

WITTGENSTEIN AND  
THE NONSENSE PREDICAMENT

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# **Wittgenstein and the Nonsense Predicament**

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## **Abstract**

A single philosophical problem is developed, which will be called *the nonsense predicament*. The predicament arises because an *argument from nonsense*—which is an argument that aims to establish that some, or all, philosophical sentences are nonsense—cannot establish its conclusion, because of what will be called *the nonsense paradox*. This paradox has three parts, which establish that the argument from nonsense leads to (i) a *regress*, (ii) a *contradiction*, and (iii) the *ineffability* of nonsense. Insisting on the argument in the face of this paradox leads to the fallacy that one insists on the sense of nonsense. It is argued that this predicament is solvable only by rejecting the argument in the first place.

My propositions elucidate 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 overcome these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

I might say: if the place I want to reach could only be climbed by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place which I really have to go is one that I must actually be already. Anything that can be reached with a ladder does not interest me.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

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# Introduction

## 1. Aim

One of the major achievements of early analytic philosophy, it has often been argued, is that it changes the framework of philosophy's criticisms from truth and falsity to a framework based on sense and nonsense.<sup>1</sup> However, a growing frustration with the self-refuting character of arguments based on this new distinction led to a fast decline of the once-celebrated achievement. But this, quite obviously, does not mean that it is forgotten, and indeed, recent years have seen renewed interest in and hot debates about it.<sup>2</sup> From enthusiasm to skepticism, the range of possible attitudes towards it is wide open.

If the achievement were indeed an achievement, the character of philosophical arguments would change radically. Where one previously would have asked whether an argument was either true or false, one now would ask first whether it makes sense or not. If the argument makes sense, one could go on and ask further if it is true or false; but if the argument does not make sense, the question of truth and falsity does not even arise. The positive case seems fair enough. How could it not be a requisite that an argument would have to make sense in order to be true or false? However, the negative case isn't as straightforward. How can an apparent argument turn out to be nonsense? Isn't there a sense in which we would first have to understand and explain why the argument doesn't make sense? It would seem wildly unfair to reject an argument on the grounds that we simply don't understand it. But nonsense, on the other hand, has literally no sense, so there is not a queer way in which one could explain that nonsense has a sense that is nonsense, so to speak. The negative case, then, is highly troubling.

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<sup>1</sup> A classic example of such a view is Baker and Hacker 1984.

<sup>2</sup> An example is the debate between Hacker (Bennett and Hacker 2007) and Dennett (2007), which will be discussed in chapter 7 of this thesis.

This brings us to the main goal of this thesis, which is an investigation of a single philosophical problem, which I'll call *the nonsense predicament*. The predicament, in short, is that the infamous line of philosophical criticism that appears to lead to the conclusion that (some, most, or even all) philosophical sentences are *nonsense*—which I'll call *the argument from nonsense*—is, as I hope to show, inherently *paradoxical* and ultimately *fallacious*.

First, the argument from nonsense runs into a *paradox* that surrounds talk about nonsense. The paradox has three parts: (i) in order to say with a meaningful sentence  $q$  that  $p$  is nonsense,  $p$  has to be a part of  $q$ . But if  $q$  contains  $p$ , some parts of  $q$  have no meaning either, and hence  $q$  is nonsense. Thus the attempt to say *that* and *why*  $p$  is nonsense leads to further nonsense—the paradox of the *regress* of nonsense. Therefore, (ii) in order to say with  $q$  that  $p$  is nonsense, one would have to give a meaning to all of  $q$ 's constituents. Thus one could meaningfully say with  $q$  that  $p$  is nonsense only if  $p$  would *not* be nonsense (which would necessarily result in a false proposition)—the paradox of the *sense* of nonsense. And therefore, (iii) one cannot meaningfully say that  $p$  is nonsense if it is, because any attempt to do so would lead back to either (i) or (ii)—the paradox of the *ineffability* of nonsense. I'll call this set of paradoxes *the nonsense paradox*.

Second, while most philosophers have attempted to get around the predicament, insistence on the argument from nonsense in spite of its problematic nature leads, quite inevitably to a *fallacy*: because of the nonsense paradox, to argue for the rejection of  $p$  because it is nonsense cannot, in any case, achieve its argumentative aim (i.e. the rejection of  $p$  because of its alleged nonsensicality). I'll call the insistence on the argument from nonsense in the face of this *the nonsense fallacy*.

Thus, the predicament arises as a result of the argument from nonsense, but it has far reaching implications for talk about nonsense in philosophy. Most pressing of all, sentences that at some point contain parts said to be nonsensical are themselves nonsense, and therefore nonsense cannot be a part of any philosophical argument—this would only lead to *further* nonsense.

Although the nonsense predicament probably has a history that goes back much further, it is in the works of Frege where it is first clearly locatable. Frege, quite necessarily, is forced *to lapse into nonsense*. However, the nonsense predicament achieved its most pressing expression in the works of Wittgenstein, who was, without wanting to exaggerate here, quite *obsessed* with nonsense. In his early work the *Tractatus* and the posthumously published works, there are literally hundreds of passages in which he speaks of ‘nonsense,’ many more if one also takes into account the numerous cognates or alternative formulations he uses throughout (like ‘no sense,’ ‘no meaning,’ ‘no use,’ etc.), and still more if one goes on to count all the relevant passages to be found in his *Nachlass*.

It is, however, quite another matter whether Wittgenstein committed the nonsense fallacy, or if he instead dealt with the nonsense predicament as a philosophical problem (which I think could be more likely). The nonsense fallacy is also most vivid in the works of philosophers who take themselves to be highly influenced by the writings of Wittgenstein, most notably Rudolf Carnap and A. J. Ayer. And it is also passed on to the famous commentators on Wittgenstein, such as G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Geach, and Anthony Kenny, and more recently Roger White and (above all) P. M. S. Hacker.

Since the predicament is most elaborated in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s early masterwork, much of this thesis is either directly or indirectly concerned with that book. I’ll give a particular reading of the work, according to which Wittgenstein suggests a solution that is difficult to accept—what one might call, following the terminology Kripke has suggested in another context, a *skeptical solution*.<sup>3</sup> The bottom line of early Wittgenstein’s answer is short and punchy: in his words, ‘it is impossible to judge [*urteilen*] a nonsense.’<sup>4</sup> I’ll call this *Wittgenstein’s principle*. After elucidating that nonsense is nonsense, ultimately, we

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<sup>3</sup> On the term ‘skeptical solution’ and its distinction from an ‘anti-skeptical solution,’ see Kripke 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein 1961, 5.5422; hereafter cited as *TLP*. Wittgenstein makes this crucial point as a criticism of Russell’s philosophical theory: ‘The correct explanation of the form of the proposition “A judges *p*” must show that it is impossible to judge a nonsense. (Russell’s theory does not satisfy this condition.)’ Accordingly, judgments of the form ‘*p*’ (where *p* is nonsense) and equally ‘*p* is nonsense’ (where *p* is nonsense) are impossible.

have to ‘be silent’ about nonsense to avoid further nonsense.<sup>5</sup> This is the final point of what I’ll call *the Tractarian solution*.

As much as this is a straightforward answer to the difficulties that surround talk about nonsense, it is equally hard to accept. The question of whether it concedes too much, I’ll leave for others to judge. Anyway, early Wittgenstein means to provide this, as he states in the preface to his book, as *the definitive and final solution of the philosophical problems*.<sup>6</sup>

The reading of the *Tractatus* that I’ll propose reads that book as primarily interested in giving the Tractarian solution as a response to the nonsense predicament in general. Much of the *Tractatus*, however, can be read as an investigation into that predicament in the context of *the problem of the demarcation of the limits of thought*, in particular. The core of the problem, in this context, is the difficulty of determining the correct answer (true or false) to the puzzling philosophical question of whether there are limits of thought (and equally of language, and knowledge)—in a relevant sense, that is, not simply empirical or physical *shortcomings*, which could in principle be ruled out through idealization, stipulation, or further considerations, but inherent and *insurmountable* limits to the effect that there is, by necessity, *something that cannot be thought*, said, or known.<sup>7</sup> Something that is impossible such that it cannot be otherwise—something that cannot even be *imagined*.

The difficulty arises once this question has been answered, either in the affirmative or negative. First, it seems that, by having conveyed what the limits are those very limits have been overcome—which appears to be self-refuting. But second, even if it turned out that there are no such limits, the pressing question

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<sup>5</sup> *TLP*, preface, 7.

<sup>6</sup> For an impression of what was possibly the crucial influence on Wittgenstein’s account of the problems of philosophy, see Russell 1912, 220-237, and G. E. Moore 1953, 23-26.

<sup>7</sup> Consider the difference between ‘*S* cannot jump higher than *R*’ and ‘It is impossible for thought to have “*p*” as its content’ (or shorter: ‘It is impossible to think “*p*”’). The former is a limitation, which is only contingently the case (and could be overcome through training or enhancement, or whatever), and the latter is, if true, supposed to state a limit—in this case, to thought—that, generally, holds for anything of which it can be meaningfully said that it has the capacity to think. In what follows, talk about limits is only used in this, for the philosophical purposes of the investigation of the problem under consideration relevant, sense.

would still be how it could be rightly identified *what* the limits would consist in if they were actual, since making sense of that would be a requirement for grasping that there are no such limits. And to respond at this point that what one rejects is ‘that, whatever it is’ does not help, since that would only lead to a sentence that has no determined meaning either.

If thought, language, and knowledge were constituted by such limits, knowing what they are would entail knowledge of what cannot be thought, said, or known. The reverse conditional is also true: if a subject *S* knows what cannot be thought, said, or known, *S* knows what the limits of thought, language, and knowledge are. Since these limits, understood in the relevant sense, are not concerned with specific or particular shortcomings, but with something that cannot be done *per impossibile*, such limits would generalize: for any *S*, there are instances that are impossible to think, to say, to know.

Thus, the original development of the Tractarian solution had to be such that it could be used for a systematic investigation into the reformulated version of the problem, which is the question ‘*Is it possible to determine if there is something one cannot think, say, or know?*’ The Tractarian solution is a response to that question—though a skeptical response, since it suggests that we have to be silent about that apparent question because it is ultimately nonsense. Indeed it is Wittgenstein’s main point that such seemingly philosophical questions and equally the apparent answers to them are not really questions and answers at all (I’ll try to highlight this point throughout this thesis).

The problem, however, is *not* solved by a mere *denial* of theories of the limits of thought, language, or knowledge. This is because, since Wittgenstein is out to show that these theories depend on the problematic argument from nonsense, they produce further nonsense, and a denial of this nonsense would not make sense, but would *again be nonsense*. What is needed, if Wittgenstein’s point is correct, is to *stop* talking about such nonsense.

Thus, this thesis argues that the nonsense predicament cannot be dissolved without giving up on, or rather overcoming, the argument from nonsense

(a lesson I take myself to have learned from Wittgenstein). This has important implications for areas in which the argument is (frequently) made. Some of the most important are the demarcation of the limits of thought and language, skepticism, and the relationship between philosophy and science—all of which will be discussed in this thesis.

## 2. The contemporary debate

Wittgenstein's philosophy has received a lot of attention, and the attention is well deserved. Since the publication of his two main works, the *Tractatus* and the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*, these philosophical books have been praised by many of the most distinguished philosophers. Wittgenstein's books are recognized to be among the most influential and important volumes of philosophy of the twentieth century. Each year there are literally hundreds of new papers and books devoted to these philosophical works.<sup>8</sup>

But already in the early 1980s, Saul Kripke wondered, in his seminal book on a paradox he finds in the later writings of Wittgenstein, whether there weren't already too many attempts out there to make sense of Wittgenstein's philosophy. So is it a problem that much of this thesis deals with Wittgenstein's philosophy either directly or indirectly, through a discussion of commentaries on Wittgenstein?

I think it isn't. Despite the huge attention that Wittgenstein has received, there has been virtually no agreement about many of even the most crucial points about his works, let alone about the details. Furthermore, recent years have seen a growing frustration among (analytic) philosophers about both Wittgenstein's works and Wittgensteinian scholarship in general.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there remains much work to be done, and the task of making sense of Wittgenstein is

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<sup>8</sup> And the tendency is that the number of publications is growing exponentially.

<sup>9</sup> One reason for analytic philosophers to be frustrated with Wittgenstein's works is that the demand for clarity in analytic philosophy doesn't seem to be satisfied by Wittgenstein's unique writing style (Horwich 2012). Frank Cioffi (1998) speaks of Wittgenstein's 'obscurantism.' This might also be a reason to dismiss Wittgensteinian scholarship. Another reason is that Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinian scholarship are often associated with 'quietism,' a term that carries heavily negative connotations (see Rorty 2007; Wright 2007). A recent example of frustration with Wittgensteinian scholarship is Paul Horwich (2012, xii-xiii; see also chap. 9 of this thesis).

not an easy one. However, it is a corollary of the argument of this thesis that there is a clear reason why that is such a difficult project: if Wittgenstein is out to show the problematic nature of nonsense, the nonsense predicament explains why the nature of his task makes it so hard to make sense of his writings—and ultimately, that this might, at many points, not even be possible.

With the status of the debate about Wittgenstein’s philosophy still being far from uncontroversial after the many years since the publication of his two exceptional books, the situation which scholars are facing today has turned into a ‘battlefield’ between (two) radically opposed views, which divide the secondary literature into (two) rival camps that are fiercely combating each other.<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup> This battle is between so-called *resolute* and *standard* readings of the *Tractatus*. Conant (2007, 111n3) lists as resolute readers Kevin Cahill, Alice Crary, Edmund Dain, Rob Deans, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Burton Dreben, Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, Logi Gunnarsson, Martin Gustafsson, Michael Kremer, Oskari Kuusela, Thomas Ricketts, Rupert Read, Matt Ostrow, and Ed Witherspoon. Silver Bronzo (2012, 46) adds Phil Hutchinson, Denis McManus, and the late Gordon Baker. Kremer (2007, 16n2) mentions as standard readers Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Hacker, Peter Geach, Robert Fogelin, David Pears, Brian McGuinness, Ray Monk, David Stern, Hans-Johann Glock, and Anthony Kenny. Representatives of the resolute reading are, among others, Oskari Kuusela, Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, Michael Kremer, and Thomas Ricketts. The most important and influential voices of the resolute reading are James Conant and Cora Diamond (see Diamond 1991; Conant 1991, 2000, 2007; Conant and Diamond 2004). An important collection of essays on the resolute reading is *The New Wittgenstein*, edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read (2000). The resolute reading is sometimes equated with a ‘therapeutic reading’ or ‘(conceptual) Quietism.’ Again, for reasons of simplicity and strength I will only use the term ‘resolute reading’ here. Recent critics of the resolute reading, and simultaneously adherents to the standard reading, are Meredith Williams (2004), Peter Sullivan (2002, 2004), Ian Proops (2001), and H. J. Glock (2004). A response to this criticism comes from Edmund Dain (2006, 2008). The debate between the two readings is still very intense, which is explicit even in the title of the recently published collection of essays *Beyond The ‘Tractatus’ Wars: The New Wittgenstein Debate*, edited by Read and Leavery (2011). (In this collection of essays, Roger White criticizes the resolute reading in his contribution. A response in the same collection comes from Conant and Dain in their joint essay.) This overview is of course not exhaustive, and many fine essays about Wittgenstein’s philosophy could not be included due to limited space. One of the most influential and most serious critics of the resolute reading is P. M. S. Hacker (2001, 2000). He formulates his criticism in multiple papers. His strongest argument, which he forcefully demonstrates on more than one occasion, is that the resolute reading does not seem to correspond with the self-understanding that Hacker ascribes to Wittgenstein after his return to Cambridge in the year 1929. Hacker arranges quite a bulk of material from Wittgenstein’s letters, lectures, conversations, and notebooks from the years after 1929 to make this point (see Proops 2001). Among the evidence, Hacker cites from Wittgenstein’s letters to Engelmann, Wittgenstein’s discussions with F. P. Ramsey, Wittgenstein’s lectures in Cambridge 1930-1932, Wittgenstein’s discussions with Schlick and Waismann, the posthumously published *Philosophical Grammar* and *Philosophical Remarks*, and Wittgenstein’s unfinished, and during his lifetime unpublished, paper ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form.’ As Conant (2007, 35-36) explains, the argument against the resolute reading goes like this: ‘What has not been equally clear [...] is that it is equally open to resolute readers further to hold [...] that it is this very misunderstanding of the aim of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy that has helped to bring about a correlative misunderstanding of the aim of his later philosophy. This has an immediate bearing on the original dispute for the following

thesis developed out of an interest in that debate, and shares many of its core questions.

What has been brought to the surface in these contemporary debates is that those readings that take Wittgenstein's philosophical aim to be to advance a philosophical theory are highly problematic, as was first argued by Cora Diamond in her pathbreaking paper 'Throwing Away the Ladder,' where she points out that Wittgenstein, in both the *Tractatus* and *Investigations*, insists that he does not want to establish theses, theories, or doctrines; furthermore, he even insists that this cannot be done—except through a confused relation to our words, which fools us into believing that we could establish theses in philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Diamond argues that there is almost nothing of worth in Wittgenstein's writings when we do not take this conception of philosophy into account.<sup>12</sup> Diamond developed her reading especially in connection with her critical analysis of the problem in Hacker's reading of Wittgenstein. Yet her criticisms of Hacker's reading should be understood as applying to other readings as well. Whereby this is not to suggest that there is a coherent position that Diamond attacks. Instead it

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reason: many of their critics look to evidence in Wittgenstein's later writings to bolster their case against the approach that resolute readers take to the early work. This is fair play, of course, if the proper interpretation of the evidence and its bearing on the debate is reasonably clear. If, however, putative refutations of resolute readings proceed in part by looking to passages in Wittgenstein's later writings (that are adduced as evidence against those readings), with the critics in question (in their understanding of the bearing of the relevant passages) simply presupposing their preferred understanding of the later philosophy (reading it in ways that it is open to resolute interpreters to contend rests upon a misunderstanding related to the original one under contention), then such a procedure of refutation runs a serious risk of begging the original question.'

<sup>11</sup> Diamond 1991. And here is Conant (1991, 419) on this point: '[N]onsensicality is to be traced, not to the logical structure of the sentence, but to *our* failure to mean something by it: to, what the *Tractatus* calls, our failure to make certain determinations of meaning. For Wittgenstein, the source of the clash is to be located in *our relation* to the linguistic string—not in the linguistic string itself. The problem, according to the *Tractatus*, is that we often believe that we have given a meaning to all of a sentence's constituent parts when we have failed to do so. We think nonsense results in such cases not because of our failure on our part, but because of a failure on the sentence's part. We think the problem lies not in an absence of meaning (in our failing to mean anything by these words), but rather in a presence of meaning (in the incompatible sense the words already have—senses which the words import with them into the context of combination). We think the thought is flawed because the component sense of its parts logically repel one another. They fail to add up to a thought. So we feel our words are attempting to think a logically impossible thought—and that this involves a kind of impossibility of a higher order than ordinary impossibility. Wittgenstein's teaching is that the problem lies not in the words, but in our confused relation to the words: in our experiencing ourselves as meaning something definite by them, yet also feeling that what we take ourselves to be meaning with the words makes no sense.'

<sup>12</sup> Diamond 1991; see also Conant and Diamond 2004.



is Diamond and Conant's diagnosis that the readings they attack oscillate between contradictory assumptions.<sup>13</sup> They therefore argue against a certain form of inconsistency, which readers tend to take on in reaction to the penultimate passage of the *Tractatus*. She attempts to make clear that it is Wittgenstein's goal to elucidate that this perspective, the one that Hacker wants to adopt, is only the *illusion of a perspective*.<sup>14</sup> Following John McDowell, Conant calls such an illusion of a perspective the view from 'sideways on.'<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, he describes such 'ideas' as the 'fantasies' of philosophers.<sup>16</sup> And Meredith Williams labels such illusions of perspective (or fantasies), with a term from Willard V. O. Quine, as 'cosmic exile.'<sup>17</sup>

Following Diamond and Conant, a growing number of commentators became unsatisfied with the picture that both early and late Wittgenstein put forward a theory of meaning.<sup>18</sup> Therefore they challenge the traditional picture of Wittgenstein as a straightforward 'philosopher of language' in the conventional sense. Robert J. Fogelin writes on this topic:

Wittgenstein [distances himself] from an approach that has played a dominant role in philosophy for more than a century. Many philosophers have been attracted to the idea that producing a *theory of language*—or, more specifically, developing a *theory of meaning*—is the first task of philosophy. With such a theory in hand, one can then turn to the *problems of philosophy*, possessing the tools needed for their proper solution or, perhaps, their dissolution. On this approach, theory of meaning comes first; the treatment of other philosophical problems comes later. The logical positivists' attempt to formulate an empiricist criterion of cognitive meaning is one example of this approach. [...] In contrast, *I want to suggest that Wittgenstein's concern with philosophy is antecedent to*

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Anthony Kenny (1974) writes about the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein's propositions (I) express a 'picture theory' (15), (ii) are nevertheless *simply* nonsense (121), (iii) attempt to say what cannot be said, but only shown (121-122), (iv) simultaneously express a metaphysic (1974, 89), (v) are 'philosophers' nonsense' (236), (vi) solve the problem of the relation between language and world (15), (vii) point towards important continuities and discontinuities with the *Investigations* (255), and so on and so forth.

<sup>14</sup> Diamond 1988, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Conant 2002, 422.

<sup>16</sup> Conant 1989a, 263.

<sup>17</sup> Williams 2004, 6.

<sup>18</sup> See Diamond 1988, 5; Goldfarb 1997, 86; Goldfarb 1983, 279; Fogelin 2009, 7.

*and controls his reflections on language.* In the absence of these antecedent philosophical perplexities, I do not think that Wittgenstein would have any interest [...] in language at all. [...] *[I]t is at least misleading to refer to Wittgenstein as a philosopher of language.*<sup>19</sup>

And Goldfarb writes that Wittgenstein's writings are 'a *denial of the possibility and appropriateness of theorizing about meaning.*'<sup>20</sup> He further writes that 'Wittgenstein's point, of course, is *not to present a theory*; it is rather, to *unravel what leads one.*'<sup>21</sup> And Cora Diamond writes that,

[w]hether one is reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* or his later writings, one must be struck by his insistence that he is not putting forward philosophical doctrines or theses; or by his suggestion that it cannot be done, 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. I think that there is almost nothing in Wittgenstein which is of value and which can be grasped if it is pulled away from that view of philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

That those readings that argue that Wittgenstein's aim was to put forward a theory are highly problematic is most vivid in the fact that these readings have to bite the bullet that the book must in the end be intended to be self-refuting—because the theory, which these readings ascribe to it, is nonsense according to its very own criteria.<sup>23</sup> As Diamond puts it, the doctrine 'itself requires that any

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<sup>19</sup> Fogelin 2009, 7; emphases mine.

<sup>20</sup> Goldfarb 1983, 279; emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> Goldfarb, 1997, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Diamond 1988, 5. What does it even mean that Wittgenstein does not put forward a theory of meaning? Kuusela (2008; see also 2005) gives a plausible answer to this question. Especially the case of Wittgenstein's talk about the rules of language is a good example to explain what Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical stance, which *prima facie* may seem kind of abstract, amounts to, if cashed out. Kuusela (2008) argues that the material, which is interpreted as Wittgenstein's alleged theory of 'meaning as use,' is rather Wittgenstein's attempt to avoid theses, theories, doctrines, and dogmatism by using his 'method of comparisons.' Thereby, according to Kuusela, Wittgenstein is not putting forward statements including metaphysical 'musts' and 'cans,' but sentences devoid of such doctrinaire necessary conditions: sentences that can be used for philosophical clarification without committing oneself to a metaphysical system, and therefore further avoiding the commitment to the 'it must be so,' which results from the generality and the necessity of the metaphysical system (cf. Wittgenstein 1999, 593; hereafter cited as *PI*).

<sup>23</sup> Because the sentences of the book do not picture the world, cannot be verified, lack bipolarity, or whatever criteria the alleged theory of the book postulates. What I describe as the *Carnapian* and *Fregean* view disagree about the question of which criterion is the correct one according to the *Tractatus*.

attempt to state it as a doctrine must fail.<sup>24</sup> But this leads to the paradox that a doctrine that cannot be stated states a doctrine that cannot be stated (i.e. itself). But a doctrine that entails that it cannot be stated cannot even be stated in the first place.

Recent work on Wittgenstein's philosophy has instead often been concerned with the role that *methodological* and *metaphilosophical* considerations play for Wittgenstein.<sup>25</sup> But it is a difficult task to give a precise answer to the question of what exactly Wittgenstein's methodology is, or what his views on philosophy and philosophical problems are, and if his account can be used in a productive way in contemporary philosophy.<sup>26</sup> A crucial as much as difficult point is to develop his account such that it explains how Wittgenstein could have thought that he had solved *all* philosophical problems in essentials, as he says in the preface to the *Tractatus*. This is a task that this thesis takes head-on, by considering the Tractarian solution as a general response broad enough to encompass the critical potency for the whole philosophical tradition.<sup>27</sup> (Note that I agree with later Wittgenstein that such a project is essentially confused.)

However, the predicament is not only relevant for scholars interested in the history of early analytic philosophy, but it is a serious philosophical problem and is (I think) interesting in its own respect, and it deserves attention independent from any interest in scholarship. Also, the argument from nonsense re-

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<sup>24</sup> Diamond 1988, 21.

<sup>25</sup> There is a host of recent publications on this topic (for instance, Diamond 2000; Schulte 2002; Ammereller and Fischer 2004; Baker 2004; Conant 2002, 2011; Kuusela 2008; Horwich 2012).

<sup>26</sup> For an account of Wittgenstein's method(s), see Conant 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Philosophical criticisms are often developed against a position one finds outrageously confused. Such a position often finds expression in the works of a single philosopher. One such person is P. M. S. Hacker (see, for instance, Hacker's role as a recurring target in the works of Cora Diamond, James Conant, Oskari Kuusela, and others). For instance, Daniel Dennett recently wrote (2007, 77) about Hacker's collaboration with M. R. Bennett that 'Bennett and Hacker manage to express positions that I have been combating *indirectly* for forty years but have never before been able to confront head on, for lack of a forthright exponent. Like Jerry Fodor, on whom I have relied for years to blurt out vividly *just* the points I wish to deny—saving me from attacking a straw man—Bennett and Hacker give me a bold doctrine to criticize. I've found the task of marshaling my thoughts on these topics in reaction to their claims to be illuminating to me and, I hope, to others as well.' Hacker is also a recurring target in this thesis, and I too hope that my criticisms of his views will be helpful 'to others as well.'

appears repeatedly in non-Wittgenstein-related contexts.<sup>28</sup> Thus it is a pressing question whether the predicament can be solved or circumvented, since only if that could be done would the argument from nonsense be rehabilitated.

### 3. Plan

Chapter 1 sketches the historical dimension of the argument from nonsense. The chapter begins by posing *the Tractarian difficulty*, and, after a discussion of the argument from nonsense as it appears in the works of Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap, it develops Wittgenstein's response in summarized form, *the Tractarian solution*. The core of this solution is a two-pronged move. First, it involves the questioning, and ultimately the rejection, of philosophical discourse that is built around seemingly opposed, contradictory, and mutually exclusive *theories*. Instead, the aim is to engage in an *activity of elucidation*, which has as its goal the *clarification of thoughts*, and thus finally to solve the puzzlement that leads to the problems posed by philosophical theories in the first place. And second, the aim is to avoid further nonsense by being silent about nonsense.

Chapter 2 turns to a particularly influential take on the argument from nonsense, which I'll call *the boundary model*. According to this model, nonsense arises if the *rules of correct language use*, which are said to constitute the *bounds of sense*, are *violated*. This model is primarily defended in P. M. S. Hacker's work on Wittgenstein, but has been taken up by many more commentators from there on.<sup>29</sup> The discussion of this model brings out the problematic nature of nonsense further. It leads to the question whether nonsense might be inherently paradoxical.

Chapter 3 is the core of this thesis. It spells out the different rungs of *the nonsense paradox* in much detail. The paradox's bottom line is that it is impos-

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, it was very recently put forward by Herman Cappelen (2013), and also by Peter Unger (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Here are some examples (this list is not at all meant to be exhaustive): Addis 2006; Baker and Hacker 2005; Badiou 2011; Brenner 1999; Child 2011; Frascolla 2007; Fogelin 1987; Garfield and Priest 2003; Grayling 2001; McGinn 2006; Medina 2002; A. W. Moore 2006, 2012, 2013; Morris and Dodd 2009; Nordmann 2005; Schulte 1992; Stern 1995; White 2006, 2011; Williams 2004; and Wilson 1998.

sible that nonsense can be part of meaningful speech, and hence it cannot be part of any philosophical argumentation either (however broad one understands such an activity). Is there a solution to the paradox? It is argued that there appear to be no more than three remaining options that might avoid the paradox: (i) one might *point* to something one believes to be nonsense and utter ‘Nonsense!'; (ii) one could say that nonsense can *dialectically elucidate* that it is what it is—simply nonsense; or (iii) one could be *silent* about nonsense. All of these options are used by Wittgenstein at some point in his writings, but (ii) and (iii) are very prominent in his early work and are part of his Tractarian solution.

Such a solution will most likely appear ‘unhappy’ or ‘skeptical’ to most readers, since it avoids the paradox only by *banishing* nonsense, so to speak.<sup>30</sup> But if the paradox isn’t avoided, the argument from nonsense leads to the fallacy of insisting on the apparent sense of nonsense, what will be called *the nonsense predicament*. This movement (the argument from nonsense, the paradox of nonsense, the nonsense fallacy, the nonsense predicament, the Tractarian solution) will set the grounds of the investigation in the next chapters.

Chapter 4 investigates *the nonsense movement* in the context of the question whether the demarcation of the limits of thought is possible. To demarcate thought it would be necessary to specify what cannot be thought. But this question leads to an apparently unsolvable philosophical problem. If *p* cannot be thought, it seems that, to determine what ‘it’ is that cannot be thought, what cannot be thought has already been thought, which leads the whole project into apparent incoherence or self-contradiction. Since this chapter argues that Wittgenstein considered such a ‘project’ doomed, and further that his aim was therefore *not* to draw the limits of thought (but to investigate it as a philosophical *problem*), it might be considered to be an attack on nearly every single work on Wittgenstein, since it is the overarching opinion in almost all of the secondary

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<sup>30</sup> Stephen Schiffer (2003) introduces the term ‘unhappy face’ solution, while a ‘skeptical’ solution is Saul Kripke’s terminology (1982).

literature that Wittgenstein's aim *was* to draw the limits of thought.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 5 investigates the nonsense movement in the context of the question of whether there are limits of language. To see if there are such limits, one would first have to rule out the shortcomings that everyday languages (apparently) exhibit. Only then would it be possible to investigate further if there could be a language that is devoid of these shortcomings, and can instead show the *limits* searched for. Therefore, this chapter considers if there is a distinction between formal and non-formal languages to be drawn, which can be philosophically useful in this way. Drawing such a distinction would require that there is a definition of what a formal language is, such that this definition would make it the case that a formal language has a philosophical use. This use should at least guarantee that a formal language has no shortcomings; but the more interesting question, and the one that is under investigation in this chapter, is if a formal language can show that there are limits of language. It is argued that this is not the case. Already non-formal languages are without limits—or, as Wittgenstein puts it, 'in perfect logical order.'<sup>32</sup> Although the point of this chapter is not primarily exegetical, the main target here are doctrines, in the spirit of Frege and Carnap, which insist on the project of an 'ideal language.'

Chapter 6 investigates the nonsense movement in the context of the problem of skepticism. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein appears to give an argument according to which skepticism is nonsense. But this apparent argument against skepticism is given only in a highly condensed form there, claiming that skepticism doesn't succeed to raise doubts where nothing can be said. This chapter attempts to spell his line of thought out, and try to show how Wittgenstein could have thought that he could elucidate that skepticism, although it seems as if it puts forth valid arguments, ultimately fails to provide a sound argumentation. Is Wittgenstein here relapsing into putting forward an argument from nonsense? As one might suspect already from the discussion of the nonsense movement in earlier chapters, the point of this chapter is that the argument from nonsense

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. the examples for standard readers given above in footnote 11. Two prominent exceptions are Conant (1991) and Diamond (2011b).

<sup>32</sup> *TLP*, 5.5563.

cannot establish its conclusion that skepticism is nonsense, but that Wittgenstein thought his use of the Tractarian solution might.

Chapter 7 is on the question of whether the argument from nonsense, as used by M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, can show that neuroscience is nonsense. Here, too, it is argued that this is not the case, again because of the nonsense predicament. The use of the argument from nonsense against neuroscientists leads once more to the nonsense fallacy.

Chapter 8 considers a last attempt, recently made by Roger M. White, to get around the nonsense predicament. His attempt concedes that nonsense cannot be part of meaningful speech (in general), but tries to show that nonsense can nevertheless ‘communicate’ (ineffable) insights—that is, on his account, a nonsensical sentence  $p$  can convey insights over and above the fact that  $p$  is nonsense. The discussion of whether this is possible is framed in respect to White’s counterexamples, which he introduces to show that nonsense is indeed frequently used to communicate (unsayable/ineffable) insights. The chapter argues that his counterexamples cannot establish the claim they are invented for; that is, they cannot show that we communicate understanding with nonsense.

Chapter 9 is a concluding excursus from the previous discussion of the nonsense movement. The point of this chapter, however, is a Wittgensteinian one: his point that mutually exclusive philosophical positions, which try to refute each other, ultimately coincide—they vanish when they are overcome.<sup>33</sup> The current debate between Paul Horwich and Timothy Williamson about the correct methods and metaphilosophy of contemporary analytic philosophy is such a debate of mutually exclusive philosophical positions. The chapter argues that they share a *limiting conception of philosophy*, which leads to the problem of *the dogma of metaphilosophy*.

This thesis concludes by highlighting the seriousness of the nonsense movement: that if held onto, the argument from nonsense results in the nonsense predicament, and its unavoidable nature.

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<sup>33</sup> *TLP*, 5.64.

# 1. An Argument From Nonsense

## 1.1 Introduction

The *argument from nonsense* is an argument that appears to lead to the conclusion that *some*—or, in its more aggressive forms, *most* or even *all*—philosophical sentences (or sometimes parts of these sentences, or at other times individual philosophical words) are *nonsensical*. To talk of *the* argument from nonsense, in the singular form, might be somewhat misleading, since there are most likely *varieties* of such an argument. Therefore the task of this chapter is to sketch some of the history of such an argument.

Section 1.2 sets the stage by raising the *Tractarian difficulty*. To put it in the form of a question, what does it mean that a number of philosophical sentences  $p_1, \dots, p_n$  *elucidate* if and only if these sentences are recognized to be *nonsensical*? Section 1.3 discusses the roots of this difficulty in the works of Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap. As the reader will notice, this chapter devotes most of its space to a discussion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. This is because Wittgenstein brings out the set of problems that surround this difficulty most pressingly and might have the best solution. Section 1.4 discusses the different conceptions of nonsense that arise from the works of Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap. It then sketches, in the abstract, the solution that I take to be Wittgenstein's in the *Tractatus*, which will therefore be called *the Tractarian solution*. These are its key parts: *the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense*, *the activity of elucidation*, and *the sign/symbol distinction*. The main point, however, also appears to be the most difficult one to accept: one has to be *silent* about nonsense.

## 1.2 The Tractarian difficulty

The list of uncontroversial things to be said about the *Tractatus* is indeed very short. Apart from a short 'inventory list' of the book—i.e. that the book consists of approximately twenty thousand words, or about seventy pages of text; that it features a peculiar numbering system; and that it is difficult to read—the book



appears to be *anything but straightforward*. The difficulties with reading the text begin as early as the preface and the first few sentences of the book. Most famously, Frege, one of the very first readers of and commentators on the book, had immense difficulties reading it, as can be seen in Frege's letters to Wittgenstein (and one might even speculate if Frege has managed to read the whole book). In these letters, Frege expresses his deep troubles with even the first page of the *Tractatus*—Frege's letter from June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1919 is solely about his confusion with basically the first few propositions of the book.<sup>1</sup> And he even writes in his next letter to Wittgenstein that '[w]hat you write me about the purpose of your book [which appears to be a partial repetition of the preface] strikes me as *strange*.'<sup>2</sup> This comes as quite a surprise given Wittgenstein's credit to Frege—in the very same preface—as the source of 'the stimulation of my thoughts.'<sup>3</sup>

However, at the very least, despite the huge difficulties that readers usually experience with the book, it seems to be clear to most (even to Frege) that the book is made up of *philosophical propositions*. At a first glance, the book seems to be a *treatise on logic and language*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it seems that even Frege could agree that Wittgenstein appears to give a clear and concise statement of what the book is about in its preface (though Frege would probably insist that it is 'strange' to him). And when Wittgenstein warns, in a letter to a publisher whom he attempts to persuade to publish the *Tractatus*, about the difficulties of his book, he advises him *how to read* it. First, Wittgenstein writes, 'You won't—I really believe—get too much out of reading [the *Tractatus*]. Because you won't understand it—the content of the book will be strange to you.' But then he adds that '[i]n reality, it isn't strange to you,' and he advises him that '[f]or the time being I'd recommend that you read the *foreword* and the *conclusion* since these express the point [of the *Tractatus*] most directly.'<sup>5</sup>

If we take Wittgenstein's advice here seriously, we find this in the foreword:

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<sup>1</sup> *TLP*, 1-2.011.

<sup>2</sup> Frege sends this letter (2011; my emphasis) to Wittgenstein September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1919.

<sup>3</sup> *TLP*, preface.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Sullivan (2004, 32) has argued that, despite the perplexities the reader might experience with the *Tractatus*, the book 'presents a philosophical system of the world, and thought about the world, that is *disturbingly simple*' (my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein 2012, 94-95, emphasis mine; hereafter cited as *WC*.

The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on a misunderstanding of the logic of our language. Its whole meaning could be summed up as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.<sup>6</sup>

Whether it is ‘strange’ (as it was to Frege) or not, in this passage, then, we seem to get a summary of the book’s (i) *topic* (the problems of philosophy); (ii) *diagnosis* (the problems arise because of a misunderstanding of language); (iii) *conclusion* or *solution* (silence); and (iv) *method* (clarification or elucidation, as Wittgenstein will call it at a later point in the book). But is this enough to work one’s way through the book? For Frege, clearly, it wasn’t.

To make matters worse, neither the preface nor the main body of text might be the most pressing problem with the book. If we follow Wittgenstein’s advice further and turn to the conclusion of his book, the situation gets even more complicated. Since if working through the sentences that make up the main part of the book is not a great obstacle, then getting through those at the end of the book most definitely is. Having arrived there, the two last passages of the book are quite *puzzling*. The puzzlement arises because, at the end of the book, we find this almost alarming passage, which drags into question the very impression we had until then—that the book we have read so far is *really* a treatise on logic and language. The *penultimate passage* says,

My propositions elucidate thus that anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them—on them—over them (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up

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<sup>6</sup> *TLP*, preface.

on it.) He must overcome these propositions, then he will see the world aright.<sup>7</sup>

And Wittgenstein continues and ends his book by adding this *final passage*: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’<sup>8</sup> I’ll call the suggestion Wittgenstein gives in the book’s penultimate passage—that we understand him if and only if we recognize that those propositions of the book that elucidate do so when we recognize them as nonsense—the *Tractarian difficulty*.<sup>9</sup> And I’ll call the proposal to be silent the *Tractarian solution*.<sup>10</sup> The problem, in the face of the Tractarian difficulty, as Diamond has urged, is not to ‘chicken out’: ‘To chicken out is to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it.’<sup>11</sup>

Thus this curious conclusion has become the turning point for the debate about the *Tractatus*. But why is it so curious? What is that special about it? There are a couple of things that stand out here that need to be mentioned.

First, it is one of the very few passages where Wittgenstein uses the *first person*—presumably to address the reader directly. Thus it seems that he tries to engage into a *conversation* with his readers. In a sense, we get a direct *instruction* from the author about *how to* approach his work.<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein asks us to understand *him*, in opposition to the propositions of *the book*, which we have to recognize as nonsensical.<sup>13</sup>

Second, it has a special sounding *metaphilosophical* character. This is es-

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<sup>7</sup> *TLP*, 6.54.

<sup>8</sup> *TLP*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein envisaged the difficulty his book will create for his readers. Thus he writes in a letter to Bertrand Russell from February 13, 1919, that ‘I’ve written a book called “Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung” [...]. *Nobody* will understand it; although I believe it’s all as *clear as crystal*’ (WC, 96). That Wittgenstein’s writings might exhibit such a difficulty in general is a possibility that one should consider (for an account of the accessibility of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, see Cavell 1962). Some have argued that Wittgenstein has to be taken ‘at his word’ in his later philosophy, as Robert Fogelin (2009) has put it. But this is not to say that this isn’t extremely difficult.

<sup>10</sup> I’ll develop this solution in due course in this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Diamond 1988, 20.

<sup>12</sup> See Conant 1991, 159-160.

<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to evaluate whether Wittgenstein means *all* or *some* of his propositions, since Wittgenstein doesn’t qualify ‘[m]y propositions’ in the penultimate passage. Thus the text is, unfortunately, ambiguous on that point. I’ll argue, following Conant (2007), that the ‘some’ reading is the better alternative, if the ‘all’ choice is even a possibility.

pecially true if this passage is connected with earlier passages on the nature of philosophy and philosophical works.<sup>14</sup> It seems that these passages would trump other remarks, because of their metaphilosophical character.

Third, if Wittgenstein is right about the status of the propositions of his book in this passage, the text should be handled with great care because, in the end, they (i.e. all or some of them) might be recognized to be nonsensical. And it would clearly not be desirable at all to be stuck with apparently meaningful but ultimately meaningless propositions, by some deceptive person who has self-consciously employed carefully composed nonsense to have some unknown elucidatory effect on us through ‘doublethink.’<sup>15</sup>

Thus it seems the better option to take Wittgenstein’s advice in this passage at *face value*, because the passage is (or at least might be) of special importance. That is, if one ignores this passage, one has to face the awkward consequence—given that what the passage says is true—that one would hold onto the apparent sense of nonsense, if one didn’t completely ‘throw away’ those sentences that are only apparently meaningful but ultimately nonsensical—what Cora Diamond has called ‘chickening out.’<sup>16</sup>

Thus, when Wittgenstein, in the penultimate passage of the *Tractatus*, says that the propositions of his book elucidate if one recognizes them to be nonsensical, it seems that one has to take Wittgenstein seriously there.<sup>17</sup> ‘Taking Wittgenstein at his word,’ refers to this crucial moment where the reader, during her Wittgenstein interpretation, realizes that she has to take Wittgenstein quite *literally, at his word*, that his propositions really are to be recognized as nonsense.

Now we can begin to understand why the penultimate passage has become the center of attention and controversy in an intense debate about the

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<sup>14</sup> See *TLP*, 4.003, 4.112.

<sup>15</sup> See Sullivan 2004, 35, 37-44; Priest (1995, 210).

<sup>16</sup> Diamond 1991, 181, 194.

<sup>17</sup> Conant 2006, 174.

*Tractatus*. Just how ‘high the seas of language run here’<sup>18</sup> is, for example, reflected by the fact that the title of the latest collection of essays on the contemporary debate about the *Tractatus* refers to this debate as the ‘*Tractatus Wars*.’<sup>19</sup> But apart from what could as well be part of some marketing strategy, the situation really appears to resemble a battlefield.

The reason why we began this chapter with a discussion of the Tractarian difficulty is because it is a way of introduction to the problematic nature of nonsense. Again, the question that this book brought up is what it means that nonsense has to be recognized as nonsense. This is a question about the role of nonsense in philosophical works. If we recognize that  $p$ ,  $q$ , etc. are nonsense, have we been persuaded by a philosophical argument? Can nonsensical sentences even put forward a coherent philosophical argumentation? Or is the Tractarian difficulty maybe only a singular occurrence?

It isn’t. In the next section, we’ll see that other authors appear to be forced to lapse into talking nonsense too. And, as Wittgenstein appeals to the reader to understand *him* rather than his sentences, these authors too appeal to the reader to meet them ‘half-way,’ as Frege puts it. But with this, problems begin to emerge and to surround talk about nonsense. These problems appear already, before the *Tractatus*, in the works of Frege, and also plague accounts that follow after Wittgenstein, one famous example of which is Carnap’s account. I’ll turn to these three philosophers one by one.

### **1.3 Frege, Wittgenstein, Carnap**

This section sketches out some of the historical background of the argument from nonsense. As the discussion unfolds, it will hopefully clarify that Wittgenstein should not be assimilated with Frege and Carnap, which is often (wrongly) the case.

#### ***Frege***

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<sup>18</sup> *PI*, 194.

<sup>19</sup> This is the title of a recent collection of essays on this topic (Read and Lavery 2011).

Common wisdom has it that it is one of the most important goals of Frege to develop a ‘logically perfect language’—an *ideal language*.<sup>20</sup> Call that *Frege’s task*.<sup>21</sup> But what leads Frege to consider such a difficult and time-consuming task, which, one would initially think, is rather remote from his actual task of reducing arithmetic to (the laws of) logic? A hint can be found when Frege complains in the preface to his *Begriffsschrift* that:

I found the *inadequacy* of language to be an *obstacle*; no matter how unwieldy the expressions I was ready to accept, I was less and less able [...] to attain the precision that my purpose required’.<sup>22</sup>

The ‘obstacle’ that Frege soon finds in language, that ‘inadequacy’ or ‘deficiency’ of language, accordingly, led Frege to invent a new conceptual notation—his *Begriffsschrift*.<sup>23</sup> And this *Begriffsschrift*, according to conventional wisdom, is supposed to be a logically perfect language, a language free of any logical inadequacies whatsoever.

It might be a mistake to think that Frege thinks that ordinary language is confused in *such* a bad way that this ideal language would eventually completely *replace* it—Wittgenstein at some points in the *Tractatus* seems to read Frege in this way and objects to such a view<sup>24</sup>—but what should be uncontroversial, however, is that Frege, in the above passage from the preface to his *Begriffsschrift*, clearly expresses his worries that ordinary language is (at least) too confused or defective to use it for (his) scientific research.<sup>25</sup>

Frege’s inquiry, however, appears to lead him into some rather pressing difficulties, the bottom line being that, when he puts forward his formal language, the criteria his theory deploy appear to lead to sentences which the theory embraces, which are notwithstanding defective according to the criteria of the

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<sup>20</sup> See Weiner 2004, 28. A classic example of such a view appears in the work of Michael Dummett (1981, 142, 585, 624-626). In a recent example, Michael Potter (2012, 856-857) also defends this point.

<sup>21</sup> Eike-Henner Kluge (1980) has argued that a much earlier variant of this is found in Leibniz’s works.

<sup>22</sup> Frege 2002, 5-6; my emphases.

<sup>23</sup> Frege 2002, 6.

<sup>24</sup> See *TLP*, 5.5563.

<sup>25</sup> See Weiner 2004, 28-29.

theory. How can that be?

The outline of the part of Frege's theory that is relevant for our discussion can be explained as follows. It is according to one of Frege's core principles that he advises us: 'never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.'<sup>26</sup> Call that *Frege's principle*. According to this principle, a word can *never* be both an object *and* a concept.

Concepts and objects are interrelated in such a way that a concept predicates something of an object, for instance in

$X$  is  $f$

' $X$ ' takes an object place, and is consequently an object, while ' $f$ ' sits in the concept place of the sentence, and is thus a concept. And furthermore, 'is  $f$ ' predicates that ' $X$ ' falls under the concept ' $f$ .' Now consider the sentence

The concept 'concept' is an object.

Or even worse,

The concept 'concept' is not a concept.

This sentence is correct according to Frege's theory. It has the same formal structure than our simple example above, that is, 'the concept "concept"' is an object about which the concept 'is an object' correctly predicates that it is what it is according to Frege: an object. But this is heavily counterintuitive. It obviously feels like this sentence has to be false, since shouldn't the above sentence say that the concept 'concept' is a concept, and not an object? So the sentence definitely appears to be confused, but can it be salvaged? Or maybe the sentence is an exception to the rule, and Frege does not even have to revise his theory?

This sentence is definitely not an exception, since such apparently confused sentences *generalize*. We can easily think of (probably unlimited) sentences of the form

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<sup>26</sup> Frege 1968, xxii.

The concept 'X' is an object.

or

The concept 'X' is not a concept.

Let's call such problematic sentences *Fregean sentences*. So it seems like we have two options here to deal with such sentences: either (i) we have to hold on to our intuitions about them, in which case we would have to reject Frege's theory (or at least the universal character of it—we could, for instance, revise the theory and say that some items of language can be both an object and a concept at the same time), or (ii) we could hold on to the theory, but reject our intuitions about the Fregean sentences. If we choose (i), maybe we could say that Fregean sentences are simply false? We could say that

The concept 'X' is not an object, but a concept.

But if we go down that road, there is no way we can hold onto the most general character of Frege's principle and the accompanying analysis of sentences into concepts and objects. In Frege's view, what we would end up with is a violation of his principle: we would falsely say of something that is an object (takes the object place in a sentence) that it is a concept. For Frege, that would mean that we have lost sight of the distinction between concept and object, and that would be very bad news, since, according to him, this conception is of 'the highest importance.'<sup>27</sup> So granted we agreed with and wanted to repair Frege's theory, we would definitely not want to choose the first option.

If we choose option (ii), it seems that we have to affirm the sense of a whole category of sentences which appear to us to be simply confused, maybe worse: Fregean sentences could point to an inconsistency, incoherence, or even a *paradox* in the theory.

Frege chooses (ii), the latter option. His original stance, in a nutshell, is to refuse that there is any difficulty that arises for his inquiry with such sentenc-

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<sup>27</sup> Frege 1968, xxii.



es.<sup>28</sup> He seems to agree that these sentences ‘feel funny,’ so to speak, and that they might appear to violate our understanding of what correct sentences are, but he claims that this is because of the inadequacy of language: this ‘forces’ him to use sentences that do not only seem to be false, but seem to fail to make any sense at all, since what could it possibly mean to say that a concept is not a concept? Doesn’t this amount to saying something contradictory? It seems to amount to something along the lines of

$X$  is a concept and  $X$  is not a concept.

But that would be nothing less than a contradiction of the kind

$p$  and not- $p$ .

Frege seems to feel the force of this, which is documented by the passages in which he claims that language has a deep obstacle. His trick seems to be to argue that those sentences that seem to make trouble for his theory (which I have therefore called Fregean sentences) have a *special communicative* role between him and his readers—apparently a huge difference compared to ordinary sentences, which lack this feature. But whether this move is successful or not is still very much controversial.<sup>29</sup> (More on this soon.)

However, what shouldn’t be controversial is the reason Frege gives for why it might appear to some of his readers that his theory violates the very criterion it puts forward (it appears to lead to sentences which have a concept in the place of an object, thereby violating the universal character of the distinction between concept and object), which would consequently bring into question that the theory could put these criteria forward in the first place. It seems that Frege has entangled himself in a paradoxical situation. That Frege’s theory leads to such a situation is clearly an intuitive view, as is shown by the above reconstruction.<sup>30</sup> The bottom line of the charge against Frege is that Fregean sentences are

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<sup>28</sup> See Frege 1997.

<sup>29</sup> For someone who argues that it isn’t, see Ian Proops (2013), and for someone who takes the opposite stance see Charles Travis (2014).

<sup>30</sup> Following Benno Kerry’s original objection (1887) against Frege.

indeed nothing less than paradoxical sentences, such as  $p$  and not- $p$ . Can Frege get out of this paradox?

Frege acknowledges that he has ‘imposed on [his] views a paradoxical character.’<sup>31</sup> But he also seems to think that the paradox can be circumvented. Already above, we have seen Frege complaining about the deficiency of language—which Frege regards as an obstacle in language. The point is that Frege wants to argue that it might only appear that the sentences are paradoxical because of the obstacle, which is supposedly inherent in the nature of language, but that there, ultimately, is not a paradox proper. Apart from the passage already cited at the beginning of this section, here are some further passages in which Frege talks about the obstacle:

I admit that there is a quite peculiar *obstacle* in the way of an understanding *with the reader*. By a kind of *necessity* of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes *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.<sup>32</sup>

It must indeed be recognized that here we are confronted by an *awkwardness* of language, which I admit *cannot be avoided*, if we say that the concept [ $X$ ] is not a concept [...]. [O]ne would expect that the *Bedeutung* [reference] of the grammatical subject would be the concept; but the concept as such cannot play this part, in view of its predicative nature; it must first be converted into an object, or, more precisely, an object must go proxy for it.<sup>33</sup>

[W]e come up against the same *obstacle* [that it is, by necessity, impossible to say certain things in language]; and 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 that there is nothing for it but to realize this and always take it into account.<sup>34</sup>

Accordingly, if we attempt to say that  $X$  is a concept, we cannot do that, because

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<sup>31</sup> Frege 1997, 199.

<sup>32</sup> Frege 1984, 193; my emphases.

<sup>33</sup> Frege 1997, 185; my emphases.

<sup>34</sup> Frege 1997, 193; my emphases.

every attempt to say of  $X$  that it is a concept would make  $X$  into an object—the result would be a false sentence saying that  $X$ , which now is converted into an object, is a concept. Call this *Frege's obstacle*.<sup>35</sup> Apparently, it is a feature of language to necessarily lead to improper sentences in a range of cases, because there appear to be some features of language that cannot be stated—most problematically, for Frege, one cannot say that

$X$  is a concept.

How are these cases to be interpreted? The problem, as Graham Priest has put it, is that 'Frege needs to be able to talk about concepts in order to express his own theory. Yet he cannot do so (meaningfully) by his own theory.'<sup>36</sup> And this leads Frege to an 'embarrassment,' as Priest writes:

Frege's view is to put much, including his own theory, beyond the limit of the expressible. Frege recognises this, and is obviously embarrassed by it [...]. But he was not embarrassed enough. It is one thing for mystics [...] to hold views that they also hold to be ineffable; it is quite another for a man of science, such as

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<sup>35</sup> Proops (2013) distinguishes between four problems that arise for Frege: (i) what he calls the 'breach custom problem' (77-84), from which Proops argues that Frege might be able to escape; (ii) what he calls the 'problem of self-stultification,' that is, 'a wider problem, illustrated by this claim ["The concept horse is unsaturated" (which is false because "The concept *horse*" refers to an object in that sentence, and thus is not saturated)], of which the custom-breach problem is just an instance: the form in which we attempt to refer to concepts sometimes makes what we want to say about them false' (84-85)—to which Proops concludes that Frege has no proper answer; (iii) what he calls 'the frustration of referential intentions problem' (85-88), to which Proops concludes again that Frege has no answer, but that Frege does not think the problem to be problematic; and (iv) what he calls the problem of 'the inexpressibility of logical category distinctions' (89-94), which Proops concludes is a deep problem that Frege, however, probably did not recognize. Proops (94) concludes that '[w]e have distinguished four sub-problems that might reasonably be taken to fall under the general rubric "Frege's concept *horse* problem". It has been argued that the first—"the custom-breach problem"—is plausibly soluble, but that this is a local and shallow solution, since a second, deeper and more general problem—the problem of "self-stultification"—remains unsolved. The third problem, concerning "the frustration of referential intentions", is one about which Frege's most considered position is just that it is an inevitable, yet harmless, awkwardness of natural language. The last problem—that of the inexpressibility of logical category distinctions—is a deep and deeply intractable problem. It is not one, however, to which Frege paid much, if any, attention. Although this problem is intractable, the related problem of how strictly inexpressible logical category distinctions may nonetheless somehow be indirectly communicated or got across—and of what that achievement consists in—is one on which some progress has been made in recent work [Proops refers here to A. W. Moore's "Ineffability and Nonsense"].' I disagree with Proops that there has been progress on these matters. At any rate, to the degree that Proops's set of problems overlaps with those that this thesis aims to spell out, I'll argue (in later chapters) that there can be no progress on circumventing the predicament without giving up on the argument from nonsense.

<sup>36</sup> Priest 1995, 200.

Frege was. In a later [...] essay [...] Frege comes back to the issue and offers a solution to it. [...] [I]n any case, the trick cannot do the required job. [...] [W]e cannot paraphrase away all the things we need to say. [...] [T]he [...] repair will not solve Frege's fundamental problem. It might be thought that some minor modification of Frege's views would dispose of it, whilst leaving their essence intact; or that the problem is generated by some quirky and false Fregean doctrine, which should be disposed of anyway. Neither thought is correct.<sup>37</sup>

In Priest's reading, much of what Frege says is 'nonsense' because it is 'ineffable' or 'inexpressible,' because it lies beyond the limits of what the theory of language or theory of meaning that Frege establishes, according to Priest, deems to be expressible or effable.<sup>38</sup> In the end, this even leads to a troubling, 'self-consuming status' for Frege's theory.<sup>39</sup> Thus Frege's theory says of itself that it is nonsense because it transgresses and lies beyond the limits of language that the theory itself is said to have (meaningfully) established. It is difficult to see how this can make any sense at all: how can a theory have such contradictory features? Is Frege's obstacle only a rather unproblematic one or does it lead to a dangerous paradox? Can Frege's theory be saved?

Priest, as he says in the above quoted passage, is skeptical about this, but it has not been unattempted to explain Frege's doctrine such that it sounds more reasonable. Peter Geach, for instance, argues that Frege's conundrum has led him to a 'doctrine of aspects of reality that come out but cannot be propositionally expressed.' As Geach writes,

Frege [...] held [...] that there are logical category-distinctions which will clearly *show* themselves in a well-constructed formalized language, but which *cannot* properly *be asserted* in language: the sentences in which we seek to *convey* them in the vernacular are logically improper and admit of no translation into well-formed formulas of symbolic logic.<sup>40</sup>

[...]

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<sup>37</sup> Priest 1995, 200-202

<sup>38</sup> Priest 1995, 197-198, 200-202.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Priest thinks that this analysis applies to Russell's theory.

<sup>40</sup> Geach 1976, 55; my emphases.

Paradoxical as is *the doctrine of aspects of reality* that come out but cannot be propositionally expressed, it is hard to see any viable alternative to it.<sup>41</sup>

I'll call what Geach here describes as the 'doctrine of aspects of reality that come out but cannot be propositionally expressed' more shortly *the doctrine of ineffability* (DI). The core of this doctrine is that it is a limit of language that it is impossible to assert certain features of reality (say, whether *X* is a concept).

Frege nevertheless thinks that this limit can be circumvented by employing what he describes as the use of 'hints' or 'hinting.'<sup>42</sup> This is the 'pinch of salt' that Frege demands of his readers. But can this pinch resolve the paradox?

The above passage from Geach shows that Frege's talk of hints has been understood to be a part of (DI) and suggested that such hints can (somehow) bring out those otherwise (because of the limit of language) 'ineffable' features of reality, i.e. whether *X* is a concept or an object. So put crudely, the doctrine of ineffability states that:

(DI) Hinting can bring out ineffable features.

Although these features of reality are 'beyond' reach, and cannot be part of a *completely* successful instance of communication with proper language, they can be part of a *partly* successful instance of communication. In this sense, trying but ultimately failing to say that *X* is a concept is supposed to somehow 'hint' or 'show' that *X* is a concept. There is a complicated pattern or logic to this doctrine: First, grant that Frege was right about the distinction between concept and object. Second, suppose that we want to say about a concept that it is a concept. Then third, every attempt to say that *X* is a concept results in a violation of the distinction between concept and object, and the resulting sentence is nonsense.

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<sup>41</sup> Geach 1976, 68; my emphases.

<sup>42</sup> Frege 1995, 182, 184, 193. Joan Weiner (1989, 115 and passim) and Kelly Dean Jolley (2007, 1-3, 74) have followed Frege's suggestion that 'hinting' can solve the problem of the obstacle even further, holding that hinting can show that there is no obstacle in the first place. But if Frege's hints have to be used, there is something that cannot be said in an ordinary way, hence there is something that is ineffable—but this is precisely what the obstacle says. The commitment to hinting is a commitment to (DI), and that presupposes the obstacle. And therefore the elaboration on Frege's hints cannot 'dissolve' the obstacle.

Therefore, fourth, it cannot be said that  $X$  is a concept, since every attempt to say this would insert the concept  $X$  into an object place, and that would lead to the violation and hence nonsense. However, fifth, nonetheless the resulting nonsensical sentence of the attempt to say that  $X$  is a concept can effectively hint that  $X$  is an object.

We have now arrived at a presentation of (DI) that is clearer and much more complete than the original one. According to this doctrine, nonsense arises if one tries to put these apparently ineffable but not uncommunicable features into instances of communication. There are different reformulations and revisions of (DI), sometimes, as already indicated above, the word ‘hinting’ is substituted for another verb, sometimes the word ‘ineffable,’ sometimes ‘features,’ etc. The core of this doctrine, its structure or form, so to speak, remains the same through all these merely terminological substitutions, however.

For now, it seems that it is possible to communicate, in some sense (i.e. by hinting), otherwise ineffable things that, although they cannot be communicated with meaningful sentences, *strictly speaking*—and nonsense follows if it is attempted to do that anyways—by providing hints. Is this the solution to Frege’s obstacle? Can this solve the problem that there is supposedly ‘something’ that is impossible to be part of a successful instance of meaningful communication? If it were the solution, it would not be completely beyond our reach, since one could apparently hint at what this—unthinkable, unsayable, and unknowable—‘something’ is. One might call such a position *the Fregean view*: the view that there are features of reality that cannot be communicated (said) with proper language (meaningful sentences), but communicated (shown) with improper language (nonsense).<sup>43</sup>

So the question is if the key, needed to make the communication, especially ‘showing’ of the supposed ‘something’—the ineffable features of reality—happening, is to already be found in the writings of Frege. Can (DI) solve the

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<sup>43</sup> The Fregean view, as summarized here, has been defended by some influential philosophers: Anscombe (1971), Black (1964), Geach (1976), Hacker (1976, 2000); Kenny (2006), and Pears (1987).

problem of Frege's unavoidable obstacle, which language presumably has, by using apparently paradoxical but ultimately nonsensical sentences to communicate ineffable 'insights'?

If Frege's original proposal can not already do the trick, maybe it was Wittgenstein who gave an extended and repaired version of the Fregean view? Can this version overcome paradox and nonsense? I now turn to the suggestion that it can.

### **Saying and showing**

It is one of the characteristic features of Wittgenstein's philosophical style that he seldom gives references, but Frege is one of the few exceptions to the rule. Thus in the preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes that 'to the great works of Frege [...] I owe in large measure the stimulation of my thoughts.'<sup>44</sup> Thus we indeed find some evidence that Wittgenstein dealt with Frege's philosophical work already in the preface of the *Tractatus*. And that, for Wittgenstein, probably meant that he was primarily concerned with the *problems* Frege was entangled in—since Wittgenstein claims in the preface that his book deals with 'the philosophical *problems*.'<sup>45</sup> So is there a substantial way in which the works of Frege are crucial for an understanding of the *Tractatus*? How far does the 'stimulation' of Wittgenstein's thoughts go? Might Wittgenstein even reinforce Fregean *doctrines*?

To G. E. M. Anscombe it has clearly appeared that way. Anscombe even goes so far as to claim that it is *only* against the Fregean background that one is in a position to understand Wittgenstein's thoughts. As Anscombe puts it,

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has captured the interest and excited the admiration of many, yet almost all that has been published about it has been *wildly irrelevant*. If this has had any one cause, that cause has been the neglect of Frege. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein assumes, and does not try to stimulate, an interest in the kind of questions that Frege wrote about. Wittgenstein's relative estimate of Fre-

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<sup>44</sup> *TLP*, preface.

<sup>45</sup> *TLP*, preface; my emphasis.

ge comes out in the acknowledgment he makes in the Preface to the *Tractatus*.<sup>46</sup>

So when Anscombe published her book on the *Tractatus* at the end of the nineteen-fifties, surely one of her main aims was to put forward a view that encapsulates the insights Wittgenstein learned from Frege.<sup>47</sup>

Another philosopher who has highlighted the importance of Frege's writings and their influence on Wittgenstein is Peter T. Geach. Geach is even more explicit about the estimate of Frege's influence on Wittgenstein. Thus he writes, in a similar vein to Anscombe,

[R]eflection upon 'the great works of Frege' [...] can never be out of place for anybody who seriously wants to understand Wittgenstein [...]. The influence of Frege on Wittgenstein was pervasive and lifelong, and it is not of course just confined to places where Frege is mentioned by name or overtly referred to [...]. [F]undamental aspects of the Wittgensteinian saying/showing contrast are already to be discerned in Frege's writings.<sup>48</sup>

According to Geach then, what we find in Wittgenstein is in fact a further elaboration of Fregean themes. Now the pressing question is precisely what insights are the crucial ones that Wittgenstein learned from Frege. The answer Geach gives is the 'saying/showing contrast,' which is Geach's preferred terminology for what Frege calls 'hinting.' And as we have seen above, in Geach's reading of this, it is intertwined with the doctrine of ineffability (DI). Thus, if the core of Geach's suggestion is that one can find in Wittgenstein's book the reappearance of this doctrine, and, essentially, that (DI) can be used to make room for a way out of the Fregean paradox—the paradox that the formulation of a philosophical theory forces one to lapse into nonsense—which Geach and others find reappearing in Wittgenstein's saying, in the penultimate passage of the *Tractatus*, that his sentences are to be recognized as nonsense—what I earlier called the *Tractarian difficulty*.

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<sup>46</sup> Anscombe 1971, 12; my emphases.

<sup>47</sup> As much can be inferred from Anscombe's preface and the constant references to Frege throughout her book (1971, 12-17 and *passim*). Another example of a commentator who highlights Frege's influence on Wittgenstein in the way Anscombe does is Kenny (1974, chap. 2).

<sup>48</sup> Geach 1976, 55.



Apart from Anscombe and Geach, P. M. S. Hacker is one of the most vehement defenders of such a view. Let's hear him on this alleged Fregean/Wittgensteinian 'paradox,' and the supposed way out of it:

Wittgenstein's remark that whoever understands him will recognize that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense [...] was greeted by philosophers with incredulous indignation. In his preface Russell observed that 'after all Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said'. Black, like Russell, cannot doubt that we understand the book and learn much from it, so there must be *some way out* of this *paradox*.<sup>49</sup>

The 'way out,' according to Black's suggestion, is again to use the distinction between saying and showing—i.e. to resurrect (DI) in new clothes—to account for the apparent feature of nonsense to be understandable and to be able, in some sense, to communicate 'something' (even 'much' or 'a great deal') more:

He suggests that we may concede that if communication is equated exclusively with 'saying' then the *Tractatus* communicates nothing. Nevertheless there is, according to the *Tractatus* itself, *much that can be shown* even if it cannot be said. Hence, surely, the *Tractatus shows a great deal*, and this is salvageable.<sup>50</sup>

Note that there can be no disagreement about the fact that there is a significant number of sentences in the *Tractatus* in which the topic of a distinction between saying and showing is present (anyone who would deny that fact would probably have to see an eye specialist or a shrink).<sup>51</sup> The disagreement, instead, is about the question whether the *mere occurrence* of these sentences should be read as Wittgenstein's *endorsement* and elaboration of apparent doctrines that Frege wanted to embrace, *or* if Wittgenstein dealt with these sentences as the expression of a philosophical *problem* or confusion?

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<sup>49</sup> Hacker 1986, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Hacker 1986, 25; my emphases.

<sup>51</sup> The following are the most striking of these sentences. '[Philosophy] will signify what *cannot be said*, by presenting clearly what can be said' (*TLP*, 4.115; my emphasis). 'What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said' (4.1212; emphases in the original). '[W]hat the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest' (5.62; emphases in the original). 'If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: There are laws of nature. But of course that *cannot be said*: it makes itself *manifest*' (6.36; my emphases).

Although Hacker argues that Black's reading of the distinction in this passage 'is mistaken,' he nevertheless wants to capture the suggestion to resurrect (DI) from Black's proposal, whereby (DI) is now described as the claim that nonsense can (somehow) have a 'meaning' that can (somehow) be grasped:

Wittgenstein was quite correct and consistent; the *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseudo-propositions. Of course, *what Wittgenstein meant by these remarks [...] is, in his view, quite correct, only it cannot be said.* Apparently what someone *means* or intends by a remark can be grasped even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense.<sup>52</sup>

But what is it supposed to mean that someone can mean something that is correct but cannot be said? Hacker himself seems to be quite puzzled by this, as his careful use of the word 'apparently' to formulate his next sentence shows. Nevertheless, this doesn't lead Hacker to question his ascription of this paradoxical view to the *Tractatus*, and even years later, Hacker's aim still is (in order to find a way out of the Fregean/Wittgensteinian paradox, which is apparently embedded in the Tractarian difficulty) to defend (DI)—the ideology of hinting ineffable features—and add to it another doctrine, '[t]he doctrine of what cannot be said but only shown'—what he rightly acknowledges to be a rather 'baffling doctrine.'<sup>53</sup> And this doctrine is clearly understood to be a descendent of Frege's distinction between the use of language proper and the use of language to give 'hints.'<sup>54</sup>

The attraction of the doctrine of saying and showing is easy to explain. If combined with (DI), it constitutes (if it could be successful) a general solution to

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<sup>52</sup> Hacker 1986, 26; my emphases.

<sup>53</sup> Hacker 2000, 355. Hacker (2000, 353-355) lists ten items as examples of 'something' that cannot be said but only shown, according to this doctrine, which are supposed to encompass the topics of all of the sentences of the *Tractatus*: (1) the harmony between thought, language, and reality (the logical form between a proposition and reality); (2) semantics (the meaning of a symbol and the sense of a proposition); (3) logical relations between propositions (the internal relations between constituents of propositions); (4) internal properties and relations of things and situations; (5) categorial features of things and type classifications (that a certain thing belongs to a given category or is of a certain type); (6) the limits of thought; (7) the limits of reality and the logical structure of the world; (8) metaphysical principles of natural science (that there are laws of nature); (9) metaphysics of experience (what the solipsist means, that there is no soul, no Cartesian soul-substance, and so on); (10) ethics, aesthetics, and religion.

<sup>54</sup> See Conant 2000, 2001, 2002.

every single one of ‘the problems of philosophy.’ And this is why this combination of the two doctrines, an idea which has its roots in the readings of Anscombe, Geach, and Hacker, remains influential today in the secondary literature on the *Tractatus*.<sup>55</sup> The solution, for every given philosophical problem *X*, is to hold that this is something that ‘cannot be said,’ but only ‘shown.’<sup>56</sup> But the price for this solution is high: it leads to the puzzle that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are said to be both nonsense and true.<sup>57</sup> This result is indeed outrageous, and has to be circumvented—a task that I’ll execute in the next chapter, by giving an alternative reading.<sup>58</sup>

Here is the saying/showing distinction in summarized form:

Saying: Sentences *say* what they mean.

Showing: Sentences *show* what they cannot say.

The *doctrine of saying and showing* (DSS) can be summed up as follows: Apart from *saying* what sentences mean, they can also *show* what they cannot say.

According to Hacker’s account, this doctrine specifies what can and cannot be thought (everything that can and cannot be said/shown); it thus gives the limits of thought, and what fails to meet the criteria for being said or shown lies beyond these limits thus drawn, and ‘it’ is therefore nonsensical and ineffable.

Hacker thinks that if he were able to explain how the *Tractatus* could itself *show* a doctrine that makes it plausible that there are things that cannot be said but only *shown*, this would explain (i) why the *Tractatus* itself cannot say the things he can only *show*, and also (ii) why Wittgenstein acknowledges that his propositions are nonsense that nevertheless shows what they cannot say.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Not only in textbooks and introductions to the *Tractatus*, like Michael Morris’s recent work (2008), but also in papers from Wittgenstein scholars, for instance Marie McGinn’s reading (2001).

<sup>56</sup> Morris 2008, 337 and passim.

<sup>57</sup> Morris 2008, 346-347.

<sup>58</sup> See chapter 2, where I discuss Ramsey’s and Ayer’s reaction to this puzzle.

<sup>59</sup> I’ll come back later to this doctrine when I consider White’s project, which can be seen to be analogous to Hacker’s at least in two respects. To anticipate, White too has the aim of rehabilitating the (DSS). Furthermore, White’s reason for doing so, too, is that he wants to explain the

Furthermore, this would solve the ‘old’ problem of the Fregean—and now Wittgensteinian—paradox.

But the success of the employment of (DSS) comes at a price. If the method of the *Tractatus* is to show what cannot be said (because it lies beyond the limits of thought), it unavoidably leads to the uncomfortable conclusion that the propositions of the book themselves lie on the other side of the limits of thought, and the method is therefore itself nonsensical, as Hacker himself acknowledges:

[T]he philosophical method practised *in* the *Tractatus* (as opposed to the method preached *by* the *Tractatus*) is not strictly the correct one. The *Tractatus* does not set a limit to thought by a clear presentation of what can be said. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are not clarifications of ordinary empirical propositions. On the contrary, they are, as Wittgenstein pointed out in the penultimate remark of the book, nonsensical pseudo-propositions. A critique of the kind constituted by the *Tractatus* itself would have to stand, as it were, on both sides of the limits of the thinkable. Such a critique could not possibly make sense. What then is its rationale? What point can such nonsense have?<sup>60</sup>

A nonsensical doctrine that shows that it is a nonsensical doctrine? Let’s just say, for anyone who feels like this proposal is a confusion rather than a solution, there are other options one can choose about how to read Wittgenstein, one of which I’ll develop shortly.<sup>61</sup>

It is not obvious if (DSS) can handle the Tractarian difficulty successfully. Apart from this exegetical puzzle, there are further, and even more pressing, respects in which (DSS) is philosophically deeply troubling. For instance, there is the puzzle that arises out of Hacker’s commitment to the picture that certain actions (the use of certain sentences, attempts to entertain certain thoughts, etc.) ‘will unavoidably violate the bounds of sense, misuse language, and produce

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*Tractatus* as a book that shows what cannot be said. Therefore, Hacker and White face the same difficult question: How can nonsense convey anything (other than that it is nonsense)?

<sup>60</sup> Hacker 1986, 24-25.

<sup>61</sup> For a defense of the Anscombian reading of the saying and showing distinction, see Cheung 2008. As our discussion of the distinction shows, I don’t think that his defense is successful.

nonsense.’<sup>62</sup> What’s the status of such actions? For the sake of argument, let’s say I’ve said  $p$ , and  $p$  lies beyond the limits of thought. Now we stipulate further that  $p$  shows some insight that cannot be said. Take one of the above examples from the *Tractatus*: ‘There are laws of nature.’<sup>63</sup> So,

$p$  = There are laws of nature.

That there are laws of nature cannot be said. But, that there are laws of nature can be shown. Now hasn’t what apparently cannot be said but only shown (that there are laws of nature) been said already, just now? Of course one might reply that ‘There are laws of nature’ is on a pair with ‘wrks swrk krws.’ But then again what would it mean to say that something exactly like ‘wrks swrk krws’ cannot be said?

Thus one of the most pressing issues with the doctrine of saying and showing, in which the puzzling nature of Hacker’s commitment becomes most pressing, is that it depends on the schema ‘ $p$  cannot be said but only be shown,’ i.e. it appears that the successful showing of what cannot be said presupposes saying what allegedly cannot be said—thus the schema says exactly what cannot be said.<sup>64</sup> For in order to make plausible the claim that  $p$  cannot be said but only shown, the doctrine has to give an account of what it actually is that saying  $p$  would amount to. But, remember that if  $p$  is nonsense and cannot be said, it lies beyond the limits of thought, and it follows from this that  $p$  would be unthinkable.

Do the doctrine’s evasive formulations, such as that it is only supposed to enable us to ‘*apprehend* [...] what *cannot* be said,’ help?<sup>65</sup> Well, it depends on what one means by ‘apprehend.’ In the way Hacker seems to want to use it, it

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<sup>62</sup> Hacker 1986, 21.

<sup>63</sup> *TLP*, 6.36.

<sup>64</sup> Here are two of Hacker’s examples (1986, 21-22) that exhibit this structure clearly: ‘The logical syntax of colour names *shows* that spatial objects, but not auditory ones, *can* be coloured. Of course, on this view, it makes no sense to say that red is a colour—that is something *shown* by the logical syntax of colour names. The general concept of colour is the common form of unanalysable colours, hence represented in a logically perspicuous notation by a variable. [...] That there are infinitely many objects (Russell’s “axiom of infinity”) cannot be said, but it would be shown by the existence of infinitely many names with different meanings.’

<sup>65</sup> Hacker 1986, 22; my emphases.

definitely appears to describe a process *akin* to thinking. Maybe a fruitful suggestion would be to think of these apparently unthinkable thoughts as something along the lines of a ‘quasi-kind of thought’? Or similarly, might it help to suggest, as we have seen Hacker do at another point, that ‘what someone *means* or intends by a remark can be *grasped* even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense’?<sup>66</sup> Or maybe to use the word ‘grasping’ instead of ‘apprehending’ might even be a better idea? Can these formulations evade the problem at hand? Can they explain the apparent sense in which the doctrine’s stating of what cannot be said but only shown presupposes that what can only be shown indeed can be said—which would, quite obviously, lead the doctrine into incoherence? Are the terminological variations potent enough to explain how we can apparently reach beyond the limits of thought and get a hold of the unthinkable?

There are strong reasons for thinking that they cannot. This comes out clearly in the fact that if (DSS) is pushed, it commits one to the thought that showing is an instance of saying ‘quasi-propositional’ content. A good example is John Koethe, who is most explicit about putting forward such a view: ‘Showing, in my view, [...] is a kind of second-rate saying.’<sup>67</sup> But this brings the view to a paradox, since it would amount to saying

$p$  cannot be said, but  $p$  can be quasi-said

and equally

$p$  cannot be thought, but  $p$  can be quasi-thought.

But this seems to be too much of a retreat to philosophical trickery to avoid biting the bullet that

if  $p$  cannot be said,  $p$  cannot be said

and equally

if  $p$  cannot be thought,  $p$  cannot be thought.

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<sup>66</sup> Hacker 1986, 26; my emphases.

<sup>67</sup> Koethe 1996, 39.

Of course such remarks are only helpful for the philosophically diseased, so to speak. It is not that such remarks make deep points about something that cannot be said or thought. Rather, these remarks themselves say nothing, but they also show nothing too. They resemble some of Wittgenstein's quite tautological remarks, such as 'what cannot be expressed we do not express'<sup>68</sup> or 'thought can never be of anything illogical, since, if it were, we should have to think illogically.'<sup>69</sup> Thought can never be of anything unthinkable, since that would require thinking what cannot be thought, which is something that Wittgenstein rejects early in the preface of his book.

In the *Tractatus*, there are passages in which the distinction between saying and showing is present, just as there are tautological remarks such as the one just quoted—which bite the bullet that one cannot say what cannot be said, cannot think what cannot be thought, and also cannot, with the help of any trick one might believe there to be, circumvent this and get a hold of the unsayable, etc.—as well as metaphilosophical and methodological remarks.<sup>70</sup> I opt to read those passages featuring talk about saying and showing in light of those passages featuring talk about the method and the aim of the book, since not only will doing otherwise lead into a philosophical deadlock, but highlighting the metaphilosophical and methodological remarks also leads to a superior reading of the *Tractatus*.<sup>71</sup> Thus, I want to show that the mere appearance of talk about saying and showing mustn't convince one into thinking that Wittgenstein wants to embrace such a doctrine as Hacker has claimed to have found in that book,<sup>72</sup> since highlighting the methodological remarks explains how the *Tractatus* even undermines the doctrine of saying and showing—which is, as Michael Kremer has

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<sup>68</sup> Wittgenstein 1998b, 52, 27.5.1915; hereafter cited as *NB*.

<sup>69</sup> *TLP*, 3.03.

<sup>70</sup> *TLP* remarks about saying and showing: 4.115, 4.1212, 5.62, 6.36. *TLP* remarks about metaphilosophical and methodological remarks: preface, 3.322-3.328, 4.003, 4.112, 4.114, 5.473-5.4733, 6.53-7.

<sup>71</sup> Demonstrating that reading the remarks featuring talk about saying and showing to contain a doctrine leads to such a deadlock is the aim of chapter 2, which paradigmatically deals with Hacker's account as an account that argues that there is a doctrine of saying and showing to be found in these passages. Proving that the reading that results if one highlights the metaphilosophical and methodological remarks is a superior reading of the *Tractatus* is the aim of this thesis as a whole, and in this sense every chapter deals with this task.

<sup>72</sup> Hacker 2000, 353-355.

convincingly argued, supported by Wittgenstein's saying in the preface that he thinks he has solved all problems 'in essentials,' combined with the fact that in a letter written after the *Tractatus*, he wrote that the distinction between saying and showing is the fundamental *problem* of philosophy.<sup>73</sup> Thus it seems more likely that he targets the distinction in his book as a philosophical problem, rather than putting it forward as a doctrine. And therefore, it is reasonable to highlight those aspects in Wittgenstein's book.<sup>74</sup>

One might think that only commentators interested in exegesis of Wittgenstein (like Anscombe, Geach, and Hacker) are led to claim such a paradoxical doctrine lies at the heart of the *Tractatus*, but this is not the case. For instance, earlier in this chapter, we saw Priest arguing that Frege's theory leads him to an 'embarrassment.'<sup>75</sup> And after having given us his picture of Frege as 'embarrassed' of the shortcomings of his own nonsensical theory, Priest as well notes Frege's 'important influence' on Wittgenstein,<sup>76</sup> and he too begins to read Wittgenstein's book by ascribing to him an embarrassing, self-stultifying paradoxical project: to defend a theory that entails its own nonsensicality (by the lights of the very nonsensical theory).<sup>77</sup>

To summarize this section, the first point is that a reading of Wittgenstein that is developed along the lines of a reading of Frege—and inspired by a certain view of Fregean doctrines à la Geach, Hacker, and Priest—essentially depends on a combination of the doctrine of ineffability and the doctrine of the distinction between saying and showing. But these doctrines leave the *Tractatus* in a devastated state.<sup>78</sup> And thus the second point of this discussion is to question the reading of Wittgenstein that results from such an approach.

The Fregean view has become increasingly criticized since the late

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<sup>73</sup> Kremer 2001.

<sup>74</sup> See Kremer 2001, 2007, 2013. See *TLP*, preface, 4.112.

<sup>75</sup> See the section of this thesis on Frege.

<sup>76</sup> 'Frege's writings were an important influence on the early Wittgenstein' (Priest 1995, 202-203).

<sup>77</sup> Priest finds 'several doctrines' (1995, 208) in the *Tractatus*, which he furthermore construes as being paradoxical theories (1995, 209-211).

<sup>78</sup> Whether a reading along these lines can be defended nonetheless is still a matter of controversy. For a recent defense, see White 2011.



1980s.<sup>79</sup> We now turn to Wittgenstein once more, to see if there is an alternative view to be found.

## **Wittgenstein**

Geach, Hacker, and others think that ‘Wittgenstein revised Frege’s views without unfaithfulness to Frege’s spirit.’<sup>80</sup> But we have seen that what I called the Fregean view has its flaws, and if this view captures Wittgenstein’s reaction to Frege correctly, it raises the question of whether it is really the correct reading of Wittgenstein.<sup>81</sup> However, this section only gives a preliminary answer, since it is the task of the next part of this chapter to give a detailed account of the solution embedded in the *Tractatus*.

What I have described as the Fregean reading exhibits what Conant calls the ‘doctrinal schema,’ according to which, where the early Wittgenstein wants to claim a theory  $p$ , the later Wittgenstein replaces it with the opposite theory  $\text{not-}p$ .<sup>82</sup> One of the core points that emerged from the criticisms of the Fregean view is that Wittgenstein’s commitment to an anti-theoretical conception of philosophy is of crucial importance. As he puts it, ‘[p]hilosophy is not a theory but an activity.’<sup>83</sup> Thus, I reject the doctrinal schema. But this straightforward rejection of philosophy as an enterprise to arrive at a theory has often been over-

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<sup>79</sup> For a devastating criticism of what I call the Fregean view, see Diamond (1991) and Conant (1989a, 1989b, 1991, 2002).

<sup>80</sup> Geach 1976, 68. Ian Proops (2013, 96) argues that Wittgenstein derived ‘his views on the inexpressibility [i.e. ineffability] of logical category distinctions and the say/show distinction from Frege.’

<sup>81</sup> It is important to note that the rejection of the Fregean view does not entail a commitment to the rejection of the assumption that Wittgenstein did agree with Frege on some points. In fact, the view defended here embraces that there are some moments of agreement, but they are understood radically differently from the account given by the Fregean view.

<sup>82</sup> Conant (2007, 37) originally puts the doctrinal schema thus: ‘The *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are both trying to answer the same philosophical questions, but in each case in which early Wittgenstein aimed to show that the answer to a given philosophical question was  $p$ , later Wittgenstein aims to refute his earlier self and show instead that the answer to the question is really  $\text{not } p$ .’ Anthony Kenny, in his book *Wittgenstein* (2006, 173, 183), seems to disagree with readings that exhibit such a schema, when he writes that ‘[T]here grew up the idea that Wittgenstein had fathered two wholly dissimilar and disconnected philosophies. [...] [T]his view is too simple. There are many connections between the earlier and the later work, and many assumptions common to both. [...] [T]he likenesses [of the *Investigations*] to the *Tractatus* are as important as the unlikenesses.’ His account nevertheless exhibits the schema when he reads Wittgenstein as putting forward a philosophical theory in both his works.

<sup>83</sup> *TLP*, 4.112.

looked; most prominently, a so-called ‘picture theory’ has often been ascribed to the *Tractatus*.<sup>84</sup> The main point of such a theory is that, just like a toy car can be used to represent a regular car, and thus could depict a situation where (for instance) a regular car hits somebody, language is supposed to be able to ‘picture’ the world. As such, this analogy seems innocent enough, so what is the problem? What is wrong with such a theory?

The bottom line of the problem with this theory is that it becomes self-undermining, since ‘[a]nyone who has grasped the principles of the picture theory should understand that the propositions of the *Tractatus* do not comply with them.’<sup>85</sup> What this suggests, however, is that (i) one would first have to grasp the sentences that propound a theory, which (ii) then entails that the very sentences that propound the theory are nonsense. Does that even make sense?

It doesn’t. When Wittgenstein rejects philosophical theorizing, it is fair enough to think that he *already* attacks (i) the lynchpin of the postulation of a theory (of meaning) that violates its own conditions, and (ii) the doctrine of ineffable features of reality that cannot be said but only be shown, viz. the doctrine of ineffability, which the Fregean view attempts to use as a solution to the problem posed by (i). Wittgenstein’s bottom line against (ii) is rough-and-ready: ‘What can be said [...] can be said,’ and ‘[w]hat cannot be expressed we do not express.’<sup>86</sup>

Wittgenstein rejects (ii) on the basis of his insight that the philosopher’s task, i.e. to solve the problems of philosophy, is not achieved through the development of a further philosophical theory, but instead through the development

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<sup>84</sup> For instance, Irving Copi finds the ‘picture theory of meaning’ to be among ‘Wittgenstein’s doctrines’ (1958, 146, 147, and *passim*). For further examples of such a reading, see the papers collected in Copi and Beard 2006.

<sup>85</sup> Frascolla 2007, 219.

<sup>86</sup> *TLP*, preface; *NB*, 52, 27.5.1915. Conant (2002, 380) argues that his ‘central claim’ is that ‘Wittgenstein saw a tension in Frege’s thought between two conceptions of nonsense, which I shall call the *substantial conception*, and the *austere conception*, respectively.’ Since, according to this analysis, the ‘substantial conception’ has its roots in Frege and is rejected by Wittgenstein in favor of the ‘austere conception,’ I call the former the *Fregean conception* and the latter the *Wittgensteinian conception*.

of a new philosophical activity: the clarification of thoughts.<sup>87</sup> And this activity is precisely supposed not to be another form of philosophical theorizing. Wittgenstein's point seems to be that philosophical theorizing is an inherently doomed and therefore failed 'project'<sup>88</sup>—and this, of course, also applies to a philosophical theory that postulates ineffable insights.<sup>89</sup>

This move is an integral part of Wittgenstein's solution to the problems of philosophy. And he is certain that his solution has been successful; as he puts it in the *Tractatus's* preface, he is of the opinion that, with his book, 'the problems have in essentials been finally solved.'<sup>90</sup>

The result of this solution is the recognition that we often mistakenly believe that some sentences have been given a determinate meaning, although we did no such thing—which makes those sentences nothing more than nonsensical lines on paper.<sup>91</sup> It is crucial to note that this is not to be confused with the recognition that some propositions violate the rules of a theory of meaning. In the Wittgensteinian view, signs are nonsensical if and only if we have failed to confer any meaning on them, which he further elaborates as *not having used* them.<sup>92</sup>

Thus one of the most characteristic features of Wittgenstein's account is its stance towards what a failure to mean something is. Accordingly, there is only one form of nonsense: sentences which make simply no sense—that is, which are 'simply nonsense,' as the preface puts it, or 'plain,' 'mere,' 'garden-variety,' or 'austere' nonsense (or whatever formulation one prefers).<sup>93</sup>

However, it is crucial to note here that this does not rule out the fact that it may *appear* as if there were different kinds of nonsense, and that nonsense

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<sup>87</sup> *TLP*, preface, 4.112.

<sup>88</sup> See *TLP*, 4.003.

<sup>89</sup> This is a point made by Conant and Diamond (2004, 47-48).

<sup>90</sup> *TLP*, preface.

<sup>91</sup> *TLP*, 3.23, 3.323, 4.003.

<sup>92</sup> *TLP*, 5.473-5.4733.

<sup>93</sup> *TLP*, preface, 5.4733, 6.53. Glock (2004) disagrees with this point. Glock argues, as the title of his paper already indicates, that there are 'all kinds of nonsense.' A criticism of Glock's view comes from Edmund Dain (2006, 2008). I think Dain's objection is successful.

often has the *appearance* of being meaningful.<sup>94</sup> Accordingly, nonsense has psychologically different effects, but that doesn't show that there are forms of nonsense different than simple nonsense. Especially, Wittgenstein is committed to the claim that nonsense cannot show anything—though he maintains that it can *elucidate*. However, 'elucidating' here means only that one recognizes that it is nonsense, and nothing over and above that.<sup>95</sup>

Needless to say, it follows from the rejection of the project to establish a philosophical theory in general that the project to establish in particular a theory of meaning that demarcates the limits of thought is also understood to result in necessary failure.<sup>96</sup> According to Wittgenstein, the *Tractatus* is precisely such an attempt to prove the above claim to be true: the claim that *any* philosophical theorizing fails.<sup>97</sup>

However, there is the question why the *Tractatus* has had, for many readers (at least initially), the *appearance* of a philosophical theory, if its aim is precisely to show that such theorizing fails. Can Wittgenstein's answer—that his book uses nonsensical propositions to elucidate that the sentences that appear this way are nonsensical because they have not been used, have not been assigned a determinate meaning—be of help here?

Maybe one could draw a comparison between the sentences of Wittgenstein's book to a syllogism of the form 'A is B, B is C, hence A is C.'<sup>98</sup> Just as a syllogism of this form is completely empty of content unless A, B, and C are given a meaning, the nonsensical sentences of Wittgenstein's book are completely empty of content, because the meaning of the sentences is not being determined.

It appears that Carnap puts forward a view that has taken up this sugges-

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<sup>94</sup> See Diamond 1991, 2000.

<sup>95</sup> Conant 2007; *TLP*, 5.4733, 6.54. I will give a more detailed review of the different conceptions of nonsense later in this chapter.

<sup>96</sup> Since the theory of meaning that allegedly can be found in the book consists of nonsensical sentences, in order to establish the theory, one would have to assign a meaning to those sentences; but this would turn them into more than mere nonsense.

<sup>97</sup> See *TLP*, 4.003, 4.112, 6.53-7.

<sup>98</sup> As James Conant has pointed out to me in personal communication.

tion.<sup>99</sup> There is, according to him, one kind of nonsense that has a logical form, although it consists of meaningless signs. The next section raises some questions for the resulting account. If nonsense shares with meaningful sentences that both have a logical form, isn't there a way in which one can, somehow, make sense of nonsense after all? How could one otherwise recognize the logical form? But wouldn't that be paradoxical? This is a worry that will follow our investigations in the next chapters.

## **Carnap**

According to Carnap, it is the primary philosophical task to develop a 'logical syntax,' given by a formal 'theory of language,' which is understood to be a 'theory of meaning.'<sup>100</sup> Carnap describes his underlying analysis of language thus:

A language consists of a vocabulary and syntax, i.e. a set of words that have meanings, and rules of sentence formation. These rules indicate how sentences may be formed out of the various sorts of words. Accordingly, there are *two kinds* of pseudo-statements: either they contain a word which is erroneously believed to have meaning, or the constituent words are meaningful, yet are put together in a counter-syntactical way, so that they do not yield a meaningful statement.<sup>101</sup>

Carnap's analysis of language into words which have (or lack) meaning (semantics) and the rules for their combination (syntax) leads him to acknowledge that there are 'two kinds of pseudo-statements': (i) sentences in which one or more constituents lack meaning, and (ii) sentences in which all constituents have meaning, but their combination violates the rules of logical syntax. In the second case, it is a result of Carnap's view of language that *what* the individual words mean can *clash*, so to speak, such that the combination of these meanings produces pseudo-statements. One of his examples of such a pseudo-statement is the sentence 'The Nothing exists,' which he says 'must be rejected for *two* reasons.'

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<sup>99</sup> For the influence of Carnap, see Conant 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Carnap 1963, 13, 29. The idea of a 'total language' also features in Carnap's contemplations a couple of times (e.g. 1963, 33). But, to anticipate, this notion of *totality* leads into Russell's paradox, as we'll see in a number of places later on.

<sup>101</sup> Carnap 1959, 61; my emphases.

The first is that it involves ‘the error using the word “nothing” as a noun,’ but he thinks that there is also a second reason:

[I]n addition it involves a contradiction. Even if it were admissible to introduce ‘nothing’ as a name or description of an entity, still the existence of this entity would be denied in its very definition, whereas [the] sentence goes on to affirm its existence. This sentence, therefore, would be contradictory, hence absurd, even if it were not already meaningless.<sup>102</sup>

Let’s take a close look at this second reason for why something can be a meaningless pseudo-statement. How can Carnap know that the sentence would be contradictory if it wouldn’t be nonsensical? It appears that the sentence is more than just simply nonsense, since otherwise why could it be known that it would be contradictory if it weren’t nonsense? Knowing what the sentence would mean if it weren’t nonsense presupposes that there is a way in which one can understand what the sentence means already. There is simply a tension between (i) saying that a sentence is meaningless, and (ii) nevertheless saying what it would mean if it were meaningful.

Carnap derives his conviction that (much of) traditional philosophy consists of meaningless pseudo-statements from Wittgenstein. Furthermore, Carnap takes himself also to have inherited from Wittgenstein a whole new and radically distinctive outlook on what the nature of philosophy is, what philosophical problems are, and how they arise. Thus Carnap writes:

[An] influential idea of Wittgenstein’s was the insight that many philosophical sentences, especially in traditional metaphysics, are pseudo-sentences, devoid of cognitive content. I found Wittgenstein’s view on this point close to the one I had previously developed under the influence of anti-metaphysical scientists and philosophers. I had recognized that many of these sentences and questions originate in a misuse of language and a violation of logic. Under the influence of Wittgenstein, this conception was strengthened and became more definite and

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<sup>102</sup> Carnap 1959, 71.

more radical.<sup>103</sup>

This passage clearly shows that what Carnap takes himself to be doing is agreeing with much of what he takes Wittgenstein to be saying in the *Tractatus*. But when Carnap highlights the task of constructing a theory of meaning or language that establishes what he calls an ‘ideal language’ (an inheritance of Frege’s task), he notices a tension in his understanding of Wittgenstein’s book.<sup>104</sup> The tension can be clearly felt in Carnap’s writings. Consider this passage:

When we [the members of the so-called Vienna Circle] found in Wittgenstein’s book statements about ‘the language’, we interpreted them as referring to an ideal language; and this meant for us a formalized symbolic language. He had a skeptical and sometimes even a negative view of the importance of a symbolic language for the clarification and correction of the confusions in ordinary language and also in the customary language of philosophers which, as he had shown himself, were often the cause of philosophical puzzles and pseudo-problems.<sup>105</sup>

Carnap here openly concedes that Wittgenstein (the person) disagreed with Carnap’s (and the Vienna Circle’s) reading of Wittgenstein’s book (the *Tractatus*). While Carnap gave importance to the development of a philosophical theory that would establish an ‘ideal language’ (as we have seen him say just now), he acknowledges that such a project seemed alien to Wittgenstein. This is a difference between Carnap’s and Wittgenstein’s views that is absolutely crucial to note.

So according to Carnap, the development of a theory of meaning is supposed to permit the task of establishing an ideal language, what I called Frege’s task. If the theory is established, Carnap thinks, its job is to delimit meaningful sentences from meaningless pseudo-sentences. However, the amount of sentences that turn out to be meaningless pseudo-sentences according to the theory is *much* higher than one might have assumed before the theory was found.

Most famously, according to Carnap, violation of the rules of the theory

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<sup>103</sup> Carnap 1963, 25.

<sup>104</sup> Carnap 1969, 29.

<sup>105</sup> Carnap 1963, 29.

mean that the propositions of aesthetics, ethics, logic, mathematics, metaphysics, and semantics—and even of the theory itself, as we will see shortly—turn out to be nonsensical.<sup>106</sup>

The Carnapian moral is that, after language has been ‘cleansed’ by the appropriate theory of meaning, no nonsensical propositions are left, and hence everything that can be said will be meaningful. Whatever else one might have thought could be said, has not been around at all anyway. Couldn’t that be the message of the final passage of Wittgenstein’s book? Accordingly, the silence that Wittgenstein is alluding to is not a silence *about* anything, but an *empty* one—completely devoid of any content whatsoever.<sup>107</sup>

Carnap faces a devastating outcome, however. Unfortunately, after the theory of meaning has been applied, it turns out that even the very propositions that put forward the theory in the first place are also nonsensical. As Carnap puts it, the theory ‘has clearly overstepped th[e] boundary.’<sup>108</sup> But how can a theory conclude that its own sentences are nonsense? And if the sentences that put forward the theory really are nonsense, how could they convey the theory in the first place? It is difficult to imagine an answer to these questions that would be philosophically satisfying. It is a conclusion that is hardly sustainable. To conclude that one’s own theory consists of nonsensical sentences seems to come at too high a price: self-refutation.

Carnap nevertheless thinks that he can give a convincing answer to these questions. He thinks that he can avoid the daunting conclusion that the propositions that put forward the theory of meaning are nonsensical, by proposing a solution to the very problem that makes it necessary to state the disturbing conclusion in the first place. His proposal is, in short, to invent a *hierarchy* of languages, according to which it should be possible to talk, with a formal language, about nonsensical sentences of the non-formal everyday language—without vio-

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<sup>106</sup> Carnap 1959, 76-77. Hutto (2009, 644) attacks such a wholesale rejection of metaphysics, since he argues that there is no wholesale rejection or argumentation against metaphysics to be found in Wittgenstein’s writings, but opposition on a case-by-case basis, a retail approach, to misleading pictures.

<sup>107</sup> See Carnap 1963, 25.

<sup>108</sup> Carnap 1937, 284.



lating the rules of the theory of meaning. Carnap calls this ‘metalogic’:

[S]tatements about statements and parts of statements belong in part to pure metalogic (e.g. ‘a sequence consisting of the existence-symbol and a noun, is not a sentence’), in part to descriptive metalogic (e.g. ‘the word sequence at such and such a place in such and such a book is meaningless’). Metalogic will be discussed elsewhere. It will also be shown there that the metalogic which speaks about the sentences of a given language can be formulated in that very language itself.<sup>109</sup>

This proposal, however, faces an immediate objection. What happens in the hierarchical or metalogical model is that the meaningless status of the sentences in question cannot be decontaminated on one level; but what happens instead is that nonsense ‘spreads’ across the levels of the hierarchy, so to speak, as I’ll show in much detail in later chapters.

To anticipate, consider a second level statement  $S$  about a first level combination of words  $p$ :

( $S$ )  $p$  is nonsense.

According to Carnap, the combination of words that constitute  $p$  is nonsense if either (i)  $p$  contains meaningless words, or (ii) the combination of the meanings of the words in  $p$  violates the rules of logical syntax. But  $S$  contains the same combination of words as  $p$ . So if some of the words in  $p$  are meaningless, some of the words in  $S$  are meaningless—hence,  $S$  would be nonsense too. Or if the meanings of words in  $p$  violate the rules of the logical syntax, then the words in  $S$  violate the rules of logical syntax—thus again,  $S$  would be nonsense.

Would it help to make a third level statement?

( $S^*$ )  $S$  is nonsense.

Not at all. Again, the original *defectiveness* of  $p$  would, so to speak, *spread* across levels, from  $p$  to  $S$  to  $S^*$ .

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<sup>109</sup> Carnap 1959, 77-78.

Thus in the end, the theory that Carnap attempts to develop appears to lead to more and more nonsense. Carnap meant his theory to eliminate only metaphysics, but now the theory itself cannot satisfy the criteria it aims to establish. Why is that? First, according to the theory,

[T]he meaning of a statement lies in the method of its verification. A statement asserts only so much as is verifiable with respect to it. Therefore a sentence can be used only so much as is verifiable with respect to it. Therefore a sentence can be used only to assert an empirical proposition, if indeed it is used to assert anything at all. If something were to lie, in principle, beyond possible experience, it could be neither said nor thought nor asked.<sup>110</sup>

Second, this criterion, Carnap thinks, ‘automatically’ decides whether a given statement is meaningful or nonsensical. As he puts it,

(Meaningful) statements are divided into the following kinds. First there are statements which are true solely by virtue of their form (‘tautologies’ according to Wittgenstein; they correspond approximately to Kant’s ‘analytic judgments’). They say nothing about reality. The formulae of logic and mathematic are of this kind. They are not themselves factual statements, but serve for the transformation of such statements. Secondly there are the negations of such statements (‘*contradictions*’). They are self-contradictory, hence false by virtue of their form. With respect to all other statements the decision about truth or falsehood lies in the protocol sentences. They are therefore (true or false) *empirical statements* and belong to the domain of empirical science. Any statement one desires to construct which does not fall within these categories becomes automatically meaningless. Since metaphysics does not want to assert analytic propositions, nor to fall within the domain of empirical science, it is compelled to employ words for which no criteria of application are specified and which are therefore devoid of sense, or else to combine meaningful words in such a way that neither an analytic (or contradictory) statement nor an empirical statement is produced. In either case pseudo-statements are the inevitable product.<sup>111</sup>

Third, however, the statements of the theory themselves do not fall into either

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<sup>110</sup> Carnap 1959, 76.

<sup>111</sup> Carnap 1959, 76.

‘meaningful’ category. And this leads the theory, in the end, to nonsense (or meaninglessness, as Carnap prefers to say):

Logical analysis, then, pronounces the verdict of meaninglessness on any alleged knowledge that pretends to reach above or behind experience. This verdict hits, in the first place, any speculative metaphysics, any alleged knowledge by *pure thinking* or by *pure intuition* that pretends to be able to do without experience. But the verdict equally applies to the kind of metaphysics which, starting from experience, wants to acquire knowledge about that which *transcends experience* by means of special *inferences* [...]. Further, the same judgment must be passed on all *philosophy of norms*, or *philosophy of value*, on any ethics or esthetics as a normative discipline. [...] Finally, the verdict of meaninglessness also hits those [...] movements which are usually called [...] *realism* [...] and its opponents: subject *idealism*, solipsism, phenomenism, and *positivism*.<sup>112</sup>

So the ‘verdict of meaninglessness’ hits hard. Does it even apply to the theory that establishes this verdict itself? But that can’t be right: there must be some way that the theory can overcome this verdict. Can it achieve that goal? Or is the verdict inevitable? We have already seen that a Fregean view faces a similar problem, and that adherents to such a view argue that it can be overcome. But the move they propose is still highly controversial, and I already expressed my doubts that it can be successful. In the next chapters, I’ll argue that both theories’ verdicts on their own meaningfulness leads to a predicament that they cannot overcome. But before that, we’ll turn to the *Tractatus* once more.

## 1.4 The Tractarian solution

This section spells out *the Tractarian solution*. First, its main parts are specified: *the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense*, *the activity of elucidation*, and *the distinction between sign and symbol*. Finally, the overall solution is summarized.

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<sup>112</sup> Carnap 1959, 76-77. Note that by ‘positivism’ Carnap only refers to earlier versions of his own theory, since he thinks that his more refined views are not subject to this kind of criticism. However, since the crucial move of this view (the switch to a meta-level in order to overcome the charge that the theory is itself nonsense) doesn’t work, as I have shown above, the verdict also applies to this refined version of his theory.

## ***Conceptions of nonsense***

Roger White has claimed that no ‘careful thinker’ would hold any other view about nonsense than that nonsense is only ever simply nonsense.<sup>113</sup> Admittedly, Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap all might have wanted to agree that nonsense is only ever mere nonsense. As a matter of fact, at least Wittgenstein and Carnap both come close to affirming this. However, it is another matter whether they have succeeded in adhering to such a conception of nonsense, or if they rather unwittingly succumbed to a philosophical fantasy in order to salvage their theories. James Conant and Edward Witherspoon argue that this is so for both Frege and Carnap.<sup>114</sup> Conant and Witherspoon furthermore argue that Frege and Carnap are each committed to a distinct conception of nonsense, both of which they distinguish from Wittgenstein’s own conception. I’ll follow this tripartite distinction here. I’ll call the conception of nonsense that Frege is committed to *the Fregean conception of nonsense*; the conception of nonsense that Carnap is committed to *the Carnapian conception of nonsense*; and the conception of nonsense that Wittgenstein is committed to *the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense*, respectively.<sup>115</sup>

It’s absolutely crucial to note that neither Frege and Carnap, nor the representatives of what I call the Fregean view and the Carnapian view (as I have discussed them above) *explicitly* endorse the conception of nonsense that I argue they are committed to. The point, however, is that (i) the Fregean view and the Carnapian view are—however unwittingly—respectively committed to the Fregean or Carnapian conceptions of nonsense I’ve described; (ii) we find in Wittgenstein a detection and criticism of such conceptions (this also means that Wittgenstein anticipates what I call the Carnapian conception); and (iii) Wittgenstein does not want to commit to either the Fregean or the Carnapian conception of nonsense, but instead aims to replace these conceptions with his own

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<sup>113</sup> White 2011, 33.

<sup>114</sup> Conant 2000, 2002, 2004; Witherspoon 2000, 317 and *passim*.

<sup>115</sup> See Witherspoon 2000, which uses a similar terminology. For a different terminology that is similar in meaning, see Conant 2000, 2002.

conception in the *Tractatus*.<sup>116</sup>

## The Fregean conception of nonsense

Let's take a look at the Fregean conception of nonsense first.<sup>117</sup> Roger White, whom I take to be an example of this conception, wants to hold that there is *only* simply nonsense.<sup>118</sup> But he is also committed to holding that, although some (or all, depending on the reading) of the propositions of philosophy are nonsense, these propositions nonetheless express or show 'something.' Thus, he follows Geach and Hacker in accepting the doctrine of ineffability (DI): that the content, which these sentences express, is *inexpressible* or *ineffable*. This is because every attempt to put *that* into words results in violations of the logical syntax. As Hacker put this,

Categorial necessities are reflected in the formation-rules of language. Any attempt to express them involves [...] the violation of rules of logical syntax [...]. These attempts [...] unavoidably violate the bounds of sense, misuse language, and produce nonsense.<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, according to such a view, there is said to be a way to show what the inexpressible content is. Here is Geach on this:

Wittgenstein holds that various *features of reality* come out [...] in our language, but we cannot use this language to say, assert, that reality has these features: if we try to frame propositions ascribing these features to reality, then it will be possible to show that strictly speaking these are not propositions, only sentence-like structures which violate the principles of logical syntax and are thus devoid of any sense, true or false. All the same, these nonsensical [...] structures may be useful; they may serve to *convey* from speaker to hearer *an insight* that cannot

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<sup>116</sup> As Conant (2002, 376) puts it: 'Each of these readings advances a conception that of the task of philosophy [...] that figures centrally in the *Tractatus*—only not as its doctrine, but rather as a candidate for [...] *elucidation*.'

<sup>117</sup> Note that I've chosen this terminology because the main point of this conception is something that commentators, as I'll argue, have found in Frege.

<sup>118</sup> White 2011, 33-4, 37-38.

<sup>119</sup> Hacker 1986, 106, 21. Equally, Priest (1995, 207) holds that 'something has sense if its formulation does not violate the canons of conceptual grammar [...]. Something that is meaningless in this sense [that is, violates the grammar] can carry no information at all, trivial or otherwise. For this sense of meaninglessness, Wittgenstein uses the phrase *unsinnig*.'

be put into proper propositions.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, this kind of nonsense seems to be different from simply nonsense. There is still ‘something’ that is ‘conveyed’ or communicated by this nonsense. We saw earlier that Frege himself thinks that his ‘hints’ can play such a *communing* role. Here is a passage from Hacker that features such a view of nonsense, according to which nonsense can be used for communicative purposes:

[W]ithin the range of philosophical [...] nonsense we can distinguish [...] between [...] illuminating nonsense and misleading nonsense. Illuminating nonsense will *guide* the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy [...]. [T]he *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseudo-propositions. Of course, what Wittgenstein meant by these remarks is, in his view, quite correct, only it cannot be said. Apparently what someone means or intends by a remark can be *grasped* even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense.<sup>121</sup>

Hacker here says that nonsense can mean something. However, this seems to be just plain false, since doesn’t nonsense make no sense, quite literally? Thus it is a corollary of this account of nonsense that there are different forms of nonsense—there is not only one form of nonsense, simply nonsense, but, apart from that, another form of ‘important’ nonsense. But obviously, this view doesn’t comply with the claim that no careful thinker would hold that there is any nonsense other than simply nonsense, which was a premise laid down above.

To summarize this (defective) view:

*The Fregean conception of nonsense:* a sentence is nonsense if what it attempts to say cannot be said because it is an incorrect use of language, but is shown in the correct use of language.

In my understanding of the *Tractatus*, it is Wittgenstein’s aim to give a thorough

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<sup>120</sup> Geach 1976, 54; my emphases.

<sup>121</sup> Hacker 1986, 18-19, 26; my emphases.

criticism of such a view, the core of which is a new conception of nonsense.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, I'll turn to this conception next.

## The Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense

On this much, commentators on the *Tractatus* can agree: in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein develops his conception of nonsense as a response and objection to Frege, and in opposition to views of nonsense that presuppose anything over and above simply nonsense.<sup>123</sup> He especially combats views according to which there is a communing nonsense (which is the case, for instance, in the Fregean conception)—for Wittgenstein, nonsense consists simply of signs to which we have given no meaning.<sup>124</sup> Here is the passage in which Wittgenstein contests Frege's conception most obviously, at full length:

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts. (Even if we believe that we have done so.) Thus 'Socrates is identical' says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word 'identical' as *adjective*. For when it occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way—the symbolizing relation is another—therefore the symbol is in the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign in common with one another only by accident.<sup>125</sup>

Wittgenstein combats the idea that there is something that cannot be done, something that is excluded because it is a violation: '*Every* possible proposition is legitimately constructed.' It seems crucial to highlight the fact that Wittgenstein uses the first person singular in this passage, presumably to emphasize that he refers to *his* views here—in short, it seems that it is here that Wittgenstein speaks as the *author* of his book.<sup>126</sup> And it is clear enough that Wittgenstein does not say that nonsense arises in connection with a violation of the rules of a theo-

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<sup>122</sup> This should not be controversial: see the papers collected by Reck (2002).

<sup>123</sup> *TLP*, 5.4733.

<sup>124</sup> *TLP*, 3.32-3.328.

<sup>125</sup> *TLP*, 5.4733.

<sup>126</sup> See Conant 2007, 42-43, and *passim*.

ry of meaning, logical syntax, or whatever, in this passage.

Instead, what is clear is that the conception of nonsense expressed in the above quote is that a sentence is nonsense if and only if no meaning has been given to one or more of its constituents. Conant and Bronzo have argued that this is a point Wittgenstein inherits from Frege's so-called *context principle*.<sup>127</sup> The thought is that, in order to see if  $p$  makes sense, we need to start with a *whole* proposition, not with the individual *parts*. Thus, the whole of the proposition has a *logical priority* over its parts:

Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning. Every part of a proposition which characterizes its sense I call an expression (a symbol). [...] An expression has meaning only in a proposition.<sup>128</sup>

Call this *the mereological point about propositions*:

(MPP) Only a whole proposition can either make sense or it is nonsense.

Wittgenstein draws our attention to the fact that it is during the logical employment in a proposition that a part of a proposition has meaning.<sup>129</sup> 'Outside' of this employment, the meaning is not yet determined. Only if the whole proposition makes sense do all the words have meaning. If a proposition has a word that that has no meaning, the proposition too makes no sense. With this analysis, Wittgenstein avoids the trouble that arises if one starts with individual parts that are subsequently combined to arrive at a proposition. It is this picture that leads to the paradoxical idea of propositions with a sense that does not make sense.

Such a view can be found to be underlying Russell's account:

Let us begin with the most tangible thing: the proposition as a form of words. Take [...] 'Socrates loves Plato'. This is a complex symbol, composed of three symbols, namely 'Socrates' and 'loves' and 'Plato'. Whatever may be the meaning

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<sup>127</sup> Conant 2000, 180-182; Bronzo 2011.

<sup>128</sup> *TLP*, 3.3-3.31, 3.314.

<sup>129</sup> *TLP*, 3.326-3.327.



of the complex symbol, it is clear that it depends upon the meanings of the separate words. Thus *before* we can hope to understand the meaning of a proposition as a form of words, we must understand what constitutes the meanings of single words.<sup>130</sup>

So according to Russell, individual words have meaning *before* they enter the context of an employed sentence. Russell thinks that by stacking words, we arrive at a sentence proper. Call that *Russell's additivism*. Wittgenstein thinks that such a view is confused.<sup>131</sup> It is clear that Russell's additivism violates (MPP). It is not *before* we understand the sense of a whole proposition that we have to understand the meanings of the parts of it, but it is *because* we understand the whole proposition that we understand its parts.

To summarize:

*The Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense:* a sentence is nonsense if and only if no meaning has been given to one or more of its constituents.

Judging from the clarity with which Wittgenstein puts forward his conception, one would guess that it would be almost impossible for any philosopher who wants to agree with Wittgenstein's conception to misunderstand it. Who would have thought that it might even be misunderstood by one of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? But indeed, it seems that Carnap does misunderstand. Therefore, I'll next turn to his conception of nonsense.

## **The Carnapian conception of nonsense**

Carnap says that he wants to use the term 'nonsense' and its cognates only in its 'strictest sense.'<sup>132</sup> If *p* is nonsense, according to him, then it is 'entirely meaningless,' 'devoid of meaning,' and contains 'nothing at all.'<sup>133</sup> Thus Carnap is committed to the sentence

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<sup>130</sup> Russell 1956, 290.

<sup>131</sup> For an illuminating criticism of such this account, see Conant 1998.

<sup>132</sup> Carnap 1959, 61.

<sup>133</sup> Carnap 1959, 61, 65, 67, 78.

(CN) Nonsense contains *nothing*.

But that nonsense contains ‘nothing at all,’ Carnap adds, and leaves us with a ‘painful feeling of strangeness’—therefore, he concedes that nonsense is not entirely without content. Rather, it ‘does indeed have a content.’<sup>134</sup>

It is ironic that Carnap, whose paper is meant to be a sustained criticism of Heidegger, does not realize how close he comes to his target of choice at this point. Carnap’s claim that the ‘nothing’ leads to a ‘painful feeling of strangeness,’ and that it *contains* ‘the *expression of the general attitude of a person towards life* (“Lebenseinstellung, Lebensgefühl”)’ seems to come close to Heidegger’s claim (which Carnap criticizes in his paper) that ‘Nothing’ induces ‘anxiety.’<sup>135</sup>

So Carnap is also committed to the sentence

(CN\*) Nonsense has *content*.

But how can nonsense lack content (i.e. (CN)) and have content (i.e. (CN\*)) at the same time? Doesn’t contradiction lurk here?

(CCCT) Nonsense contains a content that is no content.

Call that *Carnap’s content without content thesis*. If one puts it in this perspicuous manner, it is obvious that contradiction indeed does lurk. Can Carnap be saved from this contradiction?

What nonsense shares with meaningful statements, according to Carnap, is that it has a certain ‘logical character,’ it is *logical erroneous* or *logically defect*. In short, it is *illogical*.<sup>136</sup> Nonsensical sentences are ‘logical incorrect and hence senseless modes of expression.’<sup>137</sup> Since nonsense is illogical, it is *impossible to think a nonsense*.

We have already seen that Carnap holds that nonsense is the result when

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<sup>134</sup> Carnap 1959, 78.

<sup>135</sup> Carnap 1959, 78.

<sup>136</sup> Carnap 1959, 73.

<sup>137</sup> Carnap 1959, 74; cf. 72.

the *rules* collected in the *logical syntax* of a *theory of meaning* are *violated*. Note an important caveat. According to Carnap, nonsense does not violate the rules of ordinary language, but only of an ideal language (if Carnap were able to develop it). This is why, according to Carnap (and this is a thought that is shared by him and Frege), ordinary language is misleading and even ‘inappropriate, dangerous.’<sup>138</sup> Once the logical perfect ideal language (what Carnap calls ‘logically correct language’) is given, ‘pseudostatements could not be formed’ anymore and nonsense ‘could not even be expressed.’<sup>139</sup>

Again, Carnap distinguishes between *two kinds* of nonsense:

(i) ‘pseudo-statements which contain a meaningless word’, and (ii) pseudo-statements that ‘consist of meaningful words, but the words are put together in such a way that nevertheless no meaning results’, and it is the task of the ‘syntax of a language’, then, to ‘specif[y] which combinations of words are admissible and which inadmissible’.<sup>140</sup>

Both kinds of nonsense are troublesome. Let’s focus on the second kind, however, since it best shows the problem inherent in both of them. This nonsense consists of *individually meaningful words* that are *illegitimately combined*, as we saw already above in Russell’s account—what I called Russell’s additivism, which we now see is shared by Carnap. It arises if the meanings of words clash because what they mean does not fit. Thus, the resulting sentences share something with meaningful propositions: they consist of meaningful words.

Hence, although this nonsense is, in the end, a failure to mean something determined, it is not a complete failure. Or is there a way in which one can think a nonsense after all?

These nonsensical sentences, nevertheless being nonsense, are, according to Carnap, not completely *empty of content*. If *p* is nonsense, the theory of meaning can nonetheless say *why* this sentence is nonsense, that is, which logi-

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<sup>138</sup> Carnap 1959, 74.

<sup>139</sup> Carnap 1959, 68.

<sup>140</sup> Carnap 1959, 67.

cal-syntactical rules the sentence violates. But this entails that the meanings of the parts of such propositions therefore say ‘something,’ just not something meaningful, but rather something *incorrect*, meaningless. *That* ‘something’ just *cannot* be said. But that there is something wrong with the meaning of the parts of the sentence obviously presupposes that they have meaning in some sense. What makes *p* nonsense is that the meaning of the words that are contained in *p* is just the wrong meaning (in that sentence). Thus Carnap concedes, contradicting what he had said earlier, that nonsense can ‘indeed have a content’:<sup>141</sup> what this nonsense does, according to Carnap, is to *express* that which is *impossible*.<sup>142</sup> According to Carnap, then, there is a way in which illogical thoughts can be communicated. And that is a view that Wittgenstein had already combated in the *Tractatus*.

To summarize:

*Carnapian logical syntax*: The collection of rules specified by a theory of meaning.

*Carnapian violation of logical syntax*: If propositions fail to satisfy the logical syntax, they are nonsensical.

*Carnapian conception of nonsense*: There are two kinds of nonsense. A sentence is nonsensical either because it (i) contains a meaningless word, or (ii) because it violates the syntax of sentences.

However, when Carnap goes on to spell these two ideas out, we have seen that he gives an explanation of nonsense that we have already seen given by Frege. Accordingly, what the words of the sentence attempt to say cannot be said because it expresses content that is impossible to say. Thus in the end, the two conceptions of nonsense converge in this point.

Can (CCCT) be salvaged? Though Carnap puts this view forward only after Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus*, it seems that Wittgenstein opposes such a

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<sup>141</sup> Carnap 1959, 78.

<sup>142</sup> Carnap 1959, 76.

view, according to which there is a second kind of nonsense, a nonsense that has a ‘wrong’ sense, so to speak—a sense that violates the theory of meaning already outlined in his book. He puts his objection straightforwardly. He writes simply, to make the tension most explicit, that ‘[w]e cannot give a sign the wrong sense.’<sup>143</sup> Wittgenstein’s point is that a ‘wrong’ sense, a sense that would violate the theory, as described by Carnap, would not be a sense at all—the *Tractatus* summarizes this point as ‘the requirement that sense be determinate.’<sup>144</sup> Nonsense does not come in degrees, but rather in an either/or schema: either we are faced with a meaningful symbol, or only with the sensible part of a symbol, a meaningless sign.<sup>145</sup> Wittgenstein’s insight highlights a deep tension in the Carnapian conception of nonsense. What this conception entails is that a sentence is nonsense, because its ‘sense’ is nonsense. Wittgenstein makes this objection against such views in the *Investigations*: ‘When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless.’<sup>146</sup> The apparent idea of a ‘senseless sense’ is just confused. It’s simply nonsense.

Fregean and Carnapian views share the commitment that nonsense arises if the logical-syntactical rules of a theory of sense are being violated. Thus, these views also share a similar fate. Where these views both show their problematic structure most vividly is the point after the nonsense has been detected. But there is also another sense, in which the disagreement between both of these positions can be made to vanish. This is because both views are committed to the idea that there is something that cannot be thought (Carnap’s point about illogical thought, Frege’s obstacle), but they nevertheless don’t concede that what cannot be thought cannot be communicated either (Carnap’s content without content, Frege’s hinting).

This section introduced the distinct conceptions of nonsense that the different views of Frege, Wittgenstein, and Carnap are committed to, and argued that both the Fregean and Carnapian conception face severe problems, which an

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<sup>143</sup> *TLP*, 5.4732.

<sup>144</sup> *TLP*, 3.23.

<sup>145</sup> *TLP*, 3.262-3.31. More on the Tractarian distinction between sign and symbol at a later point in this chapter.

<sup>146</sup> *PI*, 500.

adherence to the Wittgensteinian conception would solve as part of the Tractarian solution.

Wittgenstein rejects both a showing of Fregean ineffable insights (DI), and also Carnapian content without content (CCT). The Wittgensteinian elucidation is supposed to do the trick, by making possible the recognition of nonsense (that nonsense is only ever simply nonsense) and its problematic nature (that the insistence on the sense of nonsense leads to the nonsense fallacy), to which I turn next. So in the next section, the role in the book that nonsense plays, which Wittgenstein describes as *elucidatory*, will be further added to the discussion.

## ***Elucidation***

We saw Frege and Carnap sharing the view that the aim of philosophy is to arrive at the discovery of a philosophical theory. Here is a clear, more recent statement of such a view by Geach:

But in spite of all the enemies of modern logic grows and flourishes; we have reaped such a harvest of *discoveries* that in the words of the hymn we may ‘boast More blessings than our father lost’. [...] What we still have not got is a formal *theory* [...]. Success in stating such a *theory* would be *Paradise Regained*.<sup>147</sup>

Wittgenstein differs from such a view already in the *Tractatus*, when he says that logic is not a theory.<sup>148</sup> Wittgenstein’s own response to such an account of philosophy at a later point is that it is not clear at all if such an account of philosophy would actually be a paradise, as he (in a different context) puts it:

I would say: ‘I wouldn’t dream of trying to drive anyone from this paradise’. I would do something quite different: I would try to show you that it is not a paradise—so that you’ll leave on your own accord.<sup>149</sup>

So does reading Wittgenstein in Geach’s spirit lead to a problematic oversight of Wittgenstein’s case *against* the view that philosophy’s aim is one of making dis-

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<sup>147</sup> Geach 1972, 61; my emphases.

<sup>148</sup> *TLP*, 6.13.

<sup>149</sup> Wittgenstein 1978, 103; hereafter cited as *RFM*.

coveries and stating theories? I'll argue that it does.

To show this, we can add together some of the strands that run through the *Tractatus*: (i) Wittgenstein appears to think of himself as applying his genuinely own and new *method*;<sup>150</sup> (ii) his saying, in the penultimate passage of the *Tractatus*, that the sentences of his book *elucidate* if and only if we understand him by eventually recognizing his sentences as nonsensical;<sup>151</sup> (iii) his rejection to advance any theory in his book;<sup>152</sup> and (iv) other passages in which he seems to be engaged with reflections on philosophy and its aim/methods (clarification through elucidation), and on what a philosophical work is and what it consists of.<sup>153</sup>

In effect, the *Tractatus* distinguishes between two different uses of language in the *Tractatus*. On the one hand, language as used in an ordinary, everyday kind of way. On the other hand, language—or better, what only looks like meaningful language—as used in the activity of elucidation. This means that nonsensical strings of paper that happen to invoke the impression to be meaningful are used to elucidate. They elucidate if and only if they are recognized to be nonsensical. The different types of use are captured by the following distinction:<sup>154</sup>

*Constative use*: Employing language in a fact-stating, predicative manner.

*Elucidatory use*: Self-conscious application of nonsensical propositions in order to make us recognize that we are often deceived by imagining meaning where none has been assigned.

The activity that Wittgenstein practices in the *Tractatus* depends on both uses of language. He employs the constative use of language when he describes his aim, his target, his criticism, or his method, and he employs the elucidatory use when he deals with nonsense.

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<sup>150</sup> *NB*, 44, 1.5.15; *TLP*, 4.1121.

<sup>151</sup> *TLP*, 6.54.

<sup>152</sup> *TLP*, 4.112.

<sup>153</sup> *TLP*, 4.003, 6.53.

<sup>154</sup> See Conant 2002.

The description of the activity of elucidation or elucidatory use of language is meant to describe how Wittgenstein manages to build up a ladder. This activity, however, is not part of a philosophical theory that claims that it can delimit thought, but is meant to be an exercise of the clarification of thoughts.<sup>155</sup>

### ***Sign and symbol***

The distinction between sign and symbol received some positive attention recently. It has been assigned an important role to play in the elucidatory activity, which was described above.<sup>156</sup>

Wittgenstein's basic thought behind the distinction is that it is helpful to distinguish between a *symbol*, which is a *sign* that is meaningful because it is part of a proposition, and (a written or spoken) sign, which may be a part of a symbol, but which can also occur outside of a proposition—in which case, however, it is meaningless because it does not symbolize.

Wittgenstein further argues that it is sometimes difficult to recognize if what we face is a symbol or a sign, and he argues that it is a common error in philosophy to mistakenly confuse a sign with a symbol. He considers this to be a primary source of philosophical problems. The passages in which he develops this line of thought are worth quoting at length. First, here are the lines in which he draws the distinction between sign and symbol:

The sign is the part of the symbol perceptible by the senses.<sup>157</sup>

Two different symbols can therefore have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common—they then signify in different ways.<sup>158</sup>

It can never indicate the common characteristic of two objects that we symbolize them with the same signs but by different *methods of symbolizing*. For the sign

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<sup>155</sup> As Diamond (2000) has argued, this activity or philosophical training uses the reader's ability to engage in an act of imagination.

<sup>156</sup> See Conant 2002; McManus 2006; Bronzo 2011.

<sup>157</sup> *TLP*, 3.32.

<sup>158</sup> *TLP*, 3.321.



is arbitrary.<sup>159</sup>

When we write or say some words, then, it must not be the case that what we write or say amounts to a symbol, since, as Wittgenstein draws this distinction, a sign is only that part of the symbol which is ‘perceptible.’ However, the sense of a sentence gets only fixed when every one of its constituent signs (individual words) ‘symbolize,’ and hence will be symbols.

But now Wittgenstein mentions that one and the same sign can be used to symbolize different symbols. This is, obviously, often the case. As Wittgenstein explains,

In the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways—and therefore belongs to two different symbols—or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition. Thus the word ‘is’ appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence; ‘to exist’ as an intransitive verb like ‘to go’; ‘identical’ as an adjective; we speak of *something* but also of the fact of *something* happening. (In the proposition ‘Green is green’—where the first word is a proper name as the last an adjective—these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*.)<sup>160</sup>

That we use the same sign as two (or more) different symbols is not necessarily a troubling conclusion. But Wittgenstein’s point is that, in philosophy, it is the reason that ‘there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full).’<sup>161</sup> He then suggests what appears to be a solution:

In order to avoid these errors, we must employ a symbolism which excludes them, by not applying the same sign in different symbols and by not applying signs in the same way which signify in different ways. A symbolism, that is to say, which obeys the rules of *logical* grammar—of logical syntax. (The logical symbolism of Frege and Russell is such a language, which, however, does still not ex-

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<sup>159</sup> *TLP*, 3.322

<sup>160</sup> *TLP*, 3.323.

<sup>161</sup> *TLP*, 3.324.

clude all errors.)<sup>162</sup>

The Fregean view and the Carnapian view have argued that these passages fit with the claim that nonsense arises when the rules of logical syntax are violated, and that it is the task of a philosophical theory to establish an ideal language powerful enough so that such violations don't even arise.

Wittgenstein, however, appears to propose quite a different solution, which appeals to the *use* of sentences:

In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant *use* [*sinnvollen Gebrauch*].<sup>163</sup>

The sign determines a logical form only together with its logical syntactic *application* [*Verwendung*].<sup>164</sup>

If a sign is *not used* [*nicht gebraucht*], it is meaningless.<sup>165</sup>

I think that these passages are most important, but instead they get somewhat overlooked, or at any rate their significance is not yet fully appreciated.<sup>166</sup> This might stem, to a certain degree, from problems of translation. Wittgenstein's use of the German '*nicht gebraucht*' in the last passage is translated by Ogden as 'not necessary,' which is simply unacceptable to my mind, since it gives a totally different sound to these passages, and by Pears and McGuinness as 'useless,' which still has a different ring to it than '*nicht gebraucht*,' since 'useless' connotes 'worthless' while '*nicht gebraucht*' simply means '*not used*.' However, this does not fully explain why the emphasis on 'use' and 'application' in the *Tractatus* have often been overlooked. For instance, Saul Kripke thinks that the explanation for Wittgenstein's philosophical development is that later Wittgenstein criticizes his earlier self for having, in his alleged theory, overlooked the crucial point that use plays, and consequently proposes a so-called 'use theory of mean-

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<sup>162</sup> *TLP*, 3.325.

<sup>163</sup> *TLP*, 3.326; my emphasis.

<sup>164</sup> *TLP*, 3.327; my emphasis.

<sup>165</sup> *TLP*, 3.328; my translation.

<sup>166</sup> As is the case in Kripke 1982 and Horwich 2012.

ing.<sup>167</sup> However, it is clear that such an explanation doesn't work in the face of the above passages, since already early Wittgenstein emphasized the crucial role that the use of sentences plays.

Rather, what Wittgenstein diagnoses is that *equivocations*, as he discusses it in the passages quoted above, are a crucial problem in philosophy.<sup>168</sup> Philosophical puzzles, as he argues, often arise if we fail to see this kind of equivocation, which signs sometimes exhibit. And these equivocations occur if we don't consider and put enough emphasis on the use or application of signs, since it is only when a sign is used that it occurs as a symbol.

The Wittgensteinian view further argues that the notation that the *Tractatus* suggests, which Wittgenstein refers to in the passage above, is not supposed to be a part of a theory, since he clearly rejects such a project. Rather, the notation should be useful in such a way that it helps to avoid confusions, which arise when it is not recognized that the same sign is used for different symbols, as indicated in the above passages.

Consider Wittgenstein's perspicuous example of how signs can be used for different symbols, which he gives in the above quotation.<sup>169</sup>

He says that the written or spoken sign 'is' can be used to mean one of the

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<sup>167</sup> Kripke 1982.

<sup>168</sup> The problem of equivocation is already highlighted by Frege (1967, xix), as part of his criticism against psychologism and the psychological logicians. Frege worries that, by failing to recognize the equivocation of terms we use in philosophizing, we are pushed into idealism and solipsism: 'The equivocation on [the word 'idea'] obscures the issue and helps the psychological logicians to conceal their weakness. When will a stop be put to this? In the end everything is drawn into the sphere of psychology; the boundary that separates objective and subjective fades away more and more, and even actual objects themselves are treated psychologically, as ideas. For what else is *actual* but a predicate? And what else are logical predicates but ideas? Thus [by failing to recognize equivocation] everything drifts into idealism and from that point with perfect consistency into solipsism [*So mündet denn Alles in den Idealismus und bei grösster Folgerichtigkeit in den Solipsismus ein*].' We can find three important points in this passage that resurface in Wittgenstein's early thinking. First, the idea of equivocation, i.e., the thought that philosophical problems arise because of our failure to see that a sign can be used in more than one way, that is, for more than one symbol (see *TLP* 3.325–3.328). Second, the idea that a failure to keep track of the distinction between logical and psychological uses of words, which again leads to serious misunderstandings (see 4.1121, 6.3631). And third, the idea that philosophical theories like realism, idealism, or solipsism, coincide when strictly thought through. Thus, these theories vanish altogether (see 5.64).

<sup>169</sup> *TLP*, 3.323.

following three symbols: as copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence. Take Wittgenstein's example 'Green is green.' One way to use this sign is to say, for instance, that the person called 'Green' is *literally* green in his face (maybe because he is seasick, or he is a painter and was not careful when he used green pigment). In this case, the first instance of the sign 'Green' is a symbol of a proper name and the second instance of the sign 'green' is a symbol of an adjective. The sign 'green' is not ambiguous or vague in this example, it is more than that: it refers to completely different symbols. And the sign 'is' is used in this example as the *copula* (the copula connects the subject with the predicate). Then we could also use the sentence 'Green is Green' to say that the person we called Green is the same person. In this example, the sign 'is' will be used as the sign of equality. And this is a different symbol.

If the propositions that are the reason for a confusion are translated, we get an overview or a *perspicuous presentation*, as it is sometimes called, of the different options we have to give a meaning to the constituents of *p*.<sup>170</sup> It can then be decided for one of the options to mean something determinate with the words in question. But if we *hover* between different options without deciding for any one of the choices we have, it has to be admitted that we have not yet managed to say something at all—since it is a requirement for sense that it is determinate.<sup>171</sup>

Rather, what Wittgenstein aims to do is to use the notation of his early

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<sup>170</sup> For a discussion of this term, see Kuusela 2008, 112 and *passim*.

<sup>171</sup> This is an idea we find already in Frege (1968, xxiv; my emphasis). His criticism is that an indeterminate 'hovering' between two alternatives, without deciding for either one of them, leads to much confusion. He writes: 'I will not put up with this *hovering* between the two; I ask: If actuality is asserted of an object, then is the real subject of the judgment the idea? Yes or no? If it is not, then presumably the subject is the Transcendent, which is presupposed as the ground of being of this idea. But this Transcendent is itself a thing ideated or an idea. Thus we are driven on to the supposition that the subject of the judgment is not the ideated Transcendent, but the Transcendent that is presupposed as the ground of being of this ideated Transcendent. Thus we should have to go on forever; but however far we went we should never emerge from the subjective. Moreover, we could begin the same game with the predicate too [...]. What can we learn from this? That psychological logic is on the wrong track entirely if it conceives subject and predicate of a judgment as idea in the psychological sense, that psychological considerations have no more place in logic than they do in astronomy or geology. If we want to emerge from the subjective at all, we must conceive knowledge as an activity that does not create what is known but grasps what is already there.'

philosophy to achieve the logical clarification of thoughts.<sup>172</sup> If we suspect that we have a philosophical confusion, we can use the notation to arrive at a perspicuous overview of the different options for what we could mean with our words. In this way, we get a clear view of the puzzlement we are in. The notation is supposed to serve to clarify the use of words. It helps us to get clear on what we want to do with the words we utter. But not because it is a part of a theory, but because it is a part of the clarification of thought. After having mastered translation into the notation, there are still those instances where we have no idea how to even begin determining the meaning of every constituent of the sentence; in this sense, the notation can help realize which sentences are nonsense.

Here are descriptions of the relevant terms for this debate:

*Symbol*: A constituent of a meaningful proposition.

*Sign*: A contingent, arbitrary, and meaningless mark on paper.

*The distinction between sign and symbol*: It is helpful to distinguish carefully between a sign (meaningless) and a symbol (part of a meaningful proposition).<sup>173</sup>

*Logical notation*: A device that is used to translate sentences into a perspicuous form, in order to solve the problems of philosophy by recognizing the illusion of sense during the activity of elucidation.

*Equivocation*: One and the same sign is used for different symbols, which leads to confusion and nonsense.

For the current discussion of the distinction between sign and symbol, the notion of cross-category equivocation is very important. Together, these two notions fit neatly into the picture of the underlying plot that structures the Tractarian solution.

### ***The Tractarian solution***

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<sup>172</sup> *TLP*, preface; see Conant and Diamond 2004.

<sup>173</sup> See Conant 2002, 400.

We have seen how there are strong and interrelated trends in Wittgenstein's writings that provide arguments against Fregean and Carnapian views. Therefore, I'll call *the Wittgensteinian view* the view that rejects both the Carnapian and the Fregean view.<sup>174</sup>

*The Wittgensteinian view*: an anti-theoretical view of nonsense, according to which there is only simply nonsense, and which rejects both the Carnapian and Fregean view.<sup>175</sup>

This is most vivid in Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical and methodological talk, which can be read as his effort to describe the goal he is pursuing in his book. Here is a summary of the relevant concepts:

*Illusion of sense*: In philosophy, the surface structure of language often misleads us into thinking that philosophical sentences are meaningful, although no meaning has been assigned to them.<sup>176</sup>

*The problems of philosophy*: The whole of philosophy is full of problems that arise out of the failure to recognize the illusion of sense.<sup>177</sup>

*Activity of elucidation*: The deliberate use of carefully forged nonsensical sentences—which deceive us into thinking that they are meaningful, but which ultimately have to be recognized as nonsensical—in order to illustrate that we are often unknowingly deceived in such a way when doing philosophy.<sup>178</sup>

*Resolution and silence*: The result of the activity of elucidation should be a re-

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<sup>174</sup> Positions with similar features have been variously labeled. For instance, the terms 'new reading' (Proops 2001; Krebs 2001), 'therapeutic reading' (McGinn 1999; Hutto 2003; White 2006), 'austere reading' (Williams 2004), 'nihilistic reading' (Emiliani 2003; Stern 2004), and 'post-modern reading' (Hacker 2000).

<sup>175</sup> Some of the readers that are sympathetic such a view include Kevin Cahill (2004, 2011), Alice Crary, Edmund Dain, Rob Deans, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Burton Dreben, Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, Logi Gunnarsson, Martin Gustafsson, Phil Hutchinson, Michael Kremer, Oskari Kuusela, Denis McManus, Thomas Ricketts, Rupert Read, Matt Ostrow, and Ed Witherspoon, along with the late Gordon Baker (Conant 2007, 111n3; Bronzo 2012, 46). Note, however, that most of these philosophers prefer their own terminology for their readings. Note further that a change in terminology often goes hand in hand with a change of position.

<sup>176</sup> *TLP*, 3.323-3.328, 5.4733.

<sup>177</sup> *TLP*, 4.003.

<sup>178</sup> *TLP*, 4.112, 6.54.

lease from the illusion of sense that leads to the problems of philosophy, and consequently from the feeling of needing to solve philosophical *puzzles*.<sup>179</sup>

All of these play a crucial part in the *Tractarian solution*. The Tractarian solution is the *method* that Wittgenstein develops in his book to show the problematic nature of nonsense. Its core stages are as follows:

(i) Wittgenstein detects the core of the *problems of philosophy* in a confusion that develops in our relation to our words. He draws the *distinction between sign and symbol*, and diagnoses *equivocation* as a common mistake in philosophy.

(ii) The confusion of equivocation makes us think that words are meaningful that actually are not. This gives rise to the *illusion of sense*.

(iii) Wittgenstein invents the *activity of elucidation* to combat this confusion and its attendant illusions.

(iv) This activity involves the invention of *nonsensical propositions*, which, at first, deceive us into believing that they are meaningful. Thus, at a *transitional* stage, we have to deal with the (ultimately nonsensical) notion of the *violation of logical syntax* and the *Fregean* and *Carnapian* conceptions of nonsense.

(v) By controlling the character of the nonsensical propositions, Wittgenstein aims to lead the reader to recognize the nonsensicality of the book's propositions at the end of his book. Thus, we recognize the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense.

(vi) If we make this move from the Fregean and Carnapian conceptions of nonsense to the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense, we are *freed* from the illusion of sense. What looked like a puzzling but meaningful question/problem before is now recognized to be simply nonsense. The activity of elucidation has then been successful if and only if *silence* is the result.

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<sup>179</sup> *TLP*, 7.

Steps (iv)-(vi) illustrate what I have described before as the activity of elucidation. It is part of the activity of elucidation that the transition from the Fregean and Carnapian conception of nonsense to the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense has to be made, which is reflected in steps (v)-(vi). This means that the distinction between different logical kinds of nonsense must be recognized as part of the illusion of sense in order to successfully complete the activity of elucidation. This is the solution that we get if we adhere to the metaphilosophical and methodological remarks that Wittgenstein scatters throughout his book.<sup>180</sup>

## 1.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide something like a very short introduction to the history of the argument from nonsense. It discussed those parts of the works of Carnap, Frege, and Wittgenstein that bear on this topic. This chapter then gave a particular reading of the solution as developed in the *Tractatus*, the bottom line of which is that one has to be silent about nonsense (to avoid further nonsense). Of course, the discussion of how to deal with nonsense proceeded only on a rather abstract level, which does not necessarily do much substantial philosophical work on its own. The main task, then, will be to consider these approaches *at work*, which will be done in later chapters (chapter 4-7). Only there can it be shown whether one of them can be successful. But before that, we first turn to a particular highly influential variety of the argument from nonsense (chapter 2), and then to a further discussion of the problematic nature of nonsense in general (chapter 3).

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<sup>180</sup> See Conant 2002; McManus 2006.



## 2. The Boundary Model

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates a particular variety of the argument from nonsense, which will be called in what follows *the boundary model*. According to this model, *nonsense* arises if the rules of language, which constitute *the bounds of sense*, are *violated*. The boundary model comes up most clearly in the work on Wittgenstein by G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker.

Section 2.2 begins with some of A. J. Ayer's and F. P. Ramsey's comments on the *Tractatus*, since they suggest that Wittgenstein indeed commits the nonsense fallacy. Section 2.3 then discusses the work on Wittgenstein by Baker and Hacker, who argue that Wittgenstein proposes the boundary model. Section 2.4 goes back to some of the previous work of Hacker, since it is interesting to see just how much of Hacker's earlier account went into Baker and Hacker's collaborative work (which is one of the reasons why their collaboration ended, because Baker himself became skeptical about their collective account). And considering the boundary model as proposed by Hacker, I hope to show the serious defects inherent in this model.

### 2.2 Ayer and Ramsey on the *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein writes in the preface to the *Tractatus* that there are 'thoughts' expressed in the *Tractatus*, and that the 'truth' of these thoughts is 'definitive.'<sup>1</sup> In the penultimate remark of the same book, however, he writes that his sentences have to be recognized as nonsense.<sup>2</sup> And one passage earlier, Wittgenstein appears to concede that this is because he too is writing metaphysical nonsense, since he does not use what he there calls 'the correct method of philosophy.'<sup>3</sup> Russell, in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, and equally Ramsey first expressed

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<sup>1</sup> *TLP*, preface.

<sup>2</sup> *TLP*, 6.54.

<sup>3</sup> *TLP*, 6.53.

the worry that there might be a deep tension in Wittgenstein's work.<sup>4</sup> Here is an expression of this worry by Ayer: 'What is quite unacceptable is that one and the same series of pronouncements should be both devoid of sense and unassailably true.'<sup>5</sup> What Ayer suspects is that Wittgenstein commits to *the content without content thesis* (CCT). This is because Ayer proceeds on the assumption that Wittgenstein meant that *all* of the sentences of the *Tractatus* have to be recognized as nonsense in order to understand him as the author, while, at the same time, *all* of the sentences express definitive truths. Call this *the all-nonsense-all-truth-thesis*:

(ANAT) *All* sentences of the *Tractatus* express truths and *all* are nonsense.

Recently, such a view of the *Tractatus* has been put forward by Michael Morris.<sup>6</sup> As Morris reads Wittgenstein's book, the issue with it is encapsulated in this question that Morris raises in order to give his preferred answer:

how can we make sense of there being a certain philosophical theory which is, in some sense, right—and how can we make sense of someone, as it were, *accepting* it, even though he knows (as it were) that it cannot really be true?<sup>7</sup>

Morris' answer is that

The position seems best described by saying that, for Wittgenstein, the (apparent) sentences of the *Tractatus* are in an unstable position, which we can charac-

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<sup>4</sup> *TLP*, introduction; Ramsey 2000, 263. Diamond (2010), in her minutely detailed examination Ramsey's famous remark '[W]hat we cannot say we cannot say, and we cannot whistle it either' (Ramsey 1929, 238), convincingly shows that it is *not* directed against an alleged theory of ineffable truths that is ascribed to the *Tractatus* by Fregean reading. There are other examples of the misreadings of the Fregean reading, like the question of which conception of logical syntax Wittgenstein was committed to in the *Tractatus* (which connects to the relationship between Wittgenstein and Carnap's reading of his book), if his book aims to target or endorse the distinction between saying and showing, which conception of nonsense his book proposes, and so on and so forth. For instance, the discussion of Ramsey's quip in Diamond 2010, of logical syntax in Diamond 2005, of the conception of nonsense and Wittgenstein's method in Conant 2002, of the question of continuity and discontinuity in Conant 2011, and of the context principle in Dain 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Ayer 1985, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Morris 2008. Elsewhere, Morris and Dodd (2009, 248-251) distinguish between (1) 'The Ineffable Truths View,' (2) 'The Not-All-Nonsense View,' and (3) 'The No-Truths-At-All View.' They argue for option (3) (252). Priest (1995, 210n18) argues that 'Wittgenstein even seems to concede this in the introduction to the *Tractatus*, since he says [...] that the thoughts expressed by the *Tractatus* are unassailably and definitively true and so not nonsense.'

<sup>7</sup> Morris 2008, 346.

terize as that of *being both nonsense and true*, or else as successively (and endlessly) *nonsense and true*. This does not stop them being plain nonsense, insofar as they are nonsense. Nor does it make their truth—insofar as they are true—ineffable. Rather, they are *both* (or successively) *plain nonsense and stably true*.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we see that Morris ascribes (ANAT) to Wittgenstein. If Wittgenstein said that, then it seems fair to say that he would indeed be the victim of a confusion, since making sense is a requirement for being true.

But if instead, indeed much more plausibly (and more charitably), Wittgenstein only meant that *some* of the sentences of the *Tractatus* have to be recognized as nonsense in order to understand him, and some others express definitive truths, there would be nothing incoherent or paradoxical in these claims. Call this *the some-nonsense-some truths thesis*:

(SNST) *Some* sentences of the *Tractatus* express truths and *some* (of those that don't express truths) are nonsense.

Isn't this straightforward? Of some sentences, Wittgenstein thought that they express truths, and others are supposed to play an 'elucidatory' role if and only if they are recognized as nonsense. The only *other* possibility to make sense of Wittgenstein's pronouncement in the preface and the penultimate passage would be to say that Wittgenstein, from the preface on, deliberately deceived the reader insofar as he knew, when he writes that the book expresses unassailable truth, so that at a later stage this will lead the reader to question and interrogate the apparent meaning of the sentences once she recognizes the apparently paradoxical air to them. And once she interrogates the sentences of the book, she is supposed to recognize that she had not given a meaning to all of these sentences in the first place. Call this *the only-nonsense-no-truth thesis*:

(ONNT) *Only nonsense and no truths* are expressed in the *Tractatus*.

Such a *wholesale* rejection of the book as nonsense would lead to some pressing

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<sup>8</sup> Morris 2008, 347; my emphases.

issues: what about those parts in which Wittgenstein (appears to) put forward the method and metaphilosophy underlying the book? Are they nonsense too? What about the conclusion as he puts it in the preface? That conclusion is repeated at the end of the book. But then is the preface nonsense too? I think we can agree that both (ANAT) and (ONNT) lead to both an exegetical and a philosophical dead end, and (SNST) is the option to be preferred.

Ayer, however, is convinced that he has located the problem with the *Tractatus* precisely in the book's alleged defense of (ANAT). He writes:

Wittgenstein could not have it both ways. It cannot be the case both that his assertions are true and that they are devoid of sense. Russell makes this point in the introduction to the *Tractatus* and so does F.P. Ramsey in one of his Last Papers.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, Glock argued that Wittgenstein must allow distinctions between different kinds of nonsense, especially between philosophical (substantial) nonsense and 'gibberish' (mere nonsense), otherwise he would undermine himself.<sup>10</sup> According to Glock, we cannot operate on mere 'gibberish' alone. Therefore, Glock argues that the distinction between different kinds of nonsense is *imperative*, because it is essential in order to distinguish 'linguistic nonsense' and nonsense in connection with metaphysics, necessity and impossibility.<sup>11</sup> But Glock's account is wrongly based on the assumption of (ANAT), since only then would it be necessary for Wittgenstein to hold that there is nonsense apart from simply nonsense.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ayer 1985, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Glock 2004, 237.

<sup>11</sup> Glock 2004, 243. Edmund Dain (2008, 108) has responded that Glock's criticism is based on premises that are gained from a wrong construal of the conception of mere nonsense. This conception is no positive thesis, he observes, which would have to be backed up by a theory of meaning or another independent justification, but first of all the rejection of the substantial conception, according to which there are propositions that, although they are nonsensical, convey something. Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense, on the other hand, is simply our 'everyday' understanding, which should not be misunderstood 'theoretical' (108-109). Dain further argues that Glock's argumentation, which attempts to refute the Wittgensteinian conception by refuting the context principle does not suffice, because the Wittgensteinian conception does not depend on the context principle; but even if it did, Glock's argument would fail (109, 117).

<sup>12</sup> However, Conant (2002, 421) has argued that '[t]o understand how the *Tractatus*'s own Unsinn is supposed to elucidate (when that of other philosophers mostly only misleads), some dis-

To bolster his point, Ayer quotes Ramsey (immediately after the passage above) on Wittgenstein's alleged notion of 'important nonsense':

Philosophy must be of some use and we must take it seriously; it must clear our thoughts and so our actions. Or else it is a disposition we have to check, and an inquiry to see that this is so; i.e. the chief proposition of philosophy is that philosophy is nonsense. And again we must then take seriously that it is nonsense, and not pretend, as Wittgenstein does, that it is important nonsense!<sup>13</sup>

Ayer wants to put an exclamation mark behind Ramsey's charge of 'important nonsense' against Wittgenstein:

Nevertheless, it has now become clear that, in one central respect, the outlook of the *Tractatus* was misunderstood by the members of the Vienna Circle and the young English philosophers, including myself, who were strongly influenced by it. Even if we decline to take Ramsey's derisive phrase of 'important nonsense' as representing what Wittgenstein genuinely thought of the *Tractatus* itself, it does represent his estimate of what he saw as lying beyond the limits of language. We took it for granted that he judged metaphysics to be worthless, whereas in so far as he equated it with what he called 'the mystical', and included in it judgments of value and the appreciation of the meaning of life, his attitude was much more akin to that of Kant, whose criticisms of metaphysics were intended to limit the scope of the understanding in the interest of faith.<sup>14</sup>

So the picture is this: Ayer and others thought that Wittgenstein approves of

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inction between misleading nonsense and illuminating nonsense is obviously required; but, on the austere reading, illuminating nonsense is no longer a vehicle for a special kind of thought. If the aim of elucidation, according to the ineffability interpretation, is to reveal (through the employment of substantial nonsense) that what appears to be substantial nonsense is mere nonsense. While the aim of the former sort of elucidation was supposed to be the conferral of insight into metaphysical features of reality, the aim of the latter is not insight into metaphysical features of reality, but rather insight into the sources of metaphysics. The premise underlying the procedure of the *Tractatus* (and this is connected to why the point of the work is an ethical one) is that our most profound confusions of soul show themselves in—and can be revealed to us through an attention to—our confusions concerning what we mean (and, in particular, what we fail to mean) by our words.' These commitments may also be found elsewhere in Conant's papers. For instance, Conant appears to say that elucidatory nonsense is a special kind of nonsense, and that it is in a certain sense substantial (385). Besides, Conant sometimes even seems to imply that this kind of nonsense 'shows' something (382). But what this nonsense shows is radically different from what the Fregean reading thinks it does, since nonsense only shows that it is nonsense.

<sup>13</sup> Ramsey 2000, 263; quoted in Ayer 1985, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ayer 1985, 30-31.

what I have described as a Carnapian view, but then they recognized that he apparently rather approves of nonsense that lies beyond the limits of language, what I've described as a Fregean view.

Leaving aside the issue of whether Ayer gives a fair and adequate assessment of Kant's aim, the discussion in chapter 1 of this thesis showed that it is questionable that Wittgenstein's account was built to make room for the confused notion of 'important nonsense' beyond the limits of language. To repeat, as Wittgenstein has it in the *Tractatus's* preface, 'beyond' the limits of language there would be just 'simply nonsense.'<sup>15</sup>

Cora Diamond convincingly showed that Ramsey's point about important nonsense should not be taken as evidence for a tendency in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to (DSS) and (DI). Critics of the Diamond-Conant view on these matters (i.e. the distinction of saying and showing, the silence at the end of the book, and the status of the propositions as nonsense) have turned to a remark made by F. P. Ramsey: 'But what we cannot say we cannot say, and we cannot whistle it either.'<sup>16</sup> In her paper "'We cannot Whistle It Either": Legend and Reality,' Cora Diamond argues that this remark has been widely misunderstood, and is as a matter of fact not meant to accuse Wittgenstein of trying to express something that he cannot say, i.e. using nonsense or silence to express some ineffable truths. The argument of Diamond's critics goes like this: (1) Ramsey arrived at a unique understanding of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (through personal discussions, intensive study, etc.). Therefore, Ramsey's remarks about the *Tractatus* must be taken very seriously. (2) Ramsey's remark is evidence for the view that he thought Wittgenstein tried to avoid his own theoretical constraints and attempted to communicate something which could not be said (according to his own theory). Diamond's argument is that (1) may be true, but (2) is out of tune with the context in which Ramsey's remark appears. That is, Ramsey's remark is a *local* one directed at a specific problem that Ramsey saw in Wittgenstein's account, but is *not* a general remark on the *Tractatus*, i.e. concerning Wittgenstein's and Ram-

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<sup>15</sup> *TLP*, preface.

<sup>16</sup> Ramsey 2000, 238.

sey's account of generality and the naive treatment of infinite cases.<sup>17</sup> Diamond argues that taking Ramsey's remark as if it were an aphorism will not do, because it is clearly tied to its context and does not indicate that it is meant to reach beyond that context.<sup>18</sup> Defending Ramsey's remark as a general statement that attempts to criticize Wittgenstein for trying to express ineffable truths is a deadlock: the only evidence in Ramsey's paper is that he tied this remark closely to his discussion of general propositions.<sup>19</sup>

What is the problem that Ramsey directs this remark against? Diamond argues that there is no clear indication that the remark is directed only against Wittgenstein, and that it equally applies to Ramsey, and could therefore be meant as a criticism of both Wittgenstein and himself. This is because Ramsey shares with Wittgenstein his account of general propositions, and, just as Wittgenstein's account does, Ramsey's account has problems with the treatment of infinite cases. Commenting on H. J. Glock's paper 'Ramsey and Wittgenstein: Mutual Influences' (2005), Diamond finds that the remark is concerned with the problem of 'quantification over an infinite domain'<sup>20</sup> which arises both in Wittgenstein's and Ramsey's accounts of general propositions. According to Diamond, this problem is not dealt with by appeal to the saying-showing distinction in the *Tractatus*, but Wittgenstein just does not account for cases involving infinite quantity, even though 'if the number of things is infinite, 'For all  $x$ ,  $fx$ ' cannot be regarded as a conjunction at all.'<sup>21</sup> This is where the real target of Ramsey's remark lies:

This problem had not been dealt with by either Wittgenstein or Ramsey by appeal to saying and showing; what was rather the case was that the problem had been ignored, as if all that were involved in the infinite case would be a kind of extension to an infinite number of conjuncts of the treatment of finite cases. Both Ramsey and Wittgenstein had been willing to count as 'sayable propositions' conjunctions that we in our finitude could not actually express; but the

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<sup>17</sup> Diamond 2011a, 339.

<sup>18</sup> Diamond 2011a, 341.

<sup>19</sup> Diamond 2011a, 342.

<sup>20</sup> Diamond 2011a, 346.

<sup>21</sup> Diamond 2011a, 346.

limits imposed by our finitude were thought of as logically irrelevant, accidental. They had taken there to be nothing of logical significance in the fact that the conjunctions lay out of our reach. From this point of view there is no impediment to counting the conjunctions as sayable. That is what Ramsey is faulting Wittgenstein for.<sup>22</sup>

The reading of Ramsey's remark as a criticism of Wittgenstein for trying to whistle something that according to his theory is nonsensical only works if Ramsey had held a conception of 'deep nonsense,' i.e. that there is something which is nonsensical and unsayable all right, but nonetheless offers deep insights into the nature of things. But, as Diamond's reading indicates, Ramsey did not think that the *Tractatus* appeals to such deep nonsense after Wittgenstein discussed the *Tractatus* with him.<sup>23</sup> Diamond therefore concludes her discussion against the standard reading of Ramsey's remark:

'What we cannot say we cannot say, and we cannot whistle it either' is a great line; and it might indeed have been used to make the point with which Ramsey is credited in the legend, about Wittgenstein's method in the *Tractatus* having involved an attempt to communicate insights which according to the *Tractatus* itself cannot be put into words. It may be that Ramsey, in some other context, did use the line to make that point. But is there any evidence that that is so? Until some such evidence turns up, we should treat the legend as having no more plausibility than the stories about the crocodiles and the Dobermans. We should not treat the legend as having any tendency at all to show that Ramsey took Wittgenstein to have used the nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* as a way to convey ineffable truths. I have argued also that Ramsey was criticizing Wittgenstein, not for his treatment of what he had taken to be unsayable, but for what he had taken to be sayable. The only understanding of sayability available in the *Tractatus* allows truth-functions with an infinite number of arguments to count as sayable. The *Tractatus* understanding of sayability is connected closely to the idea that finitude is logically mere accident. Query that idea, and you query the *Tractatus* conception of sayability. That's what's at stake in the quip.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Diamond 2011a, 346.

<sup>23</sup> Diamond 2011a, 348–9.

<sup>24</sup> Diamond 2011, 349.



Diamond's account of what is really at stake in Ramsey's criticism against Wittgenstein, however, obviously wasn't available to Ayer, who wrote the above comments on Wittgenstein way before Diamond. The view that Ayer embraces about Wittgenstein, a mixture of Russell's introduction to the *Tractatus*, especially Russell's remarks on 'the mystical,' and some of Ramsey's comments on Wittgenstein, has continued to be highly influential up to this day.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, Ayer himself puts forward an argument from nonsense (which would again depend on and presuppose the notion of important nonsense): he argues that talk about God is nonsense, because it cannot be empirically verified.<sup>26</sup> And that would get Ayer into the same pickle that he thinks Wittgenstein is in—he would have to have found a way in which it is intelligible to point to that which lies beyond the limits of language, which is impossible.

I think that Ayer didn't see this predicament, but I think Wittgenstein did. So the question is if it is really the case that Wittgenstein wanted to show 'that' which lies beyond the limits of language? And did he really put forward an argument from nonsense? I think he didn't, but, to be fair, I turn now to Baker and Hacker who systematically argue that he did.

### **2.3 Baker and Hacker**

In the 'Prolegomenon' (called 'the New Philosopher's Stone') to their collaborative book *Language, Sense and Nonsense*, Baker and Hacker state the goal of their book to be 'to trace the bounds of sense':

It has frequently happened in the history of human intellectual endeavour that much ingenuity and effort has been expended to no avail because of a defective discrimination of sense from nonsense. Our goal is to trace the bounds of sense in a region where many are now prone to be led astray by grotesque conceptual confusions.<sup>27</sup>

One of these confusions that Baker and Hacker locate is to construe the bounds

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, one of the recent examples is Atkinson 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Ayer 1946, 2000. For an earlier defense of his verification principle, see Ayer 1936.

<sup>27</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, 12.

of sense as demarcated by the *calculus conception of language*:

Many theorists concur in the conception of a language as a calculus of rules for the use of symbols. These hitherto unknown rules determine the grammaticality of combinations of words, as well as the senses they convey. Speaking and understanding a language is commonly conceived as a matter of operating this complex calculus of precise rules, even though speakers have no conscious knowledge of them. Only thus can one explain and predict the limits of grammaticality and the bounds of sense, as well as render intelligible the mysterious processes of understanding. It is precisely because a language is a calculus of rules that it is possible to understand new sentences. The task of the theorist of language is to discover the forms of these rules, and thus to lay bare for the first time the hidden structures of languages. The task of the logical theorist is to demonstrate that the validity of the inferences we correctly take to be valid is explained and guaranteed by the underlying rules of a language.<sup>28</sup>

This is a description of *one* aspect that Baker and Hacker find confused in philosophical theories of language. But Baker and Hacker actually do not disagree with *all* of it. What Baker and Hacker rebel most against is that the ‘calculus of rules’ is construed as consisting of a ‘hidden’ or ‘tacitly known’ system of rules, which they think is mysterious, and fallacious.<sup>29</sup> But what they share with ‘the theorist of language’ is the construal of the bounds of sense as delimited by a set of rules of language, as we will see in the course of this chapter.

The crucial question, then, ‘is whether any such theory [...] does not traverse the bounds of sense.’<sup>30</sup> If a theory ‘presupposes metaphysical principles,’ it ‘might transgress the bounds of sense.’<sup>31</sup> And if a theory transgresses the bounds of sense, it is *nonsensical*.

A ‘theorist’ might object to the charge that her theory is nonsense by saying that she introduced new rules for the use of terms. Baker and Hacker concede that this move is an option, but think that it doesn’t help in this case, be-

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<sup>28</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, viii-ix.

<sup>29</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, ix-x.

<sup>30</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, 146-147.

cause the nature of the problem supposedly to be solved with the introduction of the new terms is such that there is a great threat that the sentences containing the new terminology will again ‘result [...] in nonsense’:

Introduction of technical terminology is not illicit provided that the explanations of it are coherent. But, unlike applications of technical terminology in physics, a misdescription of the problematic ‘phenomena’ will result, not in contingent falsehood, but in nonsense. For a misdescription of a conceptual articulation will traverse the bounds of sense.<sup>32</sup>

The crucial question, then, is this: *What are the bounds of sense?* How can one give an account of them? Since in order to say that *p* lies beyond these bounds, surely it would be a prerequisite that one would have to get a hold on those bounds first. And since Baker’s and Hacker’s argument against the philosophical tradition depends on an argument of that kind, they have to give an account of the bounds of sense. But can they achieve this goal?

In their account, the bounds of sense are a set of *linguistic rules*, a view they find expressed in the *Tractatus*:

[A] determinate set of strictly linguistic conventions generates absolute bounds of sense for all possible expressions of a language. The *Tractatus* advanced this conception in the strongest possible form. Its doctrine of analysis had the corollary that the bounds of sense could be drawn timelessly for every possible language. Wittgenstein explicitly noted the implications that whether one sentence has a sense cannot depend on whether another proposition is true or false and that every sentence has a sense that is independent of all matters of fact. Logical positivists offered a similar account.<sup>33</sup>

If, according to this picture, the philosopher had access to such a set of rules, then she would be *an expert in (judging) nonsense*, so to speak. She would be the authority in judging whether a given (philosophical) sentence *p* is nonsense. This seems to be the picture that Baker and Hacker suggest. But that would vio-

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<sup>32</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, 79.

<sup>33</sup> Baker and Hacker 1984, 219.

late *Wittgenstein's principle*: 'it is impossible to judge a nonsense.'<sup>34</sup>

But Baker and Hacker think that philosophy is only important precisely because the philosopher is allegedly such an expert in judging nonsense, since that would enable the philosopher to *eliminate nonsense*: 'philosophy [...] derive[s] its importance [...] from the elimination of nonsense.'<sup>35</sup>

Thus it appears that judging nonsense, for the philosopher, obtains a crucial role. And apparently a critical potency too, since to judge nonsense is a tool for (philosophical) criticism. For instance, in their commentary on the *Investigations*, Baker and Hacker also find Wittgenstein's use of the term 'nonsense' to be used as such a tool.

In the *Investigations*, the word 'nonsense' comes up only in few places, but one of these is the following remark, on which Baker and Hacker put much emphasis: 'My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.'<sup>36</sup> Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that this passage expresses that Wittgenstein thinks that the failure to make sense (in philosophy) has to be criticized by judging nonsense. It should follow from this that the nonsense that is being investigated and ultimately criticized is part of the investigation/criticism. But for that criticism to be intelligible, one would have to specify the object of criticism. However, that object is nonsense. And how can one make nonsense intelligible? It seems that this line of criticism can never determine its object of criticism:

The criticism of nonsense (CON): That, whatever it is, is nonsense.

But this would appear to be rather unsatisfying, and the question then would be what can be meant by a 'criticism' of nonsense?

The answer that Baker and Hacker give is that Wittgenstein means that nonsense is the result of the 'transgression' of the 'bounds of sense.'<sup>37</sup> They

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<sup>34</sup> *TLP*, 5.5422.

<sup>35</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 195.

<sup>36</sup> *PI*, 464.

<sup>37</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 255-257.

write:

The results of (decent) philosophy are the progressive disclosure of the nonsense latent in the ‘houses of cards’ that we (philosophers) construct in pursuit of ‘all that is great and important’, and the painful recognition of our own previous attempts to transgress the bounds of sense.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the role of the philosopher is merely negative. As an expert in nonsense, her job is to put forward a criticism of nonsense whenever the bounds of sense are violated: she judges whether *p* is nonsense, and if it is, nothing else remains to be done for the philosophical community than the ‘painful recognition’ that it is simply nonsense. But again, to reiterate, this whole procedure wouldn’t adhere to Wittgenstein’s principle, and as the discussion above suggests, (CON) restricts the alleged critical potential heavily.

And, to anticipate, there is also another pressing problem for the Baker and Hacker account: the rules on which Baker and Hacker put so much emphasis haven’t yet been stated.<sup>39</sup> And since Baker and Hacker, as we have seen above, reject that these rules are implicit, this leads them to *proceed as if they already knew* (in advance) the rules that *would* generate the bounds of sense, and furthermore as if they *already* knew that much of philosophy will turn out to be nonsense—what they in fact cannot, since, to reiterate, the rules that would be proof for this haven’t simply been found yet, which make their account dubious, or at least highly speculative.

But Baker and Hacker think that they follow Wittgenstein’s authority on the claim that they can know already, without having the rules, that having the rules would entail that much of philosophy is nonsense:

There is here both continuity and change relative to the *Tractatus*. There too W[ittgenstein] claimed that ‘Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical’ (TLP 4.003), *inter alia* because they transgress the rules of logical syntax by using formal concept-words

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<sup>38</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 255.

<sup>39</sup> More on this in chapter 7 of this thesis.

as if they were material concept-words in the endeavor to say things that cannot be said but are shown by well-formed sentences of the language. For the same reason, he condemned the very propositions of the *Tractatus* itself as nonsensical [...].<sup>40</sup>

And Baker and Hacker continue to flesh out the apparent striking continuity between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*: both works put forward a criticism of philosophy according to which much of philosophy is nonsense. In short, the authors see in both *an argument from nonsense*:

The later W[ittgenstein] continued to think that the task of philosophy was to disclose the latent nonsense of putative philosophical propositions. [...] [T]he putative propositions of philosophy (especially, but not only, of metaphysics) are [...] nonsense that transgresses the grammar of the constituent expressions.<sup>41</sup>

It is crucial to note that Baker and Hacker want to say that nonsense is, on their account, understood to be ‘mere’ or ‘simply’ nonsense, or, as they themselves prefer to call it, ‘plain nonsense.’ That is, nonsense that lies beyond the bounds of sense, nonsense that is equivalent to totally random meaningless signs. But, then again, they also want to say that it is something different—a tension that we already saw in Frege’s hinting and Carnap’s notion of content without content:

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<sup>40</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 255-256. Georg H. von Wright (2001, 13) describes it as ‘a matter of future debate to what extent there is continuity between the “early” Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and the “later” Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*.’ He was right indeed: it is, and in a significant way. On the question on continuity and discontinuity in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, see Kenny 2006, chap. 12; Koethe 1996; Medina 2002; and Conant 2011. Conant (1991a, 156) gives the following points of continuity: (1) ‘Both early and late, Wittgenstein will insist that the difficulty of his work is tied to the fact that he is not putting forward theses’; (2) ‘[O]ne of the most important continuities between early and late Wittgenstein lies in his attack on the idea of a hopelessly flawed sense’ (Conant 1991a, 158. See *TLP*, 5.4732; *PI*, 500); (3) ‘This brings us to a[nother] important continuity in Wittgenstein’s work—his conception of the aim of philosophy. [...] Wittgenstein [asks his reader] to understand *him* [...] the author and [that] the kind of activity in which he is engaged—[is] one of elucidation. He [...] tells us how [his] sentences serve as elucidations: by enabling us to recognize them as nonsense’ (Conant 1991a, 159. See *TLP*, 6.54; *PI*, 464); (4) ‘[O]ne of the crucial points of continuity throughout Wittgenstein’s work [is that]: ‘What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards’ – you are never deprived of anything you ever had or could have had’ (Conant 1989b, 337. Cf. *PI*, 118); (5) ‘The description of Wittgenstein’s conception of the activity of philosophy as a quest for clarity is [...] one that Wittgenstein avails himself of both early and late. For both early and late [...] Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing supplies a record of his own internal struggles with the forms of intellectual temptation and confusion that exercised him most. [...] Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing embodies a struggle to free himself from [his own philosophical] fantasies’ (Conant 1989b, 347).

<sup>41</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 256.

Is the ‘plain nonsense’ that philosophy discloses just like ‘Ab sur ah’, i.e. plain gibberish? It is *just as nonsensical* as gibberish (PI §§499f.; AWL 64), but not just like it. For it is latent nonsense—difficult to detect, and difficult to demonstrate to be nonsense. Unlike gibberish, it is generated by the subtle *misuses* of significant words in our language, and there are many *different* kinds of misuses. There are deep reasons why we are tempted to misuse words thus—to ‘run up against the limits of language’. This latent nonsense is transformed into patent nonsense (PI §§464, 524) by *operations* on the constituent expressions that show that they are being misused (AWL 64). One cannot and need not ‘operate’ on ‘Ab sur ah’ to reveal that it is nonsense. But if a philosopher thinks that to *mean something* is an act or activity of the mind, one can ask him how long it took to mean so-and-so by the name ‘N.N.’, or whether, when he said ‘*p*’ and meant by the sentence ‘*p*’ the state of affairs that *p*, he finished meaning it in good time, or whether he was interrupted in the middle, or how he acquired the skill to mean so much so quickly, and so on.<sup>42</sup>

So nonsense is plain nonsense, and the sentence

(MN) To *mean something* is an act or activity of the mind

is an instance of nonsense, according to Baker and Hacker. To get another person to see that (MN) is nonsense, it appears to suffice to ask her a couple of questions, presumably in order to show that she cannot answer them properly, or that her answering them leads to confusion or contradiction, since they go on to write that

[t]hese questions (operations on the problematic term or phrase) make it clear that the consequences of the thought that meaning is an act or activity are absurd. The argument is literally a *reductio ad absurdum* (unlike what traditionally goes by that name, which is strictly a *reductio ad contradictionem*), precisely because it transforms latent nonsense that looks like a sensible sentence into patent nonsense.<sup>43</sup>

So the philosophically confused person’s answers lead to *absurdities*. Now what

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<sup>42</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 256.

<sup>43</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 256.

is an absurdity? Presumably, Baker and Hacker would have to say that they want to use that word identically to ‘plain nonsense.’ Otherwise the ‘*reductio ad absurdum*’ couldn’t show (MN) to be nonsense. It is, however, supposed to be an argument according to them. That argument is supposed to show that (MN) lies beyond the bounds of sense:

[T]he results of philosophy are, on the one hand, the disclosure of nonsense, and, on the other hand, the bumps the understanding incurs when transgressing the bounds of sense. The bumps are incurred in the course of the struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding (cf. §109), and they make us see the value of apprehending that what we thought and were inclined to say, was nonsense.<sup>44</sup>

But how can such a conclusion be established? The nonsense that is supposed to be unmasked as nonsense would have to be part of the argument establishing that conclusion. But how can an argument (at least partly) consist of such nonsensical sentences? Especially since the result is supposed to show that (MN) lies beyond the bounds of sense, how can (MN), as something that lies beyond the bounds of sense, be part of an argument? One would think that the crucial point of lying beyond the bounds of sense is to be *unable* to be part of any argument whatsoever. In order to use (MN) as part of an argument, it would seem that we would have to recognize at least some aspects that it shares with sentences that we would normally identify as parts of arguments. But if we can define these features of (MN), how can it completely escape beyond the bounds of sense? Can it really be established that (MN) is something that is shown to be absurd or nonsense?

It seems that the argument from nonsense, as understood by the boundary model, hovers between two different takes on (or two different kinds of) nonsense, one of which doesn’t seem to be that nonsensical, since it shares a certain (logical/grammatical) structure with meaningful sentences and apparently can be part of an argument. But such ‘nonsense’ would be suspect, to say the least.

Wasn’t sense/nonsense supposed to be an either/or category? Wasn’t

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<sup>44</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 256-257.



nonsense supposed to be ‘completely’ empty? It seems that at least sometimes nonsense can be quite substantial after all, according to Baker and Hacker. But that would make the nature of the bounds of sense quite perplexing, which we’ll have to investigate further.

At any rate, the image of philosophy as ‘guarding’ the bounds of sense, waiting for someone to ‘violate’ (linguistic or grammatical) ‘rules’—though it seems highly unlikely that it is a picture that Wittgenstein embraced, or even implied (since there are no passages in which Wittgenstein speaks of such a violation)—is something that Baker and Hacker embrace. According to this picture of philosophy as the ‘guardian’ of the bounds of sense, what philosophy does is to *demarcate* sense and nonsense:

[P]hilosophy is concerned with describing the use of language, the grammar of the expressions of our language, for the purpose of dissolving philosophical difficulties. It is concerned with the network of conceptual connections within the language, connections that determine what makes sense (and which exclude certain combinations of words as nonsense).<sup>45</sup>

And, according to Baker and Hacker, philosophy does this by providing a ‘perspicuous representation’:

Philosophy [...] rescues us by offering us *the correct* perspicuous representation of our ‘system’ (‘und nun erlöst uns die Philosophie dadurch dass sie uns die richtige übersichtliche Darstellung anbietet’), so that we are no longer subject to such temptations. ‘We provide a perspicuous representation of a system of rules, namely of a system which does exclude our employing all those propositions which we have always wanted to exclude, which have always aroused suspicion in us’ (VoW 125). By implication, we do not need Russell’s Theory of Types and the grammar of *Principia*, for example, to exclude as nonsense what is nonsense anyway — and can be seen to be nonsense by a perspicuous representation of the ordinary grammar of the relevant kind of self-referring propositions.<sup>46</sup>

This seems to be a confused picture as a reading of the later Wittgenstein, since

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<sup>45</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 270.

<sup>46</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 263-264.

his ‘methodological pluralism’ does not square with ‘the correct’ representation.<sup>47</sup> Here again, Baker and Hacker seem to smuggle in much of their own views about the role of philosophy, rather than letting Wittgenstein speak for himself.

This is again true of the account of nonsense that they develop in a footnote to this passage, where they elaborate their conception of nonsense further:

W[ittgenstein]’s example (p. 125) is ‘ $a = a$ ’, i.e. the so-called Law of Identity, which Frege held to be a Law of Truth (a boundary stone ‘set in an eternal foundation, which our thought can overflow but never displace’ (BLA i, p. xvi)). But ‘A thing is identical with itself’ is a very suspect proposition — ‘There is no finer example of a useless proposition’, he was to write in the *Investigations* §216. In BT 412 (cf. MS 110 (Vol. VI), 164) he wrote: ‘The Law (*Satz*) of Identity, for example, seems to have a fundamental significance. But the proposition (*Satz*) that this “law” (*Satz*) is a nonsense has taken over this significance.’ ‘A thing is different from itself’, he explained in RFM 404 (cf. 89), is nonsense (*that* is why it is ‘unthinkable’). Hence its negation ‘A thing is identical with itself’ is nonsense too; it says nothing, delimits reality in no way.<sup>48</sup>

But what is confused in this passage is to say that  $p$  is ‘unthinkable’ *because* it is nonsensical; it is confused to say that  $p$  expresses a nonsense because what  $p$  expresses is ‘unthinkable.’ That reasoning would imply that one understands what it is that is nonsensical, and makes it seem as if one were giving an argument that is supposed to establish the conclusion that  $p$  is nonsense. Apart from that, it is questionable as a reading, since Wittgenstein nowhere says, in that passage, that the sentence Baker and Hacker discuss is nonsense or unthinkable.<sup>49</sup>

Baker and Hacker’s notion of the ‘transgression of the bounds of sense’ is evidently derived from Hacker’s own earlier account.<sup>50</sup> This is affirmed by the fact that Baker isn’t part of the second, extensively revised edition of their com-

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<sup>47</sup> See Conant 2010, 2011; Diamond 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Baker and Hacker 2005, 263n55.

<sup>49</sup> RFM VII, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Hacker 1986.

mentary on the *Investigations*; Baker's views changed so drastically that they weren't compatible with his own earlier views any longer, and much less with Hacker's views.<sup>51</sup> Their collaboration ended, and Hacker revised the commentary on his own, apparently putting forward a line of argumentation even closer to his own (earlier) reading. In order to shed some more light on the boundary model, I turn now to Hacker's earlier account.

## 2.4 Hacker on the bounds of sense

Hacker highlights the *Tractatus*'s apparent intent to draw the limits of thought. Since that is apparently a self-defeating research program, as Wittgenstein already notes at the beginning of his book in the preface, the trick is to demarcate thought *indirectly*, through a specification of the limits of language, which is in turn supposed to be achieved by the determination of these limits *from within*—that is, by stating *everything* that can be said, thereby banishing *that* which cannot be said *beyond* these limits thus set. That Hacker thinks this to be true of Wittgenstein should be straightforward. Here is how Hacker puts this:

The limits of the thinkable are set in language, determined by the essential nature of representation. What lies beyond those limits cannot be said. The totality of genuine propositions constitutes the thinkable; the totality of true propositions constitutes the whole of 'natural science'. In specifying the limits of language, philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science, the sphere of possible knowledge. [...] Finally [...] the description of the limits of language, lies beyond the realm of what can be said. Language can no more describe its own essence than it can describe the essence of the world.<sup>52</sup>

But a description that specifies the limits of sense *and* that lies beyond the limits thus specified is just a plain contradiction in my eyes. And thus it cannot specify the limits in the first place. Since what Wittgenstein apparently does is not limiting himself to putting forward what can only be said, it is another question if doing this is Wittgenstein's methodological aim. Hacker confronts this head-on, arguing that one has to distinguish between *two methods* in the *Tractatus*, one

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<sup>51</sup> Baker 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Hacker 1986, 23.

that is ‘preached’ by the book, and another that is actually ‘practiced’ in the book:

It follows that the philosophical method practised *in* the *Tractatus* (as opposed to the method preached *by* the *Tractatus*) is not strictly the correct one. The *Tractatus* does not set a limit to thought by a clear presentation of what can be said. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are not clarifications of ordinary empirical propositions. On the contrary, they are, as Wittgenstein pointed out in the penultimate remark of the book, nonsensical pseudo-propositions. A critique of the kind constituted by the *Tractatus* itself would have to stand, as it were, on both sides of the limits of the thinkable. Such a critique could not possibly make sense. What then is its rationale? What point can such nonsense have?<sup>53</sup>

Choosing the ‘incorrect’ method (the one practiced) over the ‘correct’ method (the one preached) has, however, the daunting result that what Wittgenstein writes does not itself belong to what can be said, but instead lies beyond the limits of language (and thus also beyond the limits of thought). Hacker takes Wittgenstein to describe these instances as ‘nonsensical pseudo-propositions.’<sup>54</sup> Thus the distinction between what the book aims and what it does, drawn in the way Hacker does, only makes it worse for Hacker’s Wittgenstein, since that would entail the nonsensicality of much, if not all, of his book.

This puts Hacker under pressure, which leads him to concede:

The predicament is serious. It is not merely that Wittgenstein’s explanation of what apprehension of the ineffable consists in itself perforce invokes the use of formal concepts. Nor is it merely that Wittgenstein deliberately saws off the branch upon which he is sitting, since if the account of the conditions of representation given in the book is correct, then the sentences of the book are mere pseudo-propositions. But rather, if that is so, then the account of the conditions of representation is itself nonsense. And that seems a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very argument that led to the claim that the sentences of the book are one

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<sup>53</sup> Hacker 1986, 24-25.

<sup>54</sup> See *TLP*, 4.1272, 5.534-5.535, 6.2.

and all pseudo-propositions.<sup>55</sup>

In this passage, Hacker seems to openly admit that his reading of Wittgenstein as giving an argument from nonsense leads to the nonsense fallacy, and thus to the nonsense predicament. What Hacker describes here is the way in which nonsense is like a *disease*, so to speak. It is highly *contagious*: one nonsensical sentence leads to another, and where there is one nonsensical sentence, there are probably plenty more nonsensical sentences.<sup>56</sup> This *nonsense predicament* is indeed serious, as Hacker notes. But the lesson that Hacker draws from this isn't, I think, the correct one. Hacker's way of dealing with the predicament is to insist that *it's Wittgenstein* who is giving such a paradoxical theory, which leads him into the predicament. What I think one should consider in face of the predicament, however, is that *it's the reading* that leads Wittgenstein to the predicament, and thus such a reading should be given up, and an alternative reading should be searched for.

If the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, they say 'nothing.' Wouldn't that be *very* bad news for Hacker? Didn't Wittgenstein just say *a lot* with precisely the same sentences that are now said to say nothing? Is there a way out of this mess?

Hacker wants to argue that the *Tractatus* has a way to deal with the predicament.<sup>57</sup> Hacker thinks that Wittgenstein can escape the now looming threat of self-contradiction. The plan is to take up on a suggestion made by Wittgenstein himself, which Hacker wants to spell out in connection with his criticisms of Max Black.

In a nutshell, Hacker takes Black to be arguing that nonsense, while it says nothing, has the ability to 'show.' In this way, Black thinks, surely one can

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<sup>55</sup> Hacker 2000, 356, cf. 355, 359-360.

<sup>56</sup> Relatedly, Priest (1979, 238) says about contradictions and paradoxes: 'It is always difficult to admit that something you have written is false. But this is the position I must now admit to being in. For what I have been saying is not without significance for what I have been saying. In particular, if what I have been saying is true, then some of the things I have been saying are false (as well).'

<sup>57</sup> See Hacker 2000, 360.

get Wittgenstein (and one's reading of him with it) out of the paradoxical situation and back to coherence. Hacker writes that

Wittgenstein's remark that whoever understands him will recognize that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense (*TLP*, 6.54) was greeted by philosophers with incredulous indignation. In his preface Russell observed that 'after all Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said'. Black, like Russell, cannot doubt that we understand the book and learn much from it, so there must be some way out of this paradox. He suggests that we may concede that if communication is equated exclusively with 'saying' then the *Tractatus* communicates nothing. Nevertheless there is, according to the *Tractatus* itself, much that can be shown even if it cannot be said. Hence, surely, the *Tractatus* shows a great deal, and this is salvageable. Black proceeds to erect what he calls 'a line of defence'. According to this, all cases in which Wittgenstein is seeking the essence of something that results in a priori statements belonging to logical syntax or philosophical grammar (Black's example is 'A proposition is not a complex name') consist of formal statements showing something that can be shown. These, Black claims, are no worse than logical statements which involve no violation of the rules of logical syntax.<sup>58</sup>

Put aside the question whether that is a correct reading of Black or not, what matters, for the purposes here, is whether or not that 'line of defence' works. Hacker certainly thinks that it doesn't. He argues against Black that, of course, nonsense, apart from saying nothing, *also* shows nothing. If that's true, Black's defense wouldn't work:

This [Black's reading as just characterized by Hacker] is mistaken. Logical propositions are senseless but not nonsense. They say nothing, but they show the internal properties of compound propositions and represent the scaffolding of the world. 'Formal statements', however, neither say nor show anything. They do violate the rules of logical syntax, for they wrongly employ formal concepts. Thus, in Black's example, 'proposition', 'name', and 'complex' are all formal concepts. Hence the 'formal statements' that use them are nonsense. Wittgenstein was quite correct and consistent; the *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseu-

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<sup>58</sup> Hacker 1986, 25.

do-propositions. Of course, what Wittgenstein meant by these remarks (like what the solipsist means (*TLP*, 5.62)) is, in his view, quite correct, only it cannot be said. Apparently what someone means or intends by a remark can be grasped even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense. (Thus Wittgenstein claims to understand what the solipsist means.)<sup>59</sup>

Nonsensical sentences do not say or show anything whatsoever. But Hacker notices that he cannot leave his disagreement with Black at that point. Since he has rejected that nonsense can show something, he still has to answer the pressing question of how the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* can communicate *anything* at all. Thus Hacker is forced to admit that in some sense these sentences can get us to see something; thus in a sense, he nevertheless wants to rescue something from Black's defense, namely the thought that nonsensical sentences can indeed bring us to see something philosophically important. Hacker's suggestion now is to call the role that nonsense can play to convey philosophically significant matters 'illuminating.' In effect, Hacker's proposal is to distinguish between two different kinds of nonsense:

The uneasy distinction between illuminating nonsense and misleading nonsense has frequently been attacked by critics. Ramsey argued that either philosophy must be of some use, or else it is a disposition which we have to check. If philosophy is nonsense, then it is useless and we should not pretend as Wittgenstein did that it is important nonsense. Later commentators have followed Ramsey in finding this notion absurd, and it has been objected in defense that Wittgenstein neither said nor intended any such absurdity. Certainly, Wittgenstein did not use the phrase 'illuminating nonsense'. What he said was that the propositions of the *Tractatus* elucidate by bringing whoever understands their author to recognize them as nonsensical. They are not elucidations in the sense of analyses of 'scientific' propositions into their constituents. Rather are they pseudo-propositions by means of which one can climb beyond them. They lead one to see the world aright, from a correct logical point of view. One will then realize that they are nonsensical, and throw away the ladder up which one has climbed. Ramsey claimed that if philosophy is nonsense, it is a disposition which ought to be checked. Does this follow? In one sense it does. Philosophy of the kind practised

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<sup>59</sup> Hacker 1986, 25-26.

in the *Tractatus* should no longer be written. If anyone tries to say anything metaphysical we should, dialectically, bring him to see his errors. His metaphysical questions will not have been answered, but his mind, ‘no longer vexed, will cease to ask illegitimate questions’. To this extent future philosophy, according to the *Tractatus*, ought to be purely analytical and therapeutic. The *Tractatus* itself, though a manifestation of our natural disposition to metaphysics, is a justifiable undertaking which has been fully and finally discharged. It is not a prolegomenon to any future metaphysics, but the swansong of metaphysics.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, as Hacker is fully aware, early commentators—most notably Russell, Ramsey, and Carnap—already suspected that Wittgenstein works with or is anyway (unwittingly) committed to such a distinction. Such a reading embraces paradox, however, and it is questionable that this is in Wittgenstein’s interest. Hacker’s answer, though not attractive to most philosophers, is to bite the bullet. Most of philosophy, including the *Tractatus*, is nonsense (as Wittgenstein himself appears to acknowledge)—and hence it ‘should no longer be written,’ as Hacker puts this, ‘[o]r so it seemed to the author of the *Tractatus*.’<sup>61</sup> But this does not get to the bottom of Wittgenstein’s authorial aim, and it is questionable that the argument he extracts from his reading of Wittgenstein is cogent.

For Hacker anyway, it is clear that Wittgenstein’s ‘achievement’ in the *Tractatus* lies, as already mentioned above, in the demarcation of the limits of thought. Hacker’s argument from nonsense in turn depends on a certain reading of these limits as ‘boundaries.’ As Hacker writes,

[T]here is no doubt that when he compiled the *Tractatus*, it was the very fact that the philosophy of logic which he propounded drew the limits of language at the *boundary* of all that is ‘higher’—ethics, aesthetics, and religion, as well as philosophy itself and the attendant doctrines of transcendental solipsism—which seemed the main achievement of the book. [...] It is of course the preface and conclusion that emphasize the importance of setting limits to thought.<sup>62</sup>

Apparently, if one is at the boundary set by the limits of thought and encounters

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<sup>60</sup> Hacker 1986, 26-27.

<sup>61</sup> Hacker 1986, 103.

<sup>62</sup> Hacker 1986, 105; my emphasis.



the nonsense that lies beyond, one encounters the ‘inexpressible.’ And if one then attempts nevertheless to express what is inexpressible, the result is ‘to run up against the limits of language’:

[I]t does not make sense to wonder at the existence of the world for, he claims, it is unimaginable that it should not exist. One can wonder at so-and-so being the case only if so-and-so could not be the case. Similarly it is nonsense to speak of being ‘safe whatever happens’. These are only more or less futile attempts to express the inexpressible. They are manifestations of the deep tendency of the human mind to run up against the limits of language.<sup>63</sup>

The predicament of Hacker’s Wittgenstein is serious, and it is not clear whether there is a way around it. Hacker wants to say that early Wittgenstein, at least, thought there was; but in the end, Hacker thinks that Wittgenstein’s earlier work is deeply confused. That there are confusions in his earlier work is something that is probably almost undeniable (Wittgenstein himself claimed that it is). But it is not unambiguous what exactly the confusions are, and one can suspect at this point that the picture of the *Tractatus* that Hacker paints might be wrong about what they are.

Another point that is critical in Hacker’s account is that he also wants to keep some of the logic of his discussion of Wittgenstein’s earlier work. The notion of the boundaries set by the limits of language, in particular, gets resurrected in the form of the notion of the ‘bounds of sense’:

While the correct logical point of view was to be achieved by logical *analysis* into an ideal (logically perspicuous) notation, a surview is to be obtained by a careful *description* of our ordinary uses of language. The main source of misunderstandings characteristic of philosophy is the difficulty of surveying our use of language (PI, § 122). Language is the means of representation. Its inner structure, constituted by the rules which determine the use of sentences and their constituents is the form of representation, the web of conceptual connections by means of which we conceive of the world. We obtain a proper surview of our form of representation when we grasp the grammar of language, not merely in

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<sup>63</sup> Hacker 1986, 107.

the sense in which the ordinary speaker of the language does, but in the sense of being able to survey the interconnections of rules for the use of expressions. When these reticulations are perspicuous, one can achieve a firm understanding of the bounds of sense and see what is awry with philosophical questions and their typical answers. For these characteristically traverse the limits of sense, violate—in subtle ways—the rules for the use of expressions, and hence make no sense.<sup>64</sup>

But isn't Hacker's move here just a switch in terminology? Doesn't the main logic of the doctrines he associates with the *Tractatus* remain the same? James Conant has argued that this is the case.<sup>65</sup> It is clear enough that this passage restates Hacker's belief that a violation of the rules of logic (early) and rules of grammar (later) leads to a *transgression* of the limits of language, since these limits are said to set the boundaries at the limits of thought (early) and the bounds of sense (later).

New in Hacker's account of later Wittgenstein is that he now speaks of the grammatical rules of language that 'determine the difference between correct and incorrect use, as well as the difference between sense and nonsense.'<sup>66</sup> Similarly, H. J. Glock holds that nonsense is the result of a violation of linguistic rules: 'the special function of grammatical reminders is to *draw attention* to the

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<sup>64</sup> Hacker 1986, 152.

<sup>65</sup> Conant 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Hacker (1996, 12-13) furthermore describes some of the features these rules have (and don't have) thus: '[A]ny statistical sampling will collect what are predominantly correct instances of the use of the language. But it will not provide an adequate criterion to distinguish correct uses from misuses (let alone from divergent, metaphorical, poetical or secondary uses). For *correct use* is not merely a statistical concept. The use of an expression is not just the verbal behaviour of users of the expression, but their verbal and other behaviour *in so far as it accords with the acknowledged rules for the correct employment of that expression*, rules which the users themselves acknowledge in their humdrum explanations of meaning, and of what they mean, and in their recognition of explanations by others of what certain expressions mean. These rules or conventions are not, of course, axioms or postulates of a formal system. Nor are they "implicit rules" postulated by the field linguist. They are not "mental entities". Nor are they mere history, for their role is not exhausted in the original teaching of the expressions. Far from being "explanatorily idle" as Quine suggested in his criticism of Carnap [...], they are explanatorily indispensable, since they determine the difference between correct and incorrect use, as well as the difference between sense and nonsense. They are exhibited in explanations of meaning, which are as accessible to observations of behaviour as are descriptive uses of declarative sentences' (emphasis in the original). But this seems to be a reading of rules way too weak to enable them to do the heavy philosophical work Hacker supposes them to do, if rules are equated with explanations manifested in (ordinary) language use.

*violation* of linguistic rules by philosophers, a violation which results in nonsense.’<sup>67</sup> Therefore there is, according to Glock, a new understanding of the practice of philosophy:

The Wittgensteinian philosopher will try to get his opponent to recognize an inconsistency or unintelligibility in his position. This does not indicate the need for a kind of conversion, but rather is a methodological requirement. For an undogmatic *reductio ad absurdum* it is essential to transform a latent piece of nonsense or inconsistency into a patent one (PI §464). The opponent should realize that the proposition or question he advances stems from a grammatical conflict, an inconsistency in his use of words. To give up the critique of underlying inconsistencies would amount to the acceptance of philosophical nonsense. There is no reason to believe that Wittgenstein would have tolerated such an attitude.<sup>68</sup>

The ‘job of the philosopher’ would thus be, as Glock takes it from Wittgenstein, to make latent nonsense patent. This point is also highlighted by Robert Arrington, who follows up on the notion of making the latent nonsense patent as the job of the philosopher:

[N]onsense may not appear to be nonsense; arising out of our language itself, it may appear to be the very best of sense, indeed to be a higher form of wisdom. The future that is already here as the object of an expectation, the order that is executed before it is actually followed, the round square that comes into being as we ask about it, and the belief that is true in order that it can be false—these philosophical exotica are grounded in our language. But they are illusions for all that, for they make their appearance only when we divert our attention from the actual use of language and when we confuse grammatical facts about the way we are to talk with realities accessible only to philosophers. Our study [...] has allowed us to pass from disguised nonsense to patent nonsense (§464). And that, of course, was Wittgenstein’s intent all the while.<sup>69</sup>

So the picture is this: philosophy is inherently confused, full of illusions of sense. To clear the air, all that is nonsensical would have to be banished. And the ar-

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<sup>67</sup> Glock 1991, 78.

<sup>68</sup> Glock 1991, 85.

<sup>69</sup> Arrington 1991, 199-200n14.

gument from nonsense is supposed to implement that banishment. However, we have already seen, at many crucial points, that this project might be inherently confused. We'll further investigate that worry in the next chapter.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The boundary model brought to our attention that nonsense might be much more problematic than we might have originally believed: it might have an *inherently paradoxical nature*. If that were so, the use of nonsense in an argument would lead to a *predicament*: to put it crudely, nonsense would appear to lead, not to conclusions, but 'nowhere,' so to speak—except to further nonsense. Since the argument from nonsense depends on nonsense being part of it, the predicament might be serious indeed.

One of the most urgent issues that arises (for philosophers), then, is about the role of nonsense in philosophical practice. So far, we have seen philosophers apparently putting forward what looked like (more or less) straightforward philosophical arguments that, however, self-consciously included nonsense. Are all these attempted apparent arguments themselves nonsense?

In effect, it seems that attempting to use nonsense as part of an argument would unavoidably lead to further nonsense. Does this stop at some point, or is there a regress? One crucial requirement to use nonsense as part of an argument would clearly have to be that one could use nonsense as part of meaningful speech, but now it seems that that might not even be possible. Do we have to make sense of nonsense, so to speak, before we can use nonsense as part of an argument? But then it seems that it wouldn't be nonsense anymore, and that would make the sentence or argument (saying that it is nonsense) incorrect. So actually, the result will be even more general: nonsense cannot be a part of meaningful speech. These are the crucial difficulties to which we turn in the next chapter.

## 3. The Nonsense Paradox

### 3.1 Introduction

Frege, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ayer, Baker, Hacker, and others all deal with nonsense—so they say. In fact, if they were right that (much of) philosophy is nonsense, then apparently any philosopher whatsoever—quite necessarily—would deal with nonsense. But that would appear to make any philosophical argumentation void as well. And that would as well concern the very argument that philosophy is nonsense. How, then, could such an argument from nonsense even be established in the first place? It seems that, if it were correct, it could not establish its conclusion. But in many parts of the writings of the aforementioned philosophers, it definitely looks as if nonsense can indeed be part of philosophical argumentation. How is that even possible?

There is a reasonable suspicion, then, that the insistence on the argument from nonsense might lead to a predicament. It appears that nonsense cannot, in any way, be part of philosophical argumentation. And worse, the nature of nonsense seems to make it impossible that it could be meaningful, and hence that it cannot even be part of meaningful speech at all. If one would nevertheless insist that nonsensical sentences could be used for such matters, one would mistakenly hold onto a sense of nonsense—which is, quite obviously, a philosophical *confusion*. This is Diamond's point about 'chickening out':

What exactly is supposed to be left of that, after we have thrown away the ladder? Are we going to keep the 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? *That* is what I want to call chickening out. What counts as not chickening out is then this, roughly: to throw the ladder away is, among other things, to throw away in the end the attempt to take seriously the language of 'features of reality.' To read Wittgenstein himself as not chickening out is to say that it is not, not really, his view that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but show themselves. What *is* his view is that that way of talking may be useful or

even for a time essential, but it is in the end to be let go of and honestly taken to be real nonsense, plain nonsense, which we are not in the end to think of as corresponding to an ineffable truth. To speak of features of reality in connection with what shows itself in language is to use a very odd kind of figurative language. That goes also for ‘*what shows itself*’.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of this predicament, the question arises whether the argument from nonsense, which in all of its guises depends on the possibility that nonsense can indeed be part of meaningful speech (since it is a requirement for any argument to consist of meaningful speech), can be made to work. This chapter investigates that question, and argues that an apparent argument partly containing or completely consisting of nonsense inevitably leads to a paradox, and insisting on that argument in the face of this leads in turn to a fallacy.

Section 3.2 formulates the initial question, which is how to point out that a part of a sentence is nonsense. Section 3.3 develops the case against the interlocutor’s attempt to use nonsensical sentences—sentences that contain words or combination of words to which no meaning has been given—as part of an argument. In section 3.4, the interlocutor’s sentences are pushed further, until they collapse.

### **3.2 How to flag nonsense?**

#### ***Two different kinds of examples***

In the penultimate ‘rung’ of the ladder that is the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes that *he* will be understood, if his *propositions* are recognized as nonsensical. But not all of the sentences of the book can be nonsense, as I’ve argued in the previous chapter. However, it is a difficult question to determine those sentences of the *Tractatus* that are nonsense. To make the difference between the nonsensical passages and the rest of the book clear, Conant has introduced the distinction between ‘frame’ and ‘main body.’<sup>2</sup> The propositions that Wittgenstein uses

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<sup>1</sup> Diamond 1988, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Conant 1991, 159.

to give advice to the reader belong to the ‘frame,’ and the propositions which are to be recognized as nonsensical belong to the ‘main body.’

This distinction, however, has been criticized by Proops and Sullivan, who argue that, although it is relatively straightforward in Diamond’s and Conant’s earliest papers,<sup>3</sup> close scrutiny shows that this is actually not the case for all of their papers.<sup>4</sup> Proops and Sullivan thus object that there is a (devastating) difference between the early distinction between frame and main body and its subsequent modification. This ‘relieving’ of the strictness of the distinction, with the aim to include more of the propositions of the main body into the frame, is also thought to be necessary according to Proops and Sullivan, because, if one adheres to the strict version of the distinction, the unholy conclusion follows that *all* the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, a result that Conant sometimes seems to anticipate.<sup>5</sup> Since Diamond and Conant actually approvingly quote propositions from the *Tractatus* that are said to belong to the main body of the text in their papers, in which they deploy the distinction in the first place, critics such as Hacker have argued that a certain inconsistency of their reading follows. For example, Conant claims that all propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical in the same paper as he quotes passages of the *Tractatus* as if they weren’t nonsense.<sup>6</sup> However, this proposition is not one in which Wittgenstein advises how to read his propositions, consequently not part of the frame, and furthermore, since it now belongs to the main body, it is nonsensical.

Ian Proops describes the many changes of the distinction between frame and main body in Conant’s work.<sup>7</sup> In Conant’s earliest papers at the end of the

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<sup>3</sup> Proops 2001; Sullivan 2002. A similar criticism has been put forward by Hacker (2000). Hacker claims that the resolute reading is methodologically inconsistent because of the distinction between frame and body. He calls this approach ‘cherry picking,’ meaning that Diamond and Conant only pick those propositions that would support their interpretation and reject all other propositions as nonsense—which would imply that Diamond and Conant determine arbitrarily which propositions are nonsensical (360). Accordingly, Hacker claims that Diamond chickens out, because she holds onto propositions that he believes to be nonsensical. Thus Diamond would not have succeeded in rescuing Wittgenstein from self-contradiction, but rather would have sawed off the branch that he is sitting on.

<sup>4</sup> Conant 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995, 2012; Conant and Diamond 2004; Diamond 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Conant 1993, 223; cf. Conant 2012.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, *TLP*, 5.473. See Conant 1989b, 342.

<sup>7</sup> Proops 2001, 382-383.

1980s, he is clear that *all* the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical and consequently have to be thrown away.<sup>8</sup> As Proops emphasizes, we must even throw away the paradoxical idea that we are left with ‘nothing’ after we have thrown away the ladder.<sup>9</sup> Only few years later, Conant relaxes this extreme position by developing the distinction between frame and main body.<sup>10</sup> At this point, the frame consists of the preface and the conclusion (basically *TLP*, 6.54 and 7) while the main body consists of ‘the rest’ of the propositions. Shortly afterwards, he relaxes this position again, this time by including *TLP*, 4.112 in the frame.<sup>11</sup> But only two years later he retreats to the earlier adopted version according to which only the preface and the conclusion are part of the frame, before he develops his (final) version, according to which there is no predetermined answer to the question of which propositions belong to the frame and which to the main body.<sup>12</sup> And in their joint paper, Diamond and Conant refer to their reading as a ‘program,’ which readings have in common if they at least (i) reject that the nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* convey ‘ineffable’ insights, and (ii) reject any theory which should decide what nonsense is.<sup>13</sup>

Thus according to Proops, Conant does not make it obvious enough why a proposition from *Tractatus* is considered to be nonsensical. What this shows, on the contrary, is that there are indeed propositions in the book that are not nonsensical; but this raises the question, which propositions *are* nonsensical? Proops thinks that the ‘best case scenario’ here would be that the decision of whether a proposition of the book is nonsensical and or is part of the frame would entirely depend on the individual person, and that the propositions would lose their ‘content’ independent of the individual person.<sup>14</sup> The worst case

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<sup>8</sup> Conant 1989a, 274n16; 1989b, 350.

<sup>9</sup> Conant 1989b, 337.

<sup>10</sup> Conant 1991, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Conant 1993, 223n84. In a similar vein, Conant and Diamond (2004, 46) begin their joint paper with a quote of *TLP* 4.112 in the first sentence. They seem to believe that this passage ‘really’ is Wittgenstein’s ‘opinion,’ and that his view is correct.

<sup>12</sup> Conant 1995, 285; 2000, 216n102.

<sup>13</sup> Conant and Diamond 2004, 47. These two assumptions carry further assumptions, for instance, (iii) the notion that there is only one kind of nonsense, mere nonsense, and (iv) the rejection of accounts which claim that nonsense arises if one ‘violates’ the ‘rules’ of logical syntax (47-48).

<sup>14</sup> This argument seems to point in the same direction as Proops’s worry regarding Conant’s abandonment of the realism of the *Tractatus*. Objections of this kind arise if Conant’s reading is



would be that the decision of which propositions belong to the frame is merely arbitrary. In this manner, Peter Sullivan, an influential critic of Conant's and Diamond's reading, accuses Michael Kremer, who defends a reading similar to that of Conant and Diamond, of dogmatism—i.e. Kremer is said to determine dogmatically which propositions of the *Tractatus* belong to the frame and which of them are nonsensical.<sup>15</sup> Since Kremer, Diamond, and Conant regard certain propositions of the book as not-transitional and consequently think that these are not meant to be thrown away, Proops and Sullivan have argued against them that the distinction between frame and main body is arbitrary, and that it seems that Diamond and Conant include in the frame all the propositions, and only those, that support their reading.<sup>16</sup>

Conant's and Kremer's response to this objection is that the distinction between frame and main body depends on the part that a proposition plays in the elucidatory process of the *Tractatus*. As one works through the book understood in this way, the propositions that remain meaningful belong to the frame, in contrast to those that fail to make sense. If a proposition survives this elucidatory activity, it belongs to the frame; if not, it belongs to the main body.<sup>17</sup> The question of which sentences are nonsense, precisely, remains open.

Wittgenstein himself, however, gives some precise examples of nonsense in the *Tractatus*, and I think it is best to consider those first, a task to which this chapter is devoted. What will emerge from this discussion is that these examples share a common 'form,' so to speak, which leads such sentences and talk about them into further nonsense, into the nonsense predicament.

Let's divide the examples of nonsense—which Wittgenstein gives in the

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read as a version of anti-realism. If this is an adequate rendering of his position, however, is questionable. Although there are points in his essays where he tends more towards idealism than realism, Diamond has argued that the resolute reading is more about what she transitionally calls the 'realistic spirit' (Conant 1991, 157; Diamond 1991). Needless to say, the resolute reading rejects any 'philosophical position' such as realism or anti-realism.

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan 2002, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Proops 2001; Sullivan 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Conant 2002, 457-458n135; Kremer 2001, 41-43. Part of Kremer's response is to construe the 'truths' that Wittgenstein alludes to in the preface (and which he wants to convey in the book) as 'non-philosophical truths.' He thereby evades the critique that the resolute reading conflicts with the conception of mere nonsense, i.e. that it is contradictory to claim that mere nonsense can convey 'thoughts' that express 'truths.'

*Tractatus*, where he mentions that specific signs, especially specific combinations of signs, are nonsense—into *two* different kinds.

First, those examples of sentences which only *indirectly* contain—in quotation marks—a word, or a combination of words, which is said to be nonsense. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein gives the following examples for nonsensical sentences:

‘There are objects’, [...] ‘There are books’ [...], ‘There are 100 objects’, [...] ‘There are  $\aleph_0$  objects’. [...] ‘1 is a number’, ‘There is only one zero’, [...] ‘There is only one 1’, [...] ‘ $2+2$  at 3 o’clock equals 4’.<sup>18</sup>

‘Socrates is identical’.<sup>19</sup>

Consider the form of these examples. Despite the differences in formulation, sentences of this first kind share the common form

(FN) ‘X’ is nonsense.

Here, (FN) is a whole sentence, and ‘X’ is the part of the sentence, which appears to be nonsense.

Second, we turn to those examples in the *Tractatus* of sentences that *directly* contain—without the quotation marks—*that* what is said to be nonsense:

[T]he question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful [is nonsensical].<sup>20</sup>

It would be just as nonsensical to assert that a proposition had a formal property as to deny it.<sup>21</sup>

[I]t is nonsensical to speak of the *total number of objects*.<sup>22</sup>

To ask whether a formal concept exists is nonsensical.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *TLP*, 4.1272.

<sup>19</sup> *TLP*, 5.473, 5.4733.

<sup>20</sup> *TLP*, 4.003.

<sup>21</sup> *TLP*, 4.124.

<sup>22</sup> *TLP*, 4.1272.

[T]o say of two things that they are identical is nonsense.<sup>24</sup>

It is nonsense to place the hypothesis 'p $\supset$ p' in front of a proposition, in order to ensure that its arguments shall have the right form, if only because with a non-proposition as argument the hypothesis becomes not false but nonsensical, and because arguments of the wrong kind make the proposition itself nonsensical, so that it preserves itself from wrong arguments just as well, or as badly, as the hypothesis without sense that was appended for that purpose.<sup>25</sup>

If I cannot say a priori what elementary propositions there are, then the attempt to do so must lead to obvious nonsense.<sup>26</sup>

Scepticism is [...] obviously nonsensical.<sup>27</sup>

Fair enough, one might say, and respond that what is said to be nonsensical in these sentences actually isn't part of any of those sentences. Consider again

Scepticism is [...] obviously nonsensical.<sup>28</sup>

Well, is skepticism 'contained' in that sentence? It depends on what one means by 'contained' here. What it at least has to mean is that the sign 'skepticism' has been given no meaning, i.e. it has not been used. Given that, the meaningless word 'skepticism' is 'contained' in that sentence. But what we have seen up to this point is that, in order for the sentence to be meaningful, a minimal condition is that every of its constituent words must have been given a meaning. But now what about the word 'skepticism'? The sentence appears to say that this word or concept is nonsense, and if that were correct the whole sentence itself is nonsense, since it contains that very nonsensical word. To make this more vivid, consider

(WN) 'Wrks' is nonsense.

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<sup>23</sup> *TLP*, 4.1274.

<sup>24</sup> *TLP*, 5.5303.

<sup>25</sup> *TLP*, 5.5571.

<sup>26</sup> *TLP*, 5.5571.

<sup>27</sup> *TLP*, 6.51.

<sup>28</sup> *TLP*, 6.51.

So both kinds of examples share, ultimately, the same form. Grant that ‘wrks’ is indeed nonsense. Maybe the Fregean or the Carnapian view can account for its nonsensicality? On their accounts, (WN) is either nonsense because (i) ‘wrks’ has been given no meaning, or (ii) the combination of words in (WN) violates the rules of language. In both cases, however, (WN) itself is nothing more than a nonsensical pseudo-sentence. But how can such a nonsensical sentence apparently say that ‘wrks’ is nonsense?

Now, let the interlocutor enter the stage. Our interlocutor does indeed assume that there is a way in which simply nonsense (nonsense that simply makes no sense), although it lies beyond the limits of sense on her account, can be part of sentences that can be understood. The move that the interlocutor attempts to make is to say that sentences such as (WN) could show that *that*—what is said to be nonsense in such sentences (in this case, ‘wrks’)—is nonsense that lies beyond the limits of sense, although this would turn these sentences *themselves* into simply nonsense, and one would consequently again lapse into speaking more nonsense.<sup>29</sup>

If that could *not* be done, these five things could *not* be proven either: (i) that either the Fregean view or the Carnapian view is valid, (ii) that a theory of the limits of sense is possible, (iii) that there are the limits of sense, (iv) that nonsense can be part of meaningful speech, and (v) that the argument from nonsense is valid.

### ***The interlocutor***

The problem we’re dealing with is stated in the following passage by Geach:

Nonsense cannot be turned into *oratio obliqua*; for *oratio obliqua*, which serves to report the upshot of what is said, *cannot be used to report nonsense*. So an attempt to report that somebody judges nonsense is itself nonsense. A British pu-

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<sup>29</sup> Note that I’m not simply assuming without argument that the interlocutor agrees that these examples are nonsense. They are instead meant to be *generic* examples; that is, they could be replaced by different sentences that have the same form. The problem and the argument that I’ll be developing would stay the same. Furthermore, it is not clear why the interlocutor should disagree that these examples are nonsense.

pil of Heidegger might say ‘Nothing noths’ in a tone of conviction; assuming that this is nonsense, ‘he judged that Nothing nothed’ would also be nonsense. (We ought rather to say: ‘he judged that “Nothing noths” was the expression of a truth’.) These remarks about the expression of judgments and the reports of judgments may appear very obvious; but in fact, as we shall see, they impose severe logical restrictions upon analyses of judgment.<sup>30</sup>

It is crucial to see what *oratio obliqua*, for Geach, means. He says that it is used ‘to report the gist or upshot of somebody’s remark rather than the actual words he used.’<sup>31</sup> *Oratio obliqua*, then, presupposes that the words have meaning, and thus cannot be used to report a sentence or words to be nonsense, which applies to both kinds of examples from the *Tractatus* that I’ve been collecting above. Why does this matter so much? Because one of the logical restrictions is (what I’ve been calling) Wittgenstein’s principle, which is that the correct analysis of judgment must show that one cannot judge a nonsense.<sup>32</sup> I’ll also come back to Geach at the end of this chapter, since his account of nonsense also rejects an objection that I have to reject too.

Can the interlocutor have access to a theory of the limits of sense, such that nonsensical sentences could show that some of their parts are nonsense, although that would move the sentences themselves beyond the limits of sense?

There seems to be a problem for the interlocutor’s project early on, when we consider the second kind of examples above. Since the theory has to show that *that*—what the proposition claims to be nonsense—lies beyond the limits of sense; but then it would follow that examples of this kind—in which what is said to be nonsense is contained in the proposition which claims that what is contained in it is nonsensical—are themselves nonsensical propositions that lie beyond the limits of sense, because they contain the exact combination of words that violated the rules in the first place.

Consider this example of a nonsensical proposition from the *Tractatus*:

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<sup>30</sup> Geach 1957, 10; emphases added.

<sup>31</sup> Geach 1957, 9.

<sup>32</sup> *TLP*, 5.5422.

(N) Socrates is identical.

In the style of the second examples (without the quotation marks), to say that this proposition is nonsensical would amount to this:

(Na) To say that Socrates is identical is nonsense.

Or, consider the question ‘Is Socrates identical?’:

(Nb) To ask if Socrates is identical is nonsense.

In what follows, we’ll stick to this example for the investigation of our case. Why is this sentence supposed to be nonsense? A Wittgensteinian view sticks to the original explanation that Wittgenstein gives in the *Tractatus*, i.e. that this proposition is nonsensical because we have not given meaning to one of its constituents (‘identical’ has been given no ‘adjectival’ meaning, i.e. we have not used it)—what I called the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense. Our interlocutor, however, needs more from this sentence to make the case for her theory: she has to prove that the theory can show that (N) lies beyond the limits of sense.

More precisely, the interlocutor would have to explain how the examples (Na)-(Nb) could show that (N) lies beyond the limits of sense. But note that only if (Na)-(Nb) aren’t themselves nonsensical could they show anything—that was an assumption the theory committed to (see chapter 2 of this thesis). Hence, the theory would have to explain why and how (N) lies beyond the limits of sense, *while* explaining how (Na)-(Nb) don’t lie beyond these limits. But, since (N) is a part of (Na)-(Nb), all of these sentences contain parts that lie beyond the limits of sense, thus all of them are nonsense. Furthermore, if we suppose that (Na)-(Nb) do not lie beyond the limits of sense, they are false, because they falsely say of (N) that it is nonsense (because in this case (N) wouldn’t lie beyond the limits of sense).

Therefore, if (N) lies beyond the limits of sense, and is therefore nonsense according to the theory, it would seem that (Na)-(Nb) are nonsense too, because they contain the same combination of signs that violated the rules of the limits of

sense in the first place. Thus the apparent violation of the rules keeps being the same in all of these sentences. Also, the response to this that

To say that ‘\_\_\_\_\_ is nonsense’

(whereby ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ means something like ‘whatever it is, which lies beyond the limits of sense’) would be completely uninformative, to say the least. To this, one is inclined to ask: *What* do you mean? To say *what* exactly is nonsense? But there is no way to answer these questions for the theorist. Since what is nonsense lies beyond the limits of sense, which is a premise of the theory.

In other words, it follows for the second type of examples that the theorist is not able to say that something is nonsensical because it lies beyond the limits of sense, other than by producing a further nonsensical proposition.<sup>33</sup> This is a direct consequence of the theory of the limits of sense, because one could only say what is nonsense if it would not lie beyond the limits of sense, but in this case the whole project to establish the theory would not get off the ground.

This leads to a huge problem for the theory, however. The theory is committed to the explanation of instances of nonsense that lie beyond the limits of sense by appeal to a violation of the rules specified by the theory. In order to prove that *p* violates the rules, however, the theory has to explain why *p* violates the rules, and this forces the theory to explain what it is that *p* apparently fails to say. But this is impossible if *p* lies beyond the limits of sense.

It is not clear how the theorist could overcome this problem. Indeed, the point that will be developed in what follows is that it cannot be solved by the theory. To conclude this section, let’s sketch the situation at its present state:

(P1) If some of the constituents of a proposition violate the rules of the theory, the proposition is nonsensical and lies beyond the limits of sense.

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<sup>33</sup> Unlike propositions that can correctly declare wrong propositions as wrong without themselves becoming wrong, propositions about signs that are used without giving meaning to them and are therefore nonsensical will be themselves nonsensical and will remain nonsensical unless one gives meaning to the signs that are nonsensical. But then the proposition has a meaning and will falsely say that some signs that now have a meaning are nonsensical.

(P2) The proposition (N) contains constituents that violate the rules.

(C1) Proposition (N) is nonsensical and lies beyond the limits of sense.

And the further worry is that it also follows from this that

(C2) The proposition ‘proposition (N) is nonsensical’ is nonsense and lies beyond the limits of sense (from P1, P2, C1).

This would lead the theory into a *regress of nonsensical propositions*. In what follows, we’ll investigate this worry further.

### **3.3 Some worries for the theorist**

We have seen how examples of the second type, in which what is said to be nonsense is directly contained in the sentence that says that it is nonsense, make trouble for the theory. Maybe the examples of the first type, in which what is said to be nonsense is only indirectly contained—that is, in quotation marks—can save the theorist?

I’ll argue now that these examples pose a serious problem for the theory, too. What will emerge is that, in these cases, the theory indeed can never give an example of nonsense that lies beyond the limits of sense. If this is true, then the theory of the limits of sense fails. The task is to show how this works out.

Consider again the example of the first type:

(Nc) To say that ‘Socrates is identical’ is nonsense.

On the theorist’s account, ‘Socrates is identical’ is nonsense and lies beyond the limits of sense, because it violates the rules of the theory—if (Nc) is true. But then it is odd what exactly it is that we actually understand when we understand that (N), the part of (Nc) that, allegedly, is nonsensical. How can we ‘understand’ what lies beyond the limits of sense at all? And more specifically, how can a proposition that contains a proposition that lies beyond the limits of sense *correctly* assert that some of its constituents lie beyond the limits of sense?



To be sure, the other horn of the dilemma—if we want (Nc) to be meaningful—is that we would have to make it the case that (Nc) does not lie beyond the limits of sense. But even if (Nc) was meaningful, it would then be false, because it would say that one of its constituents, i.e. (N), lies beyond the limits of sense, which is not the case anymore, since we had to bring it back to the realm of sense, so to speak, in order to make (Nc) meaningful. The use of quotation marks is of no help, insofar as the words that are contained in it are part of the proposition as a whole. Thus, what the theory faces is a paradox about nonsense.

### ***The nonsense paradox***

Wittgenstein expresses at some point in the *Investigations* that it does not make sense to speak of a sense that is senseless.<sup>34</sup> Put another way,

(NSN) It's nonsense to suppose that nonsense has a 'sense.'

Wittgenstein thus describes part of the problem to which I am here alluding. The question is how can a proposition be formulated to the effect that some part of it is nonsensical, if the theory is true? It seems to amount to saying, with a nonsensical proposition, that *it* lies beyond the limits. But how can that be? Wittgenstein's suspicion is that attempts to say why some propositions lie beyond the limits of sense makes the mistake of trying to explain the 'sense' of nonsense—thereby producing further nonsensical propositions.

The dilemma then oscillates between judging that *p* lies beyond the limits without any explanation whatsoever, or involving nonsensical propositions that are prone to generate further nonsense.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *PI*, 500.

<sup>35</sup> Nonsense, under a Carnapian or Fregean conception, has its own *Genius epidemicus*, so to speak: If we try to make nonsense explicit, we produce nonsense. Nonsense is contagious, infectious, epidemic, and so on and so forth. As Stephen Mulhall (2007) notices in connection with the *Tractatus*, the propositions of the book begin to crumble as soon as one has recognized *one* proposition of the book as nonsensical. This should be of no surprise, since one of the consequences of the Carnapian or Fregean theory that the book lures us into at first entails what I will call the 'epidemic force,' or 'inflationary character' (240), of nonsense. Mulhall puts this 'contagiousness' in a nutshell with his question: 'One begins to wonder: are any of the *Tractatus*' attempts to articulate [the elucidatory propositions of the *Tractatus*] anything other than *empty forms of words?*' (245). Wittgenstein later in the *Investigations* writes that 'our investigation [...]

## Versions of the paradox

Our worries can now be formulated more starkly:

*The paradox of the regress of nonsense (PRN):* A proposition that says one of its constituents is nonsensical and lies beyond the limits of sense will itself be nonsensical. Thus, to say of a proposition that it is nonsense leads again to a nonsensical sentence, and so on.

The regress of nonsense is not the only result of the theory of the limits of sense. There is more than one version of the nonsense paradox, with which the theory has to deal. Consider this:

*The paradox of the sense of nonsense (PSN):* In order to describe a proposition as nonsense and beyond the limits of sense, we would have to make sense of it.

But if a proposition ‘turns’ nonsensical, and therefore will be ‘beyond’ the limits of sense, we are left with the absurdity of ‘understanding’ a nonsense. The regress that the theory creates comes out best in more perspicuous notation. If the proposition

(Nd) ‘(N)’

is nonsense, because it violates the rules of the theory and lies beyond the limits of sense, the proposition

(Ne) ‘“(N)” is nonsense’

is nonsense too, and it will equally lie beyond the limits of sense—because it contains the same parts that violate the rules of the theory. In both cases, there are signs that are combined such that their combination violates the theory. This, as well, applies to the proposition

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seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important[.] (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is *nothing but houses of cards* and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand’ (*PI*, 118; emphasis added).

(Nf) ‘The proposition “ ‘(N)’ is nonsense” is nonsense’

and the proposition

(Ng) ‘ “The proposition “ “(N)” is nonsense” is nonsense” is nonsense,’

and so on. If one accepts the theory, then all of the propositions above are equally nonsensical and all of them equally lie beyond the limits of sense (because they all contain the same combination of signs that violates the theory). We seem, in effect, not to be able to say that a proposition is nonsense without producing further nonsensical propositions. There is no chance to talk about nonsense without producing further nonsensical propositions.

If we want to assert that propositions (Ne)–(Ng) are not nonsensical, but (Nd) is, without getting into (PSN), we have to explain why the former contain signs that do *not* violate the theory, but the latter contains signs that *do* violate the theory. This seems to be a lost case, since in order to do so, we would still have to explain the sense of nonsense. This would lead either to (PRN), or to the problem that the constituents of proposition (Nd), which should be asserted to be nonsensical, would actually have a meaning—but then the resulting proposition would be a false assertion, because it would claim that some of its constituents are nonsensical. This would be wrong, because they do not violate the rules anymore, which was necessary to make the propositions (Ne)–(Ng) meaningful.

Here is a summary of the situation we face thus far:

(P1) If some of the constituents of a proposition violate the rules of the theory, the proposition is nonsensical and lies beyond the limits of sense.

(P2) The proposition (N) contains constituents that violate the rules.

(C1) Proposition (N) is nonsensical and lies beyond the limits of sense (from P1, P2).

(P3) A further proposition (NN), which has (N) as its constituent, is nonsensical and lies beyond the limits of sense (from P1, P2).

(P4) To declare (N) in a meaningful proposition (M) as nonsensical, (M) would not be allowed to have constituents in it that violate the rules of the theory, which would also apply to (N) (negation of P1).

(P5) If we can make it the case that (N) does not violate the rules, (N) is no longer nonsensical (from P1); i.e. the proposition (M), with which (N) should be declared nonsensical, will be wrong.

(C2) Either we can make it the case that (N) does not violate the rules—then (N) is no longer nonsensical, but (M) is false—or attempt to declare (N) to be nonsense, result in further nonsensical propositions (NN) (from P3, P5).

The conclusion is a reformulated version of the first and second version of the nonsense paradox, according to which, in order to say that a proposition is nonsense, we would have to rewrite the combination of all of its constituents such that it does not violate the rules. And this would lead to the result that the proposition is no longer nonsensical, but false, because it says of some of its constituents that they are nonsense, which is no longer the case.<sup>36</sup>

There are two choices at this point: (1) reject the theory, or (2) accept that further nonsensical propositions follow, once one speaks about something nonsensical. Since the interlocutor doesn't want to opt for (1), she has to embrace (2). But this does not seem to be a good choice, for now we run into the problem that all of the propositions, in which we denounce some other propositions as nonsensical, and in which we discuss nonsensical propositions, have to be considered nonsensical too.

### **3.4 Some further worries**

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<sup>36</sup> There are also Carnapian or Fregean positions that work with theory of the limits of sense that are based on other criteria of sense. According to Hacker (e.g. 2000, 2003), for instance, it is when propositions lack 'bipolarity,' i.e. they lack the possibility of being true or false, that they may be nonsensical. But the lack of bipolarity is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one for nonsense. Necessary because propositions that are not bipolar cannot be meaningful, but not sufficient because propositions in Hacker's understanding can still be 'senseless,' i.e. they can be tautologous or necessarily true. The view defended here rejects bipolarity as a criterion for nonsense, since they hold that there cannot be a criterium for nonsense.

## ***A version of Russell's paradox***

After having read a manuscript of the *Tractatus* 'twice carefully,' Russell was convinced that the book is 'of first-class importance.'<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, he wrote to Wittgenstein that '[t]here are still points I don't understand,' and he added that 'some of them' even seem to him to be 'important ones.'<sup>38</sup> Therefore, Russell did send some queries on separate sheets to Wittgenstein along with his letter. However, despite Russell's confusion about these important points, he states that he is 'convinced' that Wittgenstein was 'right in [his] main contention.'<sup>39</sup>

The problem is that, when Wittgenstein received Russell's letter, he must have felt quite misunderstood, since he immediately (just a few days after Russell had written his letter to Wittgenstein) replied:

I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[osition]s—i.e. by language—(and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

If Wittgenstein's letter stopped before the final part of the last sentence in the above quote, it would seem very much like Wittgenstein indeed would have wanted to embrace (DSS). But the letter *doesn't stop* there.<sup>41</sup> Wittgenstein says that 'the theory of what can be expressed [...] and what can not be expressed' is the 'cardinal *problem* of philosophy.' Elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, he writes that '[p]hilosophy is not a theory,' and in the preface he writes that he is of the opinion that he has found 'the final solution of the problems.'<sup>42</sup> And towards the end of his book, he says that '[t]he solution of the problem [...] is seen in the vanish-

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<sup>37</sup> WC, 96, 13.8.1919.

<sup>38</sup> WC, 96, 13.8.1919.

<sup>39</sup> WC, 96, 13.8.1919.

<sup>40</sup> WC, 98, 19.8.1919.

<sup>41</sup> James R. Atkinson (2009, 44-50) pretends as if it did, and argues that Wittgenstein wants to embrace (DSS).

<sup>42</sup> TLP, 4.112; preface.

ing of the problem.<sup>43</sup> Taken together, these passages strongly suggest that Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus*

(i) wasn't to state a theory (in general);

(ii) wasn't to state (DSS) (in particular);

and instead that his aim was to

(iii) solve the problems of philosophy (in general)

(iv) solve the problem of (DSS) (in particular).

Russell, apparently, wasn't able to get ahold of this logic in Wittgenstein's book. Even Wittgenstein's explanation wasn't enough to convey (i)-(iv) to Russell.

Why is Russell's misunderstanding so important?<sup>44</sup> It matters much if we consider Wittgenstein's treatment of Russell's paradox, since, if Russell's misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's book isn't fully grasped, it can easily reappear in one's understanding of the solution to the paradox. For instance, both James R. Atkinson and James B. Davant argue that Wittgenstein wants to defend (DSS) in his answer to the paradox.<sup>45</sup> But that can't be the correct reading, in light of the above, so we need to arrive at an alternative that takes into account (i)-(iv).

There is a second part of this misunderstanding that has its roots in Russell's reading of Wittgenstein. Half a year after Russell had written the above-quoted letter to Wittgenstein, he wrote (in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 20 December 1919) that

I had found in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and

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<sup>43</sup> *TLP*, 6.521.

<sup>44</sup> That is, since this point was already made in chapter 1.

<sup>45</sup> Atkinson 2009; Davant 1975.

Angelus Silesius, he seriously contemplates becoming a monk.<sup>46</sup>

Atkinson agrees with this assessment.<sup>47</sup> As should be obvious from the preceding discussion, I strongly disagree. The reading that Atkinson suggests consists of these two points: (DSS) and mysticism. And the main point of this mysticism is that there are ineffable features of reality that cannot be expressed, but only shown.<sup>48</sup> I.e. mysticism is just another label for what I've been calling (DI), and the 'mystical reading,'<sup>49</sup> which Atkinson wants to suggest, is another label for what I've been calling the Fregean reading. In light of my criticism of this reading in chapter 1 and 2, it should be obvious that I don't think such a reading of Wittgenstein's solution to Russell's paradox will work.

Keeping this in mind, consider an attempt to rescue the theory from (PSN). The theorist now tries to use the distinction between sign and symbol to save his theory. To be more precise, this reply is based on Wittgenstein's treatment of Russell's paradox in the *Tractatus*.<sup>50</sup> Here's the passage in which 'Russell's paradox resolves itself':

The reason why a function cannot be its own argument is that the sign for a function already contains the prototype of its argument, and it cannot contain itself. For let us suppose that the function  $F(fx)$  could be its own argument: in that case there would be a proposition ' $F(F(fx))$ ', in which the outer function  $F$  and the inner function  $F$  must have different meanings, since the inner one has the form  $\varphi(fx)$  and the outer one has the form  $\psi(\varphi(fx))$ . Only the letter ' $F$ ' is common to the two functions, but the letter by itself signifies nothing. This immediately becomes clear if instead of ' $F(Fu)$ ' we write ' $(\exists\varphi):F(\varphi u). \varphi u = Fu$ '. Hereby Russell's paradox resolves itself.<sup>51</sup>

Wittgenstein argues here that Russell's paradox would not arise in a symbolism that would avoid the mistakes Russell's own symbolism makes. Wittgenstein's

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<sup>46</sup> Russell 2001, 198.

<sup>47</sup> His aim is to give a 'mystical reading,' and in that sense it is no small wonder that he begins with a discussion of Russell's reading of the *Tractatus* (Atkinson 2009, 34 and passim; see especially 91-107).

<sup>48</sup> Atkinson 2009, 96-97, 120-121.

<sup>49</sup> Atkinson 2009, 34.

<sup>50</sup> For an account of how Russell's paradox vanishes in Wittgenstein's treatment, cf. Jolley 2004.

<sup>51</sup> *TLP*, 3.333; translation amended.

argument is that Russell’s paradox arises because Russell confuses two distinct uses of the same sign. Although it is the same sign in both circumstances, it is a different symbol, and consequently has a different meaning in both cases, as Wittgenstein argues.<sup>52</sup> Consider (a version of) Russell’s Paradox.<sup>53</sup> Suppose,

$F(fx)$  means ‘ $fx$  is not true of itself.’

It follows that

$F(F(fx))$  means ‘“ $x$  is not true of itself” is not true of “ $x$  is not true of itself”.’

But this proposition is true if it is false, and false if it is true, i.e. a version of Russell’s Paradox.

To avoid Russell’s paradox, Wittgenstein argues that the translation into a correct symbolism can show that the signs, which Russell uses to formulate his paradox, are not the same symbols. Distinguishing between these two symbols should stop Russell’s paradox from arising, and that would resolve the paradox. In the notation of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein renders this as

$$\begin{array}{cc} F(fx) & F(F(fx)) \\ \varphi(fx) & \psi(\varphi(fx)).^{54} \end{array}$$

The translation into the Greek letters is supposed to make perspicuous that the same sign  $F$  is actually employed as two different symbols, as indicated in the translation by the two different Greek letters  $\psi$  and  $\varphi$ .

Now to the attempt to rescue the theory from (PSN). It consists in the adoption of Wittgenstein’s treatment of Russell’s paradox, i.e. in the assumption that the same (combinations of) signs, which are contained in different propositions, do not necessarily contain the same symbols. Thus the same combination of signs can have very different meanings in different propositions, and the same signs can be nonsensical in one sentence, and meaningful in another. Hence the

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<sup>52</sup> See Floyd 2007, 195.

<sup>53</sup> As explained by Marie McGinn (2006, 170).

<sup>54</sup> *TLP*, 3.333.



propositions (Ne)–(Ng) could have different meanings than (Nd), since it is possible that the signs in proposition (Nd) are not symbols, and consequently have no meaning, but the propositions (Ne)–(Ng), which contain some of the same signs, could very well be meaningful if in their cases the signs do not violate the rules of the theory, and hence are meaningful symbols.<sup>55</sup>

But this whole attempt is just hopeless. Because if there indeed were different symbols in those sentences, and (Nd) consisted only of nonsensical signs that violate the rules, but (Ne)–(Ng) contained meaningful symbols that did not violate the rules, then we still have not managed to say that (N) is nonsense. All we have managed to do, with (Ne)–(Ng), is to say falsely of (N) that it is nonsensical (since (N) would not then be nonsensical in (Ne)–(Ng)).

Thus the distinction between sign and symbol is of no help for the theorist. Once we establish a meaning for (Ne)–(Ng), such that the combination of signs does not violate the rules, we have already established that (N), which is a part of (Ne)–(Ng), is not nonsensical, and consequently the whole sentence does not establish that (N) is nonsense.

### ***Another version of the nonsense paradox***

At this point, there arises a third version of the nonsense paradox. Either we rewrite (Ne)–(Ng) such that no rules are violated, and we can then say with a meaningful proposition that these constituents are nonsensical, which is false, because they do not violate the rules any longer, or we do not rewrite them such that they do not violate the rules, then they remain nonsensical, but then we cannot meaningfully say that they are nonsensical. In other words:

*The paradox of the ineffability of nonsense (PIN):* Nonsense leads either (i) to a regress of nonsensical sentences, or (ii) to the contradiction that (I) a nonsensi-

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<sup>55</sup> If one still wants to argue that  $F(fx)$  in  $F(F(fx))$  is meaningful, but  $F(fx)$  ‘alone,’ i.e. outside the proposition  $F(F(fx))$  is nonsensical, because  $F(fx)$  in  $F(F(fx))$  is a symbol, and  $F(fx)$  on its own a nonsensical sign, one better not have to explain that the meaning of  $F(fx)$  in  $F(F(fx))$  is that it is nonsensical; because, that said, there is no plausible reason why in this case  $F(fx)$  on its own should not have the meaning that it is nonsensical too. However, even if one were to fix this problem, the deeper problem still is that it is odd that we should say that the meaning of nonsense is that it is nonsensical, as Wittgenstein remarks in the *Investigations*.

cal sentence is not nonsense or that (II) a meaningful sentence is nonsense; therefore, it is impossible to judge a nonsense .

What does all this mean for the argument from nonsense? Consider this argument:

(i) If under the influence of a powerful enough drug, one could not tell the difference between being on that drug and not being on that drug.

(ii) We could be under the influence of such powerful drugs all the time, without realizing it.

(iii) We cannot rule out that what we experience is the result of a powerful drug.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that (i)-(iii) are nonsensical sentences, then the conclusion would be this:

(iv) That we cannot rule out that what we experience is the result of a powerful drug is nonsense.

But if (i)-(iii) is nonsense, it says nothing more than this:

(i) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

(ii) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

(iii) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

But then (iv) would also say nothing more than this:

(iv) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

Consider this next:

(i) Philosophy is nonsense.

(ii) If philosophy is nonsense, philosophers should quit their jobs.

(iii) I should quit my job (granted that I'm a philosopher).

Translated:

(i) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

(ii) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

(iii) wrks swrk krws wrks swrk krws.

Call this *the translation schema of nonsense* (TSS). This schema helps us to realize that nonsense is simply nonsense, and that to move from simply nonsense to a conclusion is either not an argument, or plainly further nonsense.<sup>56</sup>

Consider one last possibility to show that a sentence is nonsense. It is contained in this example from a late passage of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: 'I know that a sick man is lying here? Nonsense!'<sup>57</sup> Wittgenstein here expresses that a proposition is nonsense using a separate sentence, which does not repeat the proposition that is said to be nonsensical. Another example is Geach's use of this last possibility to judge nonsense: "The verb 'to see' has its meaning for me because I *do* see--I have that experience!" Nonsense.'<sup>58</sup> To say of a preceding proposition that it is nonsense (without argument or justification) is, at least principally, not excluded by the theory. But the question is if this 'dogmatic' method is of any help here (if one is occupied, as Wittgenstein says in the preface to the *Tractatus*, with the problems of philosophy). To point to nonsense and claim 'Nonsense!' raises the question: Can this method do any philosophical work at all? The answer is negative, since such a dogmatic exclamation or oracular utterance doesn't explain why the allegedly nonsensical sentence is supposed to be nonsense, and that is something that is needed to make nonsense perspicuous, as is highlighted by the fact that even in the passage where Wittgenstein uses this way to show something as nonsense, he thereafter attempts to justify

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<sup>56</sup> Note everything that is said after a nonsensical sentence is nonsense (if it is not an argument). For instance, (i) wrks swrk krws, (ii) I want to eat an apple. In this case, (ii) might not be nonsense, despite of (i) being nonsense, if (i) and (ii) are just unrelated sentences and (ii) has been given a determinate meaning in a specific context. (Of course, one could also give (i) a meaning, it is just that in this example we're stipulating that this is not the case.)

<sup>57</sup> Wittgenstein 1975a, 10; hereafter cited as *OC*.

<sup>58</sup> Geach 1957, 112.

why the question ‘I know that a sick man is lying here?’ is nonsense.<sup>59</sup> But by doing so, he entangles himself in the nonsense paradox, because (i) when he attempts to explain why the sentence is nonsense, he presupposes that the sentence (which he says is nonsense) has a sense, and (ii) a proposition that contains the nonsensical constituents ‘I know that a sick man is lying here’ is nonsensical itself, because it has constituents that have been given no meaning, i.e. a violation of the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense.<sup>60</sup> And Geach, too, goes on to explain why exactly it is that the above words are false, and with this he presupposes that they have a meaning—thus also entangling himself in the nonsense predicament.

One might object to the worries I have raised in this chapter that there is no actual account to which these worries would apply, and that furthermore no one would try to defend such a view, and that therefore my efforts to show that such a view does not make sense are not even needed. But such a view has been put forward. I take A. W. Moore to be someone whose theory of language does not allow him to ever say that *p* is nonsense. And, as we will see shortly, Moore also draws the theorist’s conclusion from this: that there are ineffable things. Moore says that ‘the recognition of apparent sense as nonsense is liable to *resist verbal expression*,’ and he elaborates as follows:

For when we attempt to put such a recognition into words, our natural urge will always be to redeploy the nonsense, using some such formula as, ‘It does not make sense to say that...’. But if we do that, then *clearly we shall have said something that is itself nonsensical*. No more sense attaches to ‘It does not make sense to say that frumptiliously quirxaceous phlimps keed’, if taken at face value, than to ‘Frumptiliously quirxaceous phlimps keed’.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *OC*, 10. And it is also highlighted by the fact that in the passages where he discusses this reaction, he describes it as an urge, as a way we might want to react but shouldn’t, and as a reaction that must be met with further qualifications (*PI*, 252; *PI II*, 178; Wittgenstein 1980 [*LPP I*], 127, 321, 911; *OC*, 10, 138).

<sup>60</sup> *TLP*, 5.473–5.4733.

<sup>61</sup> A. W. Moore 2012, 243; my emphases. Note, however, that Moore (243) contends that ‘[t]o be sure, there are various subtleties and complications that I am ignoring here, having to do with the fact that the first of these sentences need not be taken at face value. It may be taken as a metalinguistic claim about the last four words in it. But that seems not to extend satisfactorily to a

According to Moore, nonsense ‘resist[s] verbal expression’ and if we nevertheless attempt to judge a nonsense, we ‘shall have said something that is itself nonsensical.’ Thus what Moore is saying here is that we can, in effect, never say that  $p$  is nonsense. He again affirms this view in this passage:

But like the illusion of sense attaching to the sentence ‘Time passes at one second per second,’ they are illusions whose exposure is most naturally reported in a way that is under their very sway. We naturally say, ‘Thought can only be of what is logically contingent; there is no such thing as thinking that it is either raining or not raining.’ But this is of a piece with, ‘Speed can only be assigned to a process that occurs in time; there is no such thing as the speed at which time passes.’ This is an attempted expression of the recognition that ‘the speed at which time passes’ is nonsense, just as the other sentence is an attempted expression of the recognition that ‘thinks that it is either raining or not raining’ is nonsense. But the attempt is self-stultifying. The very thing that it is an attempt to express precludes its success. It is the same when we consider the apparent restriction of reality, not only to what is logically possible, but to the kind of thing that can be represented in propositional sense-making—which excludes, for example, objects. We are liable to say, ‘Reality consists of how objects are, not of the objects themselves,’ or, as Wittgenstein himself famously does say, ‘The world is the totality of facts, not of things’ (1.1). And if asked to amplify on these claims, we are liable to say something like the following: ‘That grass is green is part of reality, because there is such a thing as thinking or saying that grass is green; greenness itself is not part of reality, because there is no such thing as thinking or saying greenness.’ But here we confront the same problem. If ‘thinks greenness’ is nonsense, then so too is ‘There is no such thing as thinking greenness.’ To put the point in a way that is itself no doubt under the sway of the illusion: if there is no such thing as either thinking or saying something, then there is no such thing as either thinking or saying that there is no such thing as either thinking or saying that thing.<sup>62</sup>

So again, the point is that, since nonsense leads only to further nonsense, we cannot judge a nonsense.

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case where there really is an illusion of sense, as when I say, “It does not make sense to say that time passes at one second per second”.

<sup>62</sup> A. W. Moore 2012, 244.

But Moore does not stop here. He wants to draw a further conclusion from this. He takes this to be an argument to support the view that there is ineffable content, that there are ‘things’ that are not expressible—the doctrine of ineffability. The error in Moore’s theory, however, is that it runs ‘in circles,’ so to speak. First he commits to a theory that deems things to be ineffable; and then he wants to support the main claim of the theory—viz. that there are ineffable things—with the outcome of the theory that there are things that cannot be expressed. But this is like the dog that chases his own tail, or the image of pulling yourself out of the swamp by pulling your own hair. But the only thing that this shows is that there has been nothing that has been expressed, although it seemed as if there was.

A final objection that I want to consider is that the problem we’re dealing with wouldn’t even arise if we would consider the problematic sentences with the help of a philosophical tool like the use-mention distinction or a proper theory of quotation. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Geach’s exposition of the problem, and said that I’d come back to his account when we consider this objection. Now is that time.

First, Geach rejects that quotation can dissolve the problem, as he puts it:

Admittedly, many ‘quotations’ are not logically part of the text at all, but serve rather as illustrations or diagrams. For example, in the discussion of the Existentialist in §4 I used quotes (as the reader may verify) to enclose bits of sheer nonsense. If quotation marks are always to be used as a logical sign, this will be incorrect; an added logical sign cannot turn sheer nonsense into sense, and so in a logically well-formed quotation the quoted expression must be a genuine bit of language.<sup>63</sup>

Second, he considers that maybe it’s possible to reformulate the problematic sentences such that quotation isn’t required any more. Geach then considers such a possibility. He writes:

But it is quite easy to rewrite the discussion so as to make it no longer open to

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<sup>63</sup> Geach 1957, 85.

this objection, as follows:

Nothing noths

He judged that Nothing nothed

Figure 1.

Figure 2.<sup>64</sup>

However, to use the apparent sentence in Figure 2 to convey that the apparent sentence in Figure 1 is nonsense doesn't work either, as Geach remarks:

Suppose that an Existentialist utters in a tone of conviction sounds transcribable as in Figure 1, then I could not use Figure 2 as a report in written English of what he judged; for neither Figure 1 nor Figure 2 is a genuine bit of English. I ought rather to say: 'He uttered sounds transcribable as in Figure 1, under the impression that they mean something that is true'.<sup>65</sup>

And Geach continues

I think one source of the accepted contrast between 'use' and 'mention' is a wrong assimilation of quotations generally to the untypical quotations of §4. Properly speaking, these are not quotations at all; we cannot *quote* sheer nonsense, we can only parrot it, or copy its visible pattern, or make believe that it is (say) English and that we are reading it aloud. Here I am not including under 'sheer nonsense' nonsensical combinations of genuine signs; for, as I have said, a complex quotation is to be read as a *description*, telling us that the quoted expression consists of such-and-such signs in such an order; and this description, if the signs are genuine, quotable, signs, is always significant, even if the signs in that order do not make up a well-formed expression.<sup>66</sup>

One could think that Geach's proposal can successfully help with sentences of the form 'To say that *X* is nonsense,' but when Wittgenstein says that a sentence is 'simply nonsense,' the point is not that such a sentence consists of 'genuine signs,' but precisely that it is simply (or 'sheer,' as Geach says) nonsense, just like Figure 1 and 2. To take Diamond's example, the proposition 'A is an object' is nothing more and nothing less than a simply nonsensical proposition like 'Socra-

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<sup>64</sup> Geach 1957, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Geach 1957, 85.

<sup>66</sup> Geach 1957, 85-86.

tes is frabble,' and the difference between these two propositions consists only in the fact that we immediately recognize the latter as nonsensical, whereas we have trouble recognizing this in the former case.<sup>67</sup> Both cases are similar in that we have not given meaning (as a predicate of a noun) to one of its constituents.<sup>68</sup> And for such instances of simply nonsense, Geach's proposal doesn't work, as Geach rightly admits. Geach's analysis, then, highlights the fact that the philosophical tools of quotation, the use-mention distinction, and reformulation or reporting don't help if one considers simply ('sheer,' as he says) nonsense, since simply nonsense can neither be quoted nor mentioned nor reformulated in a meaningful sentence.<sup>69</sup>

### 3.5 Conclusion

To judge a nonsense leads to a paradox of nonsense. The paradox of nonsense consists of three different strands. First, there is the paradox of the regress of nonsense (PRN): if  $p$  is nonsense, the sentence  $q$  that says ' $p$  is nonsense' is itself nonsense, and the sentence that says that  $q$  is nonsense again is nonsense, etc. If one attempts to block the regress, there is the second paradox, the paradox of

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<sup>67</sup> Hacker argues that Diamond and Conant operate with a (wrong) 'meaning-body' conception, which would be obvious because they insist at many points that there is 'nothing,' that there is no 'it' to understand. Conant's account, according to which nonsense arises only if we have not given meaning to some of the constituents of a given proposition, is therefore false, or so Hacker argues. This is, according to Hacker, shown in the examples that Conant himself gives for nonsense. Hacker (2003, 9-10) insists that the constituents of the propositions 'Caesar is a prime number,' 'Mao is rare,' 'Socrates is identical,' and so on, have been given a meaning, but that they are simultaneously falsely combined. In his response to this objection, Conant emphasizes that we actually do not understand what those propositions mean, when they are nonsensical. As Wittgenstein stresses, it cannot be that the sense of a proposition is nonsensical. Either we understand the proposition, then it has a meaning, or it is nonsense, then we do not even understand the proposition. If the constituents 'is a prime number' and 'is identical' have been given no meaning in those propositions, we simply cannot comprehend what they would mean, if they did have sense. Glock argues similarly to Hacker. Glock too believes that it is wrong that propositions like 'Caesar is a prime number' are nonsense because some of their constituents have been given no meaning; instead, the constituents actually had meaning, but only were illegitimately combined (Glock 2004, 222 et seq.). Glock's objection is based on the assumption that words have meaning independently of their use in a meaningful proposition, a claim that Diamond and Conant have, following Frege, Wittgenstein, and others (e.g. J. L. Austin) strongly opposed.

<sup>68</sup> According to Conant (1989a, 259), 'that we have not given meaning to some of its constituents' means that we have no idea how a proposition in question could be written in a definitive symbolism, because we are not clear about what the proposition could probably mean. One obvious objection is that this is simply wrong, because we could formalize the proposition 'Socrates is identical' as  $\exists x(x=x)$ . That this objection is false, and the proposition is really nonsense should be clear when it is translated into a correct symbolism.

<sup>69</sup> For a convincing undermining of the use and mention distinction, see A. W. Moore 1986.



the sense of nonsense (PSN): to prevent that  $q$  (i.e. ' $p$  is nonsense') is nonsense, one would have to make sense of  $p$ , which would make the sentence falsely say that  $p$  is nonsense, which then isn't the case anymore. So these two paradoxes lead to a third one, the paradox of the ineffability of nonsense (PIN): since any attempt to say that  $p$  is nonsense itself becomes nonsensical, one cannot say that a sentence is nonsense—which is simply what Wittgenstein's principle says, i.e. that 'it is impossible to judge a nonsense.'

The conclusion is that nonsense cannot be part of an argument. If that conclusion holds, the argument from nonsense would indeed lead to the nonsense predicament: nonsense would only ever lead to further nonsense. Hence to insist on the argument from nonsense is a fallacy, since it would presuppose that one could make sense of nonsense.

But maybe nonsense does not have to be part of an argument in order to have significant philosophical relevance. So the next step is to take a closer look at some of the dialectical contexts in which the argument from nonsense is deployed.

The Tractarian solution suggests remaining silent about nonsense, and that indeed would prevent letting the paradox occur in the first place. But is this philosophically attractive? The early Wittgenstein clearly thought that it is the only solution. However, we can see already in his early writings how problematic this solution is, for in order to be silent he first has to lapse into speaking nonsense. Wittgenstein later reaffirms this point, when he advises '*Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don't fail to pay attention to your nonsense.*'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Wittgenstein 1998b, 64, MS 134 20: 5.3.1947; hereafter referred to as *CV*.

## 4. Limits of Thought

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter argued that there is a systematic philosophical problem about nonsense: nonsense cannot be part of meaningful conversation, so nonsense cannot be used to establish philosophical conclusions—and therefore an argument cannot establish that philosophy is nonsense (or that parts of it are). To insist that nonsense can help to come to such conclusions, therefore, is a *fal-lacy*.

However, the discussion proceeded very much on an abstract level, which could mean that, when we turn to particular examples, the situation *might* look different. Therefore, the task of this and the next two chapters is to investigate particular philosophical contexts in which arguments from nonsense have been put forward. The first of these contexts, which will be discussed in this chapter, is the demarcation of the limits of thought.

Section 4.2 introduces two opposed views about Wittgenstein's remarks on the limits of thought. Section 4.3 considers the distinction between two ways to demarcate the limits of thought, either by drawing these limits *directly*, or by drawing them *indirectly* through a demarcation of the limits of language. Section 4.4 discusses the Tractarian solution of the limits of thought. Section 4.5 considers this solution in relation to trends in contemporary philosophy.

### 4.2 A difficult challenge

Readers of the *Tractatus* find themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, one is forced to deal with the complexity and depths of the sentences of this short book. To this point, some might respond that the *Tractatus* does not differ (that much) from many works of traditional philosophy in that respect (though one might add that Wittgenstein's book is *exceptionally* difficult to make sense of).

But on the other hand—and here the similarities with other philosophical

works abruptly come to an end—every reader is forced to cope with the difficult situation that arises due to Wittgenstein’s instruction that the only way to understand him is to recognize certain propositions of the book as nonsensical—what I called the Tractarian difficulty in the first chapter and thereafter. Thus, we have seen that Wittgenstein asks his readers, at the end of his book, to *throw away the ladder*—and we have established that that can only mean *completely* away, for otherwise, one would commit the nonsense fallacy.

Lynette Reid raised the important question of what it means to throw away the ladder ‘completely.’<sup>1</sup> Is this possible at all? Do we really want to do so? Reid discusses these questions on the basis of the first passages of the *Tractatus*.<sup>2</sup> According to Reid, traditional interpretations have found those passages to express ontological-metaphysical truths about reality, and Diamond and Conant have condemned the proposition understood in this manner as nonsense, a situation which Reid finds unacceptable and wants to make good by proposing her own account. Reid’s argument is twofold. Against traditional interpretations, Reid argues that those passages constitute an anti-metaphysical opening, by which Wittgenstein rejects Russellian and Fregean metaphysics. Against Diamond and Conant, Reid argues that those passages do not consist of nonsensical propositions.<sup>3</sup>

Reid’s argument goes like this. That the claims of traditional readings, by which she means metaphysical ones, are false should be obvious since Wittgenstein’s anti-metaphysical stance in the *Tractatus* is clear<sup>4</sup> —it is therefore an advantage of Diamond and Conant’s reading that it integrates Wittgenstein’s stance concerning this, and does not ignore it like traditional accounts do. Diamond and Conant, however, make the mistake of appealing to a sharp distinction between an explicit metaphysic, evoked through the psychological impact of mere nonsense, and an implicit metaphysic, unwittingly commitments, con-

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<sup>1</sup> Reid 1998, 107-108.

<sup>2</sup> *TLP*, 1 et seq.

<sup>3</sup> Reid 1998, 113.

<sup>4</sup> *TLP*, 6.53.

tained in the frame of the *Tractatus*.<sup>5</sup> Since it is an important lesson of the later Wittgenstein that such neat dividing lines tend to be rather unsharp and vague, Reid concludes that the opening passages of the *Tractatus* therefore do not obey sharp dividing lines, but are rather a ‘hybrid’ form, nonsense if understood as metaphysical, and meaningful if understood as a critique of Russellian and Fregean metaphysics. This objection is based on the belief that Diamond and Conant claim that nonsense is nonsense *sub specie aeternitatis*, but this is actually a misunderstanding of their position. Nonsense arises if we have given no meaning to our words. Sometimes we fail to recognize that we have not done so properly—this often happens when philosophizing—which is when we are in need of a therapeutic activity that helps us recognize that what we thought was meaningful is rather mere nonsense. But if we could successfully give meaning to our words, they would no longer be nonsensical. The same applies to the opening passages as well.

Reid further argues against Diamond and Conant that another anti-metaphysical lesson of the later Wittgenstein is that a concentration on one term alone cannot solve all problems, which makes the insistence on the term ‘nonsense’ go against the grain of the anti-dogmatical philosophizing that the later Wittgenstein seeks.<sup>6</sup> Therefore Reid suggests paying more attention to the terms that Wittgenstein uses as a whole. According to her, Diamond and Conant take the easy way out when they employ a general (wholesale) method to reject metaphysical propositions.<sup>7</sup> Reid argues that this fallacy rests on a false view of nonsense as a ‘super-false kind of falsehood,’ which is based on a ‘claustrophobic’ view that is caused by an overestimation of the distinction between logic and psychology, which is built on a distorted picture of truth and falsehood.<sup>8</sup> Reid acknowledges that an interpretation of the *Tractatus* should take seriously what

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Diamond 1991, 2000; Conant 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Reid 1998, 114. Arguments in this manner, in which the later Wittgenstein is presupposed to explain the earlier Wittgenstein, are irrelevant as criticisms against Diamond and Conant, because these arguments imply requirements on the author of the *Tractatus* which he could not possibly have fulfilled. Diamond and Conant do not attempt to cleanse the *Tractatus* from mistakes, which the later Wittgenstein recognizes, because such an approach would be not only ahistorical, but illegitimate.

<sup>7</sup> Reid 1998, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Reid 1998, 115, 132.

Wittgenstein wrote in the ‘frame’ of the book. However, Reid also wants to distinguish between different kinds of instructions and different ‘anti-metaphysical slogans.’<sup>9</sup> One possibility is to reject the propositions of the *Tractatus*—of the metaphysician, of philosophy, and so on—in general (wholesale), but a much more promising one is to examine every single proposition of the book individually by considering if it has a meaning in use.<sup>10</sup> Since Reid’s objection focuses on the idea that Diamond and Conant want to embrace a wholesale conception of Wittgenstein’s method *tout court*, it is built on an unreflective blending of the development of Wittgenstein’s *methods*. While the early Wittgenstein aims to hit upon *the* method that would solve *all* the problems *once and for all*, the later Wittgenstein rejects this monistic methodology as dogmatic. Instead he urges using a plurality of methods, as each case may demand a different treatment. The program he then develops is not far from the one that Reid describes. Reid’s misunderstanding is therefore twofold. (i) Diamond and Conant do not put forward Wittgenstein’s early method as the correct method, but they think that his later methods supersede his early method. (ii) Neither the early nor the later method enable one to reject all of some subset of propositions in toto. Diamond and Conant are very clear about the fact that one has to work through every single proposition of the *Tractatus*, and it is only after this process that one may recognize the propositions as nonsense. As they put it, one cannot take an ‘elevator’ to get to the last floor (the end of the ladder) instantly.<sup>11</sup> So there in effect is no wholesale rejection of nonsensical propositions in Diamond and Conant’s account, as Reid argues.

Marie McGinn attempts to transform the worries about the traditional reading and Conant and Diamond’s reading into something positive.<sup>12</sup> For that reason, she proposes a third reading, which integrates the strengths of both readings, and at the same time avoids their weaknesses.<sup>13</sup> Since, faced with the decision between propositions that express some inexpressible things and prop-

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<sup>9</sup> Reid 1998, 148.

<sup>10</sup> Reid 1998, 148–51; cf. *PI*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Conant and Diamond 2004.

<sup>12</sup> McGinn 1999, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> McGinn 1999, 496.

ositions that are mere nonsense, one can only make a bad decision, McGinn opts for a third option.<sup>14</sup> She labels this middle way as the ‘elucidatory reading.’<sup>15</sup> Crucial for such a reading is the distinction between form, content, and structure.<sup>16</sup> The biggest challenge for such a reading is to elucidate the opening passages of the *Tractatus*.<sup>17</sup> It is pivotal that this elucidation is not understood as metaphysical-dogmatic. McGinn refers to the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein.<sup>18</sup> The insights that the elucidations of McGinn’s Wittgenstein should bring to us are not ‘theoretical,’ but ‘ordinary.’ Their sole achievement is that we should gain a changed view and put forward no doctrine.<sup>19</sup> Even if such a project, i.e. to presuppose the advancements of the *Investigations* to develop a reading for the *Tractatus*, has some obvious attractiveness, i.e. the merits of Wittgenstein’s later remarks on philosophy and its methods, McGinn faces the objection that this approach embeds presuppositions that were not available to the early Wittgenstein at the time he wrote the *Tractatus*, and which he consequently could not have integrated into the book. For this reason, it is questionable on exegetical grounds. Nevertheless, it seems a good intention to give a detailed reading of the *Tractatus*; but then again, this is something that Conant and Diamond have also done, so there is no big difference between McGinn and Conant and Diamond on this point.<sup>20</sup> This leaves her with the objection that she presupposes Wittgenstein’s later philosophy in her reading of the *Tractatus*. McGinn appears to anticipate such objections and emphasizes passages from Wittgenstein’s early philosophy, such as 3.262 or 5.5563 in the *Tractatus*, in which Wittgenstein refers to the use of language and our ordinary language. The question is, what are McGinn’s reference to ordinary language and her talk about the change to see matters under a different perspective worth if cashed out? One could be

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<sup>14</sup> McGinn 1999, 498.

<sup>15</sup> McGinn 1999, 497.

<sup>16</sup> McGinn 1999, 500.

<sup>17</sup> McGinn 1999, 499-503. McGinn claims that Wittgenstein is giving a ‘mythological description’ of the ‘myth of the world’ (McGinn 1999, 500; see Gabriel 2009, 68-71; Gabriel 2013 forthcoming; *OC*, 90 et seq.). In a similar way, Daniel Hutto calls the truth tables a ‘mythologising [of] logical objects,’ which is built to reveal the misleading nature of the symbolism of Russell’s notation, according to which the logical connections correspond to something (Hutto and Lippitt 1998, 271).

<sup>18</sup> Especially *PI*, 89-133.

<sup>19</sup> McGinn 1999, 502, 504.

<sup>20</sup> See Ostrow 2002; McManus 2006.

skeptical here and question if they do not concur with the program of Conant and Diamond, if further spelled out. According to McGinn, her elucidations should help us recognize a certain ‘order’ in language, and a ‘picture’ should enable us to dissolve confusions about logic and the relation between language and world.<sup>21</sup> This should yield a new perspective of the work of the logician, and this would then lead to a re-evaluation of Russell’s and Frege’s views on logic and their self-understanding as logicians.<sup>22</sup> On these grounds, the question arises if McGinn can really avoid making any substantial claims, because if she cannot avoid these, this would make her vulnerable to the objection that she operates with a false methodological self-understanding (she thinks that she avoids all substantial theses, but in fact establishes some). Since McGinn deems the chief advantage of her elucidatory reading to be that she avoids attributing a substantial theory or theses to Wittgenstein, this objection would be trouble for her account if it goes through.

Similar to Conant and Diamond, McGinn only wants to dissolve questions (about logic, the relation of language and world, and so on). This is the point at which she integrates *TLP* passage 6.54 into her reading. She argues that the elucidatory remarks have only transitional use, they will not be needed anymore—and can be recognized as nonsense and thrown away—once the illusions (of the questions of philosophy, of the problems of philosophy, and so on) are successfully expelled and a change in our state of mind has taken place.<sup>23</sup> One example of such an illusion is, according to McGinn, the gap between language and world, which we should recognize as nonsense with the help of Tractarian elucidation. The concept of ‘elucidatory remarks’ is modeled after passage 4.112 of the *Tractatus* and the ‘grammatical remarks’ in passage 90 of the *Investigations*. McGinn’s attempts to identify the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* amount to a problematic strong continuity thesis.<sup>24</sup> As with all representatives of a strong

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<sup>21</sup> McGinn 1999, 505, 507. McGinn here targets traditional readers like Anthony Kenny (1974, 15), for whom the relation between language and world has the status of Wittgenstein’s ‘lifelong main problem,’ which Wittgenstein is further said to have attempted to solve with his invention of the ‘picture-theory.’

<sup>22</sup> McGinn 1999, 508-509.

<sup>23</sup> McGinn 1999, 512.

<sup>24</sup> McGinn 1999, 513.

continuity thesis, McGinn's account is open to the objection that Wittgenstein would have no reason to later criticize his own earlier work, if he already in his earlier work operated with the same assumptions as in his later philosophy. In McGinn's case, this would raise the question why, if Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* already uses some version of 'grammatical remarks,' he would later criticize his earlier self. To conclude, it is unclear if McGinn's reading can actually deliver the 'middle way' she aspires to provide. She faces serious challenges, on the one hand to avoid the fate of the traditional reading, and on the other hand to prevent her reading from collapsing into Conant and Diamond's account. In any case, the story that McGinn gives to explain why the propositions of the *Tractatus* have to be recognized as nonsense, i.e. in her account that they are transitional 'grammatical remarks,' already presupposes Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and is therefore problematic as an exegesis.

But if only certain propositions of the book are to be overcome, if and only if we recognize our alleged understanding of these propositions as *illusory*, what precisely are those propositions? In the previous chapter, we have already seen Wittgenstein's examples of nonsense, those that he explicitly mentions in the *Tractatus*, but are there more?

Wittgenstein expresses early in the preface that he thinks that talk about the demarcation of the limits of thought is deeply confused. Might this be an area where there are further nonsensical sentences to be located? Do we have to throw the sentences apparently speaking about 'the limits of thought' away? Doesn't this seem too radical? Should we instead hold onto the propositions of the *Tractatus*? But this would lead to a violation of Wittgenstein's principle that it is impossible to judge a nonsense. So should we say that the book cannot show that there are such limits? We turn to two opposed views now, which give radically different answers to these questions.

### ***Two opposed views***

Here are two quotations, each from a highly influential commentator on Wittgenstein. Both of them deal with the limits of thought, though both of them in an



utterly different way.

Hacker, whom we have already seen defending what I called the boundary model, a version of a Fregean reading of the *Tractatus*, expresses the first view:

*The limits of thought:* One cannot, as Wittgenstein emphasized in the preface, circumscribe the limits of thought in language. For it is nonsense to say that such-and such cannot be thought. Nor can one justify excluding a form of words by reference to reality [...]. But one can circumscribe the limits of thought from within, by drawing the limits of language. One can explain the nature of symbolism and thereby indicate which forms of words are licit. Forms of words that are not permitted are not descriptions of the unthinkable nor are they descriptions of logical impossibilities. For there cannot be such a thing as an intelligible description of something that cannot be thought. To be sure, these claims immediately condemn the propositions of the *Tractatus* as *nonsense*, since they employ formal concepts and describe internal relations—a paradox which its author gladly embraced. They are attempts to say what cannot be said, but manifests itself. Their role is fulfilled when one comes to understand *both that they are nonsense and that what they were trying to say is shown*.<sup>25</sup>

The bottom line of this picture is this: nonsense *cannot* be used to draw the limits of thought. But wait. Nonsense *can* be used to draw the limits from within. But wait. That seems utterly contradictory. Does the suggestion that it is nonsense help? No, because then we're back to the nonsense paradox, as Hacker rightly notices. Unfortunately, Hacker doesn't draw the conclusion from this that nonsense shows nothing, but instead embraces the paradox and furthermore holds that nonsense can 'show' what it was 'trying to say.' Can the limits of thought be shown in this way?

How could nonsense perform such a task? Nonsense is unthinkable, but to understand what the limits of thought are, it would appear that we first have to think what those limits are. Thus it would appear that we would have to think the unthinkable—we would have to think a nonsense.

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<sup>25</sup> Hacker 2001, 22; my emphases.

Many commentators have followed Hacker's suggestion that the author of the *Tractatus* thought he could get around that paradox.<sup>26</sup> Only a small minority has questioned this orthodoxy. The alternative view agrees with Hacker that the sentences about the limits of thought are nonsense, but disagrees that there is something that these nonsensical sentences (or any other sentences) show—except the fact that they are nonsense. Especially, the view argues that it is a confusion to say that they show 'that what they were trying to say' (as Hacker assumes that they do).

One of the most prominent defenders of this alternative view is James Conant. Here is a passage from Conant, in which he proposes the counterview to Hacker's account:

In the Preface, Wittgenstein tells us that the idea that we can form thoughts about the limits of thought is *simply nonsense*. [Thus] [t]he book starts with a *warning* to the effect that a certain kind of enterprise—one of attempting to draw a limit to thought—leads to plain nonsense. In the [...] text, we are offered (what appears to be) a doctrine about 'the limits of thought'. With the aid of this doctrine, we imagine ourselves to be able to both draw these limits and see beyond them. At the conclusion of the book, we are told that the author's elucidations have succeeded only if we recognize what we find in the [...] text to be (simply) nonsense. The sign that we have understood *the author* [...] of the work is that we can throw the ladder we have climbed up away. That is to say, we have finished the work, and the work is finished with us, when we are able to simply *throw* the sentences [...] of the work—sentences about 'the limits of language' and the unsayable things which lie beyond them—*away*.<sup>27</sup>

Conant's suggestion is that those sentences that elucidate if and only if they are recognized to be nonsensical include the propositions apparently contemplating on the limits of thought, instead of Hacker's suggestion that such limits are shown in some way. Thus these two commentators highlight the radical opposi-

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Addis 2006; Badiou 2011; Baker and Hacker 2005; Brenner 1999; Child 2011; Frascolla 2007; Fogelin 1987; Garfield and Priest 2003; Grayling 2001; McGinn 2006; Medina 2002; A. W. Moore 2006, 2012, 2013; Morris and Dodd 2007; Nordmann 2005; Schulte 1992; Stern 1995; White 2006, 2011; Williams 2004; Wilson 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Conant 1991, 159.

tion between two very different views about Wittgenstein on the topic of the limits of thought.

According to Hacker, Wittgenstein attempts to show, using nonsensical propositions, the limits of language, thereby proving that there are limits of thought by an *indirect demarcation* (note that this would follow only if we accepted the premise that there is a thought-language identity such that everything that can be thought can also be said). Thus Hacker thinks that Wittgenstein ‘gladly embraced’ a *paradox* in his book, because he wants nonsense to show what cannot be said (the limits of thought).

Conant, on the other hand, rejects Hacker’s account, and proposes instead that the *Tractatus* shows the failure of philosophical theories of the limits of thought. On this alternative view, Wittgenstein builds up the illusion of sense, as part of the activity of elucidation, which finally collapses, when the sentences of the *Tractatus* are recognized to be nonsense. This recognition, however, also entails that the sentences, which one thought to be demarcating the limits of thought, are recognized to be nonsense—this is a crucial part of the method of the book, which aims to establish that philosophical theories of the limits of thought fail to make sense. Thus Conant rejects that Wittgenstein thinks that nonsense can show any such thing.

Hacker writes that ‘words that are not permitted are not descriptions of the unthinkable nor are they descriptions of logical impossibilities’ because ‘there cannot be such a thing as an intelligible description of something that cannot be thought.’ This might look like common ground between Hacker and Conant, but, as we have already seen in discussion of Hacker’s defense of the doctrine of the distinction between saying and showing, it is not the case that Hacker himself is keeping to that promise. This chapter, then, argues that views according to which the limits of thought are established by nonsensical sentences fail to adhere to *Wittgenstein’s principle*: that it is impossible to judge a nonsense.

### **4.3 Direct and indirect demarcation**

## ***The argument from the preface***

Let's consider Wittgenstein's case against the demarcation of the limits of thought as a whole, which I have derived to a large extent from the preface of the *Tractatus*, but also from some later passages of that book. In the preface, Wittgenstein seems to debunk head-on the possibility of the demarcation of the limits of thought.

(1) To draw the limits of thought, we would have to think both sides of these limits. To think both sides, we would not only be able to think what can be thought, but it would have to be possible to think what cannot be thought—we would have to be able to *think the unthinkable*. But we cannot think what cannot be thought; otherwise it would not be unthinkable. Hence, we cannot draw the limits of thought. With this insight, Wittgenstein *already* begins his argument against theories of the limits of thought in the preface of the *Tractatus*—what Conant calls a 'warning,' to the effect that such an enterprise leads to 'simply nonsense.' Thus the possibility of a theory that establishes the demarcation of the limits of thought seems to be, if not refuted, then at the very least highly dubitable, right from the start.

(2) However, to draw this limit nevertheless, the *Tractatus* considers another possibility: the demarcation of the limits of thought on a different route, through the demarcation of the limits of language. In order to draw the limits of thought, we would accordingly have to draw the limits of the *expression of thought*. These limits would have to be drawn *in language*. Therefore we would have to say what cannot be said. But this clearly cannot be done either. However, the *Tractatus* seems to manage to find a way to express the inexpressible—what the book calls 'the mystical.'<sup>28</sup> What the mystical is, although that cannot be said by language, is shown by it. Nevertheless, the book manages to say that the mystical is *that the world is*. Hence what cannot be said is expressed, but as a result it is no longer inexpressible. To paraphrase the 'whole meaning' of the book, as he states it in the preface and later in the final passage of the *Tractatus* to tauto-

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<sup>28</sup> *TLP*, 6.44.

logical extremes: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot speak.<sup>29</sup> Or as Wittgenstein himself puts it early in his notebooks: '[w]hat cannot be expressed we do not express.'<sup>30</sup>

(3) We encounter this dilemma as well when we try to draw the limits of thought through an attempt to draw the limits of logic. This is because, according to the *Tractatus*, every *illogical* thought must necessarily be a *logical* thought, if it is a thought, since *we cannot think illogical*.<sup>31</sup> As a consequence, we fail to be able to think both sides of the limits.

This whole endeavor, then, looks highly suspicious. Have we really managed to draw the limits we searched for?

### **Case one: indirect demarcation**

An attentive reader of the *Tractatus* could stress the following point. Admittedly, Wittgenstein does exclude the possibility of a demarcation of the limits of thought as early as in the preface. But in some later passages, Wittgenstein indeed seems to give what looks like an argument for the indirect demarcation of the limits of thought 'from within,' by drawing the limits of language. Wittgenstein writes the following:

Philosophy limits the disputable sphere of natural science.<sup>32</sup>

It should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable. It should limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable.<sup>33</sup>

It will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable.<sup>34</sup>

In these passages, it appears that Wittgenstein considers the idea of a demarcation of the limits of thought through the demarcation of the limits of language. What lies beyond the limits of language will be 'unthinkable.' If something inex-

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<sup>29</sup> *TLP*, preface, 7.

<sup>30</sup> *NB*, 52, 27.5.1915.

<sup>31</sup> *TLP*, 3.03.

<sup>32</sup> *TLP*, 4.113.

<sup>33</sup> *TLP*, 4.114.

<sup>34</sup> *TLP*, 4.115.

pressible will be expressed, it is not a proposition in Wittgenstein's view—an interlocutor might argue—because it cannot be true or false, does not reside in the logical space, and is for these reasons nonsensical. Is this the reason why he writes in the penultimate passage of his book that his propositions have to be recognized as nonsense?

One example that is often given for such a nonsensical proposition is the first passage of the *Tractatus*: "The world is everything that is the case."<sup>35</sup> For instance, McGinn writes that "[t]here is a great temptation to read the opening remarks of the *Tractatus* as a statement of Wittgenstein's fundamental ontology, which leads standard readers to the view that Wittgenstein expresses a metaphysical theory in his book."<sup>36</sup> McGinn cites Black, Hintikka, Hacker, and Pears as representative philosophers who hold such a view. To take one of McGinn's examples, Hacker finds a 'metaphysical vision par excellence' in the *Tractatus*.<sup>37</sup> But the paradoxical claim of such a metaphysical reading of the opening passage, is that this proposition is said to be nonsense, *because* it is said to be a statement of metaphysics, and metaphysics is said to lie beyond the limits of language: 'Wittgenstein saw the illusions of metaphysics as the product of a deep-rooted need to thrust against the limits of language.'<sup>38</sup>

If this proposition is nonsensical, it is said to lie beyond the limits of language, and consequently beyond the limits of thought, because Wittgenstein says in the preface that 'what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.'<sup>39</sup>

A version of this view is clearly in play in Hacker's account. Consider this

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<sup>35</sup> *TLP*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> McGinn 2006, 134; emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> Hacker 2005, 253; quoted in McGinn 2006, 134. Unfortunately for McGinn, it seems an open question if McGinn's own view that 'what Wittgenstein is doing in [the *Tractatus*] is nothing more than tracing the logical order that is essential to language's ability to express propositions that can be compared with reality for truth or falsity' can successfully avoid the flaws of Hacker's reading. How can McGinn's just-cited statement not be 'a substantial claim concerning the relation between language and a transcendent reality'? (McGinn 2006, 137.) McGinn's notion of an 'internal relation' does not seem to be of much help here, and some of her criticisms against the standard reading also apply to her reading, at least partially.

<sup>38</sup> Hacker 1986, 174.

<sup>39</sup> *TLP*, preface.

passage from Hacker:

Metaphysical propositions appear to describe the necessary features of the world. They look like super-empirical descriptions of reality. But in fact they are either expressions of grammatical rules for the use of words or nonsense. This claim can be clarified by examining such metaphysical propositions as 'Red is a colour', 'Nothing can be red and green all over', 'White is lighter than black' which we are naturally inclined to think of as stating truths about the world. It is important to note that they have no significant negation. It would only make sense to say that it is false that something can be red and green all over simultaneously or that white is darker than black if we could say what would be the case if it were actually true. But we cannot. Of course, we are inclined to say that it is unthinkable that something be red and green all over simultaneously, or that it is unimaginable that white be darker than black. And that is correct. But not because of limitations on our cognitive or imaginative powers. Rather, because no sense attaches to the sentences 'A is red all over and also green all over' or 'A is white, B is black and A is darker than B'. Such sentences do not express propositions describing possibilities which happen not to obtain. Nor do they describe impossibilities, for a 'logically impossible state of affairs' is not, as it were, a possibility that is impossible. These sentences are nonsense, for they violate grammatical rules.<sup>40</sup>

The bottom line of this is that, according to Hacker, metaphysical sentences are nonsense because they violate the rules that make up the limits of language and consequently the limits of thought from within. And philosophy is said to give an account of these rules. Apparently it would be the job of the philosopher to give a criticism of everything that doesn't comply with these rules. But in a sense, this job appears to be quite unrewarding, since the criticism itself doesn't comply with these rules. Here is another passage in which Hacker expresses this view:

The limits of the thinkable are set in language, determined by the essential nature of representation. What lies beyond those limits cannot be said. The totality of genuine propositions constitutes the thinkable; the totality of true propositions constitutes the whole of 'natural science'. In specifying the limits of lan-

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<sup>40</sup> Hacker 1986, 197.

guage, philosophy sets limits to the much disputed sphere of natural science, the sphere of possible knowledge. Can science thus broadly conceived tell us whether we possess an immortal soul or whether God exists? Only if the totality of propositions encompasses propositions about God and the soul. Is there any possible ethical or aesthetic knowledge? Only if there are ethical or aesthetic propositions. [...] Wittgenstein's critique of language reached [...] radical conclusions. What we are not able, *in principle*, to know we cannot think either. The traditional metaphysical subjects of God and the soul lie beyond the boundaries of language. More radically, there can be no ethical or aesthetic propositions. Knowledge is denied to make room for silence. Finally [...] *the critique itself, the description of the limits of language, lies beyond the realm of what can be said*. Language can no more describe its own essence than it can describe the essence of the world.<sup>41</sup>

According to Hacker, then, philosophy gives 'the totality of true and genuine propositions' (all the propositions of natural science); and once they have been assembled—maybe either in the form of a list or by specifying a general form that they share—philosophy provides *all* the propositions that can be said.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the limits of thought, knowledge, logic, and the world are supposed to be drawn through the limits of language. Priest puts it as follows:

[T]he main point of the *Tractatus* is to delimit the bounds of (legitimate) thought [...]. First, he reformulates the problem as one concerning, not thought, but the language used to express thought. He then argues that language which appears to express thoughts on the other side of the boundary does not express ineffable thoughts (which would be contradictory), but is pure nonsense, and so expresses nothing at all. Hence, in the last analysis, his solution is [...this]: he denies that there is anything on the far side of the boundary. As we might expect, however, switching from talk of thought to talk of language is ultimately of little help. Even the distinction is bogus in the *Tractatus*; for Wittgenstein actually identifies thoughts with the propositions that express them. In working out the details of his project Wittgenstein is forced, time and time again, to make statements on the far side of the boundary. The problem is like a time-bomb hidden

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<sup>41</sup> Hacker 1986, 23; my emphases.

<sup>42</sup> See Gabriel 2014a, 2014b.



in the machinery of the *Tractatus*, which finally detonates at the penultimate proposition in the book.<sup>43</sup>

However, there is a huge drawback for Hacker's and Priest's account. The deadly lynchpin of this account is that 'the critique itself [...] lies beyond the realm of what can be said.' How could such a critique be successful? If the critique cannot be said, then it cannot establish the limits of language. But then the critique could not establish the limits according to which it cannot be said in the first place. But if the critique could be said, and it could establish the limits of language, then it could be said according to the limits. But that would be false again. Thus, the lynchpin appears to be a full-blown paradox—if the critique can be said, then it cannot be said. And if the critique cannot be said, then it can be said and it is therefore wrong since it contradicts its own verdict—we're back to 'familiar territory': *the paradox of nonsense is inescapable*.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, although the suggestion that the limits of thought can nevertheless be drawn (if only indirectly through a specification of everything that is possible to say in language) might initially have sounded viable, it is ultimately not successful.

The role that Wittgenstein attributes to his nonsensical propositions is difficult to grasp, and it seems that our interlocutor fails to appreciate the solution Wittgenstein develops in the *Tractatus*—what I called *the Tractarian solution*. Wittgenstein does not account for nonsense in the way Hacker's suggestion has it. For Wittgenstein, nonsense does not arise due to a violation of the rules of the limits of thought. According to him, nonsense arises if and only if we have not given meaning to all the constituents in the propositions we use—what I

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<sup>43</sup> Priest 1995, 202-203.

<sup>44</sup> The reading I'm describing here is given by Priest (1995, 209-210), who writes this: 'We are now back in familiar territory. We have seen that structural things cannot, quite literally, be said. Any attempt to make such claims must produce a string of symbols that is nonsense. Structural claims are therefore beyond the expressible. Yet Wittgenstein expresses them all the time. Most of the *Tractatus* contains nothing but structural claims. This should be clear [...]. [T]o hammer in the final nail, we sometimes find Wittgenstein actually saying what it is that propositions show [...]. We see that Wittgenstein is in [...] the situation that [...] [t]here are certain things which cannot, quite literally, be said (or thought, since these are the same thing for Wittgenstein). But to explain this very idea such things must be said.'

called the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense. Wittgenstein is pretty clear about this.<sup>45</sup>

If we combine this insight with the *Tractatus's* penultimate passage, we get the idea that the notion of the limits of thought itself is to be recognized as nonsense—theories of the limits of thought are only an *illusion of sense*. It is the aim of Wittgenstein's *activity of elucidation* to expose such illusions.<sup>46</sup> Thus, we should consider that the passages, in which our interlocutor found Wittgenstein to state that he wants to draw the limits of thought indirectly by drawing the limits of language, could equally belong to those propositions of the *Tractatus* which elucidate only if we recognize them as nonsense.

### ***The argument from the preface, continued***

(4) The suggestion to draw the limits of thought from within leads to the following dilemma: in order to draw the limits of thought by drawing the limits of language, we would have to specify the rules that establish the limits of language. But according to these rules, the rules themselves are nonsense. The limits of language fail to fulfill the constraints for the limits of language, so to speak. But such obvious nonsense cannot establish anything. We are thus not able to provide this limit.

It follows that to draw the limits of thought does not work, either directly (through the demarcation of the limits of thought themselves) or indirectly (through the demarcation of the limits of language or the limits of logic). Theories of the limits of thought are untenable. Neither thought, nor language, nor logic is a 'cage' that holds us captive. The image that holds us captive is the belief in such limits themselves in the first place.

### **Case two: the 'correct' method of philosophy**

Our interlocutor is still not convinced by the combination of Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense and his method of elucidation through nonsense, which

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<sup>45</sup> *TLP*, 5.4733.

<sup>46</sup> Similar cases are the 'unutterable,' the 'unthinkable,' the 'unsayable,' and so on and so forth.

made us consider that the propositions of the *Tractatus* that feature talk about the limits of thought have to be recognized as nonsensical in order to understand Wittgenstein as the author of his book. Our interlocutor believes that we have misread Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense, and backs this up with the antepenultimate passage of the *Tractatus*:

The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method.<sup>47</sup>

Our interlocutor claims that this passage is an elaboration of Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense and his account of the limits of thought. She takes this to be telling evidence against the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense. And, furthermore, that this would imply that the passages our interlocutor quoted to back up the claim, which the interlocutor wanted to use to show that Wittgenstein thinks one can intelligibly draw the limits of thought, might not be nonsense after all. The charge would thus be exegetical, and would object that we are deviating from the text, and it would furthermore claim that, considering what Wittgenstein actually wants to say, the limits could indeed be drawn.

The reply is that the Tractarian solution explains the peculiar *structure* of the book better than the interlocutor's account, on which the objection depends. At first, it seems that both the interlocutor's account and the Tractarian solution share the same explanatory power: that the book appears to postulate philosophical doctrines about the limits of thought, language, logic, knowledge, and the world. This can be explained equally well by both accounts. However, the book also diagnoses the postulation of philosophical doctrines as a *philosophical problem*. And the book furthermore says that it is the solution of philosophical problems that it has achieved. Additionally, Wittgenstein has been criticized for

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<sup>47</sup> *TLP*, 6.53.

not seeming to give philosophical arguments; for instance, Kneale and Kneale, in their highly influential book on the development of logic, write that ‘Wittgenstein confined himself for the most part to oracular pronouncements without any supporting arguments.’<sup>48</sup> As the tone of this quote indicates, Kneale and Kneale aren’t very happy about this, and rather see it as a weakness in Wittgenstein’s book. The Tractarian solution, however, can read this much more charitably. If Wittgenstein is to elucidate nonsense, the Tractarian solution explains why he isn’t taking part in the usual business of giving and taking arguments, but instead developing and exercising his own method of elucidation, since any philosophical argument that aims to show  $p$  to be nonsense fails to make sense and thus only leads to the nonsense predicament. Thus it is hard to see why one should insist on the claim of our interlocutor that Wittgenstein wants to put forward a theory despite all this (despite Wittgenstein’s anti-theoretical, problem solving oriented approach).

What the Tractarian solution shows, then, is that Wittgenstein aims in his book at an *internal* implosion, so to speak, of such apparent philosophical doctrines as the doctrine of ineffability (DI). Therefore, the presence of what appears to be the postulation of such doctrines—like that of showing what cannot be said (DSS)—should, together with the metaphilosophical and methodological instructions of the book, lead to the questioning of the intelligibility of such doctrines. In this way, the apparent doctrines are not stated in order to defend them (as usually done) but in order to dissolve them, during the process of philosophical clarification aimed at the solution of the philosophical problem of the limits of thought.

That Wittgenstein does not explicitly say ‘There is no  $X$ ’ (e.g. ‘There are no limits of thought’) should not be read as evidence that it is not his aim to give a solution to the question whether ‘There is  $X$  (or not)’ (e.g. ‘There are(n’t) the limits of thought’). Since it is precisely the point of the Tractarian solution that affirming this schema would require making sense of the ‘ $X$ ’ first. But if ‘ $X$ ’ is nonsense, this is impossible. The Tractarian solution, rather, is a difficult and com-

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<sup>48</sup> Kneale and Kneale 1985, 631.

plex argument that proves that it is impossible for there to be  $X$  or not- $X$ , through the questioning of the very intelligibility of the question itself. The solution is to show that the positive thesis and its negative counterpart both equally fail to be intelligible.

That is why Wittgenstein does not say ‘There is no  $X$ ,’ but by elucidating that the question really is no question at all, he has altogether solved the need to look for a positive or negative answer. Should the question if there is an  $X$  be unintelligible, both the positive or negative answer—that there can or cannot be an  $X$ —are too.

### **Case three: not without theory**

For the author of the *Tractatus*, ‘logic is not a theory.’<sup>49</sup> Kuusela warns that ‘[w]e must move away from the idea that logic assumes or involves any claims concerning language.’<sup>50</sup> It is against this point that the next objection against the argument for the impossibility of philosophical theories of the limits of thought protests. The charge is that the Tractarian solution cannot disprove the intelligibility of the project of demarcating the limits of thought, because the solution is not a *theory* on which such an objection could be based. If it is not a theory, how can it prove that  $p$  is correctly recognized to be nonsense?

First, we find strong evidence that suggests that Wittgenstein is indeed rejecting philosophical theorizing in his book:

The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

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<sup>49</sup> *TLP*, 6.13.

<sup>50</sup> Kuusela 2005, 126. Kuusela, in discussing the question of the ‘rigour of logic’ (122-26), concludes that logic’s rigor can be retained, if logic is seen as not making statements about the nature of language (and, it could be added, not about the nature of thought either). He writes that ‘by using exact rules as a form of representation we are not committed to any claims about the exactness or inexactness of language. In this way the ‘idea of rigour’ is not bargained out of logic but given another position through rearrangement and by ‘recognising the ideal of the order as a part of the mode of presentation’ [...] [T]here is [...] no question whether language can live up to the standards of exactness of logic. [...] We do not simply want to replace a thesis about the exactness of language with a thesis about its inexactness! [...] *We must move away from the idea that logic assumes or involves any claims concerning language: that the rigour of the discipline of logic depends on any theses about the nature of language*’ (125-126; emphases mine).

The result of philosophy is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’, but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.<sup>51</sup>

Wittgenstein writes that a philosophical work *does not* put forward a theory or philosophical propositions. It is a work *without content*, so to speak.<sup>52</sup> It is supposed to be used to become clear about some of our propositions. Hence Wittgenstein has it that there can be no theory which we could put forward to recognize nonsense.

As we have seen, this is a point that is often overlooked. For instance, Hacker and White think that the *Tractatus* expresses a doctrine, which could be used to prove that the limits of thought, the unsayable, and so on, either do exist or do not.<sup>53</sup> This is a doctrine that we would first have to understand, and which would then entail that the propositions the theory consists of—the propositions which put forward the doctrine in the first place—themselves turn out to be nonsensical according to the doctrine. But as is manifest with the Tractarian solution, this is a grave mistake.

The *Tractatus*, in general, rejects every philosophical doctrine. This applies as well to doctrines that claim to have the power to allegedly decide whether  $p$  makes sense, or whether  $p$  is nonsense. Recognizing  $p$  as making sense, or as failing to make sense, is considered to be something that is already done by us, which is manifest in the use or application of sentences, as we have seen already.

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<sup>51</sup> *TLP*, 4.112.

<sup>52</sup> Ian Proops (2001) argues that readings of this kind do not leave any room to explain Wittgenstein’s later criticisms of the *Tractatus*, because if the *Tractatus* is a work without philosophical doctrines, there is nothing to repudiate for later Wittgenstein (see Conant 2007). Criticisms of this kind overlook the fact that Wittgenstein may very well have attempted to compose the *Tractatus* as a work without doctrines, but later come to recognize that he still did not achieve this task. This would explain why Wittgenstein later criticizes some of the passages of the *Tractatus*. In my reading, the *Tractatus* is what Wittgenstein later calls a ‘*prahlerischer Beweis*’ (what Anscombe translates as ‘puffed-up proof’), which Wittgenstein describes as ‘a proof [that] proves more than its means allow it.’ What Wittgenstein means here is that such a proof only *apparently* proves ‘more than its means allows,’ and warns that in the face of such a ‘proof that we always ought to be suspicious—as he puts it, ‘[o]ur suspicion ought always to be aroused when a proof proves more than its means allow it’—of whether it can show what it claims to (*RFM* II, 21). It is clear that Wittgenstein later conceives of his earlier conviction that ‘I am, therefore, of the opinion to have finally solved the problems in essentials’ as being an instance of the problem of an apparent proof in that respect (*TLP*, Preface; translation amended).

<sup>53</sup> As was shown in chapter 1 and 2 of this thesis.

Second, doesn't Wittgenstein also write that '[philosophy] should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable. It should limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable.'<sup>54</sup> Does Wittgenstein contradict in this passage what he had himself written only two passages earlier? Does he, despite what he had just written, aim to put forward a theory of the limits of thought? Does he indeed, as Russell believed, think that there is a 'loophole' that he can use?<sup>55</sup>

Graham Priest has argued that Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* was to put forward a theory of the limits of thought, analogous to a theory of the limits of thought Priest finds in Russell's writings.<sup>56</sup> Priest's reading would then be in line with Russell's conviction that he has understood the 'main contention,' in Priest's reading, i.e. that they both put forward a theory of the limits of thought. According to Priest, Russell puts forward a self-undermining paradoxical theory. '[Russell's] theory [...] pushes many claims beyond the limit of the expressible' because they 'violat[e] the theory'; but what is worse, 'the very theory [...] cannot be explained without [...] violating it[self].'<sup>57</sup> And he writes that '[t]here must therefore be such a thought, though it cannot be expressed in [Russell's] theory,'<sup>58</sup> and that

[b]y his own theory, Russell's theory cannot be expressed [...]; but he does express it [...]. Hence we have a contradiction at the limit of expression. [...] His theory is therefore [an illustration of] the contradiction at the limits of thought.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *TLP*, 4.114.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Russell's 'Introduction.'

<sup>56</sup> Priest 1995, 152-154, 205.

<sup>57</sup> Priest 1995, 152. The whole relevant passage says: 'According to the theory, every variable must range over one order of propositional functions. No variable can therefore range over all propositional functions. For the same reason, no variable can range over all propositions. This pushes many claims beyond the limit of the expressible. Take, for example, the law of excluded middle: every proposition is either true or false. Since this has a quantifier over all propositions, it cannot be expressed. Or, closer to home, consider the Axiom of Reducibility itself. This is supposed to hold for all functions, *f*. Russell's very statement of it (above) therefore violates the theory of orders. Even decent statements of the VCP cannot be made without violating the VCP since they must say *that for any function, f*, any propositional function which 'involves' *f* cannot be an argument for *f*. Such statements are impossible by Russell's own admission. To add insult to injury, the very theory of orders cannot be explained without quantifying over all functions, and hence violating it. For to explain it, one has to express the fact that *every propositional function* has a determinate order. Hence, the theory is self-refuting.'

<sup>58</sup> Priest 1995, 153.

<sup>59</sup> Priest 1995, 154.

From the above, he concludes that Wittgenstein was forced into the same problems that Russell faced:

It is worth noting that there is historical evidence to suggest that Wittgenstein observed that Russell's theory [...] forced him into supposing that there were things that could not be said [...], and that reflection on this played some role in the genesis of his notion of showing.<sup>60</sup>

I don't have the required space to challenge Priest's reading of Russell, but I've argued at length in the first three chapters of this thesis against a reading of Wittgenstein that holds that Wittgenstein's aim was to put forward (DI) and (DSS). To repeat just the counter historical evidence that I've discussed above, neither the correspondence between Wittgenstein and Russell nor between Wittgenstein and von Ficker suggest that Wittgenstein's aim was to put forward a theory of the sort that Priest ascribes to Russell and Wittgenstein.<sup>61</sup>

When Wittgenstein says that a 'philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations,'<sup>62</sup> this is connected to the penultimate passage of the book, because it also remarks on the *elucidatory* role that Wittgenstein ascribes to certain propositions of his book. And I've argued at length in chapter 1 that Wittgenstein should be taken seriously on this point, in order to avoid a paradoxical reading of his aim in his book. Wittgenstein's elucidatory aim is to get us to recognize disguised nonsense as undisguised nonsense. After a proposition has been recognized as nonsense, however, there is nothing to hold onto. Throwing away the ladder precisely means this: *not* holding onto some of the rungs of the ladder (viz. nonsensical propositions) after one has thrown the ladder away. Throwing away the ladder, therefore, also means not holding onto sentences about the apparent demarcation of the limits of thought.

This is the central unity in his philosophical work, notwithstanding that it contains points of continuity and discontinuity. Throughout his philosophical work, he is concerned with uncovering philosophical nonsense, and he always

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<sup>60</sup> Priest 1995, 205; my emphases.

<sup>61</sup> See chapters 1.2 and 3.4.

<sup>62</sup> *TLP*, 4.112.



rejects philosophical theorizing.<sup>63</sup> This is the reason why central formulations of the *Tractatus* still go together with formulations of the *Investigations*. For instance, the following line is taken from the *Investigations*, and is reminiscent of the penultimate passage of the *Tractatus*, expressing Wittgenstein's continuous aim: 'What I want to teach is: to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.'<sup>64</sup> The Tractarian solution is built on the thought that logic, which is not understood to be a theory, can be used to elucidate that nonsense is only ever simply nonsense, without having a philosophical theory of the limits of thought that would entail when philosophical propositions do not make sense, but instead by elucidating the problematic nature of nonsense and suggesting silence about nonsense as a solution.<sup>65</sup>

### **Case four: the problem of justification**

The last reply gives rise to another objection. Wittgenstein's notion of throwing away certain propositions of the *Tractatus* (among them those apparently about the limits of thought), because they form parts of the ladder, does not trigger much sympathy in our interlocutor. After all, we have thrown the ladder away, because of certain hard-won reasons and insights, the interlocutor argues. But it would seem that, in our account, if we throw the ladder away, we throw away all these insights too.<sup>66</sup> Call that *the no-insight-worry*.

What are the remaining foundations of our position then? How can we justify ourselves after this move? The interlocutor argues that we cannot, not anymore. It seems as if we have moved *beyond rational discourse*. Even if Wittgenstein did mean it that way, our opponent would be unsatisfied with such an account. And since we have rejected that we have been persuaded by an argu-

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. *TLP*, 4.221, 6.54; *PI*, 109, 464.

<sup>64</sup> *PI*, 464.

<sup>65</sup> *TLP*, preface, 7; cf. Conant and Diamond 2004.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, in Forster's discussion (2005, 17, 86 and passim) of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, he suggests that Wittgenstein's 'Quietism' should be given up as both an exegetical and philosophical position. If Wittgenstein is not interpreted as putting forward philosophical theories as a response to philosophical problems, how can one arrive at any philosophically interesting insights? Can an engagement with Wittgenstein yield anything 'positive' at all? But contrary to the objection, it seems that one can make a strong case for Wittgenstein's relevance when read in an anti-theoretical way, since this can indeed lead to philosophical insights (Diamond 2008, 43-90; See Diamond 1991, chap. 13, 14 and 15).

ment, the interlocutor argues that our standpoint will be *unjustified*. Call this the *problem of justification*.

Is the situation as problematic as it may *prima facie* look? Michael Kremer argues that it is not.<sup>67</sup> Kremer argues that the search for an *ultimate* justification is rightly diagnosed to be a philosophical problem, because it is a philosophical illusion that has to be overcome.<sup>68</sup> Kremer describes the situation (we are in) as follows:

Here is the [...] solution to the ‘problems of philosophy’ promised in the Preface [of the *Tractatus*]. There are no such problems, and coming to realize this frees us from the burden of feeling that we must solve them.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, at another point in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes that ‘[t]he solution of the problem [...] is seen in the vanishing of the problem.’<sup>70</sup> He thereby formulates the clarificatory aim of the *Tractatus*. A problem is solved if and only if it *completely vanishes*. It is difficult and crucial at the same time to take Wittgenstein *at his word* here. To strictly adhere to this aim will be not easy at all, and is connected with what Wittgenstein calls ‘groundlessness.’<sup>71</sup> As Michael Kremer puts it: ‘[W]e cannot provide justifications [...] in any kind of theorizing – [...] the grasping of ineffable insights into the nature of reality, or the “higher” is just impossible.’<sup>72</sup> Wittgenstein’s point—in the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*—is to free us from the ‘picture [that] held us captive,’ the ‘need for justification.’<sup>73</sup> Or again, as Stanley Cavell writes in *The Claim of Reason*: ‘We begin to feel [...] terrified that [...] language [...] rests upon very shaky foundations – a thin net over an abyss.’<sup>74</sup> Wittgenstein’s critical thinking about philosophical theories, and his subsequent rejection of them, is imminent as early as 1915, when he writes this in one of his earliest notebooks: ‘All theories that say: “This is how it must be, otherwise we could not philosophize” [...] *must of course dis-*

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<sup>67</sup> Kremer 2001.

<sup>68</sup> Kremer 2001, 51-52, 56-60.

<sup>69</sup> Kremer 2001, 56-60; my insertion in brackets.

<sup>70</sup> *TLP*, 6.521.

<sup>71</sup> Wittgenstein 2003, 83.

<sup>72</sup> Kremer 2013, 482-483.

<sup>73</sup> *PI*, 115; see Kremer 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Cavell 1999, 178.

*appear.*' And Wittgenstein enigmatically continues with a remark on his method in the next sentence of the same notebook entry: 'My method is not to sunder the hard from the soft, but to see the hardness of the soft.'<sup>75</sup> And this 'hardness' seems indeed to be what Wittgenstein later calls the 'hardness of the logical must,'<sup>76</sup> and the emphasis of the 'hardness of the soft' could be the contingency Wittgenstein also states in the *Tractatus*: 'Everything we see could also be otherwise. Everything we describe at all could also be otherwise.'<sup>77</sup>

These insights need not been thrown away, for they are not part of the elucidatory propositions of the book, and they are hard-won philosophical insights, since it is a difficult way, until we recognize those propositions that are elucidations and those that are not, and finally understand Wittgenstein as the author of the text. We come to embrace this if we recognize that our alleged understanding—which we thought we had before—has been part of the rungs of the ladder. Our previous understanding has been the illusion of understanding nonsense. The question of (an ultimate) justification is part of that process, but has to be overcome, at last, in the process of the activity of elucidation, as a nonsensical philosophical question which gives rise to philosophical pseudo-problems that do not have an answer.<sup>78</sup> Thus both the no-insights-worry and the problem of justification do not bolster the interlocutor's account.

#### **4.4 The rungs of a ladder**

Consider Conant's suggestion that the device of different 'lists' can be helpful to come to terms with the question of which propositions are meant to be rungs of the actual ladder Wittgenstein presents in his book.<sup>79</sup> Consider the following list of propositions that deal with theories about the demarcation of the limits of thought (those items of Conant's list that are on the topic of 'limits'):

What is brought out into the open [with a nonsensical proposition that transgresses the limits of thought], through its transgression, is a general condition

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<sup>75</sup> *NB*, 44, 1.5.15.

<sup>76</sup> *PI*, 437; cf. *RFM I*, 121.

<sup>77</sup> *TLP*, 5.634.

<sup>78</sup> This is a sure indication that the question itself is nonsensical. (See *TLP* 6.5-6.52.)

<sup>79</sup> Conant 2007, 2012.

on the meaningfulness of propositions.

The totality of [the] conditions [for the meaningfulness of propositions] constitutes the limits of (our, my) language.

The limits of language are the limits of the (our, my) world.

It is the role of a proper theory of language to demarcate these limits.

It thereby demarcates the boundary between sense and nonsense.

It thereby also demarcates the limits of the (my, our) world.

The demarcation of these limits enables one (me) to contemplate from above (outside, sideways on) our (my) language (world) as a bounded totality.<sup>80</sup>

These entries are *candidates* for propositions that Wittgenstein thought were nonsensical, which he used as rungs of the ladder, as part of the Tractarian solution, by which he thought to make explicit the transition from disguised to undisguised nonsense. Readers might agree or disagree about whether each individual entry belongs on the list. As should be evident from the discussion above, I agree with Conant that all of these entries are rungs of the ladder.

According to Conant, many readers of the *Tractatus* appear to pass (at least) through the following steps (in my paraphrase): (i) one thinks that there is an extraordinary possibility to think something illogical; (ii) one then judges this to be impossible; (iii) but one still infers that this judgment, although true, cannot be expressed in (meaningful) language, because it reaches beyond language; (iv) one holds anyway onto the thought that one can claim what cannot be said, i.e. by showing it. The view that Conant attacks ends with step (iv) as the final rung of the ladder, whereas Conant's view has it that there is (at least) one further and all-important step: (v) the preceding steps are recognized as an illusion, and one consequently throws away the ladder.<sup>81</sup> Or, put slightly differently, the shape of the ladder can be summarized thus: In a first step, one thinks that there

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<sup>80</sup> Conant 2007, 51.

<sup>81</sup> Conant 2002, 422.

is ‘something’ that must be the way it is. In the next step, one recognizes that the preceding sentence cannot be said. In another step, one realizes that what cannot be said, cannot be thought either. The final step, however, is crucial. One has to appreciate that there has been no ‘it’ all along.

On the first steps of the ladder, one will be thinking that one is part of the philosophical tradition of giving and taking *arguments*, i.e. that one draws conclusions from premises. But on the final rung of the ladder, one will look back on this process and recognize that one has only apparently been involved in such a process—what one really has been a part of is Wittgenstein’s method. The Tractarian activity of elucidation, in this sense, crucially depends on the fact that one will first succumb to such *an illusion of an apparent line of argument*. Certain propositions of the *Tractatus*, for instance those about the limits of thought and language, are especially designed to evoke such a psychological impact. Yet still, one reaches the end of the ladder only if one fully appreciates what it is that Wittgenstein means when he writes that he does not want his philosophy to result in a theory or doctrine, but in an elucidation (through nonsense).<sup>82</sup> This insight consists of a certain experience, which Wittgenstein describes in the penultimate passage as the understanding of him as the author. This experience entails succumbing to the illusion of sense first, and subsequently experiencing the dissolution of the illusion, once one recognizes that the philosophical propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical.<sup>83</sup>

Conant understands this process, in agreement with Diamond’s account, as a ‘dissolution’ of the ‘illusion of a perspective.’<sup>84</sup> This illusion of a perspective arises from the Fregean conception of nonsense, which leads us into imagining that one could say something that is impossible to say and thereby transgress the limits of what is possible.<sup>85</sup> The *Tractatus* attempts to show that the ‘problems of philosophy,’ which Wittgenstein, in the preface, claims to have ‘finally’ solved,

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<sup>82</sup> The problem with the Fregean view that arises at this point is that it mistakenly takes the doctrines that are criticized in the book for its doctrines (Conant 1989a, 248).

<sup>83</sup> This process is, following Conant (1989a, 270) and Kremer, understood as a ‘resolution’ of a haunting struggle with one’s own words, which ends when ‘words come to an end.’ See also Kremer 2001.

<sup>84</sup> See Diamond 1991.

<sup>85</sup> Conant 2002, 423.

share a similar structure (which is not to say that Wittgenstein later did not challenge this assumption). They crop up once one believes that one is capable of forming thoughts that exhibit the theorist's paradox, thoughts that would violate the logic of our language—apparently unthinkable 'thoughts.'

The Tractarian solution consists in the dissolution of the very idea that one has any clear grasp on what one does when one postulates such 'thoughts' (illogical, inexpressible, impossible, unthinkable, and so on).<sup>86</sup> And this kind of philosophizing does not result in 'philosophical propositions,' but in the recognition that the 'idea' of such apparently 'impossible thoughts' is nonsensical.

Conant also describes these pseudo-thoughts as 'hallucinations,' and the illusion, which the *Tractatus* aims to explode from within, as the idea that one runs up against the limits of language.<sup>87</sup> As the preface has it, 'beyond' the 'limits' of thought, there is only simply nonsense, which is to say that the idea of a 'be-

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<sup>86</sup> Diamond (1988, 23-24) puts it like this: "The very idea of the philosophical perspective from which we consider as sayable *or* as unsayable necessities that underlie ordinary being so, or possibilities as themselves objective features of reality, sayably *or* unsayably: that very perspective itself is the illusion, created by sentences like "A is an object," which we do not see to be simply nonsense, plain nonsense. "A is an object" is no more than an innocently meaningless sentence like "Socrates is frabble"; it *merely* contains a word to which, in its use as predicate noun, no meaning has been given. But we inflate it, we blow it up into something more, we think of ourselves as meaning by it something which lies beyond what Wittgenstein allows to be sayable. We think it has to be rejected by him because of that. We think of there being a content for it, which according to his doctrines, no sentence can have. But this conception of what we cannot say is an illusion created by our taking the word "object," which works in meaningful English sentences essentially as a variable, and putting it into other sentences where it has a wholly different grammatical function. When Wittgenstein says that we cannot say "There are objects," he does not mean "There are, all right, *only that there are* has to get expressed another way." That the sentence means nothing at all, and is not illegitimate for any other reason, we do not see. We are so convinced that we understand what we are trying to say that we see only the two possibilities: *it* is sayable, *it* is not sayable. But Wittgenstein's aim is to allow us to see that there is no "it." The philosophical insight he wants to convey will come when you understand that you want to make use of a syntactical construction "A is a such-and-such," and that you are free to fix the meaning of the predicate noun in any way you choose, but that no assignment of meaning to it will satisfy you. There is not some meaning you cannot give it; but no meaning, of those without limit which you can give it, will do; and so you see that there is no coherent understanding to be reached of what you wanted to say. It dissolves: you are left with the sentence-structure "A is an object," standing there, as it were, innocently meaning nothing at all, not any longer thought of as illegitimate because of a violation of the principles of what can be put into words and what goes beyond them. Really to grasp that what you were trying to say shows itself in language is to cease to think of it as an inexpressible *content: that which* you were trying to say.'

<sup>87</sup> Conant 2002, 423-424. It is crucial to note that it may make sense to talk about the shortcomings of language (plain, ordinary shortcomings), although it does not make sense to postulate 'limits of language'; hence language is no cage (See also Conant 1991, 155).

yond' and of 'limits' has to be recognized as nonsense too.<sup>88</sup> One reaches the end of the ladder, according to Conant, if one has arrived at a certain point in the activity of elucidation when the illusion of the 'sense' of the book collapses, as he puts it:

[W]e have finished the work, and the work is finished with us, when we are able to *throw* the sentences in the body of the work—sentences about 'the limits of language' and the unsayable things that lie beyond them—*away*.<sup>89</sup>

#### **4.5 Analytic philosophy, and deflationism**

The Tractarian solution helps to recognize that philosophical theories about the demarcation of the limits of thought, which feed on the illusion of sense, can be overcome. This is of some importance, since Wittgenstein's philosophy—and especially the *Tractatus*—is quoted with authority in the debate about theories of the limits of thought. Hence, Wittgenstein is often the point of reference in this contemporary debate, and not only in this debate, but in debates about other philosophical limits—for instance, of language, reality, knowledge, meaningfulness, and so on and so forth. Wittgenstein is also seen as the emblematic figure of one of the two influential movements of philosophy in the 20th century, i.e. analytic philosophy.<sup>90</sup> And Wittgenstein is often read as providing an argument for having a theory that draws the limits of thought. But does Wittgenstein really have such a goal? As we have seen in the preceding section, there are strong reasons to doubt this.

#### ***Another limit to overcome***

If the Tractarian solution is helpful (that is, if it can solve philosophical problems), Wittgenstein is misinterpreted very similarly by analytic and continental philosophers on the topic of the limits of thought and language.<sup>91</sup> Representative examples are Hacker and Glock on the analytic side, and Badiou and Meil-

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<sup>88</sup> *TLP*, preface.

<sup>89</sup> Conant 2002, 424.

<sup>90</sup> See Hacker 1996, Glock and Hyman 2009, Conant 2015.

<sup>91</sup> If this distinction is really helpful is another question (see Glendinning 2006).

lassoux on the continental side.<sup>92</sup> Their readings share a similar stance with which they respond to the difficulty I mentioned earlier—the Tractarian difficulty—which is the difficulty of accepting the sentences of the *Tractatus* about the limits of thought as nonsense, after one has overcome the alleged understanding of them.

The worry is that both sides of the so-called analytic/continental division hold onto these propositions. Thus both sides run into the same pitfall, namely the exegetically and philosophically problematic situation of claiming to understand nonsensical propositions—of *making sense of nonsense*. And this is a view that is, quite obviously, simply nonsense. These readings are problematic as an exegesis, because they do not fully think through the climactic point of Wittgenstein's book. And they are problematic as a philosophical 'position,' because they find themselves in the self-refuting and paradoxical situation of saying the 'unsayable/unthinkable' (the limits of language/thought).

Can Wittgenstein overcome these shortcomings, which arise out of the theorist's picture? Can the inconsistency and the paradox that arises with, and is symptomatic of, the theorist's view be resolved?<sup>93</sup> The misinterpretation this view exhibits reaches from Russell's introduction to the *Tractatus* all the way down to standard textbook accounts. The Tractarian solution rejects that Wittgenstein's view is that theories of limits of language/thought are possible—language/thought are not a cage that holds us captive.<sup>94</sup>

### ***Going 'meta'***

Consider the current revival of discourse on metaphysical questions. We find a fundamental opposition in this debate. We can capture this opposition with the mutually exclusive terms *inflationism* and *deflationism*. These two opposite positions are characterized by a very different approach to philosophy and philo-

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<sup>92</sup> Hacker 1996; Glock and Hyman 2009; Badiou 2011; Meillassoux 2008.

<sup>93</sup> This paradox arises in any interpretative framework that misreads the alleged inconsistency of the *Tractatus* as a weakness of the book's author and not as a mistake in the interpreter's own reading.

<sup>94</sup> Wittgenstein 1984, 117; hereafter cited as *WVC*. See Conant 1991; Schönbaumsfeld 2007.



sophical problems.<sup>95</sup>

For example, in the current debate about the possibility or impossibility of metaphysics, and also in the debate about the possibility or impossibility of philosophy itself, philosophers use a neat technical device to secure their external point of view (what is only the illusion of a point of view, according to the Tractarian solution). The device is to switch to a higher order discourse. Thus one speaks about *meta*-metaphysics and *meta*-philosophy. Now it seems possible to ask the second order question of whether it is even possible to ask the first order questions that metaphysics has previously thought itself to be occupied with. These include questions like ‘Can we actually *mean anything* with metaphysical or philosophical propositions?’ and ‘What is the correct method of metaphysics in particular and philosophy in general?’

*Deflationists* usually hold the opinion that these questions have not only no answers, but that the questions themselves are devoid of meaning or meaningful content—they are nonsensical and just cannot have an answer. *Inflationists*, on the contrary, believe that these questions are indeed meaningful and in principle answerable. Now, which side of the two camps is right?

To see what the different positions amount to, compare them to the different ways in which one might react to the Tractarian difficulty, which we have discussed above. We have seen Hacker and White argue that Wittgenstein uses nonsense in both his early and later philosophical writings to postulate a doctrine (a philosophical theory of language) that aims to account for the very possibility of meaning. Accordingly, the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* have the same goal of presenting and justifying the possibility of the meaningfulness of our language. Wittgenstein’s entire philosophy is said to be occupied with the development of a theory of language (sense/nonsense), including a whole metaphysics of the relation between language and world.

There are many passages in Wittgenstein’s writings that make trouble for

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<sup>95</sup> These approaches can be considered general enough to divide philosophers into two opposite camps.

such a view. It seems to be out of tune with passages from both Wittgenstein's early and later philosophy. And these passages are precisely the ones that the Wittgensteinian view finds to be the very central ones. Take this well-known passage from the *Investigations*:

When philosophers use a word—'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name'—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.<sup>96</sup>

In the face of such passages, Conant has suggested a reading that is supposed to avoid these pitfalls. According to him, Wittgenstein's aim is to dispel the curses from which philosophers suffer. These curses come along with philosophy, traditionally conceived. Wittgenstein's goal is instead to dissolve the questions and answers that have been given so far, because they are nonsensical. Accordingly, Wittgenstein does not hold that the questions of metaphysics and philosophy are answerable. They are instead debunked as nonsense, because they do not allow for answers:

For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. *The riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered.<sup>97</sup>

Wittgenstein's view is therefore 'deflationary' in this sense. Does this push the argument to the extreme, so that it would appear to follow that Wittgenstein questioned the possibility of philosophy, too? Is Wittgenstein's aim—early or late—really to 'end' philosophy?

There are crucial passages in which Wittgenstein discusses such a view. Take this passage from the *Investigations*:

It is not our aim to refine or complete the system of rules for the use of our

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<sup>96</sup> *PI*, 116.

<sup>97</sup> *TLP*, 6.5. See also 6.51: 'Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but palpably senseless, if it would doubt where a question cannot be asked. For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something *can* be said.'

words in unheard-of ways. For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear. The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question.—Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off.—Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem. There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.<sup>98</sup>

In this passage, Wittgenstein appears to be, quite clearly actually, rejecting the view that there is only one method in favor of a view according to which there is a *plurality* of methods, which both Conant and Schulte have highlighted.<sup>99</sup> However, despite this passage, Sebastian Wyss has recently argued that Wittgenstein wants to put forward only a *single* method.<sup>100</sup> Wyss's criticism is that a plurality of methods, what he calls 'various problem-oriented methods,' would require a single method, an 'overarching method,' as he calls it.<sup>101</sup> However, it seems to me that since the single overarching method just *is* the invention of a plurality of problem-oriented methods, Wyss's suggestion comes down to a mere verbal dispute.<sup>102</sup> When Wyss speaks about the single method, he too means a plurality of methods. In this sense, nothing of philosophical substance hangs on whether we use the terminology of a single method or a plurality of methods, since both terms are used to describe a plurality of methods.

The thought of ending philosophy, however, is quite radical.<sup>103</sup> Is such a position even tenable? Isn't one undermining oneself when one says that philos-

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<sup>98</sup> *PI*, 133.

<sup>99</sup> Conant 2011; Schulte 2002.

<sup>100</sup> Wyss 2015.

<sup>101</sup> Wyss 2015, 191.

<sup>102</sup> Wyss (2015, 191; my emphases) seems to be acknowledging this when he writes in the conclusion of his paper that 'Conant is *quite right to stress the diversity of methods* in the *Philosophical Investigations*.' On the topic of verbal disputes, see Balcerak Jackson 2013, 2014; Chalmers 2011. What is a verbal dispute? Chalmers's answer (2011, 515) is that 'a dispute between two parties is verbal when the two parties agree on the relevant facts about a domain of concern, and just disagree about the language used to describe that domain. In such a case, one has the sense that the two parties are "not really disagreeing": that is, they are not really disagreeing about the domain of concern, and are only disagreeing over linguistic matters.'

<sup>103</sup> See Hutto 2003 for a discussion of this issue.

ophy is nonsense, because one's own propositions are themselves philosophical?

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein comes closest to expressing the view that philosophy is nonsense:

Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language. (They belong to the same class as the question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.) And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact *not*.<sup>104</sup>

Wittgenstein explicitly replies to this worry, in the penultimate passage of his book, when he says that his propositions have to be overcome, seeing them as nonsense when we understand *him*, not his *propositions*. So Wittgenstein is clear about his propositions being nonsensical, but the understanding he aims at is that of understanding him as the author of the book. Certain propositions of the text are nonsense, but they are only an *elucidatory* tool, and they have to be recognized as nonsense as a part of the ladder.

It is therefore crucial to distinguish between a kind of deflationism that does not hold that philosophy is to be ended, and a deflationism that holds that philosophy is such that it can be ended, or that all of philosophy is nonsense. This deflationism has only the appearance of a standpoint. When we think this view through, we see that it implodes from within. It is not a genuine position at all.

If we consider the case for theories of the limits of thought, this problem resurfaces. Wittgenstein *seems* to give arguments for the existence of such limits, but if we consider the Tractarian solution, we will understand him as using nonsense to elucidate that the belief in the existence, or non-existence, of these limits equally fails to make any sense. The rungs of the ladder are, in this case, the apparent possibility of drawing a limit to thought, with the help of the limits of

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<sup>104</sup> *TLP*, 4.003.

language. We have to recognize and overcome this. We readers feel the urge to hold onto this possibility, but Wittgenstein instructs us to let go of it. The notion of this limit is only the illusion of a possibility. If we pass through the activity of elucidation, we come to see the (philosophical) view as (philosophical) nonsense.

I distinguished ‘deflationism’ into attempts to end philosophy, claiming that philosophy is nonsense, and a form of ‘quietism’—but quietism ‘about’ something. Where these two varieties of deflationism differ is about Wittgenstein’s point in the final proposition of the *Tractatus*. What they agree on is the retroactive extinction of our philosophical memory, so to speak. What we considered to be meaningful now appears to be nonsense. We have to acknowledge that this is the price to pay, but the reward is worth it: liberation from the philosophical glasses that before blurred our view. If we take these glasses off, we see that there has been no meaningful (philosophical) distinction between inside and outside all along:

The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakable. You can never get outside it; you must always turn back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe.—Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.<sup>105</sup>

After this process, we have reached bedrock.<sup>106</sup> As Wittgenstein instructs us: ‘Back to the rough ground!’<sup>107</sup>

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter considered Wittgenstein’s remarks about the limits of thought. It was argued that the question of whether there are such limits is a philosophical problem, which Wittgenstein attempts to solve with the Tractarian solution. The solution showed that philosophical theories of the limits of thought fail.

The starting point is that the attempt to draw such limits by stating what cannot be thought is, quite obviously, self-refuting. This is because, if it could be

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<sup>105</sup> *PI*, 103.

<sup>106</sup> *PI*, 217.

<sup>107</sup> *PI*, 107.

intelligibly specified what it is that cannot be thought, a necessary condition would be to be able to explain what exactly it is that cannot be thought. If that condition could not be satisfied, it is otherwise not clear what cannot be thought; and consequently, it is also not clear if there is anything at all at this point that cannot be thought. If that condition could be satisfied, however, it seems that what is said to be unthinkable has already been thought, in order to explain what it is that cannot be thought. Hence a position claiming that it can convey what cannot be thought is *highly unstable*. Once this instability is detected, it follows that there is no position at all—since it is a condition for a position to be stable, at least in the minimal sense that it does not implicitly rely on both  $p$  being thinkable and unthinkable.

Another suggestion was considered. Could it be possible to draw the limits of thought by drawing the limits of language? This line of argument is treated in depth in the *Tractatus*. It was argued that this project suffers from similar defects, which were already contained in the original attempt to establish the limits of thought. Thus it seems that if we can meaningfully say that  $p$  cannot be said, this presupposes  $p$  to be sayable. If  $p$  could not be said, it would be totally uninformative to say that that whatever it is cannot be said. It would, quite literally, be nonsensical to say so. Hence, to say that  $p$  cannot be said requires, first of all, that it can be said what it is that cannot be said, and, furthermore, why it cannot be said. In this way, the second attempt to delimit the limits of thought also has a deadly flaw. Philosophical theories of the limits of thought fail, because they get entangled in the nonsense predicament.

## 5. Limits of Language

### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter concluded that neither the limits of language nor the limits of thought can be drawn. But our interlocutor, as usual, is not satisfied with this conclusion. The topic of this chapter, therefore, is a further attempt to get around the nonsense predicament and yet construct another philosophical theory that would draw the limits of language.

The interlocutor begins by noticing that philosophers have taken it to be obvious that the language that is used in everyday life has certain *shortcomings*.<sup>1</sup> However, these shortcomings, if there are any, are not the *limits* searched for by the interlocutor, since the limits of language must be such that an ideal language must also exhibit them. Therefore, the interlocutor first considers if there is the possibility of drawing a distinction between formal and non-formal languages, to secure that the shortcomings of everyday language can be ruled out, so that it gets into clear focus whether there are limits of language, and if there are any, what they are. To do this, then, it is first necessary to define what a formal language is. Thus the guiding question is if it is possible to define a formal language such that it has no shortcomings, but can show what the limits of language are. Or if it turns out that this is impossible. The interlocutor argues that a full specification of everything that can be said would amount to a full explication of the limits of language. It looks as if the interlocutor could achieve her goal. But, as this chapter shall argue, such a specification of the limits of language would lead to the problem that it cannot account for its own specification, so to speak. It leads to the nonsense paradox.

For the sake of the interlocutor's argument, this chapter starts of on the

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<sup>1</sup> This view is often attributed to either Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, or to Frege and Russell alone. For instance, Glock (2003, 17) understands the logic of Frege and Russell to be conceived 'as an ideal language which avoids the shortcomings of ordinary language.' Lal Das (2006) writes that ordinary language has 'important shortcomings' (65), and, in discussing Frege, writes that 'ordinary language suffers from many serious shortcomings' (70). And about Wittgenstein, she writes that 'ordinary language should be purged of its shortcomings and brought into conformity with the logically perfect language' (93).

assumption that a distinction between non-formal and formal languages can be drawn to exclude the alleged shortcomings of language. To do so, two common ways of understanding what a formal language is are considered. It is argued that the first of these ways of understanding leads to some rather troubling consequences. And then that on the second way of understanding what a formal language is, it has too many shortcomings to do any significant philosophical work. What is worse, the cases that can be dealt with based on this second understanding can also be handled without requiring the use of formal languages in the first place. Attempts to overcome these shortcomings, however, make the second understanding backslide into the first one.

What can be seen from this is that the distinction between formal and non-formal languages, as drawn in these two common ways, cannot even secure that formal languages are devoid of shortcomings. Furthermore, it cannot show that there are the limits of language, let alone what they are.

A corollary consequence of this is that the status of certain arguments that feed on either understanding of formal languages fall into question. The crux of these arguments is that they lead to puzzling conclusions and unwelcome commitments. That is, their supporters mean them to prove the claim that it is possible to specify content that is *unthinkable* and *inexpressible* by definition. But once the underlying conception of the distinction between formal and non-formal languages is uncovered and thereafter questioned, it becomes clear that these arguments are not valid.

For the sake of argument, this chapter then proposes imagining that a language without shortcomings would be possible. If that were possible, could this language give a full specification of what there is, in order to draw the limits of language and the world? For the same reasons that arguments for inexpressible features of reality fail, it is shown, the attempt to draw such limits in this way leads nowhere.

Section 5.2 explains the main aim of this chapter. Section 5.3 discusses the model of an *ideal language*, and argues that the interlocutor's attempt to



establish a philosophical theory that draws the limits of language fails. Section 5.4 construes the form of the philosophical puzzlement under consideration.

## 5.2 The agenda

The interlocutor proposes that there is an important distinction between formal and non-formal languages. That this distinction is an idea that is definitely around, and in the head of many philosophers, should be uncontroversial.<sup>2</sup> How exactly is the model of such a distinction between formal and non-formal languages supposed to work?

Consider those languages we make use of in *everyday life*. Call these languages *non-formal languages* or *ordinary language*. However, because they are somewhat messy, the interlocutor argues that it is necessary to establish a language that is supposed to be free of all the messiness non-formal languages seem to contain. Call such a language a *formal language*. What I want to *show*, then, is that this model runs into some rather bad consequences—instances where one would have to say some very strange and unappealing things about what it is to say and mean *anything* at all.

The interlocutor takes as her model an influential idea about logic and language in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: the idea of a formal language conceived as an ideal language. As Kneale and Kneale write, in their highly influential book on the development of logic, Wittgenstein 'simply assumed without question the sufficiency of his symbolism as the syntactical apparatus for an ideal language.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Irving Copi writes that 'Wittgenstein [is] primarily concerned with specifications for an artificial symbolic language which would conform to "the rules of logical grammar".'<sup>4</sup> And John Wisdom too seems to suggest that Wittgenstein is concerned with an ideal language, when he writes that Wittgenstein

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<sup>2</sup> See Kneale and Kneale 1985; Copi 1958; Wisdom 1931; Putnam 2010; Jaquette 1998; Weiner 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Kneale and Kneale 1985, 631.

<sup>4</sup> Copi 1958, 147.

‘is trying to point out an ideal to which some sentences try to attain.’<sup>5</sup> And, finally, Putnam recently found it ‘a very standard move [...] to replace it [i.e. ordinary language] by an ideal language.’<sup>6</sup> We’ll work with and through that model, to see if there is any philosophical insight to be had from it. What this will hopefully show is that it’s not the case that one could have *those* insights one would probably have oneself *imagined* as having when adopting the model—these insights are no insights at all, let alone *deep* insights. There are none of these deep ‘insights’ *at all*. But that’s not to say that there aren’t *any* insights at all. Working *through* the model leads us to quite a different kind of insights, which we can have. And it’s those insights that we’re getting *attuned* to *after* having pushed *beyond* the core of what happens if we’re thinking through a *philosophical puzzle*, if we’re pushing the *tension*—the tension we feel while being subject to a philosophical puzzlement—up to the point where the idea of *making sense* with the model is no longer something we would entertain *at all*.

### 5.3 The model of an ‘ideal language’

The preface of the *Tractatus* has Wittgenstein saying that he is, as the author of that book, somewhat indifferent if, and to what extent, his thoughts and those of others before him ‘coincide,’ and he says in the same breath that what he has written ‘makes no claim to novelty in detail.’<sup>7</sup>

What could he have meant by this? Here’s how Geach, Anscombe, and Hacker (whom we have already discussed in the first chapter) attempt to spell this out. The preface itself gives the crucial clue where to look for the answer to how far Wittgenstein’s efforts coincide with others’—the works of Frege and Russell. Since as a matter of fact, Wittgenstein mentions the book’s indebtedness to those two philosophers in the preface.

It’s natural, at this point, to infer from this—as Anscombe and Geach

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<sup>5</sup> Wisdom 1931, 202. Wisdom’s criticism that Wittgenstein ‘should, I think, have drawn our attention to the fact that some sentences do not try to attain to this ideal’ suggests that Wisdom thinks that Wittgenstein’s aim was to establish the alleged ideal as an ideal for every sentence.

<sup>6</sup> Putnam 2010, 301. Needless to say, Putnam is criticizing the move.

<sup>7</sup> *TLP*, preface.

have—that one has to take a closer look at what Frege and Russell were up to in their writings, in order to oneself have the correct picture of what Wittgenstein was up to in his book. And there is nothing particularly wrong with that approach in itself—indeed, what could it likely mean to assert that it would be? There is, however, a tension that easily arises, a tension that leads to an experience of what it is to think through a philosophical puzzle.<sup>8</sup>

The problem we're driving at is most visible when considering attempts to make the inference from the *Tractatus's* acknowledgment of the writings of Frege and Russell to the kind of thoughts Wittgenstein must have expressed in his book, since the correct way to spell out *how* exactly Wittgenstein read and understood the philosophers preceding him is not clear, and this leads to the problem of assimilating Frege, Russell, and early Wittgenstein,<sup>9</sup> ascribing to them equally the project of establishing a formal language as an 'ideal language' that is meant to supersede and *replace* 'ordinary language.' Such a view of a replacement or rejection of ordinary language in favor of a formal ideal language is expressed by Copi, when he writes that '[t]he tendency [in the *Tractatus*] to *reject ordinary language* seems to me to predominate. Wittgenstein was concerned with the construction of "an adequate notation".'<sup>10</sup> And furthermore, Copi puts forward the view that Wittgenstein inherited Frege and Russell's project to establish an ideal artificial language when he writes that '[t]he *Tractatus* contains several definite proposals for improving [Frege's and Russell's] symbolism by altering it in the direction of greater artificiality.'<sup>11</sup> But this misconstrues early Wittgenstein's efforts. Remember that Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus* that ordinary language is in 'perfect logical order.'<sup>12</sup> Dale Jaquette argues that this means that '[t]he *Tractatus* does not try to replace everyday language with an ideal formalism.'<sup>13</sup> That Wittgenstein's task was not to replace ordinary language with an ideal is also suggested by Wittgenstein's vehement rejection (which

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein's aim (*NB* 1998b, 82, 85; see *PG* 185) to think matters 'strictly through [*streng durchdenken*].'

<sup>9</sup> Cf. chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Copi 1958, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Copi 1958, 146.

<sup>12</sup> *TLP*, 5.5563.

<sup>13</sup> Jaquette 1998, 138.

we've discussed in chapter 1) of Russell's 'Introduction' to the *Tractatus*, in which Russell expresses precisely such a view when he writes that Wittgenstein 'is concerned with the conditions which would have to be fulfilled by a logically perfect language.'<sup>14</sup> But as we have seen in earlier chapters, the task of Wittgenstein's book is not to set up anything like that account.

However, the interlocutor might want to insist that there is definitely talk in that book that can be read in that way.<sup>15</sup> True, we might answer, there are combinations of signs in that book which one might experience in that way. So is there a distinction to be drawn between two kinds of interest one might have in a 'formal language'?

Apart from the already mentioned first sense in which many people have tried to think about a formal language (in the sense of an ideal language that is to supersede ordinary language because of its imperfections), there is another sense in which the idea of a 'formal language' features in that book. This is the idea that we might be able to arrive at some *perspicuousness* by abstracting *as much as possible* from the peculiarities, differences, and complexities contained in our everyday language.<sup>16</sup> If such a perspicuous view were possible, it would be of great service, since it would enable us to notice those instances where we sometimes do not understand ourselves, although we might think in those instances that we understand ourselves perfectly well—i.e. instances in which what we say does not make sense as well as we might want to, without us noticing it.

To put it less figuratively, it seems that we sometimes do not understand the *logic* or *grammar* of the items of the language we use.<sup>17</sup> In such instances—and this is surely an idea that runs deep in Wittgenstein's book—we fail to recognize that we have not yet decided on any *determinate* meaning for every item of our utterances in a specific context of use. We might want to call such an idea of a formal language as a *device* that will yield a *perspicuous notation* for making obvious the misunderstandings we sometimes experience in ordinary lan-

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<sup>14</sup> *TLP*, 'Introduction.'

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Copi 1958.

<sup>16</sup> On the idea of a 'perspicuous notation' in the *Tractatus*, see Conant 2006, 189-194.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *TLP*, 5.4733.

guage a *Begriffsschrift*.<sup>18</sup>

In the reading proposed now, it is the latter understanding of what it could possibly mean to talk about a ‘formal language’ that is the one that early Wittgenstein held (if any view of what a formal language might be is worth having at all, that is, if any view is helpful for solving philosophical problems). In the end, however, we’ll see that this view won’t work either.<sup>19</sup> We shall try to show this through what could be called an ‘imaginative exercise.’<sup>20</sup>

The basic idea is to take the—supposed—understanding of a ‘formal language’ as a *model* to work with, and see where it leads, if we press it ‘as far’ as we can imagine. The failure of the first understanding of what a formal language might be will then suggest that we should consider the second understanding of a formal language. This will turn out to have a very limited range of applications, none of which will help achieve the goal of getting rid of philosophical puzzles *in general* (which was the aim of the *Tractatus* anyways). I take that to be a hard-won lesson when we move from early Wittgenstein to later Wittgenstein.

### ***Trying to get clear on the model***

Let’s put a bit more flesh on the bones of talk about formal languages in the first sense, and see how the model is supposed to look. Here’s a shot at it. Non-formal ordinary languages clearly have some *shortcomings*, as we have already men-

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<sup>18</sup> But the use of the word ‘Begriffsschrift’ might often be misleading since there are many different uses of the word, and not all of them understand a Begriffsschrift as a tool for the clarification of thoughts. See Weiner (2004, 28-29; emphases added) on Frege’s use of a formal language: ‘Although Begriffsschrift is meant to be a language, there are *important differences* between Begriffsschrift and natural language—the sort of language we use in everyday life. Frege’s language is artificial and it is *not* designed to be used for everyday purposes. [...] [W]hen [Frege] began his project he found that natural language was not adequate for his purposes. In natural language it is difficult to express complex conceptual contents precisely. Frege argues throughout his career [that] natural language has a number of logical defects. His aim, however, is *not* to improve natural language or to replace it with a logically perfect language. Rather, he regards his [...] Begriffsschrift [...] as [...] a *method* for evaluating inferences. [...] His logical language is *useful* [...] for certain [...] purposes and entirely useless for others. [...] [F]or most purposes, we are better off expressing our statements in natural language than we are expressing them in Begriffsschrift. It is *only* when our aim is to evaluate inferences that Begriffsschrift is a better *instrument* for expressing our statements than natural language. The aim is to introduce a system of evaluation that will make it a mechanical task, once an inference is expressed in Begriffsschrift, to *determine* whether or not the inference is correct and gapless.’

<sup>19</sup> This is also the conclusion that Conant (2006) arrives at.

<sup>20</sup> See Diamond 2000.

tioned above. What exactly those shortcomings are does not matter much at this point, except for one particular detail. One shortcoming—something that can be experienced both in everyday life, and when doing philosophy—is that there seem to be instances where one just wants to say something, which one is then unable to say. That is, for any given system of language  $L_1, \dots, L_n$ , there seem to be cases  $C_1, \dots, C_n$  in which what one wants to say is something that *cannot* be expressed by any  $L$ .

The question is if such shortcomings—which, necessarily, it seems, any possible  $L$  has—also amount to a general *limit* embedded in any representational system, or not. Then the even more interesting question is (if we suppose that there is such a limit) whether we can grasp that limit—and furthermore, if we can draw it in some possible  $L$ .

Call this process *LIMIT*. To be able to *LIMIT*, it seems, one would have to give an account of the most fundamental  $L$  from which every member of the set of any possible  $L$  could be derived. Call this *IL*, short for *ideal language*. What is meant by ‘most fundamental’ is this: Given *IL*, one should be able to *express anything* that is expressible at all. This *includes* anything that is already expressible by the members of the set of all possible  $L$ , and what it *excludes* is everything that is not expressible at all. (*IL* indirectly excludes this by expressing everything that is possible to express.)

If one could *LIMIT* in such a way, it would clearly be the case that *IL* should be *the* system of communication to be used in any context whatsoever. Given that all the possibilities of expression would be included in *IL*, while the impossibilities would be excluded—that is, delimited by not making it possible to state them at all—*IL* would constitute what we might want to call *LS*, short for ‘the logical space’—*the* space of *all* the possibilities to express the *sum total* of every possible states of affairs.

It is obvious that the non-formal languages we employ in everyday life won’t fit this bill. Hence, what we would need in order to establish *IL* is an abstraction from any  $L$ . If we are to establish *IL*, one thing we would definitely

need is to have contained in *IL* the capacity to represent *any* possible states of affairs. And, in order to make that happen, what we would need is for *IL* to be able to establish a *connection* between what is possible in any possible world *W*, i.e. any states of affairs, and the representation of it in *IL*. To establish such a connection between *W* and *IL*, we would have to guarantee that there is a certain *fit* between them. That is, for any possible states of affairs *S*, we would need to have an expression *E* in *IL*.

There seems to be an innocent sense in which whatever there is in the world, our way of capturing what there is in the world is to capture it in language. There is an *interdependence* between what we say there is and what there is, such that what we say *makes* the world and what the world is *makes* what we say. Hence what can be said and the world *coincide*. Given this, a full specification of everything that can be said that there is would amount to a full explication of the world, of what there is in it.

Let's consider two ways in which a philosophical theory could be thought to arrive at the limits of language through a full specification of what there is.

The first idea is to give something like an 'inventory list' of 'all there is,' all the propositions that can be said; thus, Achilles Varzi urges us to 'keep in mind that drawing up a complete inventory of what there is is just the beginning of a good philosopher's job.'<sup>21</sup> In this picture, the world is understood as 'a container,' 'a total state of things.'<sup>22</sup> Though arguably no philosopher has ever set out to *actually* provide such an inventory list of what there is, the mere thought of such a list has apparently seemed promising enough. But the prospects of this endeavor can be shown to be *unpromising* very easily, with two pressing arguments.

The first one is an argument that is based on a version of Russell's paradox. If the world is a list of all the propositions that capture everything there is,

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<sup>21</sup> Varzi 2014, 55. Similarly, William Carter (1990, 47) writes that '[d]escribing the world is a matter of offering a kind-inventory of what there is, what really exists. Perhaps such an inventory need have only two entries; perhaps everything there is—everything that exists.' And equally, Ross Cameron (2012, 221) describes 'what there is' as 'a mere list of what exists.' For a convincing criticism of the idea of a list as a description of the world, cf. Gabriel 2014a, 2014b.

<sup>22</sup> Vetter 2015, 266.

the list itself is something that belongs to what there is. Therefore another list has to be made that includes all the propositions as before, plus the proposition about the first list that captured all those propositions. But the second list is itself something that is in the world, hence a third list is needed, and so on. One can see how this leads into an *infinite regress*, terminating this project of giving the limits of language and the world. Granted, this is only a rough and ready representation of the argument, but it captures the core of it.

I'll call the second argument *the argument from the missing item*. This argument feeds on the quite intuitive thought that it is always possible that we could have missed at least one item. What could prevent such a thing from happening in the face of the overarching number of items that would have to be gathered on such a list? If we were to produce a list of all the items there are, it seems that it would be impossible to be sure that there is not at least *one* single possible states of affairs *missing* from our list, which would, of course, undermine the whole project. It appears that, in order to prevent such a thing from happening, we would have to include something like a clause '... and these are all the items there are.' But now we face the problem of having to prove the correctness of that clause, and how could we achieve that? In a nutshell, the problem is that proving the clause would require having already achieved what the clause was invented for. That is, if we could already prove that we gathered all the items, not only would we have proven the clause (that we did it!), but we wouldn't need the clause anymore in the first place, since its task was precisely to prove that we gathered all the items. But since the worry is that we can't prove that to begin with, we can neither prove the clause nor would the clause be helpful if we could do so.<sup>23</sup> Hence, the argument from the missing item shows that the completeness of the list is left permanently hanging, so to speak.

So the first idea to provide the limits of language does not work. How about the second, then? Here is another way to spell out the process in which we would have to engage. This second idea is to give what Wittgenstein called the

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<sup>23</sup> Thus Bottani (2014, 10) argues that ontology 'cannot be asked for an 'inventory' [...] of what there is, but just for a possibly incomplete and possibly redundant list of ontological commitments.'



‘general form of the proposition,’<sup>24</sup> as the idea is put in the *Tractatus*:

The general form of proposition is the essence of proposition.<sup>25</sup>

To give the essence of proposition means to give the essence of all description, therefore the essence of the world.<sup>26</sup>

What this general form supplies is a formula by which every possible proposition can be generated, and furthermore, given something that looks like a proposition, this formula says if it is a proposition or not; if it exhibits this general form, it is a proposition, and if not, it isn't.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the general form of the proposition would entail everything that can be said, and, consequently, everything that there is. Everything that cannot be said, and thus cannot be something that there is, will be excluded. In this way, the limits of language and the world would be drawn. Now it seems as if the philosophical theory that could establish such a general form of the proposition would achieve the purpose of drawing the limits in question.

It seems that what we would have to do, then, is to somehow *prove* that *IL* has the potential to *generate* any possible structure we might find in any *W*. In this way, what we would *not* have to do is give a list of all the possible states of affairs, and try to show that it is possible to represent them in *IL*. If we had to proceed in this manner, the two arguments above would otherwise immediately resurface.

Thus, to prove that *IL* contains all of the possibilities in *LS*, we would have to give *the most general form GF* of any *L* whatsoever. *GF* would allow us to generate any *E* in *IL* for any given *S*. *GF* would be *IL* if and only if *GF* would entail *LS* as the set in which any *E* is mapped to any *S*.

Therefore, having *GF* would *entail* having the capacity to express all the possibilities that exist. *GF* would provide *IL* because it would be a *complete ac-*

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<sup>24</sup> See *TLP*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *TLP*, 5.471.

<sup>26</sup> *TLP*, 5.4711.

<sup>27</sup> See *TLP*, 4.31, 4.4.

count of *LS*, by ensuring the fit—the one-to-one relation or mapping—between all the possible states of affairs and the expressions matching them.

If we could establish *GF* in this way, one feature that *GF* should definitely have is to be *recursive*. That is, having grasped *GF*, it should follow *immediately* from this how *any* possible application of *GF* should look. This must be secured by having *GF* such that it is the most general form from which one can derive *any E-S* (one-to-one) connection.

Suppose two things. (1) We would indeed appear to arrive at *GF*. But (2) even so, we would nevertheless still feel *as if* there is some ‘rest’ *R* that is excluded by *GF*.<sup>28</sup> In what follows, we’ll focus on the tension between (1) and (2).

### ***The gap between GF and R***

The first thing to say is that, in the face of the tension between *GF* and *R*, what we do not need to do is to revise *GF*. This is for the simple reason that we stipulated that (1) guarantees that *GF* is sound. What we do not want to do either, however, is to repudiate *R*. This is contained in the stipulation of (2). Hence, what we do have to do, it seems, is to find a way to maintain both (1) and (2)—at the same time and in the same possible world, so to speak—*without* having a plain *contradiction* between the claim that we have, on the one hand, found the most general form of expression that enables us to express all of the possible states of affairs in the logical space and, on the other hand, that we still want to say that there is *something* that, necessarily, is *beyond* the limit of (any) possible expression.

Here is one way we could try to make room for having both (1) and (2) at the same time. Consider that in everyday life, in many instances, there is the possibility that we feel dissatisfied with what we have said. We might *feel* that we

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<sup>28</sup> See *TLP*, 6.45: ‘The feeling that the world is a limited whole is the mystical feeling.’ McGinn (1999, 500) claims that Wittgenstein is giving a ‘mythological description’ of the ‘myth of the world’ (see Gabriel 2009, 68-71; 2014b; *OC*, 90 et seq.). In a similar way, Daniel Hutto (Hutto and Lippitt 1998, calls truth tables a ‘mythologising [of] logical objects,’ which is built to reveal the misguiding nature of the symbolism of Russell’s notation, according to which the logical connections correspond to something.

were just not able to make explicit what we *wanted* to say. In other cases, we might *feel* that there is nothing one could say that would capture what one wanted to say (for instance, think of a case in which one is overwhelmed having an intense experience). In those cases, what we might want to do is to say that what we are experiencing *cannot be said* in any *L*, although it could, in principle, be *shown* by the correct application of *IL*.

Take as an example something that cannot be said the match or fit between *E-S*. Any *E* that we could use to express the match would *itself contain*, hence presuppose, having the match. Therefore, it seems *impossible* to express the required match in *IL* (without presupposing it). We would have to build a further hierarchy on *IL*, say *IL\**, to express the match. But this would not solve the problem, since we are now facing an *infinite regress* of unlimited further instances of *IL\**, *IL\*\**, ... . To avoid this regress, we could say that, although the match is not sayable (that is, *cannot be said in IL*), it is clearly *shown* by the correct employment of *IL*, i.e. by the fact that *IL* covers all of *LS*.

Our interlocutor takes this as the basic idea and builds on it. For some members of *LS*, *GF* cannot *say* the required match between *E-S*, but it *can show* what the required match is.

If we go down this road, there is one crucial problem, which we would have to face sooner or later. The problem is that *GF* excludes *way too many* things that we wouldn't have thought to be inexpressible before.<sup>29</sup> So much the worse, what *GF* excludes, among others, is that *GF* itself can be expressed *in GF*. For, everything that is possible to express in *GF* should already be contained in *GF*. But *GF* cannot contain itself. If *GF* were to contain itself, then there would have to be a further *GF\** that would contain all the members of *GF plus GF* itself. But this, again, would lead into an infinite regress. Hence, *GF* is *necessarily in-*

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<sup>29</sup> See Carnap 1959, 76-77. As Carnap notes, it would exclude 'any alleged knowledge that pretends to reach above or behind experience'; 'any speculative metaphysics'; 'any alleged knowledge by *pure thinking* or by *pure intuition*'; 'the kind of metaphysics which, starting from experience, wants to acquire knowledge about that which *transcends experience* by means of special *inferences*'; 'all *philosophy of norms*, or *philosophy of value*'; 'any ethics or esthetics as a normative discipline'; 'movements which are usually called [...] *realism* [...] and its opponents: subject *idealism*, solipsism, phenomenalism, and *positivism*.'

*complete*. The idea that we could model the most general form of expression loses its grip on us.

### ***No GF through IL***

What we have seen, thus far, is that the idea to arrive at *IL*—through the detour of establishing *GF*—fails. In this sense, there can be no formal language as an ideal language, and furthermore no limits of language set by a formal language.

But what about the project we separated from this one earlier on? Does it make sense to establish a formal language in that sense—a formal language that is not supposed to supersede everyday language, but only to make clear those instances of language that are prone to confuse us, i.e. a formal language as a ‘perspicuous notation’?

There are a couple of things to say in favor of such a project. It seems that one can get something out of it that one might want to call a ‘philosophical insight.’

A philosophical insight, as understood here, occurs if presented with—if it makes perspicuous—our *choice* between two kinds of ways in which we could mean something determinate with the words we want to make use of. (It is not limited to two choices, but although there can in principle be more, two is stipulated here for simplicity.) We can decide either way, but if we indeterminately *hover* between these two options, we are not making any sense at all—we have not yet decided on *any* meaning at all.

Taking our model of *GF* as a prime case of this *hovering* between two radically incommensurable claims (1) and (2), the idea of *IL* seems to fall apart, if pushed to decide on either of those claims. Put more drastically, (1) maintains *LIMIT*, while (2) maintains *NOT-LIMIT*. And *IL* is committed to both. The contradiction cannot be circumvented, just overcome.

The philosophical insight, in this case, is that the idea we were trying to make sense of, the idea of a formal language that would be an ideal language to

replace ordinary language is not a *something* at all. As Wittgenstein would probably have said, it's simply *nonsense*—it makes no sense, quite literally.

Wittgenstein, in his later work, assembled a host of material to dissolve misunderstandings that the view that an ideal language is supposed to replace ordinary language evokes. First, Wittgenstein notes that this view is prone to misunderstandings, writing that

the word 'ideal' is liable to mislead, for it sounds as if these languages were better, more perfect, than our everyday language; and as if it took the logician to shew people at last what a proper sentence looked like.<sup>30</sup>

Because of such misunderstandings, Wittgenstein warns that 'we are not striving after an ideal, as if our ordinary vague sentences had not yet got a quite unexceptionable sense, and a perfect language awaited construction by us.'<sup>31</sup> Therefore, according to Wittgenstein, '[t]he task of philosophy is not to create an ideal language, but to clarify the use of existing language.'<sup>32</sup> This is because

[i]t is wrong to say that in philosophy we consider an ideal language as opposed to our ordinary one. For this makes it appear as though we thought we could improve on ordinary language. But ordinary language is all right. Whenever we make up 'ideal languages' it is not in order to replace our ordinary language by them; but just to remove some trouble caused in someone's mind by thinking that he has got hold of the exact use of a common word.<sup>33</sup>

And the same applies to logic, as he writes:

How strange if logic were concerned with an 'ideal' language and not with ours. For what would this ideal language express? Presumably, what we now express in our ordinary language; in that case, this is the language logic must investigate. Or something else: but in that case how would I have any idea what that would be?—Logical analysis is the analysis of something we have, not of something we

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<sup>30</sup> *PI*, 81.

<sup>31</sup> *PI*, 98.

<sup>32</sup> *PG VI*, 72.

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein 1969, 28; cited hereafter as *BB*.

don't have. Therefore it is the analysis of propositions as they stand.<sup>34</sup>

If we come up with a formal language in the second sense—understood as a means to make more perspicuous the choices we have in this process—a formal language would be something that can be employed as a helpful *solution* which makes the *activity* of getting clear on what we want to mean with our words more productive. Apart from being of help in the process of getting clear on what we could mean with our words, however, a formal language has no further role—at least not in the sense of establishing an ideal language. (There might be other helpful uses of a formal language, and nothing that I have written here is primarily meant to exclude that.) However, the problem is that the idea of a formal language as a perspicuous notation is full of unnoticed metaphysical confusions.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it is obvious that in this way the limits of language cannot be established. Thus, both common ways to understand what a formal language is are philosophically unhelpful, and both cannot establish the limits of language. As Conant puts it, ‘we have finished the work, and the work is finished with us, when we are able to *throw* the sentences in the body of the work—sentences about “the limits of language” and the unsayable things that lie beyond them—*away*.’<sup>36</sup> And this drags the distinction between formal and non-formal languages down with it.

## 5.4 The form of the puzzlement

### ***Diamond on ‘You can’t do or say that’***

Diamond brings to our attention a trend in Wittgenstein’s thinking that people have read as *limiting* what you *can* do or say and what you *cannot* do or say, which is what I’m going to call *the ‘You can’t do or say that’ reading of Wittgenstein*.<sup>37</sup> But the *‘You can’t do or say that’ reading of Wittgenstein* is wrong, and it is the ‘idea’ that philosophy has this limiting role which is a philosophical problem that Wittgenstein tries to dissolve *from the inside*—that is, by engaging in

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<sup>34</sup>Wittgenstein 1975a, 3; hereafter cited as *PR*.

<sup>35</sup> See Kuusela (2005, 98).

<sup>36</sup> Conant 2002, 424.

<sup>37</sup> See Diamond 2014.

talking that way, trying to push such talk, and seeing if we can make sense of it if it is pushed.

Let's connect this with what we have said in reference to the talk about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Namely, that it exhibits an argument to the effect that there can or cannot be an ideal language, which is supposed to supersede our everyday ways of talking. We have argued that Wittgenstein deals with these issues, that is, deals with them as philosophical *problems*. This means he brings the reader to the point of analyzing the *form* of the issue, to thinking through the options one sees as those which are the only ones possible, then coming to the point in the dialectic where those options don't make sense anymore, recognizing that one has been working under the illusion of there being something that one could affirm or negate, and finally, recognizing that there is no such thing as a 'something' at all.

In the present case we seem to be forced to decide whether we can have a formal language (conceived as a logically perfect and ideal language) or are stuck with a non-formal language (a language that limits our way of talking because of all the imperfections). But what could it possibly mean to decide on either of those 'options'?

It is not clear what it could possibly mean to make such a decision. That's not to say that we can't feel *as if* we 'could' imagine something along those lines. But what we're going to imagine is nothing we can hold onto. We might get the feeling that our everyday language is limited, and we might get the feeling that we can imagine something that makes sense for us to imagine at this point, but apart from that initial reaction, the question that gets more pressing is what the *limit* to our everyday language more precisely consists of, apart from the 'misunderstanding' that we might get rid of by adopting a formal language.

What we're driving at is that if this question is pressed, it leads to the problematic thought that a formal language can be a *scientific* language, such that all of our everyday talk that is 'nonsensical' according to our current best model of science is excluded by not being expressible at all. So there is a limit

that this scientific language establishes, a limit that has been there before, but a limit that can somehow be ‘violated’ in everyday life. Once a formal language, understood as an ideal language of science, is adopted, the hope is, these violations won’t ever again arise—that they are excluded by it, and everything that cannot be said one must be silent about, or so the conclusion is put. But we’re interested here in what the ‘cannot’ in question is. Before the reformulation of the language we use, there was a ‘something’ we thought was a possibility to get ahold of; now with the reformulation, we conclude that the ‘something’ cannot be said anymore.

But if we cannot get a hold of the ‘something,’ how can we still think that we can negate the possibility of there being a ‘something’ at all? In order to make sensible the thought that there is ‘something’ that we can affirm or negate at this point, it seems to be a (tautological) prerequisite that we can make sense of the ‘something’ at all. What I want to draw attention to is that the thought that there is such a thing as a ‘something’ you *cannot* do or say in language loses its intelligibility if we recognize that for the possibility to say that something cannot be said or done, we would have to have a clear grasp on *that* which is supposed to be impossible. But what’s the status of this thought?

We have been circling around this puzzle for quite a while now, and it’s time to bring that circling to an end. Making explicit the talk that we want to reject would be to say this: It’s nonsense to say that there is something you cannot say. I take that to be in line with Wittgenstein’s aim in his philosophy, and I also take this to be a hard-won achievement and a philosophically interesting insight. Admittedly, we have only done some preliminary work on how one could think about the process of spelling this insight out in full, and what I want to highlight now, relatively close to the end of this chapter, is the thought that the structure that Wittgenstein detects—that we are drawn to the conclusion that there is ‘something’ that we cannot fully grasp or understand or say or do—might be inherent in, and maybe a crucial part of, the *form of philosophical problems*.

***A further example of the problem: Lewis on what ‘cannot’***



## ***be thought***

Let's take a look at an example of what appears to be an instance of the failure to 'throw away the ladder,' as Wittgenstein prompts us to do. It is exhibited by A. W. Moore's paper 'Ineffability and Nonsense,' and, more precisely, manifests when he approvingly cites David Lewis as having an argument for the conclusion that 'there are inexpressible truths.'<sup>38</sup>

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Moore and Lewis indeed have access to such an argument. What we would be interested in, then, is the (final) conclusion Lewis wants to draw. He puts it this way:

I suggest that an unthinkable content is one that can never be correctly assigned [...]. If so, you just cannot think a thought with *that* [unthinkable] content. Being smart wouldn't help. Maybe you are already smart enough to make the unfavoured content fitting; it still isn't right.<sup>39</sup>

Let's highlight the part of this quote where the tension that we're struggling with gets most explicit. It is embedded in Lewis saying that 'you just cannot think a thought with *that* [unthinkable] content.' I think this leads to the question 'What is the *that*?' And the problem is that Lewis doesn't push the answer to that question far enough. The answer that Lewis appears to give is something along these lines: 'The "that" in question is some content *X* that is unthinkable.' But how can we say of this content *X* that it is unthinkable? How could we know that this content is unthinkable if we cannot think it? What could it possibly mean to say this?

Let's see if there is any room to get out of this mess. It seems that, in order to be able to say anything at all here, we would first have to have access to the 'content' which we then want to say that is unthinkable. But in order to have access to the content—say we grasp, understand, comprehend, or apprehend 'it,' or whatever the preferred terminology is—we seem to have *already thought* the content. This would, however, lead to the conclusion that the unthinkable con-

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<sup>38</sup> A. W. Moore 2003, 169.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis 1996, 108.

tent we're looking for is indeed *thinkable*. Hence, Lewis's sentence (his conclusion) would be false. But if Lewis's sentence is false, then the following sentence (the negation of Lewis's original sentence) would be true: 'You can think a thought with an unthinkable content.' Embedded in this sentence, however, is a clear contradiction. A thought is *either* thinkable, *or* not a thought at all. It doesn't make sense to predicate of something both that it is a thought and that it is unthinkable. (Maybe there is an occasion of use for saying that a thought is unthinkable, but in the sense in which we're considering this proposition here, it doesn't have such a use.) We're back to the nonsense predicament.

What then of Lewis's 'conclusion'? Is there or isn't there this apparently 'unthinkable content'? But is it really clear how to understand that question, or is it even clear that it is a question well put? It surely has the *appearance* of a question; but, then again, not everything that has the appearance of a question is a question—an insight that Wittgenstein already formulates early on in his philosophical development.<sup>40</sup>

Wittgenstein's thought is that, in order for something to be a question at all, it is a requirement that it is possible to answer it. But how could we possibly give an answer to the question if there is or isn't unthinkable content? It seems that, either way, if we affirm or deny that question, we are left with puzzlement. The question is formulated such that, if we affirm *or* deny it, in either way, we already have acknowledged the 'existence' or 'non-existence' of unthinkable content. But if we have done that, we have also already acknowledged that we can, in some sense, pick out that 'something' that is supposed to be unthinkable—which is contradictory.

I think that the recognition that we have arrived at a contradiction is not the final step in the dialectic, however. What I think is going on here is that we *hover* indeterminately between two meanings of the word 'unthinkable.' On the one hand, we want to say that *that* which is supposed to be unthinkable *really* is unthinkable—we cannot make sense of it, we literally cannot think it—and, on

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<sup>40</sup> See *TLP*, 6.5.

the other hand, we still want to hold onto specifying what the ‘it’ is that is ‘un-thinkable’—we still want to make sense of ‘it,’ we still want to have ‘thinkable’ thoughts that involve the ‘unthinkable.’ Put this way, it is unclear what ‘it’ is that we are imagining ourselves to think or mean at this point. We haven’t yet decided for any determinate meaning at all—what we are uttering is ‘simply nonsense.’<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, it is doubtful that the ‘conclusion,’ which Lewis thinks he is in a position to draw, is the final step in the dissolution of the philosophical problem under consideration (that of apparently unthinkable thoughts). It’s rather the point where the tension is most explicit. To get rid of the tension, however, we would have to recognize that the talk about unthinkable content makes no sense—and to recognize this is an integral part of understanding Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Moore cannot assert on Lewis’s authority that there is inexpressible content.

What this shows for the discussion of formal and non-formal languages is that there is not ‘something’ that is lacking in ordinary non-formal language, for which we have to try to compensate by building theories of formal/ideal languages: the language we already have is sufficient for the expression of thought (although a formal language as a classificatory tool may be sometimes helpful).

### ***The puzzlement dissolved***

We have worked with a specific kind of model—to which some philosophers are attracted when distinguishing between formal and non-formal languages—in order to elucidate what the grammar of the distinction between formal and non-formal languages is. We argued that this model cannot fulfill the work it’s supposed to do, but that thinking this model through nevertheless leads to a kind of philosophical insight. However, these insights are fundamentally different from those that philosophers usually claim to have when talking about formal and ideal languages—these insights are mere illusions. Wittgenstein—at the very end

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<sup>41</sup> See *TLP*, preface, 5.4733.

<sup>42</sup> See *TLP*, 3.03-3.032, 5.4731, 6.54.

of the dialectic strategy in the *Tractatus*—said that we're led to a *new perspective*, advancing our understanding beyond moments of philosophical puzzlement. Having such puzzlement is not something that we get rid of easily, and it's not something that would not demand to be dissolved.

Hence, it is an important process to engage with philosophical puzzles in the above manner, with the sole reason to get a clear understanding of the *form* of these puzzles, how they *get a grip* on us, and finally how *not to answer* them—there cannot be said anything at all at that point anyways—but to make their attractiveness for us disappear completely.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter argued that philosophical theories that attempt to draw the limits of language fail, because they run into the nonsense predicament.

Throughout this chapter, it seems that we have relied upon sentences that we later have wanted to say are simply nonsense. We have seemed to put forward arguments containing at least some nonsensical sentences. But if we did that, we would be caught up in the nonsense predicament. And that is something we are at pains to avoid. Wittgenstein's solution was to reject that what we do in such moments is the presenting of arguments, but rather, that we are taking part in an activity of elucidation. But is that enough to avoid the nonsense fallacy? In the next chapter, we'll investigate this question further, when we turn to another example of an apparent argument from nonsense.

## 6. Is Skepticism Nonsense?

### 6.1 Introduction

Early in his notebooks (May 1st, 1915, to be precise), Wittgenstein wrote that skepticism is ‘nonsense’—a remark that was eventually also published in the *Tractatus*.<sup>1</sup> He seems to be giving the skeleton of an argument for that conclusion. But is he giving an argument from nonsense? Given the extreme brevity of his remark, this is a point difficult to evaluate. It is the task of this chapter to deal with that question nonetheless.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this chapter is to show that the remark from the notebooks/*Tractatus* can be illuminated by considering it alongside remarks from Wittgenstein’s later writings, such as the *Investigations* and *On Certainty*.<sup>3</sup> As this chapter proceeds in this manner, it spells out the argument as built up on a semantic elucidation (the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense) about claims to know and our capacities to raise questions and doubts. According to this elucidation, we fail to make sense if we have not given a meaning to some of the constituents of a particular sentence. In discussions of skepticism, Wittgenstein argues, the skeptic *fails* to determine a meaning for the epistemological and skeptical concepts with which she wants to make her case against the things we know. A historical background (early Russell) for Wittgenstein’s argument is provided.

Section 6.2 first considers Moyal-Sharrock’s reading of *On Certainty*, and

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<sup>1</sup> *NB*, 44; *TLP*, 6.51. Note that I take it to be a fairly uncontroversial claim that there are varieties of skepticism (Conant 2012). The term ‘skepticism’ is used with more than one meaning in philosophy. For instance, (i) a critical inquiry; (ii) a thesis about the limitations of knowledge; (iii) a method of systematic doubt by which safe and certain knowledge is thought to be arrived at; (iv) the arbitrariness, relativity, or subjectivity of concepts; and (v) a method of intellectual wariness and refusal of judgment. Different varieties of skepticism are also distinguished in regard to historical figures, and the variety of skepticism associated with them. For instance, (i) Pyrrhonian Skepticism, (ii) Humean Skepticism, (iii) Cartesian Skepticism, and (iv) Kantian Skepticism. (See Conant 2005, 2012). Following Conant’s terminology, this chapter reads Wittgenstein as primarily dealing with the ‘Cartesian’ and ‘Kantian’ varieties.

<sup>2</sup> The task of this chapter, therefore, is not to determine what the problem of skepticism is—others have already executed that task (Conant 2012; Williams 1999). The task of this chapter is also not to give an overview or introduction to the current literature on the problem of skepticism. For such an account, see Gabriel (2014a, 2014b, 2009, 2008) and Williams (2001).

<sup>3</sup> This, however, is not to say that there are only continuities between Wittgenstein’s writings (see Conant 2008).

then introduces Wittgenstein's remark from the *Tractatus*. In short, the remark says that skepticism attempts to doubt where nothing can be said, and hence leads to nonsense, if one attempts to say something nevertheless. This appears to be an argument from nonsense. However, it might be the case that Wittgenstein believes otherwise. He doesn't say much more about it, and because of the abstract formulation of the remark, one has more or less to speculate what either the argument or his alternative could look like if spelled out. Section 6.3 notes two initial caveats that any attempt to spell out his remark has to face. Section 6.4 takes on the difficult task of developing the remark further. Ultimately, however, it is argued that Wittgenstein's remark cannot escape the nonsense paradox, if it is understood to be an argument from nonsense. The conclusion again is that insisting on the argument leads to the nonsense fallacy, and hence, to the nonsense predicament. The only other option would be the conclusion of the Tractarian solution: the two-step from elucidation to silence.

## **6.2 Wittgenstein's remark: From *On Certainty* to the *Tractatus*?**

Before I begin to develop my own reading of the remark on skepticism from the *Tractatus*, let me sketch the exegetical methodology in this chapter. James Conant and Rupert Read have both argued (and successfully shown too, in my view) that certain readings of *On Certainty* (and the *Investigations*) tend to exhibit the same flaws as some readings of the *Tractatus*.<sup>4</sup>

Moyal-Sharrock's reading of *On Certainty* is, in my opinion, an example of such a reading: it leads to the same problems as the Fregean reading of the *Trac-*

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<sup>4</sup> Conant 1998, 2004; Read 2005. Conant (2004, 168) has argued that there are 'central exegetical assumptions common to certain standard readings of Wittgenstein's writings at three different stages of his career: the *Tractatus*, the [...] *Philosophical Investigations*, and *On Certainty*' and furthermore that 'there is reason to think that the philosophical assumptions thus standardly attributed to Wittgenstein are already under indictment in the *Tractatus*, and [...] there is also reason to think that this indictment is still in force in *Philosophical Investigations* and in *On Certainty*.' In the recent anthology *Readings of Wittgenstein's 'On Certainty'*, the editors distinguish between four readings: the 'framework reading' (Stroll, Williams, Schulte, Moyal-Sharrock); the 'transcendental reading' (Mounce, Brenner, Rudd); the 'epistemic reading' (Morawetz, Pritchard, Kober); and the 'therapeutic reading' (Minar, Crary, Read) (see Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner 2005, 1-15). I cannot discuss all these different readings and the differences between them, since that would require a dissertation on its own.

*tatus*, because she reads (DI) and (DSS) into *On Certainty*.<sup>5</sup> But I hope to have shown in earlier chapters that a reading that depends on these doctrines is seriously flawed, and ‘quite unsatisfactory.’<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, I hope to have shown how the reading of the *Tractatus* proposed in this thesis is meant to overcome those problems, and therefore I also propose this alternative reading for the remark from the *Tractatus* and for the remarks from *On Certainty* to be discussed in this chapter. The thrust of this chapter is that the resulting reading of these remarks from quite different stages in Wittgenstein’s philosophy benefits from this approach.

Moyal-Sharrock’s interpretation is counted among the ‘framework readings,’ or alternatively called a ‘hinge epistemology.’<sup>7</sup> The main parts of her reading are as follows. First, she holds that grammatical rules cannot be said (DSS), they are ‘ineffable’ (DI) and ‘nonsensical’ (argument from nonsense).<sup>8</sup> And second, that grammatical rules have this structure because they ‘stand outside the bounds of sense’<sup>9</sup> since they ‘have transgressed the bounds of sense into nonsense’<sup>10</sup>—what I called the boundary model.

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<sup>5</sup> Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 46, 89-90, 94, 97, 168, 170 and *passim*. Tracing the flaws in McGinn’s reading of *On Certainty* in particular, Conant (1998) has also shown the flaws of the ‘framework reading’ in general (of which McGinn’s reading is an example).

<sup>6</sup> See Priest 1995, 210-211: ‘One might, I suppose, try to harness the distinction between saying and showing at this point, by claiming that someone who understands the *Tractatus* understands what its statements show, not what they say. This, however, is quite unsatisfactory.’ Priest’s solution (211; my emphases) is to reject the notion of ‘ineffability’ at this point: ‘Naturally, if p were some ineffable proposition, and I knew what it was, I could hardly tell you. But that is not the situation. I literally have no idea as to what should fill the gap if it is an ineffable proposition. And neither, as far as I know, has anyone else. But of course, we know what must fill the gap: a quite effable proposition. We have seen that it is quite possible to state what can be shown. In this chapter I have said many such things myself, and [...] we saw Wittgenstein doing exactly the same.’

<sup>7</sup> Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner 2005, 1-15; Moyal-Sharrock and Coliva 2014. Similarly, Duncan Pritchard (2006, 301-304; my emphases) also seems to hold that hinges cannot be (properly) asserted: ‘Moore *cannot properly make* the assertions [i.e. hinges] he does, even when what he asserts is true [...] I suggest [...] an account of why such Moorean assertions are inappropriate even though true,’ that we ‘can both regard perceptual knowledge in certain cases as conclusively supported by reflectively accessible grounds on the one hand, and yet *not properly assertible* on the other,’ and that ‘in the good case at least, what Moore says is entirely true while at the same time conceding that what Moore says *cannot be properly said*.’ And elsewhere, Pritchard (2011, 528) writes ‘[t]hat I have two hands is clearly a hinge proposition for Wittgenstein, which is why Moore cannot properly claim to know it.’ Crispin Wright’s (2004a, 2004b) terminology for hinges is ‘Wittgensteinian certainties.’

<sup>8</sup> Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 46, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 90, see 94, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 170.

Thus, we see that Moyal-Sharrock's reading exhibits the same features I have been combating for the bulk of the preceding chapters. Given the criticism given in these chapters, it is clear that the preferable reading of Wittgenstein's remark from the *Tractatus* must be an alternative reading, in line with the Tractarian solution.

### ***Wittgenstein's remark from the 'Tractatus'***

Wittgenstein's remark that skepticism is nonsense occurs in the *Tractatus*, in the context of a train of thought that begins thus:

For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. *The riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered.<sup>11</sup>

And Wittgenstein continues this thought. He writes:

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*.<sup>12</sup>

The basic thought in Wittgenstein's remark that skepticism is nonsense is that skepticism attempts to doubt where no questions can be raised. This thought is based on the further thought that a question can only be asked where an answer can be given—i.e. for a question to be a question at all, it must be possible to give an answer to the question.<sup>13</sup> And, as Wittgenstein duly notes, this can only be where something can be said.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *TLP*, 6.5.

<sup>12</sup> *TLP*, 6.51. I take it that the hardest part of Wittgenstein's thought is not only that skepticism is nonsense, but that it is *obvious* nonsense, since it hasn't been obvious at all that skepticism is nonsense. I read Wittgenstein here as saying that after having successfully understood his Tractarian solution, skepticism will become obviously nonsensical. It is only the latter and not the former sense of skepticism that is obviously nonsense.

<sup>13</sup> To a certain degree, this structure is shared between Wittgenstein's treatment of the problem of skepticism and the problem of ethics. (For an account of the latter, see Dain 2008.)

<sup>14</sup> At one point, early Wittgenstein identifies the doctrine of saying-showing as the main problem that he is occupied with in the *Tractatus*. But this does not mean that he wants to repair and embrace it, but rather that he wants to dissolve it. It should be noted that a relocation of what



First of all, who is Wittgenstein's target when he writes that skepticism is not irrefutable? It seems that both (early) G. E. Moore and (early) Russell put forward a view according to which there is at least a form of skepticism that is irrefutable.

### ***Early Moore and early Russell on skepticism***

The aim of this chapter, as I said at the beginning, is to unpack early Wittgenstein's highly condensed argument against skepticism. Roughly, according to the reading of it that I'll propose in the light of the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense, it says that in discussions about skepticism there is a failure to give a determinate meaning to the epistemological concepts (viz. to know, to be certain, to be sure) and skeptical concepts (viz. to doubt, to raise questions, to challenge) employed in those sentences that are supposed to be employed in the attempt to raise doubts about our knowledge.<sup>15</sup> To unpack the argument, however, it is a prerequisite to engage in a short historical exercise, that is, to sketch early Moore and early Russell's views on what he took be the most threatening form of skepticism. As Diamond has put it, '[i]n this case, the reader whom Wittgenstein had primarily in mind was Russell.'<sup>16</sup> This is the task of this section, before the discussion can proceed to Wittgenstein's thoughts on language, and his emphasis on context and use,<sup>17</sup> in order to, finally, spell out early Wittgenstein's argument against skepticism.<sup>18</sup>

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skepticism cannot say, to a realm of what can be shown, is only a postponement of the problem, no (dis)solution of the problem (see Conant 2004b). The form of the problem, to declare something as impossible, which first must be defined, which is therefore presupposed and cannot be impossible, remains the same even after the relocation (see *PI*, 374). The question that encapsulates this problem is this: what is *it* that is supposed to be impossible? If *it* is something, then *it* isn't impossible. Is there no *it* at all, there is nothing we can say of that *it* is impossible.

<sup>15</sup> I.e. according to this conception, sense is constituted by the subject's determination of meaning dependent on context and actual use, and it makes no sense if the subject's determination fails. Wittgenstein's emphasis on use and context is embedded in this elucidation: 'In philosophy the question, "What do we actually use this word or this proposition for?" repeatedly leads to valuable insights' (*TLP*, 6.211).

<sup>16</sup> Diamond 2014, 165n40.

<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein on 'context': *TLP*, 3.3, 4.23. Wittgenstein on 'use' (*Gebrauch*): *TLP*, 3.325–3.328, 4.013, 4.123, 4.1272, 4.241, 6.1202, 6.211.

<sup>18</sup> I also believe that contemporary debates about skepticism could gain insight from taking Wittgenstein's argument into account. And Wittgenstein's argument can profit from some back-

Skepticism, for Russell, must be distinguished into two kinds: first, absolute, complete, universal, or global skepticism, and second, the skepticism associated with, and invoked by, Descartes' method of doubt.<sup>19</sup> The former, Russell thinks, is crazy, but irrefutable. The latter, he believes, is of the utmost importance for philosophy, and indeed, at times, Russell identifies the latter as *the* method of philosophy.<sup>20</sup> I won't comment on this latter part of Russell's account, but I'll focus on the former. Russell holds that skepticism has, in a certain sense, a kind of irrefutability—'*scepticism can never be refuted*'—since the skeptic demands the impossible:

If we adopt the attitude of the complete sceptic, placing ourselves wholly outside all knowledge, and asking, from this outside position, to be compelled to return within the circle of knowledge, we are demanding what is impossible, and our *scepticism can never be refuted*. [...] Against this absolute scepticism, no *logical* argument can be advanced.<sup>21</sup>

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ground in contemporary debates in order to be fully comprehensible. Since the argument is highly condensed, considering helpful examples or strategies might provide a broader picture in which Wittgenstein's argument can be situated. Having said that, let me add that I am aware that the difficult interplay between a historical and ahistorical approach might have some caveats too. For instance, the worst thing that can happen is that neither commentators working in a historical vein nor philosophers working on contemporary issues about skeptical scenarios in epistemology would be interested in this project. For a collection of essays that are united through a subscription to the goal of treating the *Tractatus* as a work in the history of philosophy, see the collection by Sullivan and Potter (2013). In the introduction, they write that '[t]he volume contributes to the trend [...] of engaging with the writings of the early analytic philosophers as texts in the history of philosophy, rather than as slightly outmoded contributions to contemporary debates' (2). Therefore, commentators who take this approach might be suspicious and critical about my approach, though I would distinguish between an approach according to which works in so-called early analytic philosophy are contributions to contemporary debates (which I think is arguably a bad understanding of these works), and an approach which attempts to carve out a point that is of systematic relevance for contemporary debates, because it might not be found elsewhere than in the writings of, say, Wittgenstein. I take myself to be more interested in the latter project. But, there are examples that have attempted to do such a tightrope walk, and, arguably, many of them have succeeded in their attempts to make a contribution, however controversial, to both questions about individual works now counted as historical artifacts, as well as to issues relevant for contemporary debates. Though these attempts usually cause huge controversies. For instance, see the immense literature on Kripke's (1982) reading of Wittgenstein on rules, and the recent excitement about Paul Horwich's (2012) attempt to schematize later Wittgenstein's philosophical method. Attempts to make a point that can only be found in the writings of Wittgenstein available for discussion in contemporary debates is a risky business.

<sup>19</sup> Russell 1912, chap. 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> Russell 1912, chap. 1, 2, 14, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Russell 1912, 234.

The power of skepticism is to deprive us of any knowledge, and the irrefutability of doubt: '[it] may be that the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and that we alone exist. This is an uncomfortable possibility' and 'it cannot be strictly proved to be false.'<sup>22</sup> And he holds that everything we believe might be false: 'It is of course possible that all or any of our beliefs may be mistaken.'<sup>23</sup> And elsewhere he says that '[u]niversal skepticism' is 'logically *irrefutable*.'<sup>24</sup>

Moore, too, distinguishes between *local* and *global* skepticism, where global skepticism is the thesis that we cannot know anything at all, or do not absolutely know anything to be true or false. He argues that idealism and agnosticism are superstitions, and he claims that 'absolute skepticism' is a 'reasonable alternative' to these superstitions.<sup>25</sup> According to Moore, *global skepticism (understood as the thesis that we cannot know anything at all) is impossible to prove wrong*:

As regards the last two views, it may perhaps be thought that they are too absurd to deserve any serious consideration. It is, in fact, absurd to suggest that I do not know any external facts whatever; that I do not know, for instance, even that there are any men beside myself. [...] But in fact, it by no means follows that [...] that view is false [...]. What arguments, then, are there for or against the extreme view that no man can know any external fact whatever; and the still more extreme view that *no man can know any matter of fact whatever* [...]? [...] *It seems to me that such a position must, in a certain sense, be quite incapable of disproof*. So much must be granted to any sceptic who feels inclined to hold it.<sup>26</sup>

It is quite possible at least that, when Wittgenstein rebels against the alleged irrefutability of skepticism, he targets such trends in Moore's and Russell's writings, and, furthermore, that the kind of skepticism that Wittgenstein targets is one along the lines of Moore's and Russell's absolute, global, or universal skepticism, a skepticism that claims that we cannot know anything at all.

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<sup>22</sup> Russell 1912, 27.

<sup>23</sup> Russell 1912, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Russell 1914, 67; emphasis mine, see 71.

<sup>25</sup> G. E. Moore 1903.

<sup>26</sup> G. E. Moore 1922, 157–159; emphases mine.

## ***A question that has no answer***

It should be clear that Wittgenstein, speaking of questions that cannot be answered, does not have in mind the kind of questions that are, for an individual or a whole community, not answerable due to shortcomings in our resources or our capacities at a specific time. Questions of this kind may seem to be unanswerable, but they might be answerable in principle—they might not exclude an answer *per se*. Their conditions might be such that it could be possible to answer them. In this sense, the question ‘Is it possible to fly to the moon?’, both for an individual and a community, may be unanswerable at a given time, but it is far from excluded that this question might be given a definite answer, once the methods needed to give such an answer (one that satisfies us) are developed. In any case, a question of the form ‘Is it possible to fly to a particular moon *X*?’ might be answerable in principle (even if it might demand a lot of effort and skill to find the correct answer to this question).

Skepticism, Wittgenstein however diagnoses, attempts to be *irrefutable* by raising doubts where no answer can *in principle* be given, where it is impossible to find something that we would call, and that we could understand as, an answer—where nothing can be said at all, ‘where the expression of doubt would be unintelligible.’<sup>27</sup>

Wittgenstein describes such ‘questions’ thusly, in one of his early notebooks from the year 1914:

Up to now I have always regarded such questions as the real philosophical ones: and so for sure they are in some sense—but once more what evidence could settle a question of this sort at all? Is there not a mistake in formulation here, for it looks as if *nothing at all* were self-evident to me on this question; it looks as if I could say definitively that these questions could never be settled at all.<sup>28</sup>

And later, in a remark that was posthumously published, he comes back to this thought and elaborates:

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<sup>27</sup> *OC*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> *NB*, 3, 3.9.14.

I said: Where you can't look for an answer, you can't ask either, and that means: Where there's no logical method for finding a solution, the question doesn't make sense either. Only where there's a method of solution is there a problem (of course that doesn't mean 'Only when the solution has been found is there a problem'). That is, where we can only expect the solution from some sort of revelation, there isn't even a problem. A revelation doesn't correspond to any question.<sup>29</sup>

The difficulty with such 'questions' is that although it may *look otherwise* they have to be recognized as questions that are not questions at all—they do not pick out any meaningful questions, they only share the same phenomenal structure with questions proper; that is, in the language of the author of the *Tractatus*, they share with genuine questions that they consist of recognizable *signs*, but what they do not share with genuine questions is being a *symbol* proper, that is, a sign which has been given a determinate meaning in use.<sup>30</sup>

Skepticism, accordingly, attempts to carefully construct a skeptical question (what seems to be a question, anyway) such that it is *impossible* to answer it, since only in this way could skepticism be irrefutable.<sup>31</sup> Since no answer can be found, the doubt that skepticism raises stays firmly in place—as long as we do not recognize the 'decisive movement in the conjuring trick [...] the very one that we thought quite innocent.'<sup>32</sup> And the conjuring trick of skepticism is that the apparent doubt that skepticism attempts to raise, Wittgenstein suspects, is only the *illusion of a doubt*.

### ***Skepticism allows for no answer***

Wittgenstein remarks that skepticism is nonsense, because skepticism attempts to raise doubts where no answer can be given: '[t]he question [...] is nonsensical. For no proposition can answer such a question.'<sup>33</sup> The '*cannot*' be given in question here is one of *logical possibility*.

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<sup>29</sup> *PR*, 172.

<sup>30</sup> *TLP*, 3.31, 3.32–3.327, 5.4733.

<sup>31</sup> Another feature is that neither such a 'question' nor an 'answer' to it touch our everyday lives.

<sup>32</sup> *PI*, 308.

<sup>33</sup> *TLP*, 4.1274. 'With this question you are already going round in a circle' (*OC*, 191).

There is no logical possibility for a question to be such that no answer can be given. This is not a question at all. A question presupposes the possibility of its being answerable. It must be possible to say something at that point where an answer is expected to be given.<sup>34</sup> Thus there is no way of answering the question, and what seemed to be a question ceases entirely to be a question. And skepticism instead depends on putting forward what seems to be a question (something that has the *form* of a question) that could be answerable, but which cannot be answered.

When Wittgenstein detects that what seems to be a question is not a question at all, and that skepticism therefore attempts to raise a question at a point where no questions can be asked, he means that raising a question, insofar as skepticism seeks to do so, is not even a possibility. As he puts it later in *On Certainty*, “There are cases where doubt is unreasonable, but others where it seems logically impossible. And there seems to be no clear boundary between them.”<sup>35</sup> Needless to say, skepticism attempts to raise (what seems to be) a question of the latter category, that is, one that is (logically) impossible. It is impossible to raise doubts, where no question can be asked, no answer be given, and where nothing can be said.

### 6.3 Two caveats

If we take Wittgenstein at his word when he says that skepticism is nonsense, it follows that we have to recognize much of what we thought to raise serious doubts—although we were pretty sure that these doubts were meaningful—to be *actually* nonsensical.

From what Wittgenstein says elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, we can infer that it should not be the case that he wants to show that, although we have to revise our earlier self-understanding regarding those sentences we are inclined to utter in discussions of skepticism (those sentences which we have to come to recognize as nonsense), when we give up on those sentences we failed to make

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<sup>34</sup> See *OC*, 574.

<sup>35</sup> *OC*, 454.

sense with, we can (or should) hold onto those sentences somehow or other.<sup>36</sup>

Instead, if we come to understand that skepticism is nonsense—in the manner nonsense is understood in the *Tractatus*, that is, as a failure to make sense—we have to recognize that skepticism is ‘*simply* nonsense.’<sup>37</sup> That is to say, Wittgenstein does not think that we have to give up on anything *substantial* if we recognize this.<sup>38</sup> As he puts this, we have to *throw away* the ‘ladder’—Wittgenstein’s metaphor, at the time he finished his early book, to point this out—and that means *completely* away.<sup>39</sup>

There appear to be two caveats right from the beginning. These caveats seem to follow quite naturally when one writes about one of Wittgenstein’s frequent charges that something is nonsense.<sup>40</sup> Writing about Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense, the first caveat has it, itself *presupposes* that skepticism is more than mere or simply or plain nonsense, that it is, in a queer sense, *substantial*—that there is a strange way in which it still has a sense, albeit it is one that does not make sense.<sup>41</sup> Otherwise why would we care to discuss it? We’ll come back to this caveat at a later point in this chapter, but for now, let’s just note that in principle there doesn’t have to be tension if one *treats* something as a *problem*, although, and precisely because, one believes it to be simply nonsense—especially if it is to overcome the view, as it is in the case of skepticism, that it is in fact not nonsensical.<sup>42</sup> The treatment, however, precisely requires that one proceed *as if* it were meaningful, which is an essential part of Wittgenstein’s elucidatory purpose in the Tractarian solution.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This much should be clear from my discussion in the thesis’s first chapter of *TLP*, 6.54.

<sup>37</sup> *TLP*, preface; my emphasis. See 6.51.

<sup>38</sup> *TLP*, 4.003.

<sup>39</sup> *TLP*, 6.54; see Diamond 1991.

<sup>40</sup> It is not ‘something’ that is deemed to be nonsense, a fact that I will discuss later in this chapter. But at the transitional stage we are facing now, there is no better alternative than to say that ‘something is nonsense.’

<sup>41</sup> As a matter of fact, this is quite often the initial reaction.

<sup>42</sup> I argued in earlier chapters that it does not lead to incoherence if one wants to supply the reader, as Wittgenstein does, with a ladder that is constructed such that, although each rung of the ladder can be ascended only if one recognizes it to be nonsense, the rungs have the (psychological) effect that, before that, one believes that they are meaningful. In this manner, one is led from latent to patent nonsense (see *PI*, 464, 524).

<sup>43</sup> See Diamond 1991, 2002.

The second caveat that one might want to note already at this point against Wittgenstein's remark that skepticism is nonsense is that this remark is *itself* skeptical, and therefore nonsensical.<sup>44</sup> It is an essential part of Wittgenstein's treatment to dissolve philosophical problems, like philosophical skepticism, the way he does, that there is a self-undermining structure to be found in his remarks, but not because the thought that skepticism is nonsense is itself skeptical. Skepticism, dissolved in this manner, loses its appeal for us as something substantial; according to Wittgenstein, we have to appreciate that 'the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all,' so that '[t]he solution of the problem [...] is seen in the vanishing of the problem.'<sup>45</sup> If we throw away the ladder, there remains nothing that we miss. We have to overcome Wittgenstein's sentences—the ones that elucidate—to see the world rightly.<sup>46</sup> According to McGinn, Wittgenstein's elucidations should help us recognize a certain 'order' in language, and a 'picture' should enable us to dissolve confusions about logic and the relation between language and world.<sup>47</sup> Again, there would already be much to say about the—apparent or not—self-undermining structure of Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophical problems at this early point, but, for the sake of argument, let's leave that for a later time.

Note also that there is a deep contrast between the common understanding of how a proper reaction to philosophical skepticism should look and Wittgenstein's reaction to it. Wittgenstein's way to make us recognize that skepticism is nonsense differs to a large extent from the usual procedure to cope with the 'threat' of skepticism. It is often assumed that skepticism is either an argument,<sup>48</sup> hypothesis,<sup>49</sup> thesis,<sup>50</sup> theory,<sup>51</sup> scenario,<sup>52</sup> or position<sup>53</sup> that one at-

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<sup>44</sup> See Putnam 2006.

<sup>45</sup> *TLP*, 4.003, 6.521.

<sup>46</sup> *TLP*, 6.54.

<sup>47</sup> McGinn 1999, 505, 507. McGinn here targets traditional readers like Anthony Kenny, for whom the relation between language and world has the status of Wittgenstein's 'lifelong main problem,' which Wittgenstein is further said to have attempted to solve with his invention of the 'picture-theory' (Kenny 1974, 15).

<sup>48</sup> Brueckner 1994; Dodd 2012.

<sup>49</sup> DeRose 1999, 1; Kripke 1982, 8 and passim; Dodd 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Hazlett 2014, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Stone 2000.

<sup>52</sup> Dodd 2012.



tempts to show is *false* by countering it with a philosophical, ‘anti-skeptical,’ *theory*.<sup>54</sup> Thus in their replies to the skeptic, philosophers usually try to refute the skeptic by showing that her argument is flawed—where skepticism claims, or argues, that *p*, it is attempted to put forward a *theory* that proves that not-*p*.<sup>55</sup> As should be obvious from the discussion in the preceding chapters, Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense is fundamentally opposed to such a ‘treatment,’ since his aim is not to put forward philosophical theories at all, but rather to dissolve the problems in the first place. Wittgenstein’s argument, as it will emerge, leads us to the conclusion that what we *took to be* an argument only *looked like* an argument—it *reminded us* only of an argument, because it has the *form of* arguments we often employ in other areas.

To show exactly how Wittgenstein’s treatment differs is one of the aims of this chapter, and the difference should get clearer as we go along, when we think through Wittgenstein’s remark.<sup>56</sup>

One of the features of Wittgenstein’s treatment that I want to note up-front is that it would be insufficient to object to skepticism by simply stating that ‘skepticism is nonsense.’<sup>57</sup> It is a necessary feature of his idea of a ‘dissolution’ of

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<sup>53</sup> Greco 2011, 3-4.

<sup>54</sup> Williams 1996, 36 and *passim*. Note that this chapter cannot do justice to the vast literature on this topic, since its aim is to deal with Wittgenstein’s remark on skepticism in the *Tractatus*. However, as I’ll show in the section ‘A skeptical scenario,’ Wittgenstein’s treatment is still on point in contemporary debates in epistemology, since many philosophers hold that skepticism is the view that we cannot know anything at all (see Unger 1971, 1975; Stroud 1984, 1989, 2009; Bett 2010; Lewis 1996; Stine 1976).

<sup>55</sup> A paradigmatic case is James Pryor’s (2000) defense of dogmatism.

<sup>56</sup> My principal aim is not to defend Wittgenstein’s argument as part of the Tractarian solution, because it is already a difficult task to present the argument. So part of the aim of this chapter is, first of all, to make that argument accessible at all, and show some of the interest one might have in it. I do think that the argument can be made valuably against the skeptic. And I further think that one should at least be open about the possibility of making this kind of move, and I think that we’ll have to see if the argument can convince philosophers. I take it as a crucial criterion of whether an anti-skeptical argument has any worth that it should have the ‘power to resolve doubt,’ an issue that is often discussed in contemporary epistemology. The thought is that, if an anti-skeptical argument cannot convince someone who might be held captive by the riddle of skepticism, the argument cannot resolve his doubt, and if it cannot do that, it lacks some characteristic that any *successful* anti-skeptical argument should have. Here one might worry that Wittgenstein’s arguments might lack this capacity, and it is a crucial task in what follows to present the argument such that it (or at least that it is probable that it) possesses this capacity.

<sup>57</sup> *OC*, 37. ‘But is it an adequate answer to the s[k]epticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that “There are physical objects” is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to

philosophical problems, like skepticism, that one has to take part in the activity of elucidation, as he envisages it in the *Tractatus*, or to undergo a series of remarks assembled for this purpose, as he prefers to call this process in the *Investigations*.<sup>58</sup> In order to loosen our ‘mental cramps,’ as he puts it in the *Blue Book*, undergoing this process is required to dispel the illusion that skepticism has succeeded in expressing something that could be true or false, and furthermore to see that skepticism is nonsense because it has not expressed anything at all.<sup>59</sup>

### ***The remark on skepticism in context***

One last preliminary. Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense appears as early as 1915, in one of his notebooks, which is incorporated into the *Tractatus* as proposition 6.51; in both places, Wittgenstein says that skepticism is ‘*not* irrefutable, but *obvious nonsense*.’<sup>60</sup> It follows that those sentences that we used to believe to be expressions of skepticism either do not express skepticism, or else they are nonsense, that is, not propositions at all.<sup>61</sup> Wittgenstein’s basic thought (for his treatment of skepticism) that skepticism is nonsense, as he states it in the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus*, still remains intact in *On Certainty*.<sup>62</sup> But there is a misunderstanding of this thought that easily arises, especially if it is not seen in connection with Wittgenstein’s vision of philosophy, as he describes it in the *Tractatus*, as an elucidatory activity.<sup>63</sup> If Wittgenstein’s thought that skepticism is nonsense is seen in isolation from, and is not integrated with, what he writes elsewhere, a certain misunderstanding often prevails about what Wittgenstein has in mind, when he suspects and diagnoses—as he does as early as in the *Notebooks* and as late as in *On Certainty*—that skepticism is *simply*

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express what can’t be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shewn; but that isn’t the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic.’

<sup>58</sup> *TLP*, 4.112, 6.53, 6.54; *PI*, preface, see 16, 142, 251, 415, 574.

<sup>59</sup> *BB*, 1, 59.

<sup>60</sup> *NB*, 44, 1.5.15; see *TLP*, 6.51.

<sup>61</sup> They are not propositions since, according to Wittgenstein, only ‘a proposition is articulated,’ and ‘[o]nly the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning’ (*TLP*, 3.251, 3.3). The sentences (combination of signs) that skepticism yields are not propositions at all.

<sup>62</sup> See Conant 1998.

<sup>63</sup> *TLP*, 4.112; see *PI*, 133.

nonsense. The misunderstanding is to ascribe to Wittgenstein the view that, although skepticism is, and equally the answers to it are—strictly speaking—nonsense, the correct answer to skepticism nonetheless makes an important point, since it draws our attention to things that, although non-assertable, serve as the basis for our practices in which we know something to be the case.

The reason for this is a misunderstanding of the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense.<sup>64</sup> If one assumes that Wittgenstein believes nonsense to arise if the ‘bounds of sense’ are transgressed, one will probably want to say that one has to revise one’s picture of the ‘bounds of sense,’ or that one can accept that result, but nonetheless circumvent it—for instance, by saying that what the answer to skepticism says *cannot be said*, but what it cannot say can nevertheless be *shown*. I have argued that this Fregean view is both exegetically false and philosophically unappealing.<sup>65</sup> But since I have criticized this ‘view’ in earlier chapters, and the aim of this chapter is to develop Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense, there is not the required space to repeat the lengthy criticism of that view.

## 6.4 Thinking it through

Cora Diamond has recently written that

I don’t think that Wittgenstein took the remarks in the *Tractatus* to have disposed of skepticism. The work of seeing how the remarks connect with skepticism was left for the reader to do.<sup>66</sup>

This, then, is my attempt to do so.

### ***Logical impossibilities***

If Wittgenstein is right with his remark that skepticism is nonsense, what is ‘it’ that is said to be impossible, at the point where skepticism tries to raise doubts? If it is said to be logically *impossible*, it is not possible *at all*. And if it is not pos-

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<sup>64</sup> A prominent example is Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (see 2007, 90).

<sup>65</sup> See *TLP*, 4.112; *PI*, 109.

<sup>66</sup> Diamond 2014, 165n40.

sible at all, there is not even a ‘something’ that is impossible.<sup>67</sup> There is just plain nonsense. We cannot even say what ‘it’ is that cannot be said at that point. We cannot even say or think or gesture at what is impossible: ‘We cannot think anything illogical, for otherwise we should have to think illogically.’<sup>68</sup> To push the tautology: we cannot say what we cannot say, and, equally, we cannot think what we cannot think.

But this raises the question of what Wittgenstein actually speaks about, when he says that skepticism doubts where no questions can be raised. Whereof does Wittgenstein speak, when he says that there is no (coherent) possibility at all? When he says that it is (logically) impossible to say something at all at the point where skepticism tries to raise doubts?

### ***The effect of skepticism***

It is apparent that we get ourselves more and more onto ‘slippery ice.’<sup>69</sup> Not only the ‘questions’ that skepticism seeks to employ, but also the questions about those questions have a fatal flaw. Every answer we may think to be able to give to any of the above questions suffers from the same defect: ‘the answers which at first sight suggest themselves are of no use,’ with the result that ‘[n]o answer comes’ at all.<sup>70</sup> Either it is not an answer to these questions—since any answer, if it says anything at all, says something that is logically possible, and is therefore not the answer searched for (because the doubts that skepticism attempts to raise, if successful at all, are not satisfied by such an answer)—or it is not an answer at all, because we fail to express anything at all with it, and therefore utter nonsense. Hence, at this point we are drawn to the conclusion that ‘[n]either the question nor the [answer] makes sense.’<sup>71</sup>

Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense draws our attention to the fact that the sentences that skepticism attempts to employ, although they are

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<sup>67</sup> *TLP*, 3.03-3.031, 5.473-5.4733.

<sup>68</sup> *TLP*, 3.03, see 5.4731.

<sup>69</sup> *PI*, 107.

<sup>70</sup> *PI*, 678.

<sup>71</sup> *OC*, 10.

simply nonsense, have a different *feel* for us. We are held captive, as Wittgenstein expresses it at one point, by their form, by their ‘*sounding like a proposition*.’<sup>72</sup> ‘It keeps on looking as if the question [...] made sense,’ but, as Wittgenstein adds, ‘surely this question must be nonsense!’<sup>73</sup>

We are up against ‘something [that] can look like a sentence which we understand, and yet yield no sense.’<sup>74</sup> What we have trouble recognizing is that we have not yet given these sentences a definite meaning, that they have only the *form* of sentences, but they do not yet *symbolize*, as the *Tractatus* puts it.<sup>75</sup> Or as Wittgenstein expresses it at another point in the *Tractatus*: ‘if [a sentence] has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts’<sup>76</sup>—what I earlier called the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense. Or again as he later repeats the same point in the *Blue Book*: ‘A word has the meaning someone has given to it.’<sup>77</sup> And finally, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein reformulates this point by saying that we determine the meaning of our words only in, and dependent on, a particular situation:

Just as the words ‘I am here’ have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Skepticism, imagination, and illogical thought***

The problem is not that with skepticism, or the common ‘answers’ to it, we have discovered ‘something’ that we (or any being whatever) can grasp with our

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<sup>72</sup> *PI*, 115, 134. As Wittgenstein writes in his notes that were posthumously published as *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, some questions sound like they are nonsense, although they are not (*RFM*, V 17; see Wittgenstein 1986b, 486; hereafter cited as *Z.*). But there are also those questions that sound like they make sense, although they are nonsense. Skepticism, according to Wittgenstein, draws on questions of the second type. These questions are especially interesting for Wittgenstein, since we are so sure that these questions make sense (although we should know better) (*PI*, 252).

<sup>73</sup> *NB*, 45, 5.5.15.

<sup>74</sup> *PI*, 513.

<sup>75</sup> *TLP*, 3.322.

<sup>76</sup> *TLP*, 5.4733.

<sup>77</sup> *BB*, 28.

<sup>78</sup> *OC*, 348.

‘thoughts,’ but which cannot be the case. The problem is that we have not caught anything at all with our thoughts (and we have failed to recognize this), although we think that we have done so.<sup>79</sup> To put it slightly different, of all the possibilities that we can think of to give meaning to our words at this point, none is such that we would accept it as the correct formulation of what we imagined that we wanted to express.<sup>80</sup> What we failed to see, and now see clearly, is that there was nothing to express at all.

To say that there is no possibility to doubt where skepticism attempts to raise doubts is to say that we could not imagine how it could be otherwise at that point. As Wittgenstein puts this, ‘[w]e can’t imagine such a thing,’ and if we do so, the result is that we recognize that ‘it’s nonsense.’<sup>81</sup> It does not make sense to say that one could imagine how things might look different, since ‘[t]he truth is that we could not *say* what an “illogical” world would look like,’ as Wittgenstein puts this point.<sup>82</sup> When skepticism tries to raise doubts about the very possibility of certainty, the failure is to forget that the possibility of doubt requires that there are ‘some things that one does not doubt.’<sup>83</sup>

Now it follows that it should be ‘impossible’ (that is, should lead to nonsense) to doubt where no doubts can be raised (no questions can be put, no answer can be given, nothing can be said). To see if this is true, try to imagine what it would mean (what would be the case if it were possible to imagine) to doubt where no doubts can be raised, where the possibility of doubt is logically impossible. ‘What would it be like to doubt’ here?<sup>84</sup> Can we imagine such a doubt at all? Can it ‘make sense to doubt’ here?<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See *OC*, 347.

<sup>80</sup> Therefore, it would be insufficient, if ‘[a]sked whether philosophers have hitherto spoken nonsense, you [w]ould reply: no, they have only failed to notice that they are using a word in quite different senses’ (*PR*, I 9). Wittgenstein’s charge is more radical than that. His charge is that philosophers who employ skepticism have not done anything at all with their words—they haven’t yet said something at all.

<sup>81</sup> *PG*, 365.

<sup>82</sup> *TLP*, 3.031

<sup>83</sup> *OC*, 337.

<sup>84</sup> *OC*, 247.

<sup>85</sup> *OC*, 2.

## ***A skeptical scenario***

Following the distinction between local and global skepticism we saw in Moore and Russell, I take it that Wittgenstein might have targeted a version of global skepticism understood as the view *that we cannot know anything at all*.<sup>86</sup> An adherent to such a view would claim, as Barry Stroud writes, ‘that skepticism is true, and that we can never know anything.’<sup>87</sup> Equally, Peter Unger defines the skepticism that he will defend as ‘a negative thesis concerning what we know.’<sup>88</sup> Or later, in his classic book-length defense of skepticism, Unger writes that he will ‘present an argument for the universal form of skepticism,’ which aims to establish as the ‘conclusion, the thesis that nobody knows anything.’<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Truncellito defines skepticism in contemporary epistemology as ‘the view that we do not or cannot know anything at all.’<sup>90</sup> Both the distinction between local and global forms of skepticism and the association of skepticism with the doubt about (conditions of) the possibility of knowledge (‘that we cannot know anything at all’) is still influential in contemporary epistemology. For instance, Richard Bett writes that ‘[n]owadays, scepticism is largely understood as a position in epistemology, consisting in a denial of the possibility of knowledge.’<sup>91</sup> Or, as David Lewis puts it in one of his most influential papers in contemporary epistemology, ‘no sooner do we engage in epistemology—the systematic philosophical examination of knowledge—than we meet a compelling argument that we know next to nothing. The sceptical argument is nothing new or fancy.’<sup>92</sup> And

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<sup>86</sup> See Russell 1912; G. E. Moore 1922, 157–159. And this understanding of (at least one kind of) skepticism prevails, for instance, in Barry Stroud’s (1984, 100) attempts to give an answer to the question of how knowledge is possible: ‘I want to raise the possibility that, however much we came to learn about this or that aspect of human knowledge, thought, and perception, there might still be nothing that could satisfy us as a philosophical understanding of how human knowledge is possible’ (see 112 and *passim*).

<sup>87</sup> Stroud 1984, 28; cf. Stroud 1989.

<sup>88</sup> Unger 1971, 198.

<sup>89</sup> Unger 1975, 92.

<sup>90</sup> *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. ‘Epistemology’ (by David A. Truncellito), accessed September 29, 2015, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>.

<sup>91</sup> Bett 2010, 1. ‘How Can I Know Anything at All?’ was also the ‘Question of the Month’ in *Philosophy Now* (September/October 2006), accessed September 29, 2015, at [https://philosophynow.org/issues/57/How\\_Can\\_I\\_Know\\_Anything\\_At\\_All](https://philosophynow.org/issues/57/How_Can_I_Know_Anything_At_All).

<sup>92</sup> Lewis 1996, 549. Similarly, Stine’s (1976, 249) attempt to argue against skepticism that it is possible to know presupposes a view of skepticism according to which skepticism is a position that threatens the possibility of knowledge.

again even more recently, Stroud still identifies skepticism with a ‘general denial of the possibility of knowledge.’<sup>93</sup> And, when we turn to the distinction between Cartesian and Kantian skepticism that Conant draws, Cartesian skepticism about knowledge would question the ‘possibility of knowledge,’ while Kantian skepticism about knowledge would question the very ‘conditions of the possibility of knowledge.’<sup>94</sup>

If we could not know anything, it would follow, then, that it would be rational *to doubt everything*; hence, *doubt would be certain*.<sup>95</sup> Now try to imagine that doubt were certain. Can we conceive of this possibility? And if so, what would it be like to conceive of such a scenario? Can doubt really remove and replace certainty completely? ‘Is that a meaningful question?’<sup>96</sup>

It is important to notice that what we don’t have in mind here are such singular cases in which we are and can be certain that doubt is appropriate. In these cases, doubt may be certain, but this has nothing to do with doubt being certain, globally speaking.

What we are invited to imagine is the abstract possibility that doubt could obtain all the characteristics that certainty now has; that is, doubt would have to relate to our lives in the way certainty (now) does, while at the same time it would still keep those characteristics that doubt has for us. How far can this imaginative exercise take us, and what are the insights that one can derive from it? Can we really imagine that skepticism is true—that we could never be certain, that doubt would be certain, and that we would therefore act as if doubt were certain? Again, can we imagine and make sense of this?

Of course I can imagine individuals that are, so to speak, ‘pathological cases,’ that is, who pathologically doubt *some* things. For them (e.g. a person who has severe doubts about whether she has really switched the lights out every

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<sup>93</sup> Stroud 2009, 559.

<sup>94</sup> Conant 2012, 5, 20, cf. 27, 51, 56.

<sup>95</sup> It suffices for this to be the case that knowledge requires a *high* degree of certainty, which is certainly the case; we don’t need to suppose that knowledge requires *absolute* certainty.

<sup>96</sup> OC, 486.



time she leaves the house), doubt about these things seems to be certain. But this is not what we try to imagine as doubt being certain, in *all* cases. Likewise, we even might be able to imagine entire communities for whom doubt is certain, for a particular class of cases, that is. Again, this is not what we are after when we try to imagine that doubt is certain. As long as I imagine a person or a community that is certain of their doubt only for a class of particular cases, I understand doubt as something that stands—and can only do so—in contrast to certainty, that is, I understand it as I do in my life just now: ‘And that will come out in the way I act and in the way I speak about the things in question.’<sup>97</sup>

### ***No view from the outside***

If we really want to be successful in imagining something that would be adequately called ‘doubt being certain,’ it does not suffice to contemplate some vision ‘from the outside,’ so to speak. Rather, to imagine what it would be like to say that doubt is certain, it appears now, it is necessary to experience something ‘from the inside.’ We would have to be able to imagine how we would think, feel, and act if it were the case that doubt was certain. It would have to be possible for me to get a hold on how this would impact all my other words, especially related concepts like ‘to be sure (of),’ ‘to be confident (of),’ ‘to be positive about,’ and so on. If doubt were certain, these concepts would have to change, too. We would have to imagine, it now becomes clear, that doubt takes the place that certainty had before we began the contemplation. And yet it would still be required (to be possible) that ‘doubt’ maintains all the characteristics it already had (before we began to imagine the skeptical scenario).

Wittgenstein is rather pessimistic that that is something that we can make sense of. He expresses this so: ‘If you tried to doubt *everything* you would not get as far as doubting *anything*. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.’<sup>98</sup> If we tried to doubt everything, doubt would cease to be a doubt at all, it would no longer be what doubt is for us—what we call doubting—and we would no longer be in the possession of a coherent notion of doubt (and certain-

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<sup>97</sup> *OC*, 395.

<sup>98</sup> *OC*, 115; my emphases.

ty). What this indicates is ‘that the word “doubt” has a logical role.’<sup>99</sup> Its logical role is to be in contrast with, and dependent on, certainty. Remove certainty and you also remove the possibility of doubting, and vice versa.

It appears that it is impossible to alter the notion of doubt in this manner. Our question was how such a doubt could look; now we see that we do not understand at all what we want to mean when we say this.<sup>100</sup> If a person utters the combination of words ‘Doubt is certain,’ we would not be sure that we understand this person.<sup>101</sup> Whatever this person believes she wants to express to us, it cannot be our notion of doubt. That doubt is related to our lives and our concepts is essential for our notion of doubt. If we try to change our understanding of doubt such that doubt is certain, we have merely succeeded in imagining something that would not be the concept of ‘doubt.’ As Wittgenstein reminds us, ‘[d]oubt itself rests only on what is beyond doubt,’<sup>102</sup> and ‘a doubt [...] only works in a language-game.’<sup>103</sup>

If we try to imagine something ‘outside’ a language-game, the consequence is that we get ourselves entangled in philosophical problems.<sup>104</sup> We forget in these moments that, as Wittgenstein famously puts it, ‘philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*’ or ‘when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.’<sup>105</sup> The purpose of these (metaphorical) remarks is to remind us that skepticism, understood as the denial of certainty, is not something we encounter in those moments we depend on doing something with our words, in those circumstances where we are certain of one thing, or doubt the other. When we turn to those situations of use, what skepticism attempts to doubt is completely unintelligible. Only if we abstract from our use of our words, we think we can make sense of the possibility and the impossibility of

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<sup>99</sup> *OC*, 308.

<sup>100</sup> See *OC*, 24.

<sup>101</sup> *OC*, 32.

<sup>102</sup> *OC*, 519.

<sup>103</sup> *OC*, 24.

<sup>104</sup> One moment, for instance, in which we begin to get entangled in philosophical problems (puzzles) is when we begin to think of some word as something ‘unique’ (see for instance Frege 1956, 291, 293). Wittgenstein, at many times, draws our attention to this moment (*PI*, 93, 95, 96, 110, 188, 194).

<sup>105</sup> *PI*, 38, 132.

skepticism. What the imaginary exercise thus far suggests is that we should raise doubts that it is understandable what such possibilities and impossibilities would look like.

### ***The attitude towards doubt***

Our entire attitude towards doubt is part of our understanding of doubt. If we want to imagine a scenario in which we would say that ‘doubt is certain,’ we would have to integrate our entire (old) attitude towards doubt into that picture, into our entire new attitude towards doubt. We would have to conceive of something that has all the logical features of doubt, but has all the features of certainty at the same time. If we want to preserve the sense, and the way in which these concepts are related—that is, the contrast in which doubt and certainty can only exist—we cannot simply imagine that doubt is certain. We are forced to do something much more radical. It appears that we would have to turn the concepts of doubt and certainty, and all the related ones, upside down, so to speak.

Let’s suppose that we could do that (and it is not quite obvious that we can). Even if we could do that, it seems that we would only *invert* our concepts, so to speak. We would only imagine something that has the logical features of certainty. What we wanted, however, was something that has the logical features of certainty, as well as the logical features of doubt. To see if this can be done was the point of the imaginative exercise.

What we did not want to do is to substitute the written sign ‘doubt’ with a different sign, say ‘certainty.’ Our aim was to conceive of a full-fledged concept (expression, symbol) that would simultaneously incorporate the characteristic (logical) features of doubt and certainty.<sup>106</sup> If one believes to have done some work by interchanging one sign with another, one misses Wittgenstein’s thought that a sign is arbitrary, and that only the expression (a complete symbol) has sense. If we want to imagine something that has all the features we want it to have, we would have to imagine a complete expression.

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<sup>106</sup> See *TLP*, 3.3-3.31, 3.32-3.326.

Yet how could such a concept remain a concept at all? If we attempt to cook up a new ‘concept’ that has those characteristics, how can that be a concept? At this stage in the imaginative exercise, it appears that the only possible answer is that this wouldn’t be a concept after all. If one holds onto the ‘thought’ that one has done ‘something’ by stipulating a new concept in such a way, one still holds onto the illusion of making sense. The ‘thought’ that one has succeeded in doing ‘something’ (something that makes sense) is just nonsense.

Wittgenstein writes that the activity—the activity of employing a plurality of methods<sup>107</sup> in different ways in many cases—should help one recognize the nonsensicality of skepticism by showing that trying to make sense of the possibility or impossibility of skepticism’s attempts to raise doubts results in nonsense:

When one wants to show the senselessness of [skeptical] turns of phrase, one often says ‘I couldn’t imagine the opposite of that’, or ‘what would it be like if it were otherwise?’ (When, for instance, someone has said that my images are private, that only I alone can know if I am feeling pain, etc.) Well, if I can’t imagine how it might be otherwise, I equally can’t imagine that it is *so*. For here ‘I can’t imagine’ doesn’t indicate a lack of imaginative power. I can’t even *try* to imagine it; it makes no sense to say ‘I imagine it.’<sup>108</sup>

The attempt to so much as try to imagine anything at all that one would be inclined to call ‘doubt being certain,’ understood globally, fails.<sup>109</sup> And it is not that one can doubt everything and still have one (last item of) certainty, the certainty of doubting everything; doubting everything would involve a doubt about doubting everything, and a doubt about that doubt, and so on. In this way, doubt being certain leads to doubting everything, and doubting everything leads skepticism into a regress. It makes no sense to say ‘I imagine it’ at this point. But this should

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<sup>107</sup> See Diamond 2004; Conant 2011, 2010. As Kuusela (2011, 613-614) puts this, ‘Wittgenstein promotes a pluralism of conceptions [of language] and methods [of (philosophical) clarification], the choice of method depending on its suitability for the particular clarificatory task at hand.’

<sup>108</sup> *PG*, 129.

<sup>109</sup> Note that this imaginative exercise should not be read as implying that there is absolute certainty, or has been before the exercise, or that we use certainty in that way. What the exercise brings to light is that skepticism, when it rejects certainty, would have to make sense of saying that doubt is certain. And it further shows that this leads to nonsense.

not be understood as saying that there is ‘something’ that could be imagined in principle, that is just not for us to imagine. Wittgenstein is not reminding us of our ‘lack of imaginative power,’ as he explicitly says. His argument is not that there is something beyond the limits of human imagination or understanding. To put it bluntly, there is nothing to imagine for any being, whatever infinite resources that being has. Even a being with neither shortcomings nor limits at all (if such a thing were a possibility) could not imagine something that would be satisfying here.<sup>110</sup> There is nothing that is possible or impossible, just nonsense. What skepticism appeared to need in order to make itself irrefutable is not something that can be made sense of if pushed. The point that Wittgenstein makes in the *Tractatus*, and later in *On Certainty* over and over again, is that it is at the last point of thinking it through that skepticism seems to be self-undermining, practically and theoretically untenable—‘Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking!’<sup>111</sup>—before the final push that makes the sentences, which skepticism wants to employ, lose their—what appeared to be their—sense *completely*.<sup>112</sup> To brew a notion of doubt such that it is certain is neither a possibility nor an impossibility, as Wittgenstein remarks:

If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.<sup>113</sup>

### ***Skepticism is not irrefutable***

That is to say that skepticism, in its attempt to make itself irrefutable, hinges on our failure to recognize that there is no room to say something meaningful,

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Frege’s (1956, 300) discussion of the ‘limits’ of human capacities. Frege’s conclusion is that there is something such that it is impossible to imagine for us human beings. What I want to say, however, is that there is nothing of the sort that any being could imagine. There is nothing that is possible or impossible here, just nonsense. Frege talks about the ‘limits of human understanding’; but Wittgenstein’s point is not one about (our own) finitude or about shortcomings. I want to say: there is nothing such that it could make sense to speak of imagining or understanding here, there are no limits transgressed beyond which there is nonsense (the idea of such limits is itself to be recognized as nonsense).

<sup>111</sup> *OC*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> *PG*, 136.

<sup>113</sup> *OC*, 114–115. Pritchard (2011, 532) comments on this passage: ‘Wittgenstein is thus again challenging the sceptical picture whereby a wholesale epistemic evaluation of our beliefs is even possible.’

which would be a requirement to occupy a (possible or impossible) position. One could, somewhat misleadingly, put this in terms of early Wittgenstein by saying: ‘There is no point in the logical space that is singled out by skepticism.’<sup>114</sup> Put another way, this time less misleadingly, with the latest Wittgenstein: ‘A doubt without an end is not even a doubt.’<sup>115</sup> To which we could add that it is not even a ‘something,’ either. It could not be said how something would look here.<sup>116</sup> We see how sense drops out of the picture as we go along. The sentences that we wanted to use are mere nonsense, not because of some (necessarily mysterious) kind of ‘intrinsic nonsensicality,’ but because we understand that we failed to give them meaning, without being aware of that fact. We could not imagine something that would have the logical features that would be required to make doubt certain. We are invited to attempt to imagine a ‘something’ that has two incompatible sets of features. But, since this failed, because it turned out to be only an illusion of making sense, it does not even make sense to speak of a ‘something’ that is or is not imaginable at this point.<sup>117</sup> We are left with ‘a proposition without a sense [to which] corresponds nothing at all.’<sup>118</sup> To imagine two incompatible sets of features combined in one concept, we would have to think ‘illogically,’ which cannot be done according to Wittgenstein, and we now recognize that the signs which we wanted to use to express such a ‘superlative’ rather ‘say nothing’ in the way we wanted them to say something.<sup>119</sup>

When we recognize that skepticism wants to trick us into believing that it is possible to switch the logical features of our words, while they would still remain the same concepts, we recognize that what we are now dealing with are not concepts anymore: ‘One cannot tell from these words alone whether any doubt

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<sup>114</sup> Cf. *TLP*, 3.4-3.42.

<sup>115</sup> *OC*, 625.

<sup>116</sup> *OC*, 119-123.

<sup>117</sup> See Wittgenstein 1981b, 461; hereafter cited as *Z*. ‘I should like you to say: “Yes, it’s true, that can be imagined, that may even have happened!” But was I trying to draw your attention to the fact that you are able to imagine this? I wanted to put this picture before your eyes, and your *acceptance* of this picture consists in your being inclined to regard a given case differently; that is, to compare it with *this* series of pictures. I have changed your *way of seeing*. (I once read somewhere that a geometrical figure, with the words “Look at this”, serves as a proof for certain Indian mathematicians. This looking too effects an alteration in one’s way of seeing.)’

<sup>118</sup> *TLP*, 4.063, see 3.03, 3.333, 5.47321, 5.5303.

<sup>119</sup> *PI*, 192; *TLP*, 5.303, see 3.03.

at all is meant—nor what kind of doubt.<sup>120</sup> It ‘is impossible, in fact logically impossible, since it is ruled out by the logical structure of [our concepts].’<sup>121</sup> We recognize that the apparent necessities do not result—‘[a]s there is only a *logical* necessity, so there is only a *logical* impossibility.’<sup>122</sup>

Thus, we ‘first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?’<sup>123</sup> And if we think through the different stages of the imaginative exercise—in which we, as we later recognized, had only the illusion of an apparently possible doubt—we get to the point where we can no longer withstand the pressure to make sense with our words, and we recognize that we were confused by nonsense that looked as if it did make sense. This is a part of the Tractarian solution.

We can think of nothing that would satisfy any criteria whatsoever for such a doubt. ‘A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt,’ Wittgenstein reminds us.<sup>124</sup> We have to acknowledge that, although we thought that we had given a meaning to the signs we used, they had only some psychological effect on us, but were ultimately ‘logically meaningless,’ since they were ‘signs which serve *no* purpose.’<sup>125</sup>

### ***Skepticism loses its ‘sense’***

That skepticism is nonsense is shown by the fact that there is nothing to imagine, it is not possible to find a meaning that is satisfying, and it is not thinkable that things would be otherwise than they are as a matter of fact. Wittgenstein duly notes this with a tautology: ‘We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either.’<sup>126</sup> A consequence is that just like the sentence ‘doubt is certain’ (understood skeptically) is nonsense, so is its denial, i.e. ‘doubt is not certain.’ If we do not succeed in giving a meaning to the first sentence, we do not succeed in the latter case either, since the negation of nonsense

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<sup>120</sup> *OC*, 372.

<sup>121</sup> *TLP*, 6.3751.

<sup>122</sup> *TLP*, 6.375; see *PI*, 38, 89, 108, 345.

<sup>123</sup> *OC*, 24.

<sup>124</sup> *OC*, 450.

<sup>125</sup> *TLP*, 5.47321.

<sup>126</sup> *TLP*, 5.61, cf. 2.0121, 2.013, 4.01, 4.003, 5.4733.

is still nonsense.<sup>127</sup> It is just further nonsense. ‘Doubt gradually loses its sense,’ and with it, so does skepticism.<sup>128</sup>

James Conant has argued that there are two distinct kinds of ways to deal with skepticism, what he calls the ‘Kantian’ way and the ‘Wittgensteinian’ way. As he puts it,

[T]he Kantian way with skepticism is a radical following through of the implicit assumptions of a skeptical position up to the point at which the position founders in incoherence. The negative touchstone of the Kantian way with skepticism is that it seeks to find a way to respond to the Cartesian skeptic that bypasses the task of having to enter into the details of Cartesian examples, exploring how they are motivated, and considering how they differ from ordinary examples of knowledge. We can contrast the Kantian way with skepticism with what we might call the *Wittgensteinian way with skepticism*. The Wittgensteinian way is not an alternative to, but rather a supplementation of the Kantian way. The difference between the two ways points up what I take to be utterly original in Wittgenstein’s later treatment of skepticism and what I take to be utterly absent from Kant’s treatment of skepticism. The Wittgensteinian way incorporates a further movement, pushing the skeptic in the opposite direction from the one in which Kant seeks to push him: not only following the skeptic’s presuppositions out to their ultimate consequences, but also examining the initial steps in the Cartesian skeptic’s progress towards doubt, identifying how the skeptic passes from ordinary to philosophical doubt, from a claim to a non-claim context, pinpointing the decisive movement in the philosophical conjuring trick and diagnosing why it is the one that is bound to seem most innocent. Thus we might say, the Kantian way drives the skeptic forward in his doubt, seeking to propel the skeptic to grace by forcing him to pass through utter despair, whereas the Wittgensteinian way supplements this prospective movement with a retrospective one, leading the skeptic back to the point of entry into his problematic, returning him to the lost innocence of the everyday. The Kantian way compels the skeptic to progress further and further forward, further and further from the ordinary, and deeper and deeper into philosophical perplexity, to an ever more violent form of questioning, to the point at which the skeptic’s question consumes itself.

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<sup>127</sup> See Levine 2013.

<sup>128</sup> *OC*, 56.



The Wittgensteinian way adds to this pressure an additional one that seeks to bring the skeptic back to the place where he started, where he already is and never left, but in such a way that he is able to recognize it for the first time.<sup>129</sup>

And, taking the ladder metaphor from the *Tractatus* as his cue, he distinguishes between a ‘movement up’ and a ‘movement down’ the ‘dialectical ladder’:

I will henceforth refer to these two movements that Wittgenstein seeks to execute as the *movement up the dialectical ladder* (towards nonsense) and the *movement down the dialectical ladder* (towards the ordinary).<sup>130</sup>

In this chapter, my aim was adhere to these two movements and collect passages that highlight these movements to deal with skepticism. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein assembles a whole battery of examples that track how skepticism gradually loses its sense. With these examples, he reminds us that skepticism is obvious nonsense. Here are three representative samples:

When I am trying to mate someone in chess, I cannot have doubts about the pieces perhaps changing places of themselves and my memory simultaneously playing tricks on me so that I don’t notice.<sup>131</sup>

The fact that I use the word ‘hand’ and all the other words in my sentence without a second thought, indeed that I should stand before the abyss if I wanted so much as to try doubting their meanings—shews that absence of doubt belongs to the essence of the language-game, that the question [of skepticism] drags out the language-game, or else does away with it.<sup>132</sup>

Imagine a language-game ‘When I call you, come in through the door’. In any

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<sup>129</sup> Conant 2012, 63-64.

<sup>130</sup> Conant 2012, 65. Note that there is the constraint that these two movements are, according to Conant, only to be found in Wittgenstein’s later writings. As he puts it, “This way of putting things helps to bring out both a fundamental moment of continuity and a fundamental moment of discontinuity between Wittgenstein’s early and later philosophical practice. The former of these two remarks could serve equally aptly as a characterization of the aim of the author the *Tractatus*. The latter could not. What I am here calling “the Wittgensteinian way” is therefore meant to designate a way with skepticism that we first find only when we turn to Wittgenstein’s later writings’ (65). In order to spell out the remark from the *Tractatus* by using remarks from *On Certainty*, however, I’ve used both strategies to deal with skepticism.

<sup>131</sup> *OC*, 346.

<sup>132</sup> *OC*, 370.

ordinary case, a doubt whether there really is a door there will be impossible.<sup>133</sup>

With these remarks, Wittgenstein points out that it is impossible to imagine and to make sense of a doubt in skeptical scenarios. These scenarios ‘do away with’ the language game of making sense with our words.

If we proceed from Wittgenstein’s thought that skepticism is nonsense to particular sentences that are meant to be skeptical or anti-skeptical, we recognize that these sentences too are nonsense.<sup>134</sup> What makes something a skeptical sentence is the characteristic feature of not having determined a clear use. Wittgenstein replies that ‘[o]ne gives oneself a false picture of *doubt*,’<sup>135</sup> which is that one thinks it is possible to doubt anything ‘at *will*.’<sup>136</sup> But one forgets that in ‘any ordinary case’ a doubt will often ‘be impossible.’<sup>137</sup> It is characteristic of skepticism that it expresses ‘an unclarity about the [logic] of words.’<sup>138</sup> And it is this unclarity (attempting to change the logic of words in such a way) that is the source of why skepticism fails to make sense. That is why skepticism, as the denial of the possibility of knowledge, is nonsense.

### ***No theory of meaning***

Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense is not based on a theory of meaning; in fact, it is not based on any philosophical theory at all.<sup>139</sup> In the *Notebooks*, immediately after the remark on skepticism, Wittgenstein writes

[a]ll theories that say: ‘This is how it must be, otherwise we could not philosophize’ or ‘otherwise we surely could not live’, etc. etc., must of course disappear. My method is not to sunder the hard from the soft, but to see the hardness of the soft. It is one of the chief skills of the philosopher not to occupy himself with questions which do not concern him. Russell’s method in his ‘Scientific method

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<sup>133</sup> *OC*, 391.

<sup>134</sup> *OC*, 10, 58.

<sup>135</sup> *OC*, 249.

<sup>136</sup> *OC*, 221.

<sup>137</sup> *OC*, 391.

<sup>138</sup> *BB*, 35.

<sup>139</sup> *TLP*, 4.112; *PI*, 109.

in philosophy' is simply a retrogression from the method of physics.<sup>140</sup>

Wittgenstein's thought is that skepticism is nonsense because we have not given those sentences a meaning.<sup>141</sup> It is not Wittgenstein's view that skepticism is nonsense because it violates certain criteria (say of grammar or logic). Rather, his 'method' is to 'see the hardness of the soft,' that is, to determine those questions 'which do not concern' us (e.g. those of physics), and those which do not make sense (e.g. those of skepticism). His view is that, in the latter case, there is nothing at all to which we could apply any criteria we might think of. As I quoted earlier, Wittgenstein holds that we cannot say what we cannot think.<sup>142</sup> Every attempt to say that there is something that we cannot think results in nonsense. This is why '[t]he results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense.'<sup>143</sup>

### ***After skepticism***

When we think Wittgenstein's remark that skepticism is nonsense through, skepticism dissolves.<sup>144</sup> What we remain left with is our ordinary notion of doubt and certainty from which we wanted to abstract.<sup>145</sup> We have been led back to our ordinary notion of concepts like 'to be sure (of),' 'to be confident (of),' 'to be positive about,' and so on; and we now see better the role we ascribe to these words in our lives, and how we ordinarily talk about these words and the sentences they figure in, and how we use them in our daily practices; but we are now without the *temptation* to remove these words from their home, make them the object of our theories, abstract from them, change their logical features, and so

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<sup>140</sup> *NB*, 44, 1.5.15.

<sup>141</sup> It is one of the main points of the *Investigations* to remind us of the crucial role of the ordinary and the conventional (see, for instance, *PI*, 93, 98, 105-106, 108, 116, 129, 132, 134, 156, 207, 235, 412, and many more).

<sup>142</sup> *TLP*, 5.61.

<sup>143</sup> *PI*, 119; cf. *RFM*, VII 27.

<sup>144</sup> *TLP*, 5.61, 6.51, 6.521. 'Our fundamental principle is that every question which can be decided at all [...] can be decided without further trouble' (*TLP*, 5.551). A question that cannot be decided would not be a question at all.

<sup>145</sup> See *OC*, 194: 'With the word "certain" we express complete conviction, the total absence of doubt.' And equally *OC*, 255: '[d]oubting has certain characteristic manifestations.'

on and so forth.<sup>146</sup>

And does one say that the sentence ‘It’s raining’ says: such-and-such is the case? What is the everyday use of this expression in ordinary language? For you learned it from this use. If you now use it contrary to its original use, and think you are still playing the old game with it, that is as if you were to play draughts with chess-pieces and imagine that your game had kept something of the spirit of chess.<sup>147</sup>

That is why Wittgenstein says that ‘[a]s soon as I think of an everyday use of the sentence instead of a philosophical one, its meaning becomes clear and ordinary.’<sup>148</sup>

## The temptation of skepticism

It is important for Wittgenstein to make the temptation evident. He investigates the attraction the temptation has for us, and he aims to develop a diagnosis, in order to treat the temptation. He says this in the *Investigations*:

[I]n philosophy [...] we have to give a[n] [...] account of the temptation to use a particular kind of expression. What we ‘are tempted to say’ in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material. Thus [...] what a [person that suffers from a temptation] is inclined to say [...] is [...] something for philosophical *treatment*. The philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness.<sup>149</sup>

When Wittgenstein concerns himself with skepticism, he is interested in this question: ‘But how is it even possible for us to be tempted to think that we use a word to *mean* at one time the [concept] known to everyone—and at another the [one] which *I* am getting *now*? How can there be so much as a temptation here?’<sup>150</sup> ‘How is it even possible for us to be tempted to think’ that we can stipulate the meaning of doubt and certainty in the way skepticism seems to want to

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<sup>146</sup> *PI*, 20, 108, 116.

<sup>147</sup> *Z*, 448.

<sup>148</sup> *OC*, 347.

<sup>149</sup> *PI*, 254-255.

<sup>150</sup> *PI*, 277.

do? ‘How can there be so much as a temptation here?’ Wittgenstein gives an answer at another point in the *Investigations*. After having confronted himself with the objection of an imaginary voice, which represents someone who is inflicted by the temptation of skepticism—‘[i]f it is possible for someone to make a false move in some game, then it might be possible for everybody to make nothing but false moves in every game’—Wittgenstein says that we have reached the point where ‘we are under a temptation to misunderstand the logic of our expressions here, to give an incorrect account of the use of our words.’ Then Wittgenstein, immediately after the sentence just quoted, invokes the following case to make perspicuous what he wants to remind us of: ‘Orders are sometimes not obeyed. But what would it be like if no orders were *ever* obeyed? The concept “order” would have lost its purpose.’<sup>151</sup> The same point can be made about skepticism if we use the form of this example: ‘Doubts are sometimes expressed. But what would it be like if doubts were *always* expressed? The concept “doubt” would have lost its purpose.’ This shows that skepticism gradually loses its sense.

Wittgenstein says that ‘the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the *application* of the picture goes.’<sup>152</sup> Elsewhere, he expresses this so: ‘[d]on’t *for heaven’s sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don’t fail to pay attention to your nonsense.’<sup>153</sup> If we take his advice at his word, that is, we yield to the temptation, but then investigate the picture skepticism seems to suggest, we witness how the application of the picture collapses. We ‘hang in the air’: we cannot find any answer to the question that makes sense, the use of the picture is lacking.<sup>154</sup> Skepticism seems to suffer from ‘[t]he temptation to invent a myth of “meaning”.’<sup>155</sup> A *myth* because the way in which skepticism tries to alter the meaning of the concepts of doubt and certainty, they are not meaningful anymore. After we have followed Wittgenstein’s instruction, ‘Back to the rough ground!’,<sup>156</sup> we have ‘reached bedrock,’ where our ‘spade is turned,’ and we are now ‘inclined to say:

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<sup>151</sup> *PI*, 345.

<sup>152</sup> *PI*, 374.

<sup>153</sup> *CV*, 64, 5.3.1947.

<sup>154</sup> *PI*, 380.

<sup>155</sup> *PI*, 549.

<sup>156</sup> *PI*, 107.

“This is simply what [we] do”.<sup>157</sup> ‘After [w]e ha[ve] seen this and this and heard that and that, [w]e [are] not in a position to doubt’ any longer where skepticism ‘tries to raise doubts.’<sup>158</sup>

Wittgenstein’s remarks about temptations that have to be treated nicely answer an objection that someone might have wanted to make all along. That is, the worry someone might have that there is a tension between, on the one hand, Wittgenstein’s (lifelong) view that skepticism is nonsense, and on the other hand, his relentless preoccupation with skepticism in the two last years of his life. If he came to see that skepticism is nonsense as early as 1915, why come back to it, why occupy himself with it so intensely after over 30 years later? If what’s been said about Wittgenstein and his aim to treat temptations that grip us when philosophizing is correct, there is no tension to be seen here. We have to understand (fully embrace) that Wittgenstein saw his fundamental task to be to show how ‘to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.’<sup>159</sup>

## **The effect skepticism has on us**

By thinking Wittgenstein’s thoughts through, we capture an important aspect of the psychological effect skepticism has on us. Namely, the manner in which we can be held captive by a seemingly skeptical paradox—‘a spell that holds us in thrall’<sup>160</sup>—when we are seemingly forced to believe that we can think what cannot be thought.<sup>161</sup> We are hooked on the picture skepticism seems to threaten us with. As Wittgenstein puts this, ‘[a] *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.’<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *PI*, 217.

<sup>158</sup> *OC*, 280; *TLP*, 6.51.

<sup>159</sup> *PI*, 464, cf. 89, 92. Wittgenstein (*OC*, 495) remarks that one could, in principle, encounter a person that is held captive by skepticism another way: ‘[o]ne might simply say “O, rubbish [*Ach Unsinn!*]” to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not reply to him but admonish [*zurechtweisen*] him.’ But this approach would be unsatisfying, since one would not help such a person, would not provide a proper treatment of his problem (cf. *TLP*, 6.53; *PI*, 133).

<sup>160</sup> *RFM*, VII 27.

<sup>161</sup> See *TLP*, preface; *PI*, 95.

<sup>162</sup> *PI*, 115; cf. *TLP*, 3.03, 5.5422, 5.61.

The thought that skepticism dissolves when we undergo Wittgenstein's treatment nicely describes the feeling of being forced by the necessity that a skeptical puzzlement seems to impose on us.<sup>163</sup> I mean the puzzlement of being forced to decide between two untenable alternatives. Between on the one hand rejecting an argument that looks as if it cannot be rejected, and on the other hand accepting a conclusion that cannot be accepted.<sup>164</sup> The conclusion is not acceptable because then 'doubt would seem to drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos.'<sup>165</sup> Both the (outrageous) conclusion and the (uncanny) 'decision' suffice to drive us into *madness*. What the Tractarian solution shows, however, is that the argument and the conclusion share only the appearance of meaningful arguments, but do not actually make sense.

Wittgenstein speaks in this connection also of 'an urge to misunderstand,' of being 'tormented' by seemingly substantial questions, and he says that '[p]hilosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'<sup>166</sup> His response is that we need 'different therapies' to treat these 'confusions' and to get some 'peace.'<sup>167</sup> As Wittgenstein puts it in the *Tractatus*, the 'solution' of our problems is seen in 'the vanishing of the problem.'<sup>168</sup>

Once we recognize that skepticism is nonsense, the madness into which a skeptical paradox drove us reverses—'the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.'<sup>169</sup> Now it appears that '[t]o have doubts [...] would seem to me [like] madness.'<sup>170</sup> Our reaction to skepticism now amounts to saying 'your doubts don't make sense at all,'<sup>171</sup> and, simultaneously, we realize 'that there is much we cannot doubt' (because doubt-

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<sup>163</sup> As Wittgenstein writes, '[a] necessity for one thing to happen because another has happened does not exist. There is only *logical necessity*' (*TLP*, 6.37); '[a]s there is only a *logical necessity*, so there is only a *logical impossibility*' (*TLP*, 6.375). We believe that there is a further possibility, a 'possible impossibility,' so to speak, but that is an illusion.

<sup>164</sup> See Byrne 2004, 299. This is especially obvious in the case of the paradox of the regress of interpretation (*PI*, 201).

<sup>165</sup> *OC*, 613.

<sup>166</sup> *PI*, 109, 132, 133.

<sup>167</sup> *PI*, 133.

<sup>168</sup> *TLP*, 6.251.

<sup>169</sup> *PI*, 108.

<sup>170</sup> *OC*, 281.

<sup>171</sup> *OC*, 310.

ing there makes no sense).<sup>172</sup> Since the attempt to imagine a doubt (what seemed to be a possible doubt) at this point fails, the ‘doubt’ results in nonsense. Our insight is ‘a *logical* insight.’<sup>173</sup> There is nothing to be imagined at the point we initially believed there was something to imagine.

### **‘The great difficulty’**

When we see how the attempt to imagine something where skepticism tries to raise doubts fails, we eventually encounter what Wittgenstein describes thus:

Disquiet in philosophy might be said to arise from looking at philosophy wrongly, seeing it wrong, namely as if it were divided into (infinite) longitudinal strips instead of into (finite) cross strips. This inversion in our conception produces the *greatest* difficulty. So we try as it were to grasp the unlimited strips and complain that it cannot be done piecemeal. To be sure it cannot, if by a piece one means an infinite longitudinal strip. But it may well be done, if one means a cross-strip.—But in that case we never get to the end of our work!—Of course not, for it has no end. (We want to replace wild conjectures and explanations by quiet weighing of linguistic facts.)<sup>174</sup>

The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do. As if there really were an object, from which I derive its description, but I were unable to shew it to anyone.<sup>175</sup>

One encounters this ‘great difficulty’ (countless times) in one’s writings about Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense. It is crucial to understand that, as already mentioned earlier, although there is a tendency to present the matter as if there is something one could not do, there is not a ‘something’ at all, not a something that is impossible either, not a something that is only impossible for us, but possible for a being with infinite capacities, there is *nothing* of the sort that could be called making sense, there is simply nonsense.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> *OC*, 331.

<sup>173</sup> *OC*, 59.

<sup>174</sup> *Z*, 447.

<sup>175</sup> *PI*, 374.

<sup>176</sup> *TLP*, preface.



Wittgenstein thus draws our attention to the different uses of the word ‘can,’ for instance, as ‘physically possible,’ ‘logically possible,’ ‘makes no sense to say,’ and so on. If ‘can’ is used, in a philosophical argument, without being aware of these different kinds of uses, it can result in a misleading picture that there is a ‘something’ that is (physically or logically) ‘impossible.’ This accumulates into the puzzlement that we have found what is even ‘more impossible,’ as Wittgenstein puts it.<sup>177</sup> And the deeply troubling result of this puzzle is that it now seems as if we could pick out a ‘something’ that is, by logical necessity, ‘impossible’ for us to think. But if that ‘something’ is ‘impossible’ to be thought, how can ‘it’ be part of the thought that *it is impossible to think*? It appears that we have driven ourselves into contradiction, paradox, and hence, in the end, self-refutation. Conant summarizes this apparently paradoxical situation:

This makes it seem as if [...] what we have done is grasped [...] what it would be [...] to be able think in this remarkable way—and subsequently gone on to reject this possibility. We think of ourselves as rejecting the possibility of something: illogical thought. [...] [W]e take the sentences ‘illogical thought is impossible’ or ‘we cannot think illogically’ to indeed present us with *thoughts* [...]. The attempt to say that illogical thought is something that *cannot* be, to say that it involves a transgression of the limits of thought, requires that we be able to draw the limit [...] it requires that we be able to sidle up to the limit.<sup>178</sup>

The diagnosis that Wittgenstein gives for this predicament is as follows:

We are inclined to say we *can’t* [...] think *something*. [...] To say that something is ‘logically impossible’ *sounds like* a proposition. [...] [W]e make the mistake of thinking this is a proposition, though it is not. It is *misleading* to use the word ‘can’t’. [...] We should say, ‘It has no sense to say’.<sup>179</sup>

What Wittgenstein thus suggests is that we should, rather than using the word ‘can’t’ to make a philosophical point at all, use the expression ‘makes or has no sense to say.’

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<sup>177</sup> Wittgenstein 1989b, 146; hereafter cited in text as *WLC*.

<sup>178</sup> Conant 1991, 149-150.

<sup>179</sup> *WLC*, 98; emphases added.

## Back to the nonsense predicament

This is especially urgent to understand in connection with both caveats mentioned earlier in this chapter. In our attempt to investigate if skepticism is nonsense, it appears that we have presupposed that skepticism is nonsense that makes sense from the start—and that would be an instance of the paradox of the sense of nonsense. While we have wanted to think through Wittgenstein’s remark, didn’t we use sentences that we then have wanted to expose as being nonsense the entire time? Doesn’t this amount to a commitment to the nonsense fallacy, if I insist on the argument from nonsense in the face of the paradox of nonsense?

It is not clear if we can escape that situation. If Wittgenstein’s remark is correct, it says that many (most, all?) of the sentences that one uses to think his remark through must be nonsense according to the remark—thus, Wittgenstein himself says about those sentences of the *Tractatus* that elucidate that they elucidate only if one recognizes them (for what they are) as nonsense, and hence understands the *author* of those sentences, understands that his aim is to show how ‘to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense.’<sup>180</sup> If skepticism is nonsense, so is the sentence ‘skepticism is nonsense,’ and the sentence “‘skepticism is nonsense’ is nonsense,’ and so on—an instance of the paradox of the regress of nonsense.<sup>181</sup> Thus, I said that we have to throw the ladder away, and I said that that means to throw the ladder completely away. This applies to all our attempts to single out what it is exactly that is supposed to be nonsense. If ‘something’ is nonsense, it is not a something that can be described in its content, only in its appearance—thus the first instances of the paradox lead to its third instance, the paradox of the ineffability of nonsense. If skepticism were nonsense, one couldn’t meaningfully talk about it.

What more can Wittgenstein say then than that his aim is to use nonsense

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<sup>180</sup> *TLP*, 6.54; *PI*, 464.

<sup>181</sup> In fact, I believe the whole sentence to which this footnote refers is nonsense. In this way, nonsense leads to a regress of nonsensical sentences. I’m rejecting that nonsense can be part of a successful use of the capacity to make sense with words.

only as part of an activity of elucidation, as he envisages it in the *Tractatus*,<sup>182</sup> by which he tries to make us recognize that, although we think otherwise (i.e. think that something has a meaning), we have to recognize that something is nonsense? If we have this insight, and we understand the transition from latent to patent nonsense, what more needs to be said? Doesn't it follow that one should be silent about it after that?<sup>183</sup> If my account of the nonsense predicament captures the inherently problematic nature of nonsense, the answer is yes. What more can Wittgenstein do than to highlight the predicament?<sup>184</sup>

It is true that Wittgenstein calls our attention to this tirelessly. His methods presuppose the very ability that he also diagnoses as the cause for our confusions, that is, the ability to perceive something that is actually nonsense as having a sense.<sup>185</sup> That we have this ability is an essential part of the *activity of elucidation* method, the target and the bullet at the same time, so to speak.<sup>186</sup> This ability leads to the confusion we are in, on the one hand, and enables one to combat this confusion, on the other, by trying to imagine something (at first)—for instance another person or another form of life that seems to be able to think illogically—that is afterwards to be exposed as an illusion.<sup>187</sup> One is able to imagine something that is possible to give a meaning, then that this is impossible, then possible and impossible at the same time, only to finally witness that 'it' has been an illusion altogether, and see then how the picture collapses.<sup>188</sup> We then recognize that it was nonsense all along.<sup>189</sup> As Wittgenstein is at pains to try to show us, if we recognize this, we must also do away with the confused idea that we do understand what those sentences would mean if that could be expressed. But is that enough to escape the predicament?

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<sup>182</sup> *TLP*, 4.112.

<sup>183</sup> See *TLP*, 7.

<sup>184</sup> *TLP*, 5.4732, 5.4733; *PG*, 130; *PI*, 499-500.

<sup>185</sup> Wittgenstein combats the cause of the confusion with itself, as is evident in many passages in which Wittgenstein invites us to imagine something 'as if' it would (could) be such-and-such (for instance, see *PI*, 91, 102). Eventually, we have to recognize that what appeared to us is not the case.

<sup>186</sup> *TLP*, 4.112, 6.54; *PI*, 133, 464.

<sup>187</sup> See *PI*, 554; *RFM*, V 5. See also the many attempts to imagine another (alien) form of life, for instance in the *Investigations* and the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*.

<sup>188</sup> Thus what I'm contrasting nonsense with is not a possible or impossible 'something,' but the possibility or impossibility of making sense.

<sup>189</sup> See *BB*, 9-11; *RFM*, I 147-153, V 3-5; *PI*, 282.

## From latent to patent nonsense

To think something through from latent to patent nonsense means, according to the argument, to witness this breakdown: one can give a word this meaning, or the other, but not both. Doubt and certainty are interconnected, and one cannot simply eliminate the one or the other, just as there is '[d]oubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second';<sup>190</sup> but there is not something that would count as being both at the same time, that's an illusion, and we would not say of it that it is behavior at all. Take a look at the following samples, taken from different places in Wittgenstein's notes, which highlight this:

There are cases such that, if someone gives signs of doubt where we do not doubt, we cannot confidently understand his signs as signs of doubt. I.e.: if we are to understand his signs of doubt as such, he may give them only in particular cases and may not give them in others.<sup>191</sup>

Doubting has certain characteristic manifestations, but they are only characteristic of it in particular circumstances. If someone said that he doubted the existence of his hands, kept looking at them from all sides, tried to make sure it wasn't 'all done by mirrors', etc., we should not be sure whether we ought to call that doubting. We might describe his way of behaving as like the behaviour of doubt, but his game would not be ours.<sup>192</sup>

If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why.<sup>193</sup>

If one deviates, as Wittgenstein describes it in the above quotations, we would not be sure what to make of it; it would not make sense to us at all, just like skepticism does not anymore.

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<sup>190</sup> *OC*, 354.

<sup>191</sup> *OC*, 154.

<sup>192</sup> *OC*, 255.

<sup>193</sup> *OC*, 257.

## ***The exclusion of skepticism***

We said at the beginning of this chapter that Wittgenstein does not think that, when we give up on those sentences that are normally taken to express skepticism, we give up on anything substantial. On the contrary: if we recognize that skepticism is nonsense, if we recognize that skepticism is simply nonsense, we exclude those sentences, because they have the appearance of meaningful expressions, although we have given no meaning to them, and they therefore make no sense. So is there a way around the predicament after all? I want to briefly sketch this train of thought, which can be reconstructed from several of Wittgenstein's writings.<sup>194</sup>

### **Wittgenstein's train of thought**

Wittgenstein writes the following in the *Investigations*:

When a sentence is called senseless, 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.<sup>195</sup>

When we recognize that skepticism is nonsense, we exclude the sentences we thought to express skepticism with from our language. But this is far from an arbitrary choice. We exclude these sentences because of definite reasons to do so. Wittgenstein mentions this in the passage before the one just quoted:

To say 'This combination of words makes no sense' excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may shew where the property of one man ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet

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<sup>194</sup> Cf. Conant 1998, 245-246.

<sup>195</sup> *PI*, 500.

to say what I am drawing it for.<sup>196</sup>

We find the reason for excluding the sentences that are characteristic of skepticism in *On Certainty*:

The propositions that one comes back to again and again as if bewitched—these I should like to expunge from philosophical language. [...] Thus we expunge the sentences that don't get us any further.<sup>197</sup>

But why don't these sentences get us any further? In the *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein describes this:

[T]hey 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.<sup>198</sup>

## Skepticism dissolved

We exclude skepticism from our language, because it does not get us any further, we exclude it 'like some arbitrary noise,' not because its 'sense is senseless' (whatever that may be), but because we succumb to the temptation to confuse skepticism with sentences from our language which we have given a meaning to. We exclude skepticism, because it leads us into 'that dead-end in philosophy.'<sup>199</sup> This is why Wittgenstein wants to dissolve and disperse these sentences. We exclude the sentences of skepticism, as Wittgenstein writes in the *Big Typescript*, because they 'have always made us uneasy, [...] we were unable to do anything with [them], and [...] we still thought we had to respect [them].'<sup>200</sup> And Wittgenstein then goes on to say that

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<sup>196</sup> *PI*, 499.

<sup>197</sup> *OC*, 31, 33.

<sup>198</sup> *PG*, 130. The complete passage runs: 'How strange that one should be able to say that such and such a state of affairs is inconceivable! If we regard thought as essentially an accompaniment going with an expression, the words in the statement that specify the inconceivable state of affairs must be unaccompanied. So what sort of sense is it to have? Unless it says these words are senseless. But it is not as it were their sense that is senseless; 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.'

<sup>199</sup> *PI*, 436.

<sup>200</sup> Wittgenstein 2005, 17. Hereafter cited as *BT*.

the strange thing about philosophical uneasiness and its resolution might seem to be that it is like the suffering of an ascetic who stood raising a heavy ball, amid groans, and whom someone released by telling him: ‘Drop it’. One wonders: if these sentences make you uneasy, why didn’t you drop them earlier, what stopped you from doing it? Well, I believe it was the false system that he thought he had to accommodate himself to, etc.<sup>201</sup>

And shortly afterwards, Wittgenstein writes this: ‘The problems are dissolved in the actual sense of the word—like a lump of sugar in water.’<sup>202</sup> According to this picture, if skepticism is dropped, it dissolves completely and ‘without a trace.’<sup>203</sup> Wittgenstein’s remark that skepticism is nonsense leads us back to what can be said.<sup>204</sup> By witnessing the transition from latent to patent nonsense we are led back to our understanding of doubt and certainty as it features in our lives.<sup>205</sup> ‘Then the puzzling aspect of the [things that disturb us] will disappear.’<sup>206</sup>

This connects with the final response against the nonsense paradox that I considered earlier. ‘→ “...”. ← Nonsense!’ But to say of a sign that it is nonsense doesn’t appear to be what one wanted to say. Worse, what does it mean to say of a sign that it is nonsense? According to Wittgenstein, every sign is nonsense anyways, and it does not make sense to say of anything other than a whole sentence that it is nonsense. So that would not be an option. The nonsense predicament is unavoidable.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter spelled out Wittgenstein’s response to skepticism. In the end, it was a difficult question whether this response could escape the paradox of nonsense. To escape the paradox, Wittgenstein has to reject that his response is an argument, and insist that it is only an instance of the activity of elucidation, and then further to insist on silence—and stop all talk about skepticism.

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<sup>201</sup> *BT*, 175.

<sup>202</sup> *BT*, 183.

<sup>203</sup> Wittgenstein 1980, 138.

<sup>204</sup> *PI*, 103, 107, 116, 217.

<sup>205</sup> *PI*, 412, 421.

<sup>206</sup> *PI*, 524.

Elucidation and silence *interdepend*. Elucidation, ultimately, leads to silence. But one cannot start with silence, on the other hand, because there then seems to be something that is crucially missing. Thus there is not the one without the other. This is not surprising, since elucidation and silence form a structure that Wittgenstein detected and captured in the Tractarian solution.

Understanding Wittgenstein's response to skepticism leads to a radical departure from traditional ways of dealing with the problem of skepticism. How successful it is depends whether one accepts it as a successful dissolution of skepticism.

In any case, there appears to be a change between early and later Wittgenstein's takes on it. While early Wittgenstein clearly thought that he had solved the problem of skepticism (this follows from his having believed that he had finally solved all the problems of philosophy, one of which he definitely thought skepticism to be), later Wittgenstein spent a significant amount of his time again dealing with that problem.

But this renewed interest must not be counted as evidence for his having changed his mind. Indeed, there are many similarities in his treatment. Both early and later Wittgenstein think that skepticism is nonsense, both think that the argument from nonsense cannot be successful, and both think that there must be another way. So both think that elucidation and nonsense are not independent but interdependent steps.

However, the crucial difference between early and later Wittgenstein is in their evaluations of the interplay between elucidation and silence. Early Wittgenstein thought that there is only one way to go: first elucidation, then silence, and be done with it. Later Wittgenstein, on the other hand, thought that they form a continuous circular movement, so to speak, *a circular two-step*. The goal of which is no longer to come to an end.



## 7. Neuroscience and the Bounds of Sense

### 7.1 Introduction

According to the argument from nonsense, philosophy is (mostly) nonsense. But wait! As if this wasn't enough, *it's not just philosophy*. Nonsense, as we have seen, *spreads*, so to speak. And that's why, apparently, other parts of academia are (mostly) nonsense too. One example is neuroscience, as Hacker now claims in collaboration with M. R. Bennett. But can the argument from nonsense really establish that (much of) contemporary neuroscience is nonsense?

Bennett and Hacker think that *Yes* it can: much of current neuroscience is *simply nonsense*; and although having made their case already at book length,<sup>1</sup> they now go in the second round, reaffirming their (nonsense) argument,<sup>2</sup> and answering their critics.<sup>3</sup> Among their critics, there is D. C. Dennett's, who focuses in his reply most of all on the form of their argument, that is, that it is an argument from nonsense.<sup>4</sup> Bennett and Hacker then reply and disagree with Dennett's objection.<sup>5</sup> The plan of this chapter is to assess their argument.

Section 7.2 reviews the argument. Section 7.3 discusses Dennett's reply. Section 7.4 considers Bennett and Hacker's answer to the reply. Section 7.5 puts forward a criticism of their argument.

### 7.2 Bennett and Hacker against neuroscience

The core of Bennett and Hacker's argument against neuroscience is hard to digest: neuroscience is nonsense, simply nonsense, to be precise. That is, it is apparently equivalent to 'wrks swrk krws.' To most neuroscientists, this might come as a surprise, and it'll probably be rather shocking or at least perplexing for them. Is what they are doing day in and day out nothing more than speaking nonsense, 'wrks-ing' around, so to speak?

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 3-48, especially 11-12, 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 127-162.

<sup>4</sup> Dennett 2007, 73-96, especially 74, 79, 80-87, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 152-156.

Clearly, most, if not all, neuroscientists will find this claim to be absurd. So why and how can the philosopher judge that what neuroscientists do is indeed nonsense, contrary to common wisdom (i.e. it would seem that most people seem agree that neuroscience is meaningful)?

Bennett and Hacker adopt the argument from nonsense that Hacker himself had developed in connection with his work on Wittgenstein. The picture that they work with is *the philosopher as an expert in judging nonsense*. Thus, it is the philosopher, according to Bennett and Hacker, who has the greatest expertise in distinguishing between sense and nonsense. Therefore, the philosopher is in a better position to judge whether something makes sense or not, and is consequently the final authority on questions about nonsense:

Granted that neuroscientists may not be using these common or garden concepts the way the man in the street does, with what right can philosophy claim to correct them? How can philosophy so confidently judge the clarity and coherence of concepts as deployed by competent scientists? How can philosophy be in a position to claim that certain assertions made by sophisticated neuroscientists make no sense? [...] What truth and falsity is to science, sense and nonsense is to philosophy. Observational and theoretical error result in falsehood; conceptual error results in lack of sense.<sup>6</sup>

So we know *that* the philosopher is apparently in the best position to judge whether *p* is nonsense, but *why* is she in such a position? The answer Bennett and Hacker give is that the philosopher, through the study of ‘the use of words,’ tracks ‘the bounds of sense’ (what I called the boundary model in earlier chapters), and if the philosopher judges a sentence to be nonsense, it is because it exhibits a ‘transgression of the bounds of sense’:

How can one investigate the bounds of sense? Only by examining the use of words. Nonsense is generated when an expression is used contrary to the rules for its use. The expression in question may be an ordinary, non-technical expression, in which case the rules for its use can be elicited from its standard employment and received explanations of its meaning. Or it may be a technical

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<sup>6</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 11-12.

term of art, in which case the rules for its use must be elicited from the theorist's introduction of the term and the explanations he offers of its stipulated use. Both kinds of term can be misused, and when they are, nonsense ensues—a form of words that is excluded from the language. For either nothing has been stipulated as to what the term means in the aberrant context in question, or this form of words is actually excluded by a rule specifying that there is no such thing as . . . (e.g. that there is no such thing as 'east of the North Pole', that this is a form of words that has no use). Nonsense is also commonly generated when an existing expression is given a new, perhaps technical or quasi-technical, use, and the new use is inadvertently crossed with the old, e.g. inferences are drawn from propositions containing the new term which could only licitly be drawn from the use of the old one. It is the task of the conceptual critic to identify such transgressions of the bounds of sense.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Bennett and Hacker claim that 'neuroscientists' descriptions of their discoveries commonly transgress the bounds of sense.'<sup>8</sup> To give one of their examples of such an instance,

the application of [psychological] predicates to the brain or the hemispheres of the brain transgresses the bounds of sense [is nonsense].<sup>9</sup>

Why is it nonsense to do so? According to Bennett and Hacker, the reason why it is nonsense is that it is an instance of what they call the 'mereological fallacy' (more on this fallacy soon), which is to mistakenly ascribe a predicate that can supposedly only be ascribed to a *whole* to one of the *parts* of the whole.<sup>10</sup>

It is, of course, always possible for the person whose utterance is under investigation to reply that she meant to invent a new use for the words she uttered, and that these words are therefore not nonsense (do not transgress the bounds of sense, but *extend* them). Bennett and Hacker concede that, in principle, neuroscientists could try to get out of the apparent mess they seem to be involved in in this way:

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<sup>7</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 22 and *passim*.

If a person ascribes a predicate to an entity to which the predicate in question logically could not apply, and this is pointed out to him, then it is only to be expected that he will indignantly insist that he didn't 'mean it like that'. After all, he may say, since a nonsense is a form of words that says nothing, that fails to describe a possible state of affairs, he obviously did not *mean* a nonsense—one *cannot* mean a nonsense, since there is nothing, as it were, to mean. So his words must not be taken to have their ordinary meaning. The problematic expressions were perhaps used in a special sense, and are really merely homonyms; or they were analogical *extensions* of the customary use—as is indeed common in science; or they were used in a metaphorical or figurative sense. If these escape routes are available, then the accusation that neuroscientists fall victim to the mereological fallacy is unwarranted. Although they make use of the same psychological vocabulary as the man in the street, they are using it in a different way. So objections to neuroscientists' usage based upon the ordinary use of these expressions are irrelevant.<sup>11</sup>

But Bennett and Hacker don't let the neuroscientist off the hook that easily. They have a reply to that strategy. In effect, what they need for their argument to work is a distinction between what a person *intends* to mean, and what a person *actually utters*. Bennett and Hacker think that there can be a problematic *discrepancy* or gap here. Although a person *might* intend to utter something perfectly meaningful, it can *actually* nevertheless be the case that the person fails to do so, without noticing it. In these cases, while believing he makes sense, what the person actually does is utter nonsense:

Of course, the person who misascribes a predicate in the manner in question does not intend to utter a form of words that lacks sense. But that he did not mean to *utter* a nonsense does not ensure that he did not do so. Although he will naturally insist that he 'didn't mean it like that', that the predicate in question was not being used in its customary sense, his insistence is not the final authority. The final authority in the matter is *his own reasoning*. We must look at the consequences he draws from his own words—and it is his inferences that will show whether he was using the predicate in a new sense or misusing it. If he is to

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<sup>11</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 23.

be condemned, it must be out of his own mouth.<sup>12</sup>

In effect, then, Bennett and Hacker's diagnosis is that nonsense often occurs *unwittingly*. And supposedly, this also happens in neuroscience. But can Bennett and Hacker convincingly show, in the face of counterarguments, that it is the case that neuroscientists unwittingly utter simply nonsense—nothing different than 'wrks swrk krws'?

### 7.3 Dennett's criticisms

Dennett agrees with some of what Bennett and Hacker write.<sup>13</sup> Among other things, he appears to agree with them that the philosopher is the authority on questions about sense and nonsense, and that there is a threat in neuroscience of 'disguised nonsense'—that is, what Hacker sometimes, following Wittgenstein, also calls 'latent nonsense':<sup>14</sup>

When neuroscientists help themselves to the ordinary terms that compose the lore I have dubbed 'folk psychology', they need to proceed with the utmost caution, since these terms have presuppositions of use that can subvert their purposes and turn otherwise promising empirical theories and models into thinly *disguised nonsense*. A philosopher—an expert on nuances of meaning that can beguile the theorist's imagination—is just the right sort of thinker to conduct this important exercise in conceptual hygiene.<sup>15</sup>

Dennett also agrees with Bennett and Hacker that the job of the philosopher is to make latent (disguised) nonsense patent (undisguised), which is, as Dennett calls it above, understood as an 'important exercise in conceptual hygiene.'

However, there are, naturally, more points of disagreement, and they overshadow the points of agreement—as Dennett notes, his criticisms will be

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> Points of agreement, other than the one I'm going to highlight are as follow: (i) what Dennett (2007, 74) calls 'the motivating assumption of their book,' that "the evidential grounds for the ascription of psychological attributes to others are not inductive, but rather criterial; the evidence is logically good evidence"; (ii) Bennett and Hacker's criticisms of 'Cartesianism' (74-75); and (iii) their criticisms of neuroscientists who commit what they call 'the mereological fallacy' (75-76).

<sup>14</sup> Hacker 1986, 154.

<sup>15</sup> Dennett 2007, 74, my emphases.

‘severe.’<sup>16</sup> Note that Dennett explicitly directs his criticisms only against Hacker, and he consequently also addresses only Hacker for the better part of his paper.<sup>17</sup> I’ll follow Dennett’s convention on this point (Dennett switches back to addressing both Bennett and Hacker at some point, at which point I’ll do the same).

Dennett *disagrees* with the following of Hacker’s claims: (i) that instances of an ‘adjusted use of psychological vocabulary’ to describe the behavior of robots, computers, brains, and parts of brains are ‘incoherent’ or even ‘do not make sense’;<sup>18</sup> (ii) that ‘[c]onceptual questions antecede matters of truth and falsehood’;<sup>19</sup> (iii) that ‘[w]hat truth and falsity is to science, sense and nonsense is to philosophy’;<sup>20</sup> (iv) the claim, with which he most emphasizes his disagreement, that ‘one [can] investigate the bounds of sense [o]nly by examining the use of words’;<sup>21</sup> (v) the related claim that ‘[n]onsense is often generated when an expression is used contrary to the rules for its use’;<sup>22</sup> and (vi) the claim that one may not ‘cross the new “technical” use with the old [ordinary] one [...]. For this produces a conflict of rules and hence incoherence in the neuroscientists’ use of these terms.’<sup>23</sup>

Dennett has (more or less neat) replies to all of these claims. He comments rather briefly on (i)-(iii), claiming (i\*) that he is, contrary to what Hacker thinks, not being incoherent, but in fact making sense when he is ‘extending’ the use of psychological vocabulary;<sup>24</sup> (ii\*) that (ii) is ‘a non sequitur’;<sup>25</sup> and (iii\*) that (iii) is ‘plain false.’<sup>26</sup> However, he takes more time to rebut (iv)-(vi), which will therefore also be the focus here.

Dennett’s main argument against (iv)-(vi) is that ‘Hacker’s insistence that philosophy is an a priori discipline that has no continuity with empirical science

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<sup>16</sup> Dennett 2007, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Dennett 2007, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Dennett 2007, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Dennett 2007, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Dennett 2007, 79-80; Bennett and Hacker 2007, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Dennett 2007, 80-83.

<sup>22</sup> Dennett 2007, 83-84.

<sup>23</sup> Dennett 2007, 84-89.

<sup>24</sup> Dennett 2007, 78-79.

<sup>25</sup> Dennett 2007, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Dennett 2007, 80.

is the chief source of the problems bedeviling this project.’<sup>27</sup> It is here that Dennett locates a contradiction in Hacker’s emphasis on ‘rules’ and language ‘use.’<sup>28</sup> To make his case, Dennett begins by noting that

no matter what any philosopher may say, examining the use of words is an empirical investigation, which often yields everyday garden-variety truths and falsehoods and is subject to correction by standard observations and objections. [...] The conviction that this method of consulting one’s (grammatical or other) intuitions is entirely distinct from empirical inquiry has a long pedigree (going back not just to the Oxford of the 1960s, but to Socrates), but it does not survive reflection.<sup>29</sup>

Dennett goes on to compare this method with the methods of, as he puts it, ‘bad anthropology,’<sup>30</sup> arguing that, ultimately, there is significant commonality between them qua empirical investigations: ‘[t]he empirical nature of the enterprise is just the same.’<sup>31</sup> Dennett appears to argue that the problem with such an investigation is that it is *cognitively biased*,<sup>32</sup> and his bottom line is that such empirical/anthropological investigations ‘can be done well or ill,’<sup>33</sup> but not without confronting these problems head-on.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Dennett’s argument against (iv) is (iv\*) that Hacker’s investigation is, contrary to what Hacker says and thinks it is, a cognitively biased, bad empirical investigation.

In order to successfully conduct such an empirical investigation (without the cognitive bias), according to Dennett, Hacker would have to prove that *he* adequately captures *the* correct rules and uses of language for the community whose use he is criticizing. But Dennett thinks that Hacker has done no such thing:

[W]hat needs defense in the philosopher’s enterprise, is a justification for the following claim: This is what these people do and say, and you should do the

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<sup>27</sup> Dennett 2007, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Dennett 2007, 81-89.

<sup>29</sup> Dennett 2007, 81.

<sup>30</sup> Dennett 2007, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Dennett 2007, 82.

<sup>32</sup> See Dennett 2007, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Dennett 2007, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Dennett 2007, 82.

same. As we shall see, it is Hacker's failure to identify the community he is speaking for that scuttles his project'.<sup>35</sup>

What Dennett, in effect, is saying is that Hacker is attempting to impose his own understanding of the rules and uses of language on a community that has its own rules and uses of language, and which has no interest in adopting Hacker's way of talking. Hacker lacks justification for the normativity of his prescriptions of language use. And Dennett thinks that the situation gets only worse for Hacker, since, as Dennett argues in the next step, no one (let alone Hacker) has ever managed to say what the rules of language are. Thus the bottom line of Dennett's argument against Hacker is simply that Hacker does not know what the rules for the correct use of language are.

Dennett develops this line of argument against (v), on which he comments by saying that

[i]t is long past time to call a halt to this sort of philosophical pretense. Ryle notoriously claimed to identify 'category mistakes' by appeal to the 'logic' of existence claims, but, let's face it: that was a bluff. He had no articulated logic of existence terms to back up his claims. In spite of the popularity of such talk, from Ryle and Wittgenstein and a host of imitators, no philosopher has ever articulated 'the rules' for the use of any ordinary expression. To be sure, philosophers have elicited judgments of deviance by the hundreds, but noting that 'we wouldn't say thus-and-so' is not expressing a rule.<sup>36</sup>

Dennett discusses the works of linguists to prove his point. '[L]arge areas of fuzziness' are the problem that Dennett thinks could be the reason why linguists couldn't come up with the rules of language. Commenting on the example 'The cat climbed down the tree' (taken from the linguist Ray Jackendoff), he writes:

Is this nonsense that violates 'the rules' of the verb to climb? It's hard to say, and it may be that usage is changing. Such examples abound. Linguists have learned that something may sound a bit odd, smell a bit fishy, but still not violate any clear rule that anybody has been able to compose and defend. And the idea of

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<sup>35</sup> Dennett 2007, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Dennett 2007, 83.



rules that are ineffable is too obscurantist to be worth discussion. Philosophers' intuitions, no matter how sharply honed, are not a superior source of evidence in this manifestly empirical inquiry.<sup>37</sup>

So neither linguists nor philosophers have come up with the rules of language use. Granted that Dennett is correct on this point, Hacker would indeed be 'bluffing,' as Dennett suggests above. Hacker would simply claim that neuroscientists are speaking nonsense because they violate the rules for language use, pretending that he knows these rules, *without actually knowing what the rules are*. Thus, Dennett's argument is (v\*) that (v) is wrong, because, to reiterate, Hacker simply cannot say or show what the rules for the correct use of language are.

Dennett considers Hacker's attempt to get out of this mess by introducing a distinction between 'ordinary expressions' and 'technical terms.'<sup>38</sup> The point of (vi) is that 'to cross' the different set of rules for the use of an expression as an ordinary or technical term leads to nonsense. Dennett's argument against (vi) is not so much that this would not be true, if Hacker could actually show the rules which supposedly clash; however, since Dennett has established with (v\*) that Hacker cannot provide such rules, Dennett can say (vi\*) that (vi) is simply 'question begging.'<sup>39</sup> Dennett elaborates:

If Hacker were able to *show us* the rules, and show us just how the new uses conflict with them, we might be in a position to agree or disagree with him, but he is just making this up. He has no idea what 'the rules' for the use of these everyday psychological terms are. More tellingly, his insistence on an a prioristic methodology systematically blinds him to what he is doing here. Let him be *right* in his conviction that he has an a priori method that gives him 'antecedent' insight into the meanings of his ordinary psychological terms. He still needs to confront the burden of showing how his prolegomenon or stage setting avoids the pitfall of what we might call conceptual myopia: treating *one's own* (possibly narrow and ill-informed) concepts as binding on others with different agendas and training.

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<sup>37</sup> Dennett 2007, 84.

<sup>38</sup> Dennett 2007, 84.

<sup>39</sup> Dennett 2007, 85.

How, indeed, does he establish that he and those whose work he is criticizing are speaking the same language? That is surely an empirical question, and his failure to address it with sufficient care has led him astray. What he has done, in fact, is not good philosophy but bad anthropology: he went to cognitive science to ‘examine the use of words’ and failed to notice that he himself was bringing *his* ordinary language into alien territory, and that *his* intuitions didn’t necessarily apply. When he calls *their* usage ‘aberrant’, he is making a beginner’s mistake.<sup>40</sup>

It is here in (vi\*) that the different strands of Dennett’s argument converge: that Hacker is doing bad anthropology (iv\*), and that Hacker cannot show the rules (v\*). However, to make the argument for (vi\*), Dennett needs to establish one last point: that he himself knows the rules of language use (in neuroscience). This becomes evident when Dennett argues that, in contrast to Hacker’s ‘beginner’s mistake’:

The use of psychological predicates in the theorizing of cognitive scientists is indeed a particular patois of English, quite unlike the way of speaking of Oxford philosophy dons, and it has its own ‘rules’. How do I know this? Because I’ve done the anthropology. (You have to be a Quinian naturalist to avoid making these simple mistakes.)<sup>41</sup>

So Dennett, in effect, claims that he himself has actually conducted the required empirical research to know the rules of language use:

What are the rules? I asked myself. [...] The *factual* question is: do people in these fields speak this way, and does the intentional stance capture at least a central part of ‘the rules’ for how they speak? And the (factual) answer is Yes. There is also, I suppose, a political question: Do they have any right to speak this way? Well, it pays off handsomely, generating hypotheses to test, articulating theories, analyzing distressingly complex phenomena into their more comprehensible parts, and so forth.<sup>42</sup>

What are the rules indeed? Can Dennett provide them? Didn’t Dennett just say that philosophers and linguists equally couldn’t provide these rules? Wasn’t this

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<sup>40</sup> Dennett 2007, 85-86.

<sup>41</sup> Dennett 2007, 86.

<sup>42</sup> Dennett 2007, 87.

supposed to be one of the major arguments against Hacker? Did Dennett just make a major discovery of the rules of language use (in neuroscience)? Is it true that, as Dennett earlier said, it ‘is an element of discovery[,] [...] an empirical fact, and a surprising one’ that he has found the rules?<sup>43</sup> The argument now appears to be that whatever people (in neuroscience) say gives the normative rules for what one ought to say (in neuroscience)?<sup>44</sup> Dennett seems to suggest this:

Hacker also discovers this ubiquitous use of intentional terms in neuroscience, and he’s shocked, I tell you, shocked! So many people making such egregious conceptual blunders! He doesn’t know the half of it. It is not just neuroscientists; it is computer scientists (and not just in AI), cognitive ethologists, cell biologists, evolutionary theorists ... all blithely falling in with the game, teaching their students to think and talk this way, a linguistic pandemic. If you asked the average electrical engineer to explain how half the electronic gadgets in your house worked, you’d get an answer bristling with intentional terms that commit the mereological fallacy—if it is a fallacy.<sup>45</sup>

If Dennett gives, with that description, the story for what his (Dennett’s) rules are, Hacker would definitely be ‘shocked,’ precisely because of Dennett’s argumentative form, which appears to boil down to the ‘whatever works’ attitude: whatever neuroscience says, if neuroscientific research makes progress, is correct—and does make sense. If the rules were generated in that way, it would reduce Hacker’s criticism to something like a caricature, as Dennett puts it:

From my vantage point, then, Hacker is comically naive, for all the world like an old-fashioned grammarian scolding people for saying ‘ain’t’ and insisting *you can’t say that!* To people who manifestly *can* say that and know what they mean when they do.<sup>46</sup>

However, there is a deep tension between Dennett’s saying that *no* one knows the rules of correct use, *but* that they are given by current neuroscientific research (as long as it makes progress), *and* that *he* knows the rules because he has

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<sup>43</sup> Dennett 2007, 86.

<sup>44</sup> See Dennett 2007, 82-83, 86-87.

<sup>45</sup> Dennett 2007, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Dennett 2007, 89.

studied this practice.

And there is another tension with Dennett's response. Earlier he had agreed with Bennett and Hacker's criticism of neuroscientists that they commit the mereological fallacy, and he also claimed that it is an idea that he developed years ago.<sup>47</sup> But now he appears to be saying that it is *not* even a fallacy:

It is not a fallacy. We don't attribute *fully fledged* belief (or decision or desire—or pain, heaven knows) to the brain parts—that *would* be a fallacy. No, we attribute an attenuated sort of belief and desire to these parts, belief and desire stripped of many of their everyday connotations (about responsibility and comprehension, for instance).<sup>48</sup>

Although it seems pretty clear in this passage that he does reject that the mereological fallacy is indeed a fallacy, Dennett might reply that what he says here has only limited application—that is, that it is not a fallacy in his account and those close to it, but that it is a fallacy in those accounts that he wanted to criticize earlier. Nevertheless, he seems to rely on the rejection of the mereological fallacy *qua* fallacy, which comes out when he comments on a passage he quotes from Hacker. Dennett writes:

[‘][I]t seems plausible to suppose that the human brain must have a similar abstract functional structure to that of the machine design. In which case, surely it must make sense to attribute the variety of psychological predicates to the human brain after all[’]. [...] Exactly. That's the claim. How does he rebut it? He doesn't.<sup>49</sup>

The mereological fallacy is Bennett and Hacker's main argument, and Dennett is fully aware of that fact.<sup>50</sup> If he can reject it, his case against Bennett and Hacker would be won. But Dennett seems to hover between wanting to say ‘Yes! It is a fallacy—and I (Dennett) have discovered it!’<sup>51</sup> and ‘No! It is not.’<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dennett 2007, 75-76.

<sup>48</sup> Dennett 2007, 87.

<sup>49</sup> Dennett 2007, 89.

<sup>50</sup> Dennett 2007, 75, 90-95.

<sup>51</sup> Dennett 2007, 75-76.

Dennett seems to anticipate that his argument isn't watertight at this point. If he were confident that he has coherently rejected the mereological fallacy, he could have left the discussion at that point. But he puts forward what seems to be a 'backup' argument. He argues that Bennett and Hacker's mereological fallacy is a 'wholesale' argument, which fails to do justice to the details of the diversity of the theories they criticize,<sup>53</sup> which further leads them to misinterpret the theories they are out to criticize.<sup>54</sup> As he puts it,

They have one idea, the mereological fallacy, and they use it *wholesale*, without any consideration of the details. Each time they quote the offending passage—and they could have found a hundred times more instances of intentional stance attributions to brain subsystems—and then simply declare it nonsense because it commits their fallacy. Not once do they attempt to show that because of making this presumably terrible mistake the author in question is led astray into some actual error or contradiction. Who knew philosophy of neuroscience would be so easy?)<sup>55</sup>

So does Dennett affirm or deny in this passage that there is such a fallacy? I think that he is not unambiguous at this point. If there is no such fallacy, Bennett and Hacker's argument that (much of) neuroscience is nonsense completely fails. But Dennett's criticism in the above passage rather appears to agree that there is such a fallacy, but that Bennett and Hacker have not done enough to show in each case that it is an instance of the fallacy. But if that is the case and there is such a fallacy, Bennett and Hacker could still respond that the fact that they use it wholesale, without dwelling on each case, doesn't tell against the cogency of their argument, but simply shows that one would have to dwell on the details of each case, which would require a longer book, but would be possible in principle.

To sum up, the most severe problem with Dennett's argument is as follows. In his criticisms of Hacker, he claimed that both philosophers (a priori)

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<sup>52</sup> Dennett 2007, 87-89.

<sup>53</sup> Dennett 2007, 90-95.

<sup>54</sup> Dennett 2007, 93-95.

<sup>55</sup> Dennett 2007, 91; my emphasis.

and linguists (empirical) have (so far) not come up with the rules of language use. Only then would his arguments (v\*)-(vi\*) against Bennett and Hacker work. But then he seems to claim that *he* (Dennett) *can* show the rules.<sup>56</sup> But Dennett can only have it one of these two ways: the rules *cannot* be shown (his arguments (iv\*)-(v\*) stay intact, but (vi\*) fails), or the rules *can* be shown (his complete argument (iv\*)-(vi\*) fails). In both cases, he could not establish his conclusion. Worse, what Dennett has said against Hacker before with (iv\*)-(vi\*) now also applies to him—Dennett’s argument, if successful, would also apply to Dennett himself: *he too* is cognitively biased (iv\*); *he too* cannot account for areas of fuzziness (v\*); and therefore *he too* cannot claim to know the rules (vi\*). Saying that his investigation is ‘good’ anthropology doesn’t seem to help much, since (iv\*)-(vi\*) cannot be circumvented (if Dennett was correct about his claims in the first place).

#### 7.4 Hacker and Bennett’s reply

We’ll consider Bennett and Hacker’s response to Dennett only briefly, since their strategy is simply to repeat again what they have said earlier. That is, they repeat their account of nonsense which arises through the violation of the rules of language use, understood as the transgression of the bounds of sense, i.e. the boundary model that we have already seen to be deeply flawed earlier:

We are not prohibiting anything—only pointing out when conceptual incoherences occur in neuroscientific writings. We are not trying to stop anyone from extending usage in scientifically fruitful ways—only trying to ensure that such putative extensions do not transgress the bounds of sense through failure adequately to specify the novel use or through crossing the novel use with the old one.<sup>57</sup>

Bennett and Hacker try to answer Dennett’s objection to (v) in this passage. Does the answer work? I think Dennett would again say that they have given no account of ‘the bounds of sense,’ since he could repeat his point that they have not shown the rules that would make up such bounds.

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<sup>56</sup> Dennett 2007, 86-87.

<sup>57</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 152-153.

Equally, when Bennett and Hacker aim to reaffirm their case for the merological fallacy in the light of Dennett's criticisms, they try to answer the objection against their wholesale approach by saying this:

Our concern was with the use, by cognitive neuroscientists, of the common or garden psychological vocabulary (and other terms such as 'representation' and 'map') in specifying the explananda of their theories and in describing the explanans. For, as we made clear, neuroscientists commonly try to explain human beings' perceiving, knowing, believing, remembering, deciding by reference to parts of the brain perceiving, knowing, believing, remembering, and deciding. So we noted such remarks, made by leading neuroscientists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists [...]. These are not metaphorical uses. They are not bold extensions of terms, introducing new meanings for theoretical purposes. They are simply misuses of the common psychological (and semantic) vocabulary—misuses that lead to incoherence and various forms of nonsense—that we pointed out from case to case. There is nothing surprising about this.<sup>58</sup>

Again, it would be little short of a miracle if Dennett now bought into their restated doctrine. Of course, Bennett and Hacker must not mind whether Dennett agrees with their criticisms of neuroscience, but then again, the repetition of these doctrines does nothing to defuse the criticisms that what they are doing is something 'like an old-fashioned grammarian scolding people for saying "ain't" and insisting *you can't say that!* To people who manifestly *can* say that and know what they mean when they do.'<sup>59</sup>

So their response is more than unsatisfactory, and now is the time to connect their failure to defuse the objections with our discussion of the nonsense predicament.

## **7.5 Bennett and Hacker, and the nonsense predicament**

Let me start by saying that I share with Dennett his qualms about the role of Hacker's earlier account of nonsense in Bennett and Hacker's argument; but

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<sup>58</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 154-156.

<sup>59</sup> Dennett 2007, 89.

what I find problematic about that role comes from a completely different point of view. Consider what Bennett and Hacker say about the use of psychological expressions of human actions for activities of the brain:

We recognize when a person asks a question and when another answers it. But do we have any conception of what it would be for a brain to ask a question or answer one? These are all attributes of human beings. Is it a new discovery that brains also engage in such human activities? Or is it a linguistic innovation, introduced by neuroscientists, psychologists and cognitive scientists, extending the ordinary use of these psychological expressions for good theoretical reasons? Or, more ominously, is it a conceptual confusion? Might it be the case that there is simply no such thing as the brain's thinking or knowing, seeing or hearing, believing or guessing, possessing and using information, constructing hypotheses, etc., i.e. that these forms of words make no sense? But if there is *no such thing*, why have so many distinguished scientists thought that these phrases, thus employed, do make sense?<sup>60</sup>

Remember that Bennett and Hacker want to insist that nonsense is *simply* nonsense, like 'wrks swrk krws': 'nonsense is a form of words that *says nothing*, that *fails* to describe a possible state of affairs,' and 'one cannot mean a nonsense, since *there is nothing*, as it were, to mean.'<sup>61</sup> I agree with them that (i) 'nonsense says [...] nothing,' and I also agree with them that (ii) 'one cannot mean a nonsense,' since 'to mean' a nonsense would presuppose that nonsense still has something of a meaning or sense, and that would lead back to the nonsense paradox (PSN). But the disagreement I have with them is about (i') that a form of words is nonsense because it 'fails' to apply with some criterion of sense (for instance, 'for every *p*, if *p* doesn't describe a possible state of affairs, *p* is nonsense'), which they seem to presuppose; and (ii') the explanation that 'one cannot mean a nonsense, since there is nothing [...] to mean,' which makes it again seem that nonsense necessarily arises if *p* fails to be hooked up to some state of affairs.

Now more on the above passage from Bennett and Hacker. The core of

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<sup>60</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 18-19.

<sup>61</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 23; my emphases.



this passage is Bennett and Hacker's claim that sentences describing the activities of the brain using terms that are ordinarily used to describe human actions are (necessarily) nonsense. Their first example, which they discuss above, is sentences that involve talk of the brain's 'answering questions.' A sentence that Bennett and Hacker would classify as nonsense is

(AN) The brain answers the question of whether it is dangerous to walk on slippery ice with an increased level of neuronal activity.

About this sentence, Bennett and Hacker want to say that 'these forms of words make no sense' because 'there is simply no such thing'—there is 'nothing [...] to mean.' It would, however, make sense to say

(AM) The person answers the question of whether it is dangerous to walk on slippery ice with an increased level of neuronal activity.

This sentence would, according to Bennett and Hacker, make sense because in this case it is the person who is said to be answering the question, and, presumably, 'there is [...] such [a] thing' as a person answering a question—there is such a 'possible state of affairs.' One might try to block Bennett and Hacker's classification of (AN) as nonsense by saying that, clearly, (AN) could be a mere phenomenological description of what goes on in that situation, i.e. the brain increases its neuronal activity because of the danger of falling on slippery ice. But Bennett and Hacker anticipate that move, writing that

[t]he question we are confronting is a philosophical question, not a scientific one. It calls for conceptual clarification, not for experimental investigation. One cannot investigate experimentally whether brains do or do not think, believe, guess, reason, form hypotheses, etc. until one knows what it would be for a brain to do so, i.e. until we are clear about the meanings of these phrases and know what (if anything) *counts* as a brain's doing so and what sort of evidence supports the ascription of such attributes to the brain. (One cannot look for the poles of the earth until one knows what a pole is, i.e. what the expression 'pole' means, and also what counts as finding a pole of the earth. Otherwise, like Winnie-the-Pooh, one might embark on an expedition to the East Pole.) The moot question is: does

it make sense to ascribe such attributes to the brain? Is there any such thing as a brain's thinking, believing, etc. (Is there any such thing as the East Pole?)<sup>62</sup>

According to Bennett and Hacker, then, there is no 'such thing' as the brain's answer to the danger of falling on slippery ice. The brain doesn't answer anything at all, and it '*makes no sense*' to pretend that it does:

It is our contention that this application of psychological predicates to the brain *makes no sense*. It is not that as a matter of fact brains do not think, hypothesize and decide, see and hear, ask and answer questions, rather, it makes no sense to ascribe such predicates *or their negations* to the brain. The brain neither sees *nor is it blind*—just as sticks and stones are not awake, *but they are not asleep either*. The brain does not hear, but it is not deaf, any more than trees are deaf. The brain makes no decisions, but neither is it indecisive. Only what can decide, can be indecisive. So too, the brain cannot be conscious, only the living creature whose brain it is can be conscious—or unconscious. *The brain is not a logically appropriate subject for psychological predicates*. Only a human being and what behaves like one can intelligibly and literally be said to see or be blind, hear or be deaf, ask questions or refrain from asking.<sup>63</sup>

The core claim of this passage is the point that

(MFB) The brain is not a logically appropriate subject for psychological predicates.

And, according to Bennett and Hacker, this is a point that cannot be overturned by empirical research, since

[o]ur point, then, is a conceptual one. It makes no sense to ascribe psychological predicates (or their negations) to the brain, save metaphorically or metonymically. The resultant combination of words does not say something that is false, rather it says nothing at all, for it lacks sense. Psychological predicates are predicates that apply essentially to the whole living animal, not to its parts. It is not the eye (let alone the brain) that sees, but *we* see *with* our eyes (and we do not see *with* our brains, although without a brain functioning normally in respect of

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<sup>62</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 19.

<sup>63</sup> Bennett and Hacker, 21.

the visual system, we would not see). So too, it is not the ear that hears, but the animal whose ear it is. The organs of an animal are parts of the animal, and psychological predicates are ascribable to the whole animal, not to its constituent parts.<sup>64</sup>

Ok. So the point is ‘a conceptual one.’ That means that, efforts to the contrary, it cannot make sense to say that the brain ‘answers questions’? Why? Because, according to Bennett and Hacker, what the words ‘answers questions’ mean only applies to humans, but never to parts of humans, say the brain. This is their *mereological* point:

Mereology is the logic of part/whole relations. The neuroscientists’ mistake of ascribing to the constituent parts of an animal attributes that logically apply only to the whole animal we shall call ‘*the mereological fallacy*’ in neuroscience. The principle that psychological predicates which apply only to human beings (or other animals) as wholes cannot intelligibly be applied to their parts, such as the brain, we shall call ‘*the mereological principle*’ in neuroscience. Human beings, but not their brains, can be said to be thoughtful or to be thoughtless; animals, but not their brains, let alone the hemispheres of their brains, can be said to see, hear, smell and taste things; people, but not their brains, can be said to make decisions or to be indecisive.<sup>65</sup>

We have arrived at Bennett and Hacker’s mereological fallacy:

(MF) The part is not a logically appropriate subject for predicates that apply to the whole.

How can they say that (AM) makes sense, but (AN) doesn’t? They have identified the meaning of the predicate ‘to answer a question.’ And in (AN), it is not that Bennett and Hacker claim that these words have no meaning, but that the meaning they have somehow doesn’t fit the sentence—the meaning *clashes* with the meaning of the other parts of the sentence.

(MFS) The parts of a sentence are not logically appropriate subjects for predi-

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<sup>64</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 21-22.

<sup>65</sup> Bennett and Hacker 2007, 22.

cates that apply to a whole sentence.

It is appropriate only to say of a sentence that it makes sense (or doesn't). So, following this logic, one can never say that a part of a sentence is nonsense, because that would be to commit (MF), but one can only say of a whole sentence that it is nonsensical. But is that even possible?

Consider how Bennett and Hacker could flag (AN) as not making sense:

(ANN) It doesn't make sense to say that the brain answers the question of whether it is dangerous to walk on slippery ice with an increased level of neuronal activity.

Now what can Bennett and Hacker mean with (ANN)? According to (MFS), it is only appropriate to say of a sentence that it doesn't make sense. So if (MFS) holds, (ANN) does not make sense, since at least one part of this sentence (i.e. AN) is nonsense. We're back on familiar territory, since this will run into the nonsense predicament. Here's why. Consider this shorter version of (ANN):

(ANN\*) It doesn't make sense to say that (AN).

(AN) is a part of the whole sentence (ANN\*), and (ANN\*) says of a part of (ANN\*) that it doesn't make sense. So if (MFS), (ANN\*) itself does not make sense. But how can (ANN\*) say of (AN) that it doesn't make sense if (ANN\*) is itself nonsense? Have we again arrived at the paradox of nonsense? Yes. Consider the following:

- (1) If (AN) has been given no meaning, (ANN\*) contains a part to which no meaning has been given. Since a sentence is nonsense only if one of its parts has no meaning, (ANN\*) is nonsense as well (paradox of the regress of nonsense).
- (2) In order to make sense of (ANN\*), we would have to give a meaning to all of its parts. That would also involve giving a meaning to (AN). But then (ANN\*) would falsely say that (AN) makes no sense. Thus, if (ANN\*) makes sense, it is false (paradox of the sense of nonsense).

(3) Thus, if (AN) does not make sense, one cannot say that it does not make sense (paradox of the ineffability of nonsense).

Bennett and Hacker's argument leads to the paradox of nonsense. Because they proceed nevertheless as if their argument makes sense, they commit the nonsense fallacy. The nonsense predicament is inescapable.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter considered the question whether the argument from nonsense can show that neuroscience is nonsense. It was argued that it cannot, because of the nonsense paradox. But maybe nonsense can communicate philosophically interesting insights without being part of an argument, and even without being part of a significant sentence? Maybe a version of a Fregean view could solve the paradox of ineffability? Maybe such a view can be rescued after all? The next chapter puts forward a final criticism of the defense of such a view.

## 8. Can Nonsense Communicate?

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter conclusively deals with the question of whether nonsense can be used to communicate philosophical insights. The main goal of this chapter is a rebuttal of a recent objection by Roger White against the Wittgensteinian point that a nonsensical sentence elucidates nothing other than that it is nonsense—which is at the core of the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense.

White's objection is based on three examples of alleged nonsense, which are meant to underpin what one might call the *communicative property of nonsense* (CPN), which is a necessary premise of the doctrine of ineffability, which White attempts to defend. If that could be done, the cases would seem to generalize and bolster the view that nonsensical sentences can actually be used to communicate ineffable insights. And if that could be established, the objection would successfully undermine one of the core commitments of the Tractarian solution, which is to reject the point that a nonsensical sentence shows something over and above the fact that it is nonsense. If that route were successful, the doctrine of ineffability would be effectively rehabilitated.

This chapter argues that this objection is off target. The Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense is not irreconcilable with the principal question of how the *Tractatus* can communicate anything at all. Thus, the Tractarian solution could provide an adequate account of how certain propositions of the book—about the limits of thought, language, skepticism, nonsense, etc.—are to be recognized as nonsensical, while retaining that it does not make sense to say that nonsense can be understood and be used to communicate insights.

Section 8.2 poses White's principal question, which is a version of the Tractarian difficulty. Section 8.3 argues against White's claim that he can give a coherent account of the doctrine of ineffability. Section 8.4 discusses White's examples and argues that, in those instances too, White cannot make his case for *communing nonsense*—he fails to rehabilitate the doctrine of ineffability.

## 8.2 The principal question

White criticizes what I earlier called the Wittgensteinian view on a number of points. White's crucial objection is that 'the Achilles' heel' of such an account is that

it seems impossible [...] to give a coherent account of the way in which we are meant to come to see why the sentences of the *Tractatus* are to be regarded as nonsense.<sup>1</sup>

I don't think this is the case, and my aim in the rest of this chapter is to show that it is rather the other way round. Although White addresses this issue at length, he himself cannot provide an account of the way those propositions of the *Tractatus* that are nonsense—those about the limits of thought, language, skepticism, etc.—are to be recognized as the nonsense they are.

In the first chapter, it was shown that the discussion between the Fregean view, the Wittgensteinian view, and the Carnapian view revolves around the question of how to read the *Tractatus* in the face of the Tractarian difficulty: Wittgenstein's assertion that his propositions are to be recognized as nonsensical. The Wittgensteinian view answers this question that it does not make sense to assume more than one logical kind of nonsense, and thus that those propositions which are to be recognized as nonsense are *simply* nonsense.

White agrees that the above question is the point on which the discussion hinges. He gives a reformulation of this question (reformulated to serve his agenda of showing that nonsense can communicate understanding): 'How can a book, whose sentences are, on their author's own admission, nonsense, communicate anything at all?'<sup>2</sup> When White reasserts the Tractarian difficulty with this principal question, the Wittgensteinian view thus again answers that propo-

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<sup>1</sup> White 2011, 45. White's preferred terminology is different from the one I'm suggesting in this thesis. He distinguishes between 'orthodox' readings, what I call *the Carnapian view* or *the Fregean view* for the reasons given in the first chapter, and 'therapeutic' readings, what I call *the Wittgensteinian view* for the reasons given in the first chapter. In what follows, I'll stick to my established terminology.

<sup>2</sup> White 2011, 33.

sitions that are to be recognized as nonsensical cannot communicate anything except that they are nonsense.<sup>3</sup>

In the rest of this section, I discuss how White thinks the Wittgensteinian view instead has to answer this question, and how he himself attempts to respond to his principal question. I argue that White both misrepresents the Wittgensteinian view, and that he himself fails to give an answer that is not vulnerable to the charge that the Wittgensteinian view makes against the Fregean and Carnapian views. This charge still applies to him because he shares the same problems with previous attempts to rescue the Fregean view. I argue that his account both fails to circumvent the worries that the Wittgensteinian view has raised against the Fregean view, and that his objection against the Wittgensteinian view does not apply to the Wittgensteinian view, but rather applies to his own account. I argue further that White's objection is based on a serious misunderstanding of what the Wittgensteinian view is. The Wittgensteinian view can provide a sufficient answer to White's principal question. The Wittgensteinian view is able to account for why certain propositions of the *Tractatus*, of which it does not make sense to say that they can be understood, are to be recognized as nonsense. Therefore, White's objection, hopefully, will be shown to be misguided.

In his paper, White summarizes his main point as follows: 'My main purpose in this article is to establish one simple point—that 6.54 does not necessitate a [Wittgensteinian] reading of the rest of the book.'<sup>4</sup> And he also writes that

my principal concern in this article is to show that the interpretation [of the Wittgensteinian view] rests on a series of misrepresentations of what it is that the proponents of [Carnapian or Fregean] readings of the *Tractatus* are saying.<sup>5</sup>

So White's first point is the claim that the penultimate passage does not 'necessitate' the Wittgensteinian view. And White's second point is the claim that the

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that there is no positive insight. It is only if one disregards the insight that nonsense is only ever mere nonsense that one is prone to think that there can be no insight at all. When the Wittgensteinian view objects to positive insights, it is directed only against positive insights that feature the Carnapian or Fregean view.

<sup>4</sup> White 2011, 45.

<sup>5</sup> White 2011, 32.



Wittgensteinian view does misconstrue the Fregean view, which we'll consider now.

### 8.3 White's Fregean view

I'll take up White's second point first, and I'll argue that it is false. If that can be shown, it will follow from this discussion that White's first point fails too. Because, if the Wittgensteinian view does not misconstrue the Fregean view, then the Fregean view is untenable, and this would speak in favor of adopting the Wittgensteinian view. In this way, the penultimate passage would indeed suggest the Wittgensteinian view. Hence White's first point would be false too.

Consider first how White describes a Fregean reading:

[A Fregean] reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* runs along the following lines: philosophy is concerned with fundamental issues concerning the nature of logic, language, the relation of language to reality, and the 'essence of the world'. Reflection, however, on those very issues provides strong logical grounds for claiming that the answers to the questions which philosophy raises cannot be stated in language itself. Rather, philosophy is concerned with something that *shows itself* in the significant use of language, but that cannot be *said* or put into words. The body of the book is then concerned to specify precisely those features of reality that cannot be put into words and at the same time to bring out why they cannot be put into words. This automatically leads to the further reflection that this is, at least apparently, a self-defeating enterprise since both specifying these features of reality and arguing for them will at every turn involve one in attempting to say what, *ex hypothesi*, cannot be said. Hence the *Tractatus* will move inevitably to its final catastrophe, which is probably the most famous, and certainly most notorious, claim that is made by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*: the claim that he makes in the final paragraphs of the book that the sentences he has been advancing throughout the book are nonsensical.<sup>6</sup>

White himself holds, and wants to defend, this reading.<sup>7</sup> His reading is an in-

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<sup>6</sup> White 2011, 22. White calls the reading he is describing in this passage 'the most natural reading,' but it is obvious that he wants to characterize the outlines of the Fregean view.

<sup>7</sup> White 2006, 120.

stance of the Fregean view, because the crucial point of his reading is that Wittgenstein was concerned with putting forward (DSS)—the doctrine of what cannot be said but only shown.<sup>8</sup> Hence, White joins Hacker in his defense of (DSS). However, this makes his account vulnerable to the charge that it makes the *Tractatus* a self-destructive work that must condemn its own propositions as nonsense according to the ‘theory’ (or doctrine) that is expressed in it.<sup>9</sup> And the idea of a theory that must be first grasped and that then entails that the very propositions that express the theory are nonsensical is paradoxical.<sup>10</sup> From the description of his reading, which White gives in the passages I just quoted, it is clear enough that the Wittgensteinian view neither misconstrues the Fregean view, nor puts up a straw man. Therefore, White’s second point fails.

White nevertheless insists that

most of the energies of [Wittgensteinian] writers [...] are devoted to insisting on points which hardly anyone would deny, points that can readily be granted by their opponents. Above all, it would be only a careless thinker who would wish to say that there was such a thing as ‘substantial nonsense’—nonsense such that ‘its sense was senseless’, or whatever—or who would expound [a Fregean] reading of the *Tractatus* in such a way as to ascribe such an idea to Wittgenstein himself. If [a Fregean] reading does not require one to ascribe to Wittgenstein a conception of there being two kinds of nonsense, then there is very little argument being offered in favor of [a Wittgensteinian] reading.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> White (White 2011) gives six examples of something that cannot be said but only shown: (1) ‘[W]e cannot say what conditions the world would have to satisfy in order to be “logical”’ (25); (2) ‘[W]hen we talk of “comparing language with reality,” we are talking about something [...] which is *shown* by the way that we do in practice compare propositions with the world. But any attempt within language to give an informative description of the relation we are looking for when we seek to verify a particular proposition is doomed’ (26); (3) ‘[T]he opening paragraphs [of the *Tractatus*] are to be regarded as nonsensical sentences attempting to bring us to see something that, *on pain of contradiction* could not be said, but that was actually shown (but not said) by the way that sentences that *are* significant relate to reality’ (27; emphasis added); (4) ‘[The] common [logical] form [that every symbol possesses together with what it symbolizes] cannot itself be presented [...] [but] it manifests itself [...]’ (27); (5) ‘[W]hat we want to express by saying “There are objects” is something that cannot be said, but that is shown [...]’ (29); (6) ‘[T]he claim “There is only logical necessity” is [...] something that cannot be said, but which instead is shown [...]’ (30). See White 2006, 130.

<sup>9</sup> See Conant and Dain 2011, 71-72.

<sup>10</sup> Conant & Diamond 2004, 47.

<sup>11</sup> White 2011, 33.

White thus attempts to back up his second point by claiming that there is actually no one who would hold the views ascribed to the Fregean view. But the charge against adherents of the Fregean view is rather that their writings, if thought through, presuppose and work with, however unwittingly that might be, an underlying model of nonsense that is adequately described as a Fregean conception, as we have seen to be the case in Hacker's account before and in White's account now.<sup>12</sup>

Consider what White says about a sentence that he thinks is nonsensical. He says about this nonsensical sentence that we are able to ascribe to it a 'sense' that communicates 'something' that is 'impossible' to communicate.<sup>13</sup> Now if this is not already deeply troubling, the situation gets even more puzzling when White then goes on to describe a perfectly conceivable scenario, in which the sentence is used. Assertions like this make us suspicious that, *pace* what White says in the quotation above, there are indeed commentators (i.e. at least he and Hacker), who hold a version of the Fregean conception of nonsense, who are unwittingly committed to the strange idea of nonsense such that 'its sense [is] senseless.' And this is the case even if White aims to free himself from the commitment to this troubling notion. So again, White fails to achieve his second point, and he again cannot establish his claim that the Wittgensteinian view misconstrues the Fregean view, or that the Wittgensteinian view attacks a straw man.

Although I think that White's second point is off target, I will, for the sake of argument, play along and consider the alternative approach that he suggests, in order to see if he can establish his second point in this way. He writes:

[A]ll this strenuous polemic [of the Wittgensteinian view] is curiously beside the point. If we wish to convict someone of holding that there are two kinds of nonsense, we need to look elsewhere. The issue is actually simple: what [they] should be challenging is not the idea that there is substantial nonsense but the idea that they fail to distinguish from that—the idea that someone can maintain

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1 and 2 of this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> White 2011, 41.

that a sentence is simply nonsense but can simultaneously believe that one can, under appropriate circumstances, use that sentence to communicate. We need therefore to look directly at those places *where someone maintains* that they can communicate by uttering nonsense sentences. It is here that the discussion most obviously has purchase, and, if there is a case that needs answering, it is the following far simpler challenge to those who, like myself, believe that Wittgenstein was using nonsense sentences to convey philosophical insights, and to Frege who saw himself as forced into lapsing into nonsense in order to convey his distinction between concept and object.<sup>14</sup>

In order to see if White's strategy works, I will consider how he thinks one can use nonsensical sentences to communicate. To be sure, according to White, 'we do it all the time,' that is, communicate with nonsensical sentences—so it should be easily possible for White to come up with (everyday) examples of nonsense that we use all the time to communicate.<sup>15</sup> I'll turn to the actual examples that White gives in the next section, and, to anticipate, once we turn to these examples, what will emerge is that we neither use these examples 'all the time' nor are these examples nonsense. And this will be a huge drawback for White's account.

White has a number of commitments that make it difficult to see if they could be held in a single coherent account. He claims (i) that 'nonsense may be interpreted with the full austerity' that the Wittgensteinian view has argued for; (ii) but equally that 'it is possible to communicate philosophical insights by the use of sentences that are nonsense'; (iii) although he holds that there are no 'philosophically significant nonsense sentences'; and (iv) he also says that he is committed to 'Carnapian "violation of syntax", "category mistakes", and the like.'<sup>16</sup> He writes that

[c]ertainly in [Frege and commentators on Frege] there is a contemplation of the use of '*logically improper*', or *nonsensical sentences to convey an insight*, and what is more the need to resort to such nonsense sentences in order to convey that insight, because *no meaningful use of language could successfully capture*

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<sup>14</sup> White 2011, 35; my emphases.

<sup>15</sup> White 2011, 37.

<sup>16</sup> White 2011, 37.

*it*. From this, it might appear, and has appeared to some of the writers in the current debate, that Frege is thereby automatically committed to holding that there is substantial, or philosophically illuminating nonsense. But that would be an illusion. *Frege wishes to convey an 'ineffable' insight*; to do so he is forced to resort to sentences that are on his own admission inappropriate to those insights and that will include sentences that are nonsense. But this is very different from him, absurdly, ascribing a sort of sense to these nonsense sentences.<sup>17</sup>

Now it is difficult to see how White's description is not what I called a Fregean view. Thus it is also difficult to see how White can establish his bottom line that no one is committed to the Fregean view or to the Fregean conception of nonsense, and equally that there is only simply nonsense, since he is also committed, as we have seen in the above quotations, to the paradoxical claim that we use nonsense all the time to communicate ineffable philosophical insights that are impossible to communicate.<sup>18</sup> Thus, his account begins to look very incoherent: he actually bites the bullet that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, and that they are simply nonsense, but he also holds that we use those simply nonsensical sentences all the time to communicate ineffable insights.

White now has to explain how this communication is possible, and what 'it' is that is being communicated. His answer is that which the Fregean view has usually given. The communication is made possible by 'showing,' and what is communicated is ineffable.<sup>19</sup> But, like the Fregean view usually does, he goes on to explain what 'it' is that is ineffable<sup>20</sup>—which is self-refuting.

White, however, thinks he has successfully rescued his account of the charges that the Wittgensteinian view has put forward. He writes that '[a]t the very least, nothing said by [the Fregean view] shows that what I have just sketched is incoherent.'<sup>21</sup> But what makes White think that this is the case, given that he has just said that Wittgenstein followed the Fregean conception of nonsense, which is clearly an incoherent conception? Thus White's view is indeed

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<sup>17</sup> White 2011, 36; my emphases.

<sup>18</sup> White 2011, 36-38, 59.

<sup>19</sup> White 2006, 132-133; 2011, 25-30.

<sup>20</sup> White 2011, 41.

<sup>21</sup> White 2011, 44.

incoherent, since it is a plain contradiction of what White had said earlier (in the passage I quoted at the beginning of this section), where he himself mentions that Fregean accounts, such as his own, make the *Tractatus* a self-defeating work. Nevertheless, White attempts to rescue his claim that his reading does not push Wittgenstein into incoherence, by saying that

[Fregean] reading[s] of the *Tractatus* do [...] not, as many commentators have thought, convict Wittgenstein of incoherence. Wittgenstein could [...] maintain that, since he was concerned with what could only be shown, his attempt to bring to our attention what could be shown necessarily involved him in continually using nonsensical sentences to do so.<sup>22</sup>

In White's account, 'Wittgenstein [...] is using nonsense sentences to draw our attention to that which [...] he could not [...] say.'<sup>23</sup> But instead, 'we are concerned with things that, if Wittgenstein knows them, are also at least implicitly *known* to every competent user of language.'<sup>24</sup> It is puzzling what this implicit *knowledge* is: since White seems to reject 'ineffable truths,'<sup>25</sup> but not ineffable insights, and he also rejects ascribing to nonsense the status of being a proposition,<sup>26</sup> there seems to be not much room left for 'knowledge.' Furthermore, it is because of the incoherent Fregean idea that a passage of the *Tractatus* is nonsense *because* of the reasons that something is nonsense given in that passage that the Fregean view has to be rejected.

And this idea is clearly at work in White's account:

There are a large number of sentences of the *Tractatus* that [...] are in this way directly 'self-refuting'—sentences that apparently lay down formal conditions that any significant proposition must satisfy, but where the propositions themselves could not satisfy the very conditions they posit. The intriguing question is whether 6.54 is not, on reflection, as self-refuting as any other proposition of the *Tractatus*. Now the fact that a sentence is 'self-refuting' in this way does not

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<sup>22</sup> White 2011, 45.

<sup>23</sup> White 2011, 44.

<sup>24</sup> White 2011, 44; my emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> White 2006, 133.

<sup>26</sup> White 2011, 59n2.

prove it is nonsense. All that can be concluded from such self-refutation is that if the proposition is significant then it is necessarily false. After all, there are a large number of sentences—‘Every sentence is nonsense’, ‘Every significant sentence is in the passive voice’ ... —that have the requisite power of self-refutation, but where that does not show that the propositions in question are nonsense, simply that they are blatant falsehoods. We seem to be saying that it is only in so far as we give credence [to a proposition in question] that it reveals itself to be nonsense! The notion of a sentence that ‘says of itself that it is nonsense’ still remains an elusive and unsatisfactory notion.<sup>27</sup>

As adherents of the Fregean view usually do, White thinks that he can save his account from the notion that a proposition says of itself that it is nonsense by invoking the device of showing. He then argues that a proposition does not say of itself that what it says is nonsensical, but it *shows* that what it *attempts* to say is nonsensical. White writes:

[T]he crucial element in what I have said is that it is precisely because the sentences of the *Tractatus* can, for all their nonsensicality, draw attention to what shows itself, that they succeed in finally leading the reader to recognize them themselves as nonsense. [...] Wittgenstein first leads us to see that since what we have seen can only be shown, the sentences which led us there cannot be regarded as significant propositions, but as sentences condemned as nonsense by what they themselves have led us to see.<sup>28</sup>

White’s objection was that the Wittgensteinian view has no plausible story to tell about how one should recognize certain propositions of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical. His own story, however, makes use of the problematic distinction between saying and showing. Thus, his first point fails too. Because, since he cannot establish his second point, it follows that the charges that the Wittgensteinian view has made against the Fregean view apply with all their force.

In effect, now his own account has to make some efforts to tell us why certain propositions of the book are to be recognized as nonsensical. In order to do so, White gives some examples to do this heavy work for him, i.e. to make plau-

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<sup>27</sup> White 2011, 57.

<sup>28</sup> White 2011, 58-59.

sible how we could use nonsensical sentences all the time to communicate. It is now White's account that is under pressure. Although he claims that his account is not incoherent, this section raised some worries that it is highly unlikely this will turn out to be true.

I now turn to White's counterexamples against the Wittgensteinian view. White thinks that these counterexamples can refute the claim that it does not make sense to say that nonsense is understandable.

#### **8.4 White's counterexamples**

White wants to agree with two things that the Wittgensteinian view says about the *Tractatus*. First, he explicitly wants to endorse that there is only one kind of nonsense, mere nonsense, and that those propositions of the book that are nonsense are such mere nonsense. Second, another crucial point of agreement is that he himself finds the Fregean conception of nonsense quite 'bizarre' (although the last passage suggested that it is not clear at all how White's account differs from this conception). Given that agreement, the burden of proof actually falls on White, who now has to make reasonable how the merely nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* can show all those things he wants them to—because White is not satisfied that nonsense can make us recognize nothing beyond the fact that it is nonsense.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, White still has to explain the difficult question: How can nonsense convey anything other than that it is nonsense? In order to do so, White attempts to establish the thesis that nonsense can communicate something that can be understood. White gives three examples, to make plausible how this is supposed to go.

Let's see if his plan works out. White's counterexamples, which are supposed to refute the Wittgensteinian view, are the following:

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<sup>29</sup> See White 2011, 25-30.



(1) Deep as Australia. If there was anything deeper, he'd be it.<sup>30</sup>

(2) Bh8 I like this move a lot. Bj10 would have been even stronger.<sup>31</sup>

(3) Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle.<sup>32</sup>

White discusses the first two of these counterexamples in some detail, and mentions the third rather in passing. He believes that all three of his counterexamples have the universal psychological effect that, if one reads or hears them, one thinks that they are nonsense. The Wittgensteinian view inclines to differ.<sup>33</sup> It is hard to imagine how these examples could have such a universal effect, since they, at least *prima facie*, appear to be perfectly fine sentences, and it is hard to see why they should evoke the reaction that White thinks they would.

In what follows, I'll argue that White's counterexamples are not necessarily nonsensical, but can be meaningful, when considered in the context where they are actually used. The plan is to consider this context of their use to determine if they have a meaning; because if anything, they seem to be taken out of this context only to evoke the feeling that they have been given no determinate meaning. That is, one may have problems seeing the symbols in those signs, but once they are considered in their original context, it might be difficult to see why they should be regarded as nonsense. Thus I'll take Wittgenstein's advice in the *Tractatus* that '[i]n philosophy the question, "What do we actually use this word or this proposition for?" repeatedly leads to valuable insights.'<sup>34</sup> To see if White's counterexamples make sense, one first has to look if they have a sense in the context where they are used.

### ***White's great expectations?***

Let's do that then, and see if these counterexamples, when considered in their context of use, contain only signs that have been given a meaning, or if some of

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<sup>30</sup> White 2011, 37.

<sup>31</sup> White 2011, 41.

<sup>32</sup> White 2011, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Conant and Dain 2011.

<sup>34</sup> *TLP*, 6.211.

them don't. The first counterexample is from a Dickens novel, *Great Expectations*. Pip, the main character of the novel, is inquiring of Wemmick about a third person, called Jaggers. Pip then asks Wemmick if Jaggers is very skillful, eliciting the following:

‘Deep’, said Wemmick, ‘as Australia’. Pointing with his pen at the office floor, to express that Australia was understood, for the purposes of the figure, to be symmetrically on the opposite spot of the globe. ‘If there was anything deeper’, added Wemmick, bringing his pen to paper, ‘he’d be it’.<sup>35</sup>

And then the conversation goes on. So the situation is actually straightforward. Pip and Wemmick are talking about Jaggers, and Pip asks Wemmick if Jaggers is very skillful, to which Wemmick replies with the above answer. ‘Deep as Australia. If there was anything deeper, he’d be it,’ accompanied by Wemmick’s gestures such as pointing at the office floor to make sure that Pip understands that, the way Wemmick wants to use his words, the notion of ‘depth’ is applied to ‘skill’ in this sentence.

The first thing to notice here is that it is obvious that there is communication going on in this example—both between Pip and Wemmick in the novel and between the propositions of the novel and the reader. It’s not the case that Dickens could have said that ‘[m]y propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical,’ as Wittgenstein says of his propositions. This would have been a very odd way for Dickens to put it, to say the least. As I read Dickens here, he uses an elaborate form of language to convey that Jaggers is *very* skillful. Wemmick may have just answered Pip’s question with a simple affirmative ‘yes’ or ‘he is indeed highly skillful.’ But, as Jaggers is described immediately before the passage quoted above, it is clear that his character is more adequately described by a carefully crafted *metaphor* such as the one that Wemmick actually uses.<sup>36</sup>

This brings us to White’s discussion of metaphor and figurative speech.

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<sup>35</sup> Dickens 1996, chap. XXIV, 197.

<sup>36</sup> There are also more subtle ways in which Wemmick’s utterance can be understood, which would involve explaining much more of the plot of the story.

White's argument is supposed to show that there is a distinction between literal and figurative speech, with only the former being meaningful, while the latter is said to be nonsensical. If White could establish that this is the case—that is, that his example from *Great Expectations* is mere nonsense, *because* it is a metaphor, which lacks literal meaning but that can nonetheless communicate something—White's first step to establishing the conclusion that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are mere nonsense but can nonetheless communicate something would be achieved. I expressed my doubts about White's first example being nonsense, but it will become clear only with the second and third example, when White explains his reasoning for why his examples are nonsense, that his account depends on the problematic Fregean assumptions about the meaning and use of language. Therefore, I now move on to White's second example.

### ***The chess case***

White's second example is a quote from David Bronstein, a famous chess player and chess writer. In the game that White quotes from, Bronstein pulls his bishop from e5 to h8, in order to retain control over the a1-h8 diagonal.<sup>37</sup> Although e5 would have done as well, the bishop on h8 is tactically better, because this spot comes with an increase in safety; but, in fact, the bishop retains all the power on the diagonal. It is this move that plays an integral part in Bronstein's winning that game. As Bronstein is said to have commented on his move, 'Bh8 I like this move a lot. Bj10 would have been even stronger.' However, j10 is not a spot on a conventional chessboard, which ends with h8. J10 is an imagined example for a position that would be beyond the spots on a conventional chessboard. It would therefore be even more safe and powerful than h8 is already. What Bronstein is in effect doing with his comment is drawing our attention to the fact that his move could only be outmatched by a move that would require positioning the bishop 'outside' the game, so to speak. Bronstein's comment is meant to strengthen his earlier remark that he is satisfied with his move Bh8.

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<sup>37</sup> I'll discuss the example as given by White, though he doesn't specify where exactly he gets it from. I'll discuss the (only) example that I could find that resembles White's quote in the next passage.

White thinks Bronstein's remark is nonsense for two reasons. First, the position j10 does not exist on a conventional, real chessboard. So 'Bj10' does not *refer*, and *therefore* has no meaning. Second, according to the rules of chess, 'Bj10' is not an adequate move in a chess game, so it *violates the rules* of chess, and is *consequently* nonsense.

If we look at Wittgenstein's discussion of nonsense in the *Tractatus*, however, the Wittgensteinian conception is not committed to a theory of the bounds of sense, according to which a 'lack of reference' or a 'violation of rules' would determine if *p* is meaningful or nonsense. Instead, the Wittgensteinian conception tries to rule out the ill-founded notion that there ever could be limits the transgression of which would require such a 'policing' of language.<sup>38</sup>

Thus we see that the crux of the matter is the notion of 'meaning' here. While White thinks that Wittgenstein must demand reference or accordance with rules as *criteria* that determine if *p* has meaning, the Wittgensteinian view wants to disagree that this is the correct way to understand Wittgenstein on meaning and use. According to its adherents, one understands 'meaning' consonant with Wittgenstein in the just quoted passages as occurring if there is a clear use for the combination of signs in question. Since if a proposition is nonsense, this can only be because we have not determined a clear use for it. As before with the first example, the second example seems to fail to be mere nonsense. Again, White cannot establish his principal claim that nonsensical sentences can communicate after all.

## **Another chess case**

In order to back up the objection against White, consider another chess example from one of Bronstein's games.<sup>39</sup> In this game, Bronstein faces Julio Kaplan. Close to the end of their game, after Kaplan had moved his rook to f5, Bronstein

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<sup>38</sup> See *TLP*, 3.3, 3.326, 5.4733.

<sup>39</sup> It's worth considering this example primarily because, in this game, Bronstein adds an interesting comment. Also, it was impossible for the author of this thesis to determine the location of the quotation that White uses in his paper. White himself gives no reference for his quotation. So I think an actual quotation might be better for considering the motives for Bronstein's remark.

moves his bishop from g5 to e6. Bronstein seems to have been quite happy about his move. In his book, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, he cheerfully comments on this move: 'Such a lovely bishop!' And he adds that '[i]f there had been a few even safer squares further back along the diagonal, I would have retreated him still further!'<sup>40</sup> Although Bronstein, in his comments on that game, mentions that he thinks his opponent has made the 'losing move' five moves earlier,<sup>41</sup> move 21 is crucial for Bronstein, which is reflected in his comment on this move. In what follows, I'll mainly be concerned with investigating what Bronstein could probably have meant with the latter part of his comment, i.e. the conditional '[i]f there had been [...], I would have [...].'

Bronstein's move, Bh6, achieves a twofold aim for him. The situation he faces is that Kaplan's rook threatens his bishop. If Bronstein does not want to lose his bishop, he either has to move the bishop away, or shield it with another playing piece. Since the latter option is not available for Bronstein, he has to choose the former. But Bronstein also does not want to give up the c1-h6 diagonal, because Kaplan's king is currently at c1. If one takes a look at the final picture of the game, one recognizes that Bronstein's calculation about the significance of the c1-h6 diagonal is correct. Together with the rook, which puts pressure on the d1-d8 vertical, the bishop on h6 forces Kaplan to resign the game.<sup>42</sup>

There seems to be no significant difference between this example from Bronstein's book and the one White chooses from Bronstein.<sup>43</sup> In White's example, the bishop moves from e5 to h8, while in this example the bishop moves from g5 to h6. The 'imagined' square ('outside' the chessboard) is j10 in White's

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<sup>40</sup> Bronstein and Fürstenberg 1999, 180.

<sup>41</sup> With move 15, Nxe4 (Bronstein & Fürstenberg 1999, 180).

<sup>42</sup> Last move (Bronstein): Rhd1 c4; Kaplan resigns.

<sup>43</sup> I don't want to claim that White's example, and the one that I quoted from Bronstein's book, are exactly alike. Here are similarities and dissimilarities that are worth mentioning: Bronstein wins (applies to both examples); Bronstein's move with his bishop plays an important part in winning the game (applies to both examples); the bishop has a central position on the diagonal, and is then moved to a more distant one (applies to both examples). But: Bishop moves from e5 to h8 ≠ bishop moves from g5 to h6; Bishop controls a1-h8 diagonal ≠ bishop controls c1-h6 diagonal; Bronstein imagines the bishop as being positioned 'outside' a regular chessboard (applies to both examples); imagined square j10 ≠ j8. Thus the difference is only minor and can be disregarded for our purposes. What this suggests, however, is that Bronstein's move and his comments seem to work on the same structural schema. In fact, they could as well be the same.

example, and could be j8 (for instance) in this example. As far as I can see, the ‘few even safer squares further back along the diagonal’ would be beyond the scope of the traditional chessboard.

It is pretty clear that Bronstein is saying ‘if there would be, but (unfortunately) there are not.’ White thinks Bronstein does not want to say, ‘I have calculated this move on an extended 10x10 chessboard, and the best move on an extended chessboard would be to move the bishop “further back along the diagonal”.’ As White puts this,

But even if we in [a hyperbolic] way regard [Bronstein’s comment] as if it were a proposition with a sense, *we can give no coherent account of what that sense would be*. It is clear that Bronstein is imagining a move in the actual chess game, played on an 8 by 8 board. He is not, e.g., saying, ‘If this chess position occurred on a 10 by 10 chessboard, B<sub>j10</sub> would be the best move’: no one considers that possibility at all, and it is completely irrelevant—who knows, on the enlarged board B<sub>j10</sub> might be an outright blunder. The only ‘sense’ we could ascribe to this sentence would be one in which per *impossibile* the Bishop would be envisaged as moving two squares off the board while remaining on the 8 by 8 board.<sup>44</sup>

What I want to say is that White’s claim that ‘we can give no coherent account of what that sense would be’ can be challenged. It is possible to give a meaning to Bronstein’s utterance—we have indeed already given a meaning to Bronstein’s utterance when we first read and understand the fictive scenario it invites us to imagine.

White’s example is supposed to support his thesis that ‘we use nonsense to communicate all the time.’ I find it rather puzzling that he chooses examples from a novel and a professional chess match. Both are cases that seem to be rather unsuited for the task of showing that we use nonsense to communicate ‘all the time.’<sup>45</sup> Providing an everyday example would make White’s case much stronger at this point.

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<sup>44</sup> White 2011, emphases added.

<sup>45</sup> The same applies to White’s third example.

The worry is that White has a very artificial conception of what ‘nonsense’ and ‘communication’ might be, which forces him to consider examples that are rather remote from the ordinary use we make of our words.

White’s chess example has an important feature that ordinary language does not: tournament chess is played according to *fixed rules*, and even a creative player such as Bronstein cannot change that fact (at least not while he is playing a tournament).<sup>46</sup> If Bronstein made a move in one of his tournaments that did not comply with the tournament rules, he would simply get disqualified. But that should not hide the fact that, when Bronstein comments on his games above, he has already played those games, and he is consequently *not bound to obey the rules* of the tournaments in his *informal* comments.

The Wittgensteinian view has insisted that nonsense should be seen in the sense of our everyday notion of ‘not making sense.’ But in both White’s Bronstein example and the one I considered above, Bronstein indeed does make sense. And White too does not want to attack that we understand what Bronstein communicates. But why then say that what Bronstein utters is nonsense?

Here is how White explains why Bronstein’s utterance should be considered nonsense:

The first point to make about this annotation is that it contains a sentence that is demonstrably nonsense—‘austerely’ nonsensical, if you like. The explanation of the chess notation sketched above was complete, and that explanation assigned no meaning to the letter ‘j’ or numeral ‘10’.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the reason for White’s dismissing his chess example as nonsense proceeds on the assumption that Bronstein must, even in his informal comments, comply with the tournament rules that specify which moves are allowed, if he wants to

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<sup>46</sup> The rules are fixed such that they have not changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though there was a historical development before, and many new chess variants have evolved.

<sup>47</sup> White 2011, 41. The ‘explanation of the chess notation sketched above,’ which ‘was complete,’ runs as follows: ‘In algebraic chess notation, the ranks and files of the chessboard are designated by the numbers 1 to 8, and the files a to h (with, e.g., White’s Queen Rook on the square a1). A chess move is then designated by the name of the piece to be moved, followed by the name of the square that is its destination. This, with slight elaborations for castling, resolving ambiguities and the like, gives a complete account of the way to specify a move in chess’ (White 2011, 40).

make any sense at all. If he does not conform, he simply violates these rules, transgresses the bounds of sense, and nonsense is the result.

But is this plausible at all? I want to argue that it is not, because the rules of the tournament, which determine if a move is made correctly or incorrectly in the game, do not determine if a comment on the game is nonsense. The rules of the tournament have nothing to do with meaning. White's claim that the 'fixed' or complete rules, as he prefers, determine the meaning of Bronstein's comments is simply false.

Consider the following passage from the *Investigations*:

Doesn't the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw. And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along. [T]he application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules.<sup>48</sup>

My worry is that, although White, of course, knows this line of thought, he deliberately chooses an example where there is a 'complete' set of rules which determine all future applications. The rules are said to determine *in every future case* if an application would be legitimate or not. But this set of rules only determines if a move is correct or incorrect in the game, and it does not determine if a comment on the game is nonsense.

Another problem for this example is that one can easily counter it by saying that we just do not use language in that manner. So if White wants to prove that 'we use nonsense to communicate all the time,' he has to deliver an example of nonsense which we in fact use all the time to communicate; otherwise he has to accept the fact that his artificial examples cannot prove that claim. It is simply

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<sup>48</sup> *PI*, 83.



not true that we use some definite set of rules to determine if some utterance fails to comply with those rules, and is *hence* nonsense.

The claim that ‘Bronstein is “violating” the tournament rules of chess with his informal comment, and hence his utterances are nonsense’ seems like a highly questionable *criterion* for deciding if Bronstein’s comment, which is not made in a ‘formal’ mode and is not bound to the rules of the tournament, has a meaning. If Bronstein had actually made his imagined move in the tournament, it would clearly puzzle us; that is, we would not understand what Bronstein wanted to do with his ‘move’ in the first place. Bronstein’s ‘move’ would simply be disqualified. Again, this has nothing to do with linguistic meaning whatsoever.

However, in the informal mode of his comments on his game, one can easily adjust to the conditions of the situation that Bronstein evokes. ‘If there had been a few even safer squares further back along the diagonal, I would have retreated him still further!’ I don’t think that anyone has any problems giving a meaning to this utterance, and it is exactly because one can easily adjust to the ‘new rules’ that Bronstein is implicitly giving in his comment, and see the meaning of the combination of those symbols.

### ***Grammatical deviance***

White mentions his third counterexample, which is supposed to show that mere nonsense can be understood and can communicate something, in connection with his first example from the Dickens novel. It is taken from Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. The context of the example is as follows. Henry Bolingbroke, who has been exiled by King Richard II, is met by his uncle, the Duke of York, who is loyal to the King. Bolingbroke addresses the Duke: ‘My Gracious uncle—’ but the Duke interrupts him: ‘Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle; I am no traitor’s uncle, and that word “grace”, in an ungracious mouth, is but profane.’<sup>49</sup> White takes this, like his other examples, to be sentences that are ‘simply non-

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<sup>49</sup> Shakespeare 2002, 299.

sense,' because they are 'grossly grammatically deviant.'<sup>50</sup>

According to White, we frequently communicate using nonsensical sentences. White thinks that the distinction between communication with nonsensical sentences and communication with meaningful sentences is such that what is communicated can be expressed using the same sentence in the latter case, but not in the former case. In this sense, the ladder has to be thrown away, once the communication has been successful, as White puts it.

White claims that, in the case of communication with a nonsensical sentence, one cannot simply repeat the sentence in order to express what is communicated. That is, if one were asked what is communicated with the sentence 'Deep as Australia. If there was anything deeper, he'd be it,' it would be an insufficient answer to say that it is 'Deep as Australia. If there was anything deeper, he'd be it' that is communicated. However, the same applies to non-metaphorical and meaningful use of language. To take an everyday example, if one is asked what is communicated with 'I have no milk in the fridge,' it would also be insufficient to answer that it is 'I have no milk in the fridge' that is being communicated. Thus this is an insufficient criterion for determining if a sentence has no meaning.

White's distinction between communication with meaningful and communication with nonsensical sentences is unhelpful, both in its everyday use, and as a technicality to distinguish between nonsensical and meaningful propositions. In the everyday kind of scenario, it is implausible that anyone would let me get away with my description of what is communicated with 'I have no milk in the fridge.' As part of a theory of meaning, it seems that White's distinction does not apply to philosophical sentences in the sense that White wants it to. For example, take any sentence *p* of a philosophical theory. Asked to describe what is communicated with this sentence, it seems again insufficient to reply that it is '*p*' that is being communicated. Thus it turns out that White's criterion makes *any* sentence nonsensical, which makes it a compelling case that this alleged criteri-

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<sup>50</sup> White 2011, 38.

on is unhelpful.

Furthermore, White wants to say that, in the case of nonsensical sentences, what is communicated cannot be expressed with the very same sentence—it is ‘something else.’ But what is ‘it’? It is to this question that White *must* give a Fregean answer, which is highly problematic. It is something ‘hidden’ from us, something ‘ineffable.’ But we have already seen how this quite perplexing notion doesn’t make any sense. What is more, I seriously doubt that we should hold on to this notion—it is completely empty. As White puts it in another context, it’s a ‘weasel word.’ Against White, Cora Diamond’s initial objection still applies: still holding onto this empty notion of ineffable insights after having thrown away the ladder is what she aptly calls ‘chickening out.’<sup>51</sup>

White’s objection against the Wittgensteinian view was that it is impossible for this view to give an account of how the propositions of the *Tractatus* are to be recognized as nonsensical. My reply was that it is rather White’s own account that fails to do so. His diagnosis rests on a serious misunderstanding of what the Wittgensteinian view *must* be. White thinks that the Wittgensteinian view must hold that the *Tractatus* contains a theory, which one first has to grasp, which then gives the problematic result that its own sentences are nonsensical. It is this misunderstanding of what the Wittgensteinian view has said that makes it possible for White to formulate his objection in the first place, his objection being that the view is incoherent:

What is supposed to happen runs along the following lines. One is first seduced into thinking that Wittgenstein is developing an account of the relation between language and reality, although what he is putting forward is nonsense. One then comes to realize that on the theory’s own terms it is nonsense, and this has the effect of one coming to see that any attempt to develop a philosophical theory of the relation between language and reality is doomed, and therefore abandoning the attempt to construct any such theory. What is perplexing here is that, for this to work, the nonsense ‘theory’ must be seen as having ‘terms’, so that the theory can be seen as nonsense on the theory’s terms. If there is only the illusion of hav-

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<sup>51</sup> Diamond 1991.

ing understood the theory, there is only the illusion that the theory has revealed itself to be nonsense. When [a Wittgensteinian reader] writes that ‘on the theory’s own apparent telling, there can be no such theory’, a ‘theory’s *apparent* telling’ can only *apparently* imply that there can be no such theory. If what is meant is that the theory is in some way self-refuting, or that we are *actually* presented with a theory which implies any such theory to be impossible, that simply shows the theory to be false, not nonsense. We have in fact been given no good reason to suppose that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense. It is difficult to avoid the impression that this is the point at which [Wittgensteinian] readings make [...] Wittgenstein ‘chicken out’: the sentences of the *Tractatus* are to be given sufficient sense to inform us of their nonsensicality.<sup>52</sup>

I think that White’s ‘description’ misconstrues the Wittgensteinian view. It would be very strange for the Wittgensteinian view to proceed as White describes it, given that the Wittgensteinian view rejects precisely the idea that, when reading the *Tractatus*, the reader first has to grasp a ‘theory,’ which then entails that the propositions that put forward the theory are nonsensical.

What is instead going on here is that White is attempting to use one of the objections that the Wittgensteinian view has convincingly made against the Fregean view against the Wittgensteinian view itself; but this begs the question. It is not with the Wittgensteinian view that we get the picture as painted by White, but with the Fregean view. It is according to the Fregean view that the *Tractatus* features a theory that has the result that its propositions are nonsense. The Wittgensteinian view, however, rejects precisely this construal of how nonsense is to be recognized.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, it is White’s own account that makes use of such a model, which he then attempts to rescue from contradiction by invoking (DSS).

The Wittgensteinian view has, contrary to what White claims, already given a plausible answer of how we are to recognize certain propositions of the book as nonsensical. But this does not involve a theory that makes its own propositions nonsensical. Rather, it is the recognition that no possible meaning one could give to certain propositions of the *Tractatus* is the one searched for that

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<sup>52</sup> White 2011, 45-46.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Diamond and Conant 2004.

leads one to recognize these propositions of the book as nonsensical. Contrary to this, White thinks that it is the Fregean view that is fully Wittgensteinian at this point.<sup>54</sup> He writes that '[o]nce we allow the idea that Wittgenstein may use nonsense sentences to draw attention to features of language and reality, then [a Fregean] account runs along the following lines':

Wittgenstein wishes to bring us to see something that is manifest in our significant use of language, but that cannot be properly described by the sentences of that language. He therefore presents an account that apparently describes those features in order to bring us to appreciate 'what can be shown but not said'. Once he succeeds, once we 'understand Wittgenstein', we both recognize those features and why they cannot be put into words. We therefore realize that the sentences that led us to that point could not describe what we had been brought to see, and it is because they had been given no other sense that would be relevant in the context of the *Tractatus* that we realize that they are nonsense. It is precisely as baffled attempts to say something that can only be shown that they are exposed as nonsense.<sup>55</sup>

It is precisely this view that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense *because* they attempt to convey something that cannot be said, *because* they fail to have meaning, *because* they illegitimately express something that cannot be expressed, that the Wittgensteinian view rejects. And it is this view that the Wittgensteinian view has dubbed 'the Fregean conception of nonsense': the view that a proposition is nonsense because it fails to have a sense, because its parts are illegitimately combined. Thus, the Wittgensteinian view does not misconstrue the Fregean view, and this view indeed unwittingly commits to the Fregean conception of nonsense.

White appeals that '[w]e need a reading that takes seriously the idea that, whether or not the reader realizes it, from the very outset Wittgenstein is self-consciously using sentences that are nonsensical [i.e. mere nonsense].'<sup>56</sup> Well, if we may ask, is this not precisely what the Wittgensteinian view provides us with?

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<sup>54</sup> White 2011, 46.

<sup>55</sup> White 2011, 46.

<sup>56</sup> White 2011, 57.

Since White has falsely construed what the Wittgensteinian view must hold, he claims that it is precisely to the question ‘What leads us to recognize that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense?’ that the Wittgensteinian view ‘can give no adequate answer.’<sup>57</sup> But the Wittgensteinian view has already answered that question, yet White does not recognize this. And the answer that the Wittgensteinian view has given is actually better than White’s own.

Given White’s points of agreement, I have proposed that it would be a misunderstanding of the Wittgensteinian view that it must hold that all of the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical. If one holds that *a certain* proposition is nonsensical, however, a Wittgensteinian has to defend that it is only in the sense of mere nonsense that this sentence is nonsensical. Regarding White, we have to remind him that, if he adheres to his own conditions, he has to give up on the idea that he can both claim that some propositions are mere nonsense, and then go on to explain what they mean. He has to drop either his views about nonsense—which he does not want to do, in fear of the bizarre Fregean conception of nonsense—or he has to give up his attempts to explain what sense nonsensical sentences have. In Wittgenstein’s words, ‘When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless.’<sup>58</sup>

Thus, White’s counterexamples cannot fulfill his aim to undermine the Wittgensteinian view. It is questionable why these counterexamples should be seen as mere nonsense, and it is even more questionable that they should be such because of the reasons White gives. Rather, if we consider their use in the original context, they have a determinate use and meaning. Consequently, White’s comparison between those examples and the sentences of the *Tractatus* does not apply.

White’s examples do not work analogously to those propositions of the *Tractatus* that elucidate if and only if we recognize them as mere nonsense because, if we consider those propositions of the *Tractatus* in their original context in that work, we encounter the problem that, whichever meaning we attempt to

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<sup>57</sup> White 2011, 55.

<sup>58</sup> *PI*, 500.

give to them, it would not satisfy us. It is at this point that proponents of the Fregean view have wanted to withdraw from the claim that if certain propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, they are only mere nonsense that can only make us recognize that they are just this: mere nonsense. Instead, proponents have wanted to hold that they may be nonsense all right, but nonetheless nonsense such that it can make us recognize that there are inexpressible features of reality that cannot be said in language but are only shown by meaningful language. As a proponent of the Wittgensteinian view of the *Tractatus*, I submit that invoking ineffable insights is no answer, only a *compensation* for that very problem that Wittgenstein wants to dispel in his book.

To sum up, I think White's counterexamples are not nonsense, and that, if certain propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, they are mere nonsense. And although I have suggested that his counterexamples are indeed meaningful, I have claimed that I do not need to defend that. Rather, what I need to defend is that, *if* either certain propositions of the *Tractatus* or White's counterexamples, or both of them, are said to be nonsense, then they are nonsense such that they are equivalent to 'wrks swrk krws'—and that it cannot be their sense, which they are said to fail to express, that is nonsense. So again, I don't think the burden of proof lies with the Wittgensteinian view at this point, but with the Fregean view, which wants to have both mere nonsense and saying what cannot be said. For what it's worth, the question concerning the status of certain propositions of the *Tractatus* can be left an open question for another occasion. What I take the Wittgensteinian view to have wanted to attack is first of all the claim that something is nonsense because of a sense that does not make sense—a 'wrong kind of sense,' so to speak—or, to put it otherwise, claiming that something cannot be done, but then going on to say it anyways.

## 8.5 Conclusion

This chapter gave a reply to the objection that the Wittgensteinian conception of nonsense is wrong because nonsense can, contrary to what the conception says, indeed communicate ineffable insights. The chapter discussed the alleged exam-

ples of communicative nonsense. They were supposed to show that mere nonsense can communicate ineffable insights that can be understood. If the examples could show this, and it turned out that mere nonsense can at least sometimes be understood, the Wittgensteinian view, which embraces the idea that mere nonsense is nothing that can be understood, would mistakenly reject the possibility of understanding sentences that can be understood although they are nonsensical. It is argued that these counterexamples cannot show that nonsense is something of which it makes sense to say that it can be understood.

The chapter considered in detail White's counterexamples, which are supposed to raise deep worries for the Wittgensteinian view. It was argued that it is rather the other way around. Instead of raising worries for the Wittgensteinian view, his counterexamples pose a serious threat to the Fregean view, to which he himself is committed. The Fregean view has to say both that these examples are nonsense and that they can be understood. Whatever the philosophical merits of such a position—and it was contested that there are any—this view does not chime with what Wittgenstein writes in the *Tractatus*. Since it was White's aim to provide us with an account of the *Tractatus's* view on nonsense, his argument fails. Hence, the Wittgensteinian view and the Tractarian solution have been defended against their main objector.



## 9. The Dogma of Metaphilosophy

### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter is not, not in the first place anyways, concerned with the nonsense predicament (but it nevertheless aims to make some Wittgensteinian points). Rather, it is concerned with some of the phenomena that appear in discussions about the correct view about the nature of philosophy. Of these phenomena, this chapter singles out (i) the question of whether there is or isn't *philosophical progress*; and (ii) the quarrel between *theoretical* and *anti-theoretical* conceptions of philosophy. The setting in which these phenomena are investigated is a recent debate on these matters between Timothy Williamson and Paul Horwich.

The debate between Williamson and Horwich has developed over the last couple of years around two major publications by Williamson and Horwich—Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> and Horwich's *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*.<sup>2</sup> Each author has reviewed the other's book,<sup>3</sup> and Horwich has also replied to Williamson's review.<sup>4</sup> The differences between Williamson and Horwich run deep, beyond merely the terminology that Williamson and Horwich use to refer to their respective projects.

This chapter first considers Williamson's account; second, it turns to Horwich's project and raises some worries about it; third, it examines the differences between Williamson's and Horwich's account, and Williamson's objection against Horwich. It is argued that Horwich's project to extract 'Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy' from the *Investigations* is both inadequate about the insights of Wittgenstein's later philosophy and philosophically flawed. But it is nevertheless an interesting project to present Wittgenstein's insights into the nature and task of philosophy—something that Horwich aims to do but fails to achieve. In this way, the shortcomings of Horwich's account can be a helpful stimulation towards, on the one hand, a better understanding of Wittgenstein's later philos-

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Horwich, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Horwich 2011, Williamson 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Horwich 2013.

ophy, and on the other, an account of philosophy that is interesting and valuable on its own, independently of exegetical concerns in Wittgensteinian scholarship.

The aim of this chapter, however, is not merely to indulge in an exercise of Williamson/Horwich exegesis, but to evaluate their accounts' philosophical merits. It is argued here that the debate between Williamson and Horwich makes it seem as if there are just two, rather unhappy, alternatives: either philosophy is purely *theoretical* and the value of philosophy lies in its capability to arrive at (formal) theories—in which case the worry is that philosophy is not *self-reflective* enough—or philosophy is merely *anti-theoretical* and its sole purpose is to get rid of confusions and irrational beliefs—in which case the worry is that there is no room to generate *positive insights*. The goal of this chapter is to show that such a fork is itself misleading and needs to be overcome.

Section 9.2 discusses Williamson's account. Section 9.3 moves from there to Horwich's account. Sections 9.4 and 9.5 raise some worries for both accounts.

## **9.2 Williamson's account: the thesis of philosophical progress**

We'll consider Williamson's metaphilosophical account as he expresses it in his afterword, 'Must do Better,' to his recent book *The Philosophy of Philosophy*.<sup>5</sup> Williamson begins his essay by inviting his reader to engage in an *imaginative exercise*, which he starts by encouraging his readers to '[i]magine a philosophy conference in Pre-Socratic Greece.'<sup>6</sup>

The scenario Williamson describes raises a cluster of questions. Here is a representative list: Is there 'resolution' possible in philosophical disputes? Can we 'intelligibly' ask philosophical questions? Are philosophical questions 'senseless'? Has 'language gone on holiday' when we philosophize? Are philosophical inquiries nothing more than 'pseudo-inquiries'? Are they 'useful' instead?

As emerges from this list, even without having read what Williamson ac-

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<sup>5</sup> Williamson 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson 2007, 278.

tually writes about the imagined scenario, what Williamson describes is meant to make vivid the contrast between philosophers who believe in and those who are skeptical about the current state and practice of philosophy.<sup>7</sup> And, more specifically, it is meant to capture philosophical ideas that are often called ‘anti-theoretical,’ since, as will emerge later in Williamson’s essay, this ‘view’ is what Williamson is out to criticize. Of course, as should become clear shortly, what Williamson means when he thinks of this contrast is the contrast between ‘believers’ in and ‘skeptics’ about contemporary formal-mathematical-logical-technical ‘analytic philosophy.’ Williamson finds himself to be on the believer’s side of the divide. In the remainder of this part of the chapter, we’ll consider the case that Williamson makes for the pursuit of philosophy in this spirit.

Williamson’s principal claim, which he uses to make his positive case for his view of philosophy—i.e. the philosophy that he likes, viz. a version of formal ‘analytic philosophy’—is that philosophy has made much ‘progress’:

‘How much progress has [philosophy] made?’ [...] We should not be too pessimistic about the answer, at least concerning [...] ‘analytic philosophy’. In many areas of philosophy, we know much more in 2007 than was known in 1957; much more was known in 1957 than in 1907; much more was known in 1907 than was known in 1857. [...] [T]he best theories in a given area are in most cases far better developed in 2007 than the best theories in that area were in 1957, and so on. [...] [W]e know far more about possibility and necessity than was known before the development of modern modal logic and associated work in philosophy. [...] We know much about the costs and benefits of analyzing possibility and necessity in terms of possible worlds, even if we do not yet know whether such an analysis is correct. [...] Far more is known in 2007 about truth than was known in 1957, as a result of technical work by philosophical and mathematical logicians.<sup>8</sup>

According to this picture, how much philosophical progress we make in philosophy determines whether the practice of philosophy is running smoothly. This presupposes, however, an understanding of philosophy that is modeled in close

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Williamson 2007, 279.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson 2007, 279-280.

analogy with the natural sciences. The picture is that in the natural sciences, the frequency of empirical discoveries determines how much progress is made, and consequently whether a correct understanding of the nature and method of the inquiry is given. If the frequency of empirical discoveries is high, there is much progress, and the nature and method of the inquiry is correctly determined; but if there is not so much progress, something about the inquiry has to change.

The analogous model that Williamson suggests for philosophy is that the quantity of progress determines whether a correct understanding of the nature and method of philosophy is given in a philosophical community. Call this the *thesis of philosophical progress*. According to this thesis, a metaphilosophical framework is superior to its alternatives only if it enables ‘more progress’ than rival frameworks do. Now, the obvious next question is, what is to be counted as philosophical progress?

In Williamson’s account, philosophical progress occurs if we *gain knowledge* about philosophical questions. Hence, philosophical progress is measured based on the amount of knowledge we gain in philosophy. The correct metaphilosophical framework, in turn, is measured in terms of the *quantity* of knowledge we gain over a certain period of time about a given philosophical question (paradox, puzzle, problem, issue, etc.).

But now we have to understand *what kind* of knowledge philosophers should attempt to gain. Is it knowledge about the mind and the world? A priori or a posteriori knowledge? Or maybe even self-knowledge? And so on. Equally important, the question is how the ‘increase’ in knowledge has to be measured. Thus, the hidden variable that we are desperately in need of in order to evaluate the value of philosophy and the correct metaphilosophical account is, it seems in Williamson’s account, *knowledge*. (This isn’t altogether surprising given Williamson’s epistemological preferences for a knowledge-first account.)

Williamson’s metaphilosophical account, then, hinges on the *possibility* of gaining knowledge about philosophical questions. But Williamson’s account doesn’t hinge on this possibility alone. Furthermore, Williamson’s account also

thereby presupposes the nature of philosophical questions in advance: philosophical questions are such that they admit of answering our desire to have knowledge about them. The worry for Williamson's account, then, is that there are arguments to the effect that the grammar of philosophical questions turns out to be such that something that looks as if it were a question can be shown rather to be something that has *merely the appearance* of a question. And in this case, noting the problem in the formulation of the question can dissolve seemingly philosophical problems. These are so-called 'pseudo-problems.' If Williamson is committed to rigor and clarity, like he repeatedly claims he is, it is difficult to see why he would dismiss this possibility altogether.

For the next part of this chapter, we turn now to Horwich's account, which, in contrast to Williamson's account, goes down this alternative road. We'll only consider Horwich's account in a short outline, and won't have the space to review its details; instead, we'll focus on raising some worries about it. However, we'll turn in a later part of this chapter to a comparison between Williamson's and Horwich's accounts, which again should make the structure of their accounts obvious.

### **9.3 Horwich's account: Wittgenstein on the cheap?**

The outline of the account that Horwich gives in his recent book *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy* is simple enough. Roughly, the core of the metaphilosophical view is that 'philosophers' are engaged in pseudo-inquiries, and it is the job of the philosopher to expose this, to 'clean up the mess' (as Williamson has put it in one of his talks). Thus, Horwich rejects the thesis of philosophical progress. Horwich calls on Wittgenstein to make his case. In the discussion of Horwich's account in this part of the chapter, I want to criticize the very first step with which he begins: his alleged alliance with Wittgenstein.

Horwich does not strive to engage in Wittgensteinian scholarship. Nevertheless, Horwich's aim is to present a 'Wittgensteinian' metaphilosophical

framework—an account of the ‘true nature of philosophy.’<sup>9</sup> And furthermore, another one of Horwich’s goals (though a subsidiary one) is to move Wittgenstein back into the limelight of ‘mainstream’ analytic philosophy. As Horwich writes,

[M]y own primary concern is philosophy rather than scholarship. I do think that the ideas that will follow can be extracted [...] from Wittgenstein’s text [...]. But my main contention is that, regardless of their pedigree, they are worth taking seriously. My hope for this project is that it might help to restore Wittgenstein’s unique perspective to the mainstream of analytic philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

We can agree with Horwich that Wittgenstein’s ideas are ‘worth taking seriously,’ and we can also agree that it is a fascinating project ‘to restore Wittgenstein’s unique perspective.’ We should be skeptical, however, how all this is supposed to work without engaging in Wittgensteinian scholarship, and this raises a further worry that Horwich’s ‘Wittgensteinian’ account attempts to buy Wittgenstein’s authority on the cheap. Thus I do not agree with Horwich’s all-too-easy dismissal of Wittgensteinian scholarship, especially on the ‘reasoning’ that Horwich gives for the dismissal. Horwich’s negative assessment of Wittgensteinian scholarship features in this passage:

[T]here has been a polar split between, on the one hand, the great majority of philosophers, who don’t think that his [Wittgenstein’s] ideas are relevant to their work, and, on the other hand, the Wittgensteinians themselves, who are engaged in feuds with one another that no one else cares about. It would be good if this ghettoization could be done away with.<sup>11</sup>

Horwich’s unhappy choice of language aside, there still remains the deeper worry that, if the picture that Horwich suggests here were correct, it seems that it would amount to a *wholesale* argument against *any* of the highly specialized philosophical scholarship and branches into which contemporary academic phi-

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<sup>9</sup> Horwich 2012, vii.

<sup>10</sup> Horwich 2012, xii-xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Horwich 2012, xiii.

losophy is divided.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it seems that the structure of Horwich's 'argument' would even generalize to other branches of academia. Since if the fact that the majority of controversies are fought out by highly specialized experts in any field of inquiry, it seems that the fact that 'no one else cares about' these controversies could be repeated to dismiss them.

But I think it is fair to say that to claim that 'no one else cares' about some controversial scholarly issue *X* is not a good ground for dismissing the scholarship in the first place. Therefore I do not think that Horwich has given any good reason that would discredit the efforts of Wittgensteinian scholarship, and, furthermore, I do not see that Horwich has given any reason that would justify his lack of engagement with Wittgensteinian scholarship.

We can nevertheless capture from this discussion of Horwich's aim that there is a need to bring back and make accessible Wittgenstein's 'unique perspective'—the ideas and insights to be acquired in engagement with Wittgenstein's writings. But to work out what this amounts to does not come on the cheap, without learning about the practice of philosophy to which Wittgenstein aspires, as Horwich suggests. And learning about this practice of philosophy, pace Horwich, does not come without engaging in Wittgensteinian scholarship.

Take as an example the 'most important insight' that Horwich finds in Wittgenstein, the well-known remark that '[p]hilosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.'<sup>13</sup> This is a very popular remark, to say the least. Philosophers that are, broadly speaking, working after the so-called 'linguistic turn' frequently quote it, and it is also often quoted by Wittgensteinian scholars. It is fair to say that generations of Wittgensteinian scholars have already struggled with the question of what this remark implies for the current and future practice of philosophy. It is hard to understand why the 'high standards of constructive critical scrutiny'<sup>14</sup> that Horwich finds current

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that I agree that one has to assume that such a division of labor in philosophy is helpful or necessary; in fact, I take it that one of the goals of a number of Wittgenstein scholars is to highlight Wittgenstein's aim to call into question the helpfulness of such a division.

<sup>13</sup> Horwich 2012, 1; *PI*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> Horwich 2012, xiv.

work in analytic philosophy to be subject to would not demand at least an attempt to catch up with the discussion of this remark in Wittgensteinian scholarship.

It is not enough to say that ‘no one else cares about’ these discussions. If one were to employ ‘high standards’ of scrutiny, one would, at a minimum, have to take into account the work that has already been done on the remark that Horwich quotes—to at the very least to be aware of, and avoid, the mistakes that have already been made in the interpretation of the remark. To say that Wittgensteinians are only engaged in meaningless ‘feuds’ is just a superficial estimate. And since Horwich has not even attempted to gain a position that would allow him to judge the current status of Wittgensteinian scholarship, what this shows is that Horwich can only *assume* that Wittgensteinian scholars fail to exhibit the ‘high standards’ he requires philosophical writing to have. And what this further, and more pressingly, shows is that Horwich himself fails to meet his own much-appreciated ‘high standards’ of non-Wittgensteinian scholarship, because any such standard would clearly require engagement with the scholars of the topic one is interested in. Thus the watered-down Wittgensteinian backup for Horwich’s account seems to be based on dubitable grounds.<sup>15</sup> This is confirmed once the main parts of Horwich’s account are considered, that is, Horwich’s deflationary view of truth, the identification of meaning with use, and a reductive-behavioral understanding of consciousness.<sup>16</sup> The structure of Horwich’s main argumentative line is that the parts of his philosophical account directly follow from the metaphilosophical account he finds in Wittgenstein. Thus Horwich’s rendering of the allegedly Wittgensteinian metaphilosophical account has as its

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<sup>15</sup> Another crucial feature of Horwich’s account of Wittgenstein is that it is primarily based on the *Investigations*, which Horwich openly admits (2012 viii, xi-xii). This is not uncommon, and it is not yet something to be worried about. But the metaphilosophy Horwich takes Wittgenstein to announce in the *Investigations* is also only based on a small number of passages from Wittgenstein’s book—only a mere fraction of it. Since this minimal textual evidence is paired in Horwich’s account with an (almost) complete dismissal of Wittgensteinian scholarship, it is difficult not to worry about the credibility of Horwich’s project in its entirety.

<sup>16</sup> I cannot do justice to any of the details of Horwich’s discussions of rule-following, meaning skepticism, private language or qualia, since these topics are vast. Both the limited space of this chapter and the high level of abstractness that the discussion of a metaphilosophical account demands require me to be silent about the merits or failures of Horwich’s discussion of these topics.



ultimate goal to entail and justify Horwich's *own* philosophical account.

But it is puzzling that, in Horwich's rendering, Wittgenstein's metaphilosophy rather nicely seems to entail Horwich's account. If there were striking and uncontroversial textual evidence in Wittgenstein's writings for both the metaphilosophical and philosophical account, and the entailment of the latter by the former, Wittgenstein's alleged metaphilosophical sanctioning of Horwich's philosophical account would not be surprising. But the little to no evidence that is actually presented (and I contest that it would be a straightforward matter to find any more than that) makes it highly unlikely that Wittgenstein's writings can provide much authority for Horwich's account. This suggests that to take Horwich's account on Wittgenstein's authority is a leap of faith. And once it is made obvious that Wittgenstein's alleged metaphilosophical backup is not really supporting Horwich's philosophical account, what he is left with are the usual and common objections to it.

Thus, this discussion is evidence that Horwich's philosophical account lacks justification (at least from 'Wittgenstein's' metaphilosophy), and the question of whether Horwich's account is valid boils down to the question of its plausibility on independent grounds. And to seek an answer to this, we turn now to the differences between Williamson's account and Horwich's account, and to an objection raised by Williamson against Horwich.

#### **9.4 T1-philosophy or T2-philosophy?**

It should be evident that both Williamson and Horwich are highly influential figures in contemporary analytic philosophy. The differences between them, however, are striking. Put crudely, Williamson's style draws heavily on formal logic, and he thinks that a version of formal logic can establish the correct metaphysics<sup>17</sup>—whatever that may mean. Horwich's style, by contrast, is non-formal, and he doesn't put high hopes in the project of discovering the ultimate structure of reality by formal logic. If this suggests one thing, it is that these two philosophers have quite different approaches, and a comparison of their views will most

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<sup>17</sup> Williamson 2015.

likely exhibit more dissent than assent.

According to Horwich, the picture that one is confronted with in philosophy is that one has to make a decision between *two radically opposed* views of philosophy. One view is *theoretical*, and the other *anti-theoretical*. Horwich calls the first of these views ‘T-philosophy,’ which stands for both ‘traditional’ and ‘theoretical’ philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

Williamson seems to accept both that philosophy is divided into these two possibilities and Horwich’s terminology. Furthermore, Williamson accepts identifying himself with, and as a proponent of, T-philosophy. I’ll propose, for the purposes of the point this chapter aims to push, a slight amendment to this terminology. In what follows, I’ll distinguish between *T1-philosophy* (for traditional-theoretical philosophy, i.e. Williamson’s position) and *T2-philosophy* (for anti-theoretical, i.e. Horwich’s position).

Now in his review of Horwich’s book, Williamson’s main objection is that Horwich’s argument that T1-philosophy is *irrational* fails.<sup>19</sup> The crux of Williamson’s argument is that, pace Horwich, T2-philosophy is *not* obvious, but (i) lacks the high standards of T1-philosophy, and (ii) exhibits the same (flawed) features of T1-philosophy that T2-philosophy criticizes; thus, T2-philosophy cannot establish that T1-philosophy is irrational. We can agree with Williamson that Horwich’s account suffers from these defects.

Williamson’s discussion of Horwich is also interesting because Williamson himself has a well-developed metaphilosophical account. Therefore, Williamson has high stakes on the question of the merits or shortcomings of Horwich’s metaphilosophical account. In fact, Williamson’s objection to Horwich is part of a much larger debate between Horwich and Williamson that developed through a series of books, papers, reviews, and replies on the question of the nature, progress, and method of philosophy.<sup>20</sup> In a very compressed form, the difference between Horwich and Williamson is that, while Williamson’s view is

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<sup>18</sup> Horwich 2012, 21, and *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Williamson 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Williamson 2007, 2013; Horwich 2011, 2012, 2013.

characterized by a striking *optimism* about the *progress* that most recent analytic, formal, and theoretical philosophy has made on questions about truth, meaning, and knowledge, Horwich's view is instead characterized by pessimism about this progress. Thus, although there is, to a certain extent at least, an overlap in the philosophical questions that both Williamson and Horwich are interested in answering, there is a *crucial difference* in the evaluation of the work on these questions. For the last part of this chapter, we now turn to this striking contrast.

## 9.5 Theory or therapy?

The core of the debate between Horwich and Williamson is the question of whether the aim of philosophy should be to engage in philosophical *theory* building or in philosophical *therapy*. This makes it seem as if one had to decide between *two rather unhappy alternatives*, both controversial and unsatisfying: *either* philosophy is purely theoretical, *or* philosophy is merely anti-theoretical. In the former case, the worry is that philosophy is not self-reflective enough; in the latter case, the worry is that, if philosophy's sole purpose is to get rid of confusions and irrational beliefs, there is no room to generate any *positive* insights whatsoever. I'll call this the *metaphilosophical fork*. What I want to suggest now is that to see a necessity for there being such a fork is itself *misleading* and needs to be overcome.

The controversy between theoretical and anti-theoretical accounts of philosophy, however, is also much debated in Wittgensteinian scholarship. Forgive the irony, but if Horwich had not dismissed Wittgensteinian scholarship, he could have known better, and noticed the 'progress' that Wittgensteinian scholarship has made on this issue. I take that to be the recognition that the seeming pressure to accept the necessity of such a metaphilosophical fork turns out to be a red herring, if strictly thought through, until both sides of the fork lose their apparent appeal—an insight that Wittgenstein already formulates in connection with the question of realism or anti-realism.

If Horwich had engaged with Wittgensteinian scholarship, he could also have known how to strictly adhere to Wittgenstein's constant and vehement at-

tempt to avoid inflicting his philosophical practice with a *dogmatic* tone. To a certain extent at least, I take it, Horwich's rebellion against T1-philosophy seems to be one against a certain form of philosophical dogmatism: he wants to follow Wittgenstein's rejection of philosophical theorizing, and this is deeply connected with his 'struggle' to combat and avoid dogmatism, as is conclusively shown by Oskari Kuusela.<sup>21</sup> What Horwich reacts to is that T1-philosophy makes it seem as if there is just this *one* correct understanding of how to do philosophy, T1-philosophy. But when Horwich launches his criticism against T1-philosophy, he himself makes it seem as if this shortcoming could be solved if T1-philosophy were simply to be *replaced* by T2-philosophy.

But this is a mistake. Because, when Horwich attempts to make this move, he imposes his own philosophical views on the question of what philosophy is. Thus both Williamson's T1-philosophy and Horwich's T2-philosophy are *limiting* conceptions of philosophy; that is, they attempt to impose their philosophical theories by allegedly verifying their correctness through their metaphilosophy. What I take Wittgenstein to recommend, in contrast, could be called a *non-limiting* conception of philosophy.<sup>22</sup> A non-limiting conception of philosophy aims to uncover the shortcomings that both T1-philosophy and T2-philosophy impose on the practice of philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Thus what is common between Horwich and Williamson is that they are committed to a *limiting* metaphilosophy: since there are no agreed-on *criteria* to determine when a given method is a 'good one,' when given evidence is 'conclusive,' or when a given philosophical question is

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<sup>21</sup> Kuusela 2008. See *PI*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> This conception must not be mixed with and misunderstood for a form of crude relativism or pluralism in philosophy.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, what Horwich objects to in Williamson's T1-philosophy is the overemphasis on the role of formal logic. But there is no need to throw overboard completely what formal logic can do to help with the solution of philosophical problems. What has to be thrown overboard is that formal logic is the dominant or even sole method of philosophy. Kuusela (2011, 616; emphasis mine) has argued that the crucial change in Wittgenstein's later philosophy is, in addition to his shift to methods in the plural, his 'method of comparison.' He uses this for the task of philosophy to put forward models (like calculi, rules, etc.), whereby no theses or theories are advanced, but only philosophical clarification (in the form of a conceptual investigation) is achieved. For example, a (so-called) 'homespun use' of logical models would be their application to the use of everyday language—but note that this application is only allowed to solve philosophical problems, and no statement about the nature of language is made. In this sense, Kuusela concludes that '[t]he old models too may still serve us well, if put into an *undogmatic* use as objects of comparison.'

‘well formed,’ it seems to be the case that philosophers can *arbitrarily choose*, depending on their preferences, which metaphilosophical account is the correct one to be adopted. This schema is clearly exhibited by both Horwich and Williamson. I’ll call this the *dogma of metaphilosophy*.

If Horwich and Williamson had complied with the ‘high standards’ that they both praise so much (though note that what the standards are differ drastically in their respective views), they would have engaged with Wittgensteinian scholarship. Then they could have noticed that the picture of philosophy that they draw and accept is based on a completely biased and dogmatic view of what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ philosophy is, and equally what ‘progress’ in philosophy means.

Wittgenstein warns against being misled by the role the concept of ‘progress’ plays in other areas of our lives; but since allegedly ‘no one cares,’ Wittgenstein’s insights get lost in translation, when non-Wittgensteinian scholars, like Horwich, attempt to make readily available the alleged metaphilosophical account that they think features in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. That such a way of doing philosophy is neither suggested by Wittgenstein’s writings nor possibly in the interest of contemporary mainstream philosophy might strike one as superfluous to mention, but Horwich’s account reminds one that it nevertheless very much needs to be said.

## **9.6 Conclusion**

As I’ve argued, the debate between Horwich and Williamson leads to the metaphilosophical fork: philosophy must be either theoretical or anti-theoretical. Since we have seen that the debate between them boils down to this fork, this debate raises a now-familiar Wittgensteinian point about seemingly opposed philosophical positions: that they both equally have to be overcome. In that sense, theoretical metaphilosophical accounts and anti-theoretical metaphilosophical accounts coincide when they are overcome.

## Conclusion

The point of this thesis was to show that the insistence on *the argument from nonsense* leads to a fallacy—*the nonsense fallacy*. According to the argument from nonsense, a sentence is nonsense when it violates the rules of correct language use, and consequently oversteps the bounds of sense.

This argument faces *the nonsense paradox*. The nonsense paradox has three parts. First, *the paradox of the regress of nonsense* says that any attempt to state that and why a sentence is nonsense results in a further nonsensical sentence. Second, *the paradox of the sense of nonsense* says that in order for a sentence to say that one of its parts is nonsense, the whole sentence would have to consist of meaningful parts, which would make the sentence falsely say that one of its parts is nonsense. And third, *the paradox of the ineffability of nonsense* says that because of the first two paradoxes, it is impossible to judge nonsense. The nonsense paradox consists of all of these parts. It is clear that Wittgenstein saw all of them, but it has been debated since the publication of his works whether he could solve them.

My own take on that was to highlight Wittgenstein's point about elucidation and silence, which are the final steps in the Tractarian solution: only if, after elucidating that nonsense is only ever nonsense, talk about nonsense is cancelled can we avoid (further) nonsense. In the face of the paradox of nonsense, the argument from nonsense cannot be cogent. Any attempt to use it as philosophical weaponry is necessarily flawed. Nevertheless, philosophers have attempted to use the argument, and at least some of them have thought that they were successful in that. However, that led them into the paradox, and then the fallacy.

This whole movement is *the nonsense predicament*.

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