were previously in a muddle. [...] Something that was obscure becomes obvious to me in the act of seeing the force of a particular philosophical argument. Nor can I make a short cut to that clarification by perusing the conclusions but skipping the reasoning of the argument. (Ryle 2009, 174)

Nothing here collides with Wittgenstein's view of philosophy (in fact, it almost paraphrases the 4.111-4.112 sequence), except perhaps the stress laid on the notion of argument. Now, it does not seem to be the case that Wittgenstein had anything against philosophical argument *per se*. Despite its considerable idiosyncrasies, some of his strategies can indeed be taken as arguments in the traditional sense and it should not be overlooked how rigorous a thinker he was. But he seemed to think standard arguments like those exchanged by most mainstream analytic philosophers were at best insufficient

(they could complement other techniques but were probably not enough on their own), and misleading at worse. What was then their disadvantage in some cases when compared with demonstrations, purposeful wanderings, fine comparisons and distinctions, or elucidatory tales? I can think of two, which, again, are intimately connected with his view of philosophy as an activity.

(1) A more straightforward one has to do with the fact that most genuine arguments, independently of their form and variety of steps, have an explicitly formulated conclusion. As Ryle stresses, such conclusion can only be grasped by following the full course of reasoning that led to it (or at least alternative but equally sound ones). However, when a conclusion is made explicit one can always make short cuts and thus be under an illusion of understanding; just think of how often people dogmatically replicate conclusions or maybe a couple of the argument's steps without the slightest awareness of the whole argument itself. As Ryle observes, many "histories of philosophy are worthless just because they think that, for example, Hume's philosophy can be presented [...] by cataloguing his conclusions" (Ryle 2009, 172). Wittgenstein did not want to make any concessions towards that: one who follows his lines of thought might be given all the relevant clues but still has to figure out the conclusions by himself. He leads us through his often unusual steps until what matters is in front of us but does not tell us directly what it is, though providing us the instructions for understanding it.

We can here find another parallel with activities such as music or tennis, i.e. for one to be able to have his own thoughts in philosophy is not far away from being able to play piano pieces sensitively or competing in tennis: the teacher's role was important, at times even essential, but it cannot work without a minimum of ability and willingness on the apprentice's side; there will always be occasions when the latter, while relying on everything he has learned from the former, will have to keep going on his own, and the more he progresses the more likely it will be for these occasions to recur. Again, just as it does not by any means follow that a person can play tennis by knowing all the passages of a tennis textbook by heart, neither does it follow from someone being able to memorize and replicate every single sentence of an intricate philosophical system that that person is at all a capable thinker.

(2) It happens that many philosophical arguments, even seemingly logically sound ones, are abstract, i.e. the reference of some of its key notions is unclear (if not inscrutable), as is the case in metaphysics. And as we saw when trying to argue against Russell's realism or Bradley's idealism, one can easily end up falling into the same kind

of empty (though often very interesting) chatter. Still under the illusion that these arguments make sense, one can have the impression of detecting formal flaws within them and of arguing for their incoherence, but even then there is no way to tell how close they are from being right or wrong apart from purely formal matters. And when we realize that their utterers have failed to ascribe meaning to those mysterious terms that kept us guessing (and gassing), a further difficulty arises: it may then appear that we would have to outline a limit of significant talk and that such task would require us to step outside of that limit, a paradoxical situation analogous to that of the *Tractatus*. And that is once again to say that if we try to fight nonsense directly we will most probably end up producing more nonsense. But, as we have seen, there are cases where, given our ordinary understanding capacities, we can legitimately recognize that a certain sentence, argument or text fails to make sense. Not without *seeing* why that is the case, though, which often requires us to look at them from an angle different from that of standard argument, either by getting our feet out of our metaphysician boots or by putting them on with an alternative purpose. I have been trying to illustrate this throughout our entire discussion.

For instance, there is a sense in which it can be said that, though not by means of any theoretical foundation, the *Tractatus* succeeds in setting the bounds of sense, or at least in making us aware of them. ‘Setting’ may be a misleading word, as what is here at stake is not the establishment of such bounds: the *Tractatus* does not draw them, not even gestures at them; these, again, would have been illusions, as there is no such thing to be drawn or gestured at. Rather, what it does is, by way of letting us engage imaginatively with nonsense until we come to recognize it as so, to let us *feel* them, as it were, to lead us into direct acquaintance with this dark area of language (metaphors being the grey one), that though having the physiognomy of language may not quite consist of language anymore, at least if we are to keep away from any murky psychological grounds. The ‘bounds of sense’ are not *something*, i.e. they are nothing but a particular way of talking, and a transitional one, the same going for all those expressions found throughout the book such as ‘limits of language’, ‘limits of thought’, ‘limits of logic’, ‘limits of the world’, and so on. These are nevertheless expressive of our virtually irredeemable temptation to utter nonsense, notably when we become self-aware of that temptation and try to report it. We try to gesture at it, though in vain, as there is *nothing* to be gestured at, no imaginary line floating somewhere that we often, most of the time unwittingly, end up crossing. But when meeting others that have already felt the same, we may end up feeling validated: ‘Yes, I *see* what you mean by *that!*’

And what is it then, *that* which you mean? Nothing but the particular feeling, or experience, like that of a dream, of having been under an illusion, of having felt our feet somehow rising above the rough ground where we all stand, including the very illusion of having, with it, crossed a boundary of some kind. There is no way to tell where the grey area ends and the dark one begins (still talking transitionally), but what we can be sure is to have felt as if we had in some way reached it, even that we had been talking from there (the dark area and the external standpoint, both illusory, are one and the same). But then we come to see that though the noises we had been making sounded (or looked) like words, we had not said anything. And that is what I mean by *feeling the bounds of sense* – or of logic, of the world, and so on, as, though differing in physiognomy, these all amount to the same, i.e. they all aim, through the arousal of different psychological associations, at this same feeling springing from the recognition of an illusion. Again, to request silence would be misleading, as it may seem to imply that the point consists in there being prescribed limits to what can be said. There are no such limits. Rather, what we came to see is that when presumably occupying the external standpoint we had not been doing anything that counts as saying something – well, *at least* if we equate ‘saying’ with ‘sense’, and take ‘sense’ in a strictly logical sense.

§ 30. To round off our discussion let us consider three statements from among the *Tractatus*’ wrecks which I definitely believe to be of value: (1) Logical connectives are *not* representative (the self-proclaimed fundamental metalogical idea of the *Tractatus*, the key for understanding logic’s purely formal nature); (2) Scepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously *nonsensical* (a defining position of Wittgenstein’s entire philosophy³⁵); (3) Ethics is *transcendental* (the ethical story’s key point). They all seem to me to be true. And, surely, they *are* philosophical positions. So, though not necessarily theoretically grounded, Wittgenstein did put forward some theses here and there. But notice that they are all *negative* theses – even (3), though its formulation may at first deceive us – and not negative theses of the kind of e.g. ‘The Sun does not go round the Earth’, which negates a piece of *information*. They are true in the same way “‘Someone’ is not the name of

³⁵ “Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked” (TLP 6.51). The struggle against scepticism was indeed constant throughout Wittgenstein’s work, running from the *Tractatus* to his very final writings published under the title *On Certainty*, whose second fragment reads as follows: “From its *seeming* to me – or to everyone – to be so, it doesn’t follow that it *is* so. What we can ask is whether it can make sense to doubt it” (OC §2). We have thus moved from a bold pronouncement such as that of the *Tractatus* to a much subtler suggestion (which itself says a lot about the gradual shift in Wittgenstein’s tone), but the point underlying both of them is exactly the same.

someone' is, and hence compatible with the insistence that there can be no such thing as philosophical truths, i.e. 'truths' amounting to philosophical information. Nothing but confusions are being tackled, in this case that logic or ethics are fields of knowledge, or that scepticism makes sense. We need to trust Wittgenstein more than we do: there is, if we read him carefully enough, no real clash between his metaphilosophical views and how he goes about philosophical problems.

Nevertheless, even if all one does amounts to clearing up confusions and negating falsities, there will always be some additional light thrown as a consequence of it. That is to say that even if Wittgenstein refuses to explicitly put forward any sort of positive thesis, he ends up doing so through what is often implicitly implied by his negative moves. But, again, this does not necessarily clash with his metaphilosophical views, as the only thing he denies is to advance them – if what he does leads us to see something more is quite another matter, one which he leaves open. For instance, I cannot usually know what my mother is going to cook for dinner based on a list of things she did *not* buy, but if I know the kinds of things she usually buys this list serves me as a relevant clue. Moreover, if the list is exhaustive enough and I also know the kinds of things one is to find at the market where she goes, I may get very close of knowing what she is going to cook. With a little bit of luck (or, perhaps, patience) I may even get it altogether right.

Negative theology is somewhat akin to this and Wittgenstein's philosophy often works like it too. The further his ground cleaning advances, the more light is thrown over it and eventually, out of a potential *Übersicht* resulting from his assemblages of reminders, we may end up seeing it – or at least some of its parts – as we had never quite seen it before³⁶. When confronted with this, he would probably maintain that what was being illuminated amounted to nothing but truisms. And perhaps he is right, but then we become in danger of taking everything he leads us to see as a truism and so everything he contradicts or dissolves as either patently false or nonsensical (and so taking him to be right all the time – in fact, not only right, but *obviously* right), which would be as wicked a case of dogmatism as one could fall into, a most unreasonable (and unwittgensteinian) thing to do. He would have himself been horrified at the idea of an order of dogmatic followers. The very idea of there being followers of his *ideas* is problematic. According to Anscombe there could not even be such a thing:

³⁶ Still, this is not to say that, at least for Wittgenstein, philosophy can discover something which is new, even if indirectly, in the sense science does: rather, it can uncover what *we* ourselves had somehow covered.

I once heard someone ask Wittgenstein what it all came to, what was, so to speak, the upshot of the philosophy he was teaching in the 1940s. He did not answer. I am disposed to think that there wasn't a single answer that he could give. That, namely, he did not think out a total position as in writing his first book; that, rather, he was constantly enquiring; some things he was pretty sure of, but much was in a state of enquiry. I therefore deprecate attempts to expound Wittgenstein's thoughts as a finished thing. He himself in his classes sometimes said he was as it were giving examples of 'five-finger exercises' in thinking. These were certainly not limited in number like the set a piano teacher might employ, and were not like automatic formulae of investigation. Predictions of 'what Wittgenstein would say' about some question one thought of were never correct. (Anscombe 2011, 169)

I make most of her words my own. Except that I am inclined to say almost the same about the *Tractatus*. He may have then thought out of a total position, so confident had he been about the powers of his notation. But, as we have seen, that turned out to be an illusion. So I myself deprecate attempts to expound the *Tractatus* as a finished thing. It stands there inviting us to enter the kind of process I have been here going through. In fact, the very idea of looking at things out of a total position, from which the temptation of treating them as something definitive arises, is arguably the queen of all illusions. And that it is such an illusion is arguably one of the greatest lessons Wittgenstein has taught us.

We have, however, and quite evidently in front of us, his metaphilosophical legacy: though it is often hard to tell exactly where he was going (and, as Anscombe suggests, sometimes he himself was not sure), it is more or less clear *how* he was going about. He often held that philosophical questions had to be dissolved, not answered. I shall not discuss this here, but what I can say for now is that there must have been at least one that could somehow be answered: *How to do philosophy?* In fact, to *that* he could more or less answer if pressed, though often with analogies or metaphors such as that of the five-finger exercises. And above all he *showed* us, throughout the whole of his writings, a very viable answer indeed. Predictions of 'what Wittgenstein would *do*' about some question one thought of may not be as aimless.

As for the three abovementioned statements, on which he barely changed his views throughout his work, they count among the things he was pretty sure of. It is true that, on

his later days, he may have found them slightly too emphatically stated and suggestive of an air of doctrinarism, common among philosophers, which he found unacceptable. And, indeed, if one is being as honest and as less dogmatic as possible, it is most probably not enough to claim, without further ado, that e.g. logic is purely formal and so gives us no information about the world whatsoever, that most varieties of epistemic or normative scepticism are absurd, or that ethics is not to be *derived* from rationality and so its foundations cannot be the subject of inquiry or argument.

As Wittgenstein rightly saw, it is often the case that the best way to explain such things is, rather than trying to give a systematic and critical account of what logic, scepticism or ethics may be, to let one engage in the activity, to guide him through a series of situations and practices that should eventually increase his self-awareness about them. For instance, that we think through logic and so that we cannot quite grab it, just as we do not grab numbers but calculate by them. Or to let him experience sceptical positions, help him see that they lead to nowhere, as scepticism is still a case of one envisaging himself as occupying a sideways-on perspective, and teach him how to stay away from these aimless roads. And in the case of ethics, to let him face certain unsolvable moral dilemmas, to engage in vacuous metaethical discussions, and so on, once again as a way of coming into touch with the bounds of sense and hence realizing, among other things, that rational argument for or against e.g. our most fundamental principles of moral decency is impossible, as these stand beyond (*our*) decision or justification. This is far from saying that they are not firmly founded, though, quite the contrary – in fact, like e.g. the rules of inference, they may very well be *too* firmly founded for such discussions to take place³⁷. Some may be inclined to ask: but *where* does their foundation lie, then? But, as Diamond recalls, this is not the kind of question we shall ever see Wittgenstein ask, let alone answer³⁸.

But after that, if one has understood what he wished to show about logic, scepticism, or ethics, there are no real problems with the original statements, though before they were no more than hints prompting us to follow some demonstration he was willing to undertake. That their points are made clearer by one having to *go through the practice* – not by presenting them in a theory – does not necessarily imply that they cannot be intelligibly conveyed and that by trying to do that one shall come out with nonsense all the time. (This is also to say that by now the Tractarian temptation to treat any non-

³⁷ Notice that ‘too firmly founded’ is itself a piece of nonsense framed by ‘they may very well be’.

³⁸ See “Realism and the Realistic Spirit” (1991).

constative use of language as nonsense should have well and truly vanished. Moreover, though we cannot give descriptions *of* logic, we can certainly give descriptions of the sort of things we *do* with logic, which is what we do all the time, even when we think we may be describing ‘it’.) What is important is to be well aware of what is being said – and done – and that itself might require a certain acquaintance with the activity we call philosophy.

As a conclusion to his obituary Ryle remarked that Wittgenstein “made our generation of philosophers self-conscious of philosophy itself” (Ryle 2009, 266):

“[His] demolition of the idea that philosophy is a sort of science has at least made us vigilant about our tools. We no longer try to use for our problems the methods of arguing which are the right ones for demonstrating theorems or establishing hypotheses. In particular we have learned to pay deliberate attention to what can and cannot be said” (*ibid.*).

Ryle’s generation was indeed a golden one. However, if we look at what people are doing in most philosophy departments today, we shall see that, apart from some notable exceptions (living authors I have engaged with here being among such exceptions), Richard Rorty’s prediction has been largely fulfilled: “If “philosophy” comes to be viewed as continuous with science (as Quine wishes it to be) on the one hand and as continuous with poetry (as Heidegger and Derrida often suggest it is) on the other, then our descendants will be less concerned with questions about “the method of philosophy” or about “the nature of philosophical problems”” (Rorty 1992, 374). But, though Rorty was hoping that this would happen as a result of philosophers coming to understand that “neither “philosophy” nor “language” names anything unified” (*ibid.*) or that philosophy is no “special field of inquiry distinguished by a special method” (*ibid.*), the case is rather that metaphilosophical questions are less heard nowadays while the metaphilosophical (and linguistic) muddles persist. And that is my complaint.

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