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Austerity, Psychology, and the Intelligibility of Nonsense

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Perhaps the most important stimulus for the recent revival of interest in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the emergence of what have become known as 'resolute' readings of that work. This paper will explore some difficulties that resolute readers face, arising out of what Sullivan calls their '*table-thumping* insistence … that nonsense is *just* nonsense' (2003, 213) and, in particular, what I will call the 'sheer lack' interpretation of their 'austere' conception of nonsense. According to Conant and Dain, 'the central idea of the austere view' is 'that nonsense is only ever sheer lack of sense' (Conant and Dain 2011, 72) and this claim surely is - for good or ill - the single best-known claim associated with resolute readings. It finds expression again and again in resolute writings. For example:

> A[n] … 'austere' view of nonsense holds simply that … [a] sentence is
> nonsensical through containing a meaningless word or words. (Conant and
> Diamond 2004, 64)

> [W]hen Wittgenstein calls something nonsensical he implies that it has really
> and truly got no articulable content. (Diamond 2000b, 155)[1]

Such nonsense is 'real nonsense, plain nonsense' (Diamond 1991, 181); it 'expresses no thought [and] is mere gibberish' (Conant 2001, 14), just as, for example, 'piggly wiggle tiggle' (Diamond 2000b, 151) is.

I will begin by examining criticisms of another 'therapeutic' Wittgenstein, that presented in the later work of Gordon Baker, and consider whether those criticisms might be extended to the readings of the *Tractatus* offered by Diamond and Conant; they concern problematic versions of what might be called 'person-relativism' and a brand of 'psychologism' about philosophical confusions. I will argue that, despite passages that might encourage the thought, these 'isms' do not in fact run deep in the thinking of these resolute readers. But what is interesting about them is that they point us to more substantial worries, worries connected to the 'austere' conception of

nonsense that plays such a large part in the self-understanding, and broader perception, of resolute readers.

These worries concern what one might call the 'intelligibility' of philosophical confusion. Resolute readers have always been clear that philosophical nonsense does not *seem* to be 'pure gibberish'; it involves an *illusion of sense* and, hence, is precisely not experienced as a 'sheer lack' of meaning. But I will argue that there is a sense in which we rightly talk of a 'grasp' of philosophical nonsense and indeed of its '*logic*', a grasp which the 'sheer lack' interpretation struggles to accommodate.

In exploring this problem, we will also examine ways in which the idea of 'the psychological' has been invoked in the resolute literature. In response to the worry that philosophical nonsense is not experienced as 'pure gibberish', resolute readers have claimed that, although philosophical and 'plain' nonsense do not represent distinct 'logical kinds' of nonsense (as 'nonsense is only ever sheer lack of sense'), they do instantiate different 'psychological kinds'; in response to the fact that the resolute understand the confused philosopher not as thinking logically incoherent thoughts but as failing to have thoughts at all – their words 'express no thought' and have 'no articulable content' - the resolute also seem to need to depict the 'subject-matter' of their work as the psychology of the philosopher, rather than their (non-existent) opinions. But these invocations of 'the psychological' are deeply problematic, I will argue; in particular, the intelligibility of philosophical confusion to which I alluded above is invisible to the *kind* of 'psychology' that Wittgenstein would have available to him if he were to depict philosophical nonsense as a 'sheer lack of sense'.

These concerns relate to a well-established worry about whether resolute readings can make sense of how we 'climb the ladder' that Wittgenstein's elucidatory remarks supposedly embody. If such remarks are 'austerely nonsensical', 'express[] no thought [and are] mere gibberish', it's not clear how the 'ladder' can be constituted by a chain of logically connected 'rungs', that are climbed by thinking through arguments, or indeed by thinking full stop. To deny that that is crucial to what reading the *Tractatus* involves would seem to require that the book's remarks not be 'effective *as* words' but instead as a body of squiggles that merely *cause* the philosopher to stop saying what she says, acting on her 'like a blow on the head' (Sullivan 2003, 196).

I will argue that these more substantial worries can be met, but that doing so requires us to concentrate on another interpretation of 'austerity', which I will call the

'equivocation' interpretation. This is also prominent in the work of Conant, Diamond and other resolute readers but it has made significantly less impact on the discussion of such readings.[2] I happen to think that I am myself a resolute reader, but I suspect that what I have to say on these topics will lead some to insist that I am not. I will spend some time casting doubt on the wisdom of formulations that Diamond, Conant, and others have offered; but, as I have indicated, I believe that my own proposal can be seen as consistent with the broader framework that those readers have articulated and represents a *response* to worries about resolute readings. But it should also be conceded that my proposal does raise the possibility that the difference between resolute and non-resolute readings may not be as clear cut as has been thought, which is itself a reflection of the fact that some hard-and-fast distinctions that inform the literature – informed by intuitions about mind, meaning, inference, logic and nonsense – are not serving us well.

1.   'Person-Relativity' in Later Baker's Later Wittgenstein

In insisting on the 'therapeutic' character of Wittgenstein's later discussions and the importance of analogies with psychoanalysis, Baker depicts those discussions as 'strictly person-relative' (2004, 217):

Analytic philosophers are tempted to think of describing grammar as an activity which is essentially impersonal and context-free, something concerned with the more or less determinate geometry of an institutionalized natural language. The paradigm of dissolving a philosophical problem is then a demonstration that the question *cannot* be framed without transgressing the bounds of sense or running up against the limits of language. On the psychoanalytic model, however, the treatment of problems is essentially patient-specific. It is concerned more with *his* practice than a public institution, more with *his* attitudes towards speaking a shared language and less with the *facts* of this practice, more with *his motives* for raising a question than with the *abstract possibility* of doing so. Consequently, *his* question will disappear completely from his life only when he no longer *wants* to pose it. (2004, 163)

Peter Hacker has attacked this proposal of his one-time collaborator, claiming that Wittgenstein 'aspired to achieve something far more general than this would imply' (2007, 100). According to Hacker, to remedy our philosophical confusions, we must undertake the '*positive* task' of the mapping of 'logical geography' (Hacker 2007, 100), the seeking of an overview of the complex similarities and differences between the use of words around which those confusions arise. The conception of philosophy that Baker attributes to Wittgenstein is, in contrast, '*exclusively* therapeutic' and 'strictly patient-oriented':

> In the absence of a particular person with a particular complaint, there is literally nothing constructive for the philosopher to do. (Baker 2004, 152)

For Baker, the goal of Wittgenstein's 'method' 'is to show how to bring to consciousness our own **individual** intellectual biases, prejudices, drives, compulsions', and blame for these conditions lies with the individual not with, say, the unclarity of language or thought itself: 'responsibility for his disease (disorder) [is shifted] on to "the patient"' (2004, 200, bold in the original).[3]

2.   'Person-Relativity' in Resolute Readings of the Early Wittgenstein

Some resolute readers of the *Tractatus* have warmly endorsed the later Baker's later Wittgenstein,[4] and although there can be few works that smell as much of the utterly general as the *Tractatus* does, there are moments at which resolute readers might seem to want to insist on a certain 'person-relativity' there too:

> [W]e are drawn into the illusion of occupying a certain sort of perspective. ... From this perspective, we take ourselves to be able to survey the possibilities which undergird how things are with us, holding our necessities in place. From this perspective, we contemplate the laws of logic as they are, as well as the possibility of their being otherwise. We take ourselves to be occupying a perspective from which we can view the laws of logic from sideways on. The

only 'insight' the work imparts therefore is one about the reader himself: that he is prone to such illusions. (Conant 1991a, 157)

Conant elaborates as follows, identifying the 'substantial' conception of nonsense that stands opposed to the 'austere' conception and making a recognizable move to shift 'responsibility' for our philosophical illusions 'on to "the patient"':

> [W]e 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. But Wittgenstein's teaching is that the problem lies not with the words (we could find a use for them) … 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 make no sense. We are confused about what it is we want to say and we project our confusion onto the linguistic string. (1991a, 158)[5]

The responsibility for coming to speak such nonsense is that of the speaker him- or herself.

To clarify why one might make these claims, let's recall Wittgenstein's distinction between signs and symbols. Roughly speaking, the 'mere' 'dead' signs are the noises that we emit and the marks that we make on paper, whereas 'symbols' are signs considered in their 'significant use' (3.326). When we talk 'austere' nonsense, blame cannot attach to the *signs* that we produce – as the signs are arbitrary (TLP 3.22)[6] and can be put to any use one likes – nor to the *symbols*, the signs in their 'significant use', since, on such occasions, there is no such use (or at least this is how the 'sheer lack' interpretation of 'austerity' would have us talk). Instead the blame must attach to us: '*[w]e* are confused about what it is *we* want to say' (italics added) and the notion of 'substantial nonsense' - of a 'sense that is senseless' (PI sec. 500) - is merely an outward 'projection' of our confusion onto mere linguistic strings. Our seeing 'an incoherence in what the words want to be saying' is a projection of 'the incoherence of our desires with respect to the sentence' (Conant 1998, 248) and attention must turn away from - to echo Baker - '*positive*', 'constructive' and 'impersonal' 'tasks' - like the mapping of the bounds of sense or the limits of language – and instead towards the confusions of 'the patient'.

Baker insists that 'the *proper business* of philosophy' is not addressing the 'standard "isms"' – dualism, idealism, etc. – but instead 'dealing with the compulsions, obsessions, prejudices, [and] torments' of particular people; we see Wittgenstein as 'less radical' than he really is if we see him as 'address[ing] philosophical positions (say, Cartesian dualism) and [trying] to demonstrate that they are indefensible or untenable (as it were, in the abstract)' (2004, 68, 219, 173 n. 13). Resolute readers of the *Tractatus* would seem to agree that 'the target is not opinions (or mistakes)' (Baker 2004, 218). 'The task … is not to refute what [the philosopher] thinks', claims Conant, because 'there is nothing of the sort that he imagines himself to be thinking' (Conant 1993, 217), and his 'views' (at least on the 'sheer lack' reading) lack both content and logic. So, for example, in what might be heard as a refinement of the first passage from Conant quoted above (1991a, 157), Conant and Diamond insist that the task is not that of 'identifying [the philosopher's ambitions] as ambitions that show a wrong kind of perspective': '[i]t does not have to rely on ascribing to her a desire to take up a perspective on language, or anything of the kind' (2004, 77-78).[7] Instead the resolute Wittgenstein 'takes himself to have to respond to the nonsense uttered by philosophers through understanding not their propositions' – not their 'views' – 'but them' (Diamond 2000b, 156). We must 'successively examin[e] and enter[] into a whole range of genuinely felt individual expressions of philosophical puzzlement' (Conant 2011, 631) as 'the problem lies not with the words … but in our confused relation to the words'.[8]

The claim that philosophical confusions are 'austerely' nonsensical would seem then to suggest that the 'subject-matter' of the work of the 'therapeutic' resolute philosopher must be the psychology of her 'patients'. It cannot be the coherence and logic of the 'views' that those patients hold, since, in their nonsense, there is 'only [a] sheer lack of sense' and, hence, in reality, no such views and no such logic.

3.   Psychologism about Philosophical Confusion

A stress on a role for 'the psychological' has other sources in the resolute literature. For example, it emerges in a qualification that resolute readers make to the '*table-thumping* insistence … that nonsense is *just* nonsense' (Sullivan, quoted above), a qualification made in response to the undeniable fact that philosophical

confusions do not *seem* to be '*pure* gibberish' or to 'express no thought'. The qualification is that 'mere nonsense is, *from a logical point of view*, the only kind of nonsense there is' (Conant 2000, 176-77, italics added). Unlike 'piggly wiggle tiggle', nonsensical metaphysical 'claims' *seem* to make a kind of (impaired) sense, '[b]ut this is a psychological rather than a logical difference' (Witherspoon 2000, 324). So although it is a consequence of 'nonsense … only ever [being] sheer lack of sense' that we cannot distinguish between these cases 'from the point of view of logic', we can distinguish them '[f]rom the point of view of psychology': a nonsensical metaphysical 'claim' is 'no different in (logical) kind from any other sort of gibberish', but '[i]t does … exemplify a distinctive psychological kind of nonsense' (Mulhall 2007, 2, 5).[9]

In these ways, then, resolute readings come to place an awful lot of weight on the 'psychological'/'logical' distinction and one may wonder, with White, whether 'psychological' may here be a 'weasel word' (2011, 40). In his recent extended critique of resolute readings, White draws together a suspicion of 'person-relativity' - reminiscent of that which informs Hacker's criticism of later Baker - and a worry about what one might call the 'psychologistic' account of philosophical confusion sketched in the previous section. White complains that in attempting to 'understand … what it is about [certain] words which creates [philosophical] illusions', such as those that the *Tractatus* itself offers, we seek to understand 'wide-ranging illusion[s]', and confront 'a question about language and the words, and not the psychology of the individual reader of the book' (2011, 40). He goes on:

> If a man were to say to me that for him 'piggly wiggly' made sense, I would regard that as a psychological matter, and a fit subject for the alienist rather than the philosopher to look into. In the *Tractatus*, however, we have a *universal* illusion. (2011, 40)

There is reason to think that 'psychologism' about philosophical confusion follows naturally from the 'sheer lack' reading of the 'austere' conception of nonsense. The content of the philosopher's reflections provide no explanation of how they run their course as those reflections have no content; we would seem then to have no choice but to engage with them as – in some sense - '*mere* psychological phenomena', as belonging to 'the realm of [psychological] law' rather than 'the space of reasons', to

adapt McDowell's expressions (1994, xv). 'Psychologism' about philosophical confusion would then seem to be the price one must pay to preserve the 'sheer lack' claim.

But how tenable is that 'psychologism'? And is the root problem with that view its 'person-relativism', its failure to recognize that philosophical confusions are '*universal* illusions'? A deeper worry, I will suggest, is that it fails to recognize what one might call the 'intelligibility' of this particular kind of nonsense and what it is overwhelmingly natural to call its characteristically 'logical' structure.

It is interesting that White is drawn to use the (almost archaic) term 'alienist', rather than, say, 'psychologist' or 'psychiatrist', and the choice may reflect an awareness that the 'psychologism' we face here is of a conspicuously radical sort. It is so by virtue of the fact that, not only does Wittgenstein follow Frege and Russell in 'de-psychologizing' logic, he also – to adapt a remark of Cavell's (1969, 91) – 'de-psychologizes psychology'.[10] Thoughts are 'significant propositions' (TLP 4), we read in TLP. But if so, what happens, when someone takes nonsense for sense, cannot be a matter of their having particular *thoughts*: thoughts are 'significant propositions' and here we have no such things.[11] If so, what notion of 'the psychological' remains available to us here? What can we say happens in the *mind* of those deceived by illusions of sense?

Wittgenstein gives little obvious general guidance but it is tempting to believe his thinking would here be shaped by the version of 'the distinction between psychology and logic' that forms part of 'Wittgenstein's inheritance from Frege' (Diamond 2000b, 159). Frege contrasted what it is to grasp a thought and what it is for an image, say, to drift before the mind.[12] If we invoke this Fregean contrast, the person who succumbs to an illusion of sense might be seen as having certain images or associations before their mind though no genuine thoughts.

But this seems hopelessly inadequate to the 'phenomenology' of philosophical confusion and I want to examine one particular aspect of that inadequacy: the supposed confusion of *philosophical* reflection *seems* to be *logically* structured, and hence not to be a sequence of drifting images. The connection between such 'mental accompaniments of a sentence' (Diamond 2000b, 159) and the 'thought' that the sentence expresses is 'entirely superficial, arbitrary and conventional' (Frege 1884, 71); such 'accompaniments' are 'irrelevant' to a sentence's 'logical characteristics' (Diamond 2000b, 159) and one cannot see as logically structured a sequence of such

accompaniments, which is all we would seem to have when we take for sense what is actually a 'sheer lack of sense'. In their assault on 'standard readers' of the *Tractatus*,[13] resolute readers have gone out of their way to attack the notion that 'propositions' that turn out to be 'ultimately nonsensical' can stand in some kind of quasi-logical relations to one another:

> [E]ntailment is a relation between sentences only in so far as they are meaningful. (Witherspoon 2000, 348)

> If something is nonsense, then no inferences can be drawn from it. (Conant 2007, 55)

> *If I can take a sentence to stand in logical relations to other sentences, then I can understand that sentence.* (Diamond 2000a, 273)[14]

Now whether that is true or not, a hard distinction between 'the psychological' and 'the logical' leaves us in need of some explanation of how philosophical illusions of sense – which we are being invited to understand as belonging to the 'merely psychological', the domain of 'arbitrary' 'accompaniments' of sentences that are 'irrelevant to [their] logical characteristics - can be so distinctively marked by what at least appears to be a logical structure.

Moreover, we distinguish what one might call a 'grasp' of these illusions by reference to that structure. Even if those who attempt to get to grips with a philosophical discussion are attempting to get to grips with a tissue of nonsense, we still seem to be able to distinguish those who can follow through the (pseudo-? quasi-?) logic of these discussions successfully from those who can't, those who see and those who don't see how certain (pseudo-? quasi-?) conclusions (pseudo-? quasi-?) follow from certain other (pseudo-? quasi-?) commitments. Those who are drawn into the illusion elaborated by the resolute *Tractatus*, for example, fall among the former, whereas those who can't make head or tail of the book (as a result of never having studied philosophy, for example) fall among the latter. So it seems that we must retain some kind of place for a *graspable* (pseudo-? quasi-?) logic in philosophical confusion. But can we do so if such nonsense is a 'sheer lack of sense'

and if it's the case that, '[i]f something is nonsense, then no inferences can be drawn from it'?

4.   'Imaginatively entering into nonsense'

In her 2000b, Diamond herself recognizes a danger in proposing 'the psychological' as the domain within which an account of philosophical confusion must lie, and that danger drives her to postulate 'a kind of imaginative activity' through which we can 'imaginatively enter into' philosophical confusion (2000b, 157-58) despite its 'sheer lack of sense'. Resolute readers often invoke this postulate but it seems to me that it has rarely been subjected to scrutiny and remains under-developed.

Diamond identifies a challenge for those who would understand someone in the grip of an illusion of sense:

> When you ascribe to someone a thought that p, this involves you in using a sentence giving the content of the thought, a sentence that you understand, a sentence of some or other language that you understand. You are not ascribing a belief to someone if you say that she believes that piggly wiggle tiggle, if "piggly wiggle tiggle" is nonsense. (Diamond 2000b, 151)

If we cannot place such sentences in 'the space of reasons', what then of 'the realm of [psychological] law'? There might indeed appear to be another way of characterising the thoughts of such a person – that provided by 'empirical psychology' - but Diamond argues that Wittgenstein would see providing such characterisations 'as a sort of changing of the subject':

> What empirical psychology can tell us of the person who judges that such-and-such or says that so-and-so is that he or she puts together signs, has associations of various sorts, has feelings tied to different words or even some feeling of asserting something; possibly also that he or she intends to have some effect on other people; possibly also that he or she comes to have inclinations of this sort after certain kinds of experience in accordance with

such-and-such natural laws; and possibly also that he or she will now be inclined, given certain further stimuli, to make mental transitions to other collections of signs, or to actions, in accordance with other natural laws including what you might call the natural laws of inferential behaviour. (Diamond 2000b, 156)

We see here again the extreme form of 'psychology' with which we seem to be left once we accept that thoughts are 'significant propositions' and embrace the 'sheer lack' interpretation of philosophical nonsense: this is the 'psychology' of the 'alienist', of a stranger to thought, so to speak, who sees only the 'putting together [of] signs' and 'mental transitions' from one 'collection of signs' to another.[15] 'From the point of logic' – and of sense – we are in the realm of 'the arbitrary', of sentences considered as 'arbitrary' signs (TLP 3.22, quoted above) and their 'arbitrary' 'mental accompaniments'.

Diamond concludes that neither of the modes of understanding she describes – which she labels as 'internal' and 'external' understandings respectively – are apt if we are to understand someone 'being in the grip of an illusion that so-and-so' where the illusion in question is an illusion of sense:

[Y]ou are not inside his thought as you are when he makes sense and you understand what he says, because there is no such internal understanding, there is no thought that such-and-such to understand. You are not inside, because there is as it were no inside; [however] you cannot remain outside, because outside all you can see is someone inclined to put together words, to come out with them in certain circumstances, to associate with them certain images, feelings and so on: from the outside, there is nothing to be seen that could be called his being in the grip of an illusion that so-and-so, as opposed to his being inclined to come out with certain word-constructions. (Diamond 2000b, 157)

One might re-interpret the worry I raised above in this light. The logically structured character of philosophical reflection is invisible 'from the inside' because '*I can take a sentence to stand in logical relations to other sentences,* [only if] *I can understand that sentence*' (Diamond, quoted above) and '[i]n recognizing that [the

philosopher's sentences] are nonsense, you are giving up the idea that there is such a thing as understanding them' (Diamond 2000b, 150). But equally, 'from the outside', the philosopher's chains of thought becomes no more than his being 'inclined … to make mental transitions to other collections of signs'. Such transitions might be in 'accordance with … what you might call the natural laws of inferential behaviour', patterns of 'mental transition' that an empirical psychology may have observed in some group of thinkers; but there can be no appreciation of such transitions as being, for example, *appropriate* ones to make, ones made in response to norms of *valid* reasoning. Rather we are in the realm of the logically 'arbitrary'. The kind of 'grasp' of philosophical illusions and their logical structuring, that I argued above we must acknowledge is possible, now seems extremely hard to locate. It would seem to be invisible 'from the point of logic' and from that 'of psychology', unavailable to the 'empirical psychologist' who might examine such confusion from 'outside' but also to any possible 'insider', 'because there is as it were no inside'.

In response to the difficulty that she identifies, Diamond invokes 'a very particular use of imagination':

> [A] kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it. (2000b, 157-58)

> [I]f I understand a person who utters nonsense, I enter imaginatively into the seeing of it as sense, I as it were become the person who thinks he thinks it. I treat that person's nonsense in imagination as if I took it to be an intelligible sentence of a language I understand, *something I find in myself the possibility of meaning*. (p. 165)

We need some such notion of 'entering into' nonsense if we are to draw the kind of distinction discussed above between those who can (quasi-) follow the (quasi-) logic of the *Tractatus'* elucidations and those who cannot. Otherwise, we are left with the perspective of 'the alienist' – Diamond's view from 'outside' - from which such individuals are distinguished merely by their being inclined to make different 'mental transitions to [different] collections of signs', by divergent 'inclin[ations] to come out with certain word-constructions'. One of these groups might perhaps be praised as

complying with 'the natural laws of inferential behaviour'. But it's not clear that it must be the first group who are so praised; and, as Frege stressed,[16] this praise does not entitle us to think of their reaction to the text as more *appropriate* or more *intelligent*. Such normative matters are invisible from the 'outside'.

My principal worry about Diamond's proposal is that it is not much more than that, a proposal: it needs elaboration which I don't believe it has received.[17] But several critics have questioned whether such an elaboration is even possible: White insists that 'there is simply no imaginative activity of taking "piggly wiggle" for sense' (2011, 39) and Schönbaumsfeld asks 'What, if not content, is it that constrains our imaginative acts of identification?' (Schönbaumsfeld 2010, 660). There are indeed reasons to worry that 'imagination' might be another 'weasel word' here. For example, why think that *imagination* is suited to this work? One might turn to the imagination to engage with possibilities that are counter-factual or counter to the laws of nature; but it's not obvious that imagination is any better suited to engagement with pure gibberish. The 'sheer lack' reading of austerity might indeed seem to necessitate a switch of 'faculty', as it were: we must spare the 'understanding' a role where - if philosophical confusion is 'pure gibberish' - there would seem to be nothing for that faculty to engage with. Conant talks of 'entering oneself … into the realm of confusion and allowing oneself to come to appreciate what it is like to experience this or that particular confusion from the inside' (2011, 638). But this kind of 'knowing what it is like' is not merely coming to share a certain phenomenological experience. 'Imaginatively entering into' a philosophical confusion surely includes an appreciation of its (quasi-) logic and that seems perilously close to something that calls for characterisation using the forbidden U-word, 'Understanding'.

As we will see in the next section, Conant and Diamond accuse standard readers of playing a misleading 'multiplication game', of 'multiply[ing] senses' of the 'sayable' and the 'thinkable', in order to allow themselves to depict Wittgenstein's insights as 'strictly speaking' unsayable while saying them - as, 'in one sense, not thinkable, but … thinkable in some other sense' (2004 p. 91 nn. 23, 22). Conant and Diamond believe that '[t]here is in such a suggestion' - that we play such a 'game' – 'a measure of desperation' (n. 22) and a 'chickening out' from a recognition that nonsense is a 'sheer lack of sense'. But can we avoid playing such a game? Might Conant and Diamond be playing a misleading game of division when they separate off 'understanding' from the 'entering in' of which the faculty that they call

'imagination' is distinctively capable - especially when the objects of the latter are, in an obvious sense, logically structured? A hard 'logical'/'psychological' distinction and the 'sheer lack' interpretation of 'austerity' - whose fates I have suggested may be intertwined - make it difficult to see how there can be such a 'faculty'.

I will argue that progress can still be made here but that we must focus instead on the 'equivocation' reading of austerity. But before turning to that, I want to develop the worry about 'psychologism' presented in the last two sections by showing how it shapes worries that resolute readers face in making sense of the 'climbing' of the Tractarian 'ladder'.

5.   Climbing the resolute ladder

Conant and Diamond claim that standard readings of the *Tractatus* face a serious problem in explaining 'the way in which Wittgenstein thought his sentences worked': 'the way in which they were supposed to convey the insights that (according to this sort of reading) he intended them to convey' when, according to this sort of reading, those sentences are meaningless (Conant and Diamond 2004, 53). What seems to be needed is an account of how Wittgenstein 'took sentences that were not meaningful to be capable of conveying insights in a way that depended on what the sentences themselves *were*':

> But any kind of system for reading [the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus*] (or in some other way extracting insights from them) would appear to explain in what way they were meaningful. (Conant and Diamond 2004, 53).[18]

This seems a fair criticism. But, when reading this, any standard reader is bound to be thinking 'This is a bit rich, isn't it? From the people who tell us that Wittgenstein's propositions are pure gibberish!' If anything, the consensus would seem to be that the resolute face an even deeper version of just this kind of worry:

> [W]e can hardly claim that a 'ladder' consisting of mere gibberish can lead anywhere. (Hacker 2001a, 15– 16)[19]

> [I]f the ladder . . . turns out to be an illusion, how have we got anywhere by climbing it? (McGinn 1999, 496).[20]

In his most sustained examination of the question of how one 'climbs' the resolute 'ladder', Conant identifies a difficulty that echoes our earlier discussion of 'psychologism' and Diamond's awareness of the need for a 'third way', beyond – or between? – 'the internal' and 'the external':

> When thinking about how to unpack the [ladder] metaphor, there is a tendency only dimly to make out that neither a strictly logical nor a merely psychological account of the shape of the ladder will quite do here. One then responds to this dimly felt difficulty by oscillating in one's construal of the matter between these alternative understandings of what might be at stake, without stably settling on either one. (This oscillation in one's thinking is part and parcel of the sort of confusion that is to be worked through in a successful ascent of the ladder.) (Conant 2007, 57)

How then ought we to describe the ascent up the resolute 'ladder'? And is Conant's final comment meant to defend in some way 'oscillating in one's construal'? Certainly there seems to be an 'oscillation' in his discussion between viewing the process 'from the inside' and 'from the outside'. But is it harmless? Or does it 'dim' our understanding of what is taking place?

Conant talks of 'particular lines of "thought" that … figure centrally in the book', and 'implicit lines of "thought" into which a reader is naturally drawn' (Conant 2007, 50, 121). *In itself* such a use of quotation marks need not be sleight-of-hand, a closet 'chickening out'. To decide if it is, one would seem to need to examine how Conant goes on to talk about these 'thoughts'. For example, it would seem 'irresolute' to talk of these 'thoughts' entailing others - or at least it would if it were the case that, '[i]f something is nonsense, then no inferences can be drawn from it. (Conant 2007, 55). But what if he were to talk of their 'entailing' other 'thoughts' – with 'entailing' too in quotes? One can't help but smile in asking, but if we are allowed 'thoughts', then why not 'entailment'?

This last step is not one that Conant takes. Instead there seems to be something of the 'external' in his talk of 'the *triggering* of … sequences of successively collapsing rungs' of the 'ladder', and of the recognition that one 'cluster of remarks' is nonsensical '*enabl[ing]*' the recognition that another 'cluster' is too (2007, 55, 62, italics added).[21] Terms that are conspicuously – and the 'sheer lack' reading requires must be - absent here are the 'I-word' and the 'E-word' – 'inferring' and 'entailing' – as well as talk of 'meaning' and 'understanding'. Instead Conant talks of the 'giving way' of '(apparently doctrinal) footholds' being 'felt by the reader to spell some degree of trouble for' other such 'footholds' (p. 54) and of such a collapse 'exert[ing] an acute dialectical pressure … onto other footholds in the text' (p. 55). He does talk of the 'significance of remarks', though he immediately glosses this as 'their role within the dialectical strategy of the work as a whole' (p. 54). He also talks of how one 'cluster of remarks' may 'bear in a particular way' on another (p. 63) and of how one 'swatch of sections in the book ought to be understood … in the light of' another such 'swatch'; but he glosses 'understood' as 'understood (at a particular juncture in the unfolding of the dialectic …)' (p. 62).

A natural suspicion here is that Conant is merely avoiding the supposedly 'irresolute' *terms* - or at least distancing himself from them by enclosing them in quotation marks - while surreptitiously *using* the concepts they denote. I will argue that it is not obvious that he must be, but the level of abstraction of Conant's own discussion certainly makes it hard to determine whether he is: that abstraction makes it hard to predict whether one could provide plausible readings of particular passages of the *Tractatus* along the lines Conant favours without it becoming pretty clear that it is indeed only the 'irresolute' *terms* that are being avoided – the signs but not the symbols, as it were.[22]

Conant and Diamond claim that it is only by 'multiply[ing] senses' of '"inferring", "judging", and so on, across the entire spectrum of expressions for the exercises of logical capacities' (n. 23) that standard readers can 'square the claim that the propositions of the book are nonsense with the claim that those propositions are able to provide logically structured argumentation' (2004, 55), argumentation in support of a particular theory of meaning, for example. Since Conant and Diamond stress that they see no theory of sense and nonsense at work in the *Tractatus* – a theory which would have to be presented somehow in the very sentences it shows are nonsensical – they might appear to be free of the need to reinsert surreptitiously a

kind of meaningfulness and a kind of logic into those sentences. But the worry sketched above is that Conant is himself playing a 'multiplication game'. Can we understand how 'plain nonsense' - 'mere gibberish' – can 'exert dialectical pressure' without actually having to 'explain in what way [it is] meaningful'? Can we explain how recognition that one 'cluster' of sentences is nonsensical 'enables' the recognition that another 'cluster' is too and without that involving the 'reading [of] such sentences (or in some way [an] extracting [of] insights from them)'? Conant has claimed that a standard reader 'must hold that there is a fairly substantial sense in which we can come to "understand" the sentences that "explain" the theory [of meaning that she believes is found in the *Tractatus*], despite the fact that we are eventually called upon to recognize these very same sentences as nonsense' (Conant 2011, 627). The challenge for Conant is to give a 'substantial sense' to the mode of – if not 'understanding' – then 'reacting' or 'responding' that the sentences of the *Tractatus* elicit from its reader so that the 'dialectical pressure', 'triggerings' and 'enablings' of which he speaks can come about. It must be a mode of 'reacting' to those sentences '*as* words' (Sullivan, quoted above), 'despite the fact that we are eventually called upon to recognize these very same sentences as nonsense', their nonsensicality being – according to the 'sheer lack' reading - their 'really and truly [having] no articulable content' (Diamond, quoted above).[23]

Before proceeding, another point needs to be made if we are to present Conant's 2007 discussion fairly. An important theme there is that 'climbing the resolute ladder' might not be a matter of following through what one might call a 'linear' argument. Instead – roughly speaking - a certain vision (of language, thought and world) is cultivated which one then at some point comes to recognize was an illusion of sense. The reader's 'experience of the sentence[s]' which may have seemed to articulate that vision and of 'the sort of understanding [they] can seem to support' 'undergo[] a transformation' 'not by her coming to see *that p* … but rather by her coming to see that there is nothing of the form "*that* ____" (of the sort she originally imagined) to believe' (Conant 2011, 628). There seems something right in thinking that this latter step would be caricatured if one presented it as deriving a conclusion from a set of premises. In this sense, Conant's avoidance of the I-word and the E-word is over-determined.

But this raises two further issues. Firstly, one might wonder how general a story Conant's account of the 'climbing of the ladder' is meant to provide. In particular, it

seems to focus on the final stage – that at which we reach the top of the ladder and 'footholds' 'collapse' and reader's 'experiences' are 'transformed' – rather than the earlier stages at which the illusions of sense in question are cultivated and developed. There are hints that an account of that stage might be 'delegated' to the standard interpreter: so Conant insists, for example, that 'every reader must begin life qua reader of the *Tractatus* as a standard reader and climb her way up from there to a different way of coming to understand her task as a reader' (Conant 2007, 49).[24] The story that the standard interpreter provides will have to be adapted: their story of what is going on as we 'follow the argument' of the text cannot ultimately stand, as there is no argument to follow that would (impossibly) link (what are in fact) these empty strings of signs. It is at least not obvious that Conant's talk of 'triggerings', 'enablings' and 'dialectical pressures' is actually meant to help us understand this earlier – and perhaps qualitatively different - stage at which we 'follow the argument' and descend into (what the final stage of climbing will reveal as) illusion. But the question that this thought raises, of course, is 'Just how much of the work of interpreting the *Tractatus* is to be "delegated" in this way?', and I will return to this in Sec. 11.

The second issue is that, even if Conant's story is focused on the ultimate 'transformation', the worry about the need for surreptitious use of 'irresolute' concepts may re-emerge. It will do so if – to anticipate the following section - this final step must in some way or other draw on an experience of tension between different construals one is tempted to give to different 'claims'; such an experience surely draws on some level on an awareness of implications (or 'implications'?) that 'claims' on such construals must have. If so, one need not think that the 'ladder' is best understood as a linear argument in order to think that Conant's tale of 'triggerings' and 'enablings' must rely on such construals standing to one another in something *akin* to logical relations.

The ultimate resolute understanding of 'climbing the ladder' – in either its early or later stages - must steer a course between, on the one hand, capturing 'merely what happens first and then what happens next and so on in a particular reader's experience while (potentially uncomprehendingly) merely moving through the text' and, on the other, specifying 'what is to be inferred first and what is to be inferred second and so on if the reader is to become rationally entitled to some (propositional or quasi-propositional) insight' (Conant 2007, 57). This is a fine line to try to tread

and it is one that I think can be trod. But it's not one that the rhetoric of 'sheer lack' makes easy to see. I suspect that it is principally excessive exposure to that rhetoric that leads one to fear that accounts such as Conant's must ultimately be 'irresolute' and resolute readers have other resources on which to draw: in particular, those involved in the 'equivocation' reading of 'austerity'.

6.   Two readings of 'austerity'

A second theme accompanies that of 'sheer lack' in resolute discussions of 'austerity'. This second theme might be seen as pointing to another idea that might bear the label, 'austerity', or to a further part of the story that must be told in explaining 'austere nonsense'. But, for simplicity's sake, I will refer to this second theme as presenting us with a second *interpretation* of 'austerity', which I will call the 'equivocation' interpretation. We find that, for example, here:

> According to resolute readers, this is what philosophical nonsense is for the author of the *Tractatus*: an unwitting wavering in our relation to our words – failing to make genuine determinations of meaning, while believing that we have done so. (Conant 2007, 46)

Clearly this idea is closely related in the minds of resolute readers to that of nonsense as 'sheer lack'. For example, Conant and Diamond propose that if an attempt to clarify a sentence reveals it to be nonsensical,

> [Our clarification] brings out that no use has been fixed on for some or other sign, or indeed that we have been in an unclear way trying to run together two quite different sorts of use, wanting neither the one nor the other but both. (Conant and Diamond 2004, 64)

Similarly, Conant and Dain talk of

> our failure to realize that we had not given a meaning to some sign or signs within [our] sentences, perhaps because we were prevaricating between two

different ways of using the signs concerned, neither of which would give us what we wanted. (Conant and Dain 2011, 72)

Conant and Diamond alternate between formulations that point us to these different aspects – or interpretations - of the notion of 'austerity'. For example, in her (unpublished), Diamond talks of philosophically confused propositions as involving 'using some words with no meaning' (p. 13) and a page later of their involving the 'use of words with no determinate meaning';[25] Conant warns against 'the idea that there is a *definite* semantic content to be grasped' in Wittgenstein's elucidations (1993, 218, italics added) and declares that 'mere nonsense' 'strictly speaking, … has no (fully) determinate logical syntax' (2001, 19);[26] but these qualified claims are not those that one might anticipate after being told that '[m]ere nonsense is simply unintelligible – it expresses no thought [and] is mere gibberish' (Conant 2001, 14). Diamond declares that, for Wittgenstein, '*[a]nything* that is nonsense is so merely because some determination of meaning has *not* been made' (1991, 106). But a 'determination of meaning *not* being been made' could leave one either with no meaning at all or with several meanings between which one is undecided.

There are, of course, several obvious reasons why one might link these ideas. Firstly, and most apparently straightforwardly, one might cite equivocation as an explanation of how meaning has failed to be determined for a sign (as Conant and Dain do in the passage quoted above). Secondly, such pseudo-claims characteristically vanish, as it were, when we translate our talk into the kinds of logical notations that we use in disambiguating sentences; we do not come to see what such a sentence 'says'; rather we 'see how "it" (i.e. what we imagine the sentence to be trying to say) *fails to go into the notation at all* (because there is nothing determinate that we are here imagining)' (Conant and Diamond 2004, 62): 'there was nothing there to clarify' (Diamond 2004, 204). Thirdly, one might argue that there being no determinate meaning for a sign is the same as it possessing no meaning at all, that one can only mean something *in particular*, so to speak.[27] Fourthly, one might propose that these problematic signs have no meaning *of their own*, but instead are only the occasion for a 'parasitic' illusion of meaning resulting from confusedly 'combining' the meanings of two or more symbols.

All of these considerations have merit. So why stress a distinction between these interpretations? Again there are several reasons. Firstly, depicting philosophical

claims as '*pure* gibberish' - as involving a '*sheer lack*' of sense – not only seems hopelessly false to the experience of reading philosophical claims, it also makes it very hard to understand how such a set of claims might ever have engaged a reader, or how we go about distinguishing those with a 'grasp' of such claims from those who are simply baffled by them. In this way, the 'sheer lack' reading gives credence to the worries set out above: that resolute readings involve a problematic 'person-relativism', an implausible 'psychologism' about philosophical confusions, and insuperable difficulties in understanding how one might 'climb the ladder'. Secondly, there seems to be good reason to think that, on Wittgenstein's view, such an equivocation is at work in the cases of philosophical confusion he considers. (Here I share a view with a critic of resolute readings, Roger White, as Sec. 9 will show.) Thirdly, I believe that all the work that needs to be done by the 'austere conception of nonsense' can be done through the 'equivocation' reading.

7.   How nonsense happens

To adapt some words of Mulhall's, a string of signs being 'austerely nonsensical' is 'not anything about the [string] itself – nothing intrinsic to it – since logically speaking it has no intrinsic structure' (2007, 5).[28] The word I want to stress here is 'intrinsic'. Nonsense may not be 'intrinsically structured' but it is, I suggest, 'structured', nonetheless, and in a fashion that explains its apparent logical structure. This structuring is also, in a recognizable sense, *impersonal* because it arises out of the languages that those who take nonsense for sense speak. A feature which distinguishes philosophical nonsense from 'piggly wiggle tiggle' is that, in the former cases, the signs involved *always* have a significant use elsewhere or are a similar in appearance to ones that do. This is a fact that it is apt to call both 'impersonal' and 'non-psychological'.

To understand philosophical confusions and the psychological episodes in which we succumb to them, we need, I think, to 'reconceptualiz[e] the boundary between logic and psychology' (Baker 2004, 219), though in a sense directly opposed to that which Baker intended. The 'equivocation' reading directs our attention to the question, 'What happens when someone takes nonsense for sense?' Very different symbols can be expressed through very similar-looking or –sounding signs, and this

can lead us, confusedly, to assimilate the uses to which those signs are put. So, for example, '[w]e say time "flows"', suggesting an 'analogy between time and motion', 'and then ask where to and where from, and so on' (L I 60).[29] Through this confused assimilation of meaningful statements, encouraged by similarities in 'surface grammar', 'statements which previously had had a sense now lose it and others which had had no sense in the first way of speaking now acquire one' (PR 267). According to Wittgenstein, it is these confusions of which 'the whole of philosophy is full' (TLP 3.324).[30]

Now whether or not one believes this metaphilosophical hypothesis – and the *later* Wittgenstein certainly seems to have seen it as telling (at best) half the story – what would make one liable to such confusions is the fact that one speaks a particular language with a particular 'surface grammar' and the same confusions are liable to arise for *anyone who speaks that same language*. Under the influence of such confusions, the claims we come to make are nonsensical; but we come to make them through particular determinate conflations: these are confusions, one might say, with specific identities. Moreover, they are confusions with specific – if aberrant – *logics*. A crucial feature of sets of propositions which we are tempted to assimilate to one another in this way is that they have logics which seem to overlap.[31] The overlap is partial and confusion arises when we are distracted from that fact. But to share those particular confusions is to be ready to make particular confused 'inferences' that this overlap would seem to justify, as long as its being partial is overlooked.

In my 2006, I elaborated upon some of these thoughts through an analogy with the nonsense that Lewis Carroll presented in the *Alice* books, nonsense that certainly fits the template described above.[32] What's noticeable about Carroll's humour is that 'getting it' requires that one be able to follow what it is overwhelmingly natural to call the 'logic' of the nonsense in question. For example, the White King marvels at Alice's eye-sight when she tells him that she saw nobody on the road: 'Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!' (1992 [1872], 165), he declares. Then, when the Messenger is next to arrive, the King concludes that 'Nobody walks slower than you':

> 'I do my best,' the Messenger said in a sullen tone. 'I'm sure nobody walks
> much faster than I do!'

To which the King replies

'He can't do that … or else he'd have been here first.' (pp. 166– 7)

Despite the fact that the arguments in question are also nonsensical — patently so to those who understand them - to 'get' Carroll's humour one must see how conclusions that his characters draw 'follow' from their premises. There is an obvious sense in which the White King's response to the sullen Messenger is the *right* conclusion to draw: it follows in that it would follow *if* 'Nobody' figured in these propositions as a name. The humour—and the confusion—arises because that is not what 'Nobody' is in English, though its 'surface grammar' can suggest to us that it is. What we see here are reasons to say that certain nonsensical claims naturally 'follow' from others; the developing nonsense has what it is overwhelmingly natural to call a 'logic' that one might grasp.

From this perspective, there is something potentially illuminating but also potentially misleading in Diamond's recent characterisation of a philosophical nonsensical pseudo-proposition as representing a 'conceptual blur' (unpublished, 17, 27). The confused person 'blurs' together different sets of propositions and their confusion is that they don't recognize that fact. But when it is recognized, we come to see our confusion's quite *determinate* structure. Or perhaps better, we come to see that its structure is *over-determined* in certain specific ways, as one might say some of Escher's drawing are.[33] We come to see the multiple foundations upon which our 'cloudy impression-of-having-a-thought' (Diamond 2004, 205) rests, the multiple sources of sense upon which it draws and which provides it with its characteristic and specific (pseudo-) logic.[34] Rather than say that the 'propositions' that emerge have 'no articulable content' and no 'logic', one might say they have *too much*, being confused hybrids of two (or potentially more) particular senses.

For these reasons, there is, I think, something misleading in the claims that 'entailment is a relation between sentences only in so far as they are meaningful' and that the ' nonsensical … really and truly got no articulable content'. The White King amuses us because what he says is nonsense; but we can 'get' the joke, only because we can also see how his nonsense 'makes sense': we can 'quasi-follow' 'quasi-logical relations' that specifically characterise it and its further elaborations. If this is to play a 'multiplication game', then it is one that the examples show we play.

The kind of intelligibility that philosophical confusion has must surely have a bearing on what it is to be drawn into that confusion, not least as we are drawn to set foot on, and to climb, the 'ladder' that the *Tractatus* offers. In my 2006, I suggested that one might understand Wittgenstein's own elucidatory remarks as elaborations of nonsense of the sort that the previous section described, forming a 'ladder' of nonsensical 'propositions' which one can climb only if one is capable of following logical inferences.[35] We can track and *elaborate* on the 'implications' of the nonsensical 'thoughts' presented there, leading on to what are their 'logical consequences', much as the White King does in arriving at his 'conclusions'. But what this ultimately leads to is a recognition that we cannot give a consistent reading to our words and that what tempted us to think that we could were sign/symbol conflations.[36]

Am I guilty of surreptitiously using 'irresolute' concepts here, in talking of 'quasi-following' 'quasi-logical relations', etc.? I think not, in that my use of them is anything but surreptitious. On my understanding – just as elucidatory nonsense calls from us the same projections of meaning that sensical strings do – 'climbing' a 'ladder' of such nonsense calls for us to bring to bear the same capacities to follow patterns of inference that arguments composed of sensical propositions do.

Indeed this opens up some interesting and important possibilities. Firstly, one might formulate or follow such 'arguments' and only later recognize their character as 'elucidations' of confusions. This would seem essential in fact if we are to understand what it might be to both 'climb' *and* then 'throw away' 'the ladder'. (It also suggests a way of understanding how reflections that Wittgenstein initially formulated 'unframed' in the *Notebooks* could still be usefully redeployed 'framed' in the *Tractatus*, though I won't explore that possibility further here.)

Secondly, an analysis of how the *Tractatus* works may call for something very much like the analyses of its remarks that non-resolute readers have offered in what they would characterise as analyses of the *Tractatus'* 'arguments'. I will return to this point in Sec. 11.

Thirdly, it would help us understand some formulations to which the resolute seem drawn but which are not obviously consistent with the 'sheer lack' reading of 'austerity'. For example, Diamond has talked of 'the shifting character of a remark like "The world is my world"', a remark

> which shifts from its appearance as a kind of conclusion at one stage of the *thinking through* of the implications of solipsism to its ultimate appearance as something we move through and beyond in the collapse of a solipsism as a distinct view. (2011, 273, italics added)

Similarly, Conant talks of '*thinking through* our attachment to certain very particular ways of thinking about meaning to the point where they collapse in on themselves' (2007, 71, italics added). White thinks that the resolute must here be 'irresolute'. Echoing Conant and Diamond's criticism of the standard reader, White believes that they too must 'chicken out': here 'the sentences of the *Tractatus* are to be given sufficient sense to inform us of their own nonsensicality' (2011, 46).[37] What is it, he might ask, for us to 'think through' 'the implications of solipsism' and 'particular ways of thinking about meaning' when as - 'pure gibberish' – 'there is no such thing as *thinking* them' (Conant and Diamond 2004, 54)? Our encountering this 'pure gibberish' might 'trigger' certain events in our minds through their exerting a kind of 'pressure'; but can we call this a case of 'thinking through'?[38] We would seem to have before us nothing *to* think, but instead logically 'arbitrary' signs and logically 'arbitrary' 'accompaniments' of such signs. The explanation I offer lies in the fact that one can follow through the pseudo-consequences of nonsense, a possibility obscured by depicting philosophical nonsense as having 'really and truly … no articulable content' and 'entailment [as] a relation between sentences only in so far as they are meaningful'.

Fourthly, there is also a clear sense in which these forms of reflection need not be person-relative. Formulations like Wittgenstein's and Carroll's do their work within an impersonal space of readiness to see particular symbols in particular signs, a network of dispositions to unreflectively 'project' specific meanings into particular familiar signs. It is because of this dependency on this network that, for example, we see the elucidatory – that is, nonsensical – propositions of Wittgenstein's original *Abhandlung* as *in German*. For these propositions to do their 'work' on monoglot

English speakers, they need to be translated; but this is an incongruous thought if we thump the table and insist that they have no meaning – are 'pure gibberish' – and cannot be 'read'. A German speaker may not be able to make head or tail of Wittgenstein's original text; but there is something called 'reading it' that they clearly can do and that the monoglot English speaker cannot: for that reason, the former can experience its 'therapeutic' influence, while the latter cannot. Conant proposes at one point that 'what is classified as nonsense is, *strictly speaking, not a grammatical or logical unit of a language*, but a mere mark on paper (or noise) or sequence of marks (or noises)' (2001, 20, italics added). But how helpful is this form of strict speech?[39] To capture and direct our attention as the *Tractatus* and Carroll's works do, we need words before us which we recognize, which in conjunction with our readiness to see particular symbols in particular signs immediately draw us into particular but unreflective projections of meaning. In doing so, they act on us just as ordinary 'sensical' strings of signs do, though in these cases the projections happen to be confused, governed at different moments by different, incompatible but nonetheless specific readinesses or dispositions to project meaning.

So the above account, and the 'equivocation' reading upon which it rests, should spare us any suspicion of a problematic person-relativism. Indeed, despite the close connection between psychologism about philosophical confusion and the 'sheer lack' reading of 'austerity', it is clear that Conant and Diamond wish to disavow person-relativism too. For example, consider this passage in Conant's discussion of the 'climbing of the ladder':

> If the specification of the moments in the dialectic we pass through in an ascent of the ladder were to be identified with a description of psychological events as they transpire in an individual subject, then it would become mysterious how [that specification] could ever purport to be anything more than a characterization of a sequence of mere psychological contingencies in, say, *my* experience of reading the book (and thus mysterious in what sense *that* order could accurately reflect or fail to reflect anything of possible general interest to us here). (Conant 2007, 57)[40]

But as I tried to point out in my discussion of White's 'alienist' complaint above, the worry over person-relativism points to a deeper worry. What is puzzling about a

characterisation of the process of reading the book that reveals only 'a sequence of mere psychological contingencies in … *my* experience of reading the book' is not so much that it makes 'mysterious' what might be 'of possible general interest to *us* here' (second set of italics added); rather, given the sense of 'the psychological' with which we seem to be left if we embrace the 'sheer lack' interpretation of nonsense, it is mysterious how such a characterisation could have the *kind* of interest it has for us – or indeed *me* for that matter. What 'psychology' in that sense reveals can only ever be shifts in patterns of 'arbitrary' signs and 'arbitrary' 'accompaniments' of such signs. That may be the way the reading of the book engages Diamond's 'empirical psychologist'. But it is not the way that it engages those concerned with philosophical illusions.

Conant's 'sequence of mere psychological contingencies' is a process into which we cannot 'enter': none of us, not even *I* can do so, as 'there is as it were no inside'. Whether or not it is a process peculiar to me, the deeper worry is that it is mysterious what interest this process could have for any *thinker* (other than 'the empirical psychologist'). This 'climbing' of 'the ladder' is a series of 'mental transitions to other collections of signs', governed perhaps by 'natural laws of inferential behaviour' but no more normatively comprehensible than a 'blow on the head'. The account I have offered spares us person-relativism; but it does so by addressing this deeper worry about the 'intelligibility' of nonsense and it does that by casting doubt on a hard 'psychological'/'logical' distinction. It does so, I believe, in just the way we need to and in a way that my examples show we can.

So could Conant and Diamond simply accept this story? They could. It is, I think, quite in the spirit of 'resolution' and of the 'austere conception of nonsense'. Indeed my understanding of 'climbing the ladder' could be seen as reviving a suggestion of Conant's in two of his early papers on the *Tractatus*,[41] as giving a more positive spin to his later talk of 'going through the motions of "inferring" (apparent) conclusions from (apparent) "premises"' (2000, 196-97) and as elaborating on what might be involved in Diamond's 'imaginative activity' of 'enter[ing] into the taking of nonsense for sense'. But my suggestion rests on the 'equivocation' reading of 'austerity' and calls for a new caution regarding the 'sheer lack' reading, which has played such a central role in both the promotion and criticism of 'resolution'.

In his 2007, Conant admits to regrets on his and Diamond's part about 'infelicities of formulation and thought' in some of their 'early writings' (2007, 120).

One might venture a guess that these regrets might include the rhetoric of 'sheer lack', of 'pure gibberish'. That rhetoric is conspicuously absent from that particular paper, which is home – not coincidentally, I think - to the extended discussion of 'climbing the ladder' discussed above. But that rhetoric returns with some vigour in Conant and Dain 2011 and the following section will examine this paper as it offers what might seem to be reasons for rejecting the kind of account Sec. 7 sketches.

9.   But is this really nonsense? Conant, Dain and White

The natural worry to have about that account is that it gives the impression of restoring what one might call the 'graspable logic' of nonsense only by using examples that aren't really nonsense after all. Moreover, one can imagine a critic of resolute readings objecting that my White King example cannot have the relevance I suggest because it simply isn't 'pure gibberish'. But in taking 'austere nonsense' to be a 'sheer lack of sense', this claim begs the question I have sought to raise. 'But that's just what "resolute" readers say "austere nonsense" is!', it might be replied: 'It is "the central idea of the austere view"!' That is indeed what the resolute have said. But they say much more, and, in particular, in those discussions where the 'equivocation' reading becomes prominent.

My interest in the above objection here, however, is that it is just this kind of objection that Conant and Dain make in response to examples that White offers in his paper, 'Throwing the Baby out with the Ladder', examples some of which strike me as similar to those I used in my 2006 and in Sec. 6 above. White's vision of how Wittgenstein understands the emergence of philosophical nonsense – as emerging out of 'the crossing of … different, incompatible, ways of talking' (2011, 42) – also bears similarities to my own,[42] a vision which the 'equivocation' reading of 'austerity' suggests. Conant and Dain don't seem to see this connection and, I will argue, attack White at the wrong points.

White offers examples of what he suggests are nonsense which are, nonetheless, capable of being used to communicate something. He offers these examples as part of a criticism of what he takes the motivation of resolute readings to be, though I won't explore that criticism here. Conant and Dain's response to White is to question whether his examples really are nonsense and I will argue that in one case

they are right and in another wrong. But perhaps most importantly, it seems to me that their overall reaction to these examples is forced, driven by the 'sheer lack' reading of 'austerity' and opening up once again worries discussed above. The 'equivocation' reading, on the other hand, lets us see White's examples for what they are.

Let us look at two of these examples. The first is a chess annotation of David Bronstein's:

> In one of his games, David Bronstein, playing Black, had a bishop in an apparently dominant position, being well centralized on e5. In this position, he played the paradoxical move of retreating this bishop to the corner of the board, to the square h8 where it looked completely out of play. This unlikely looking move turned out, as the game developed, to be the key to his winning strategy, which depended on the bishop retaining control of the a1-h8 diagonal. From h8, it did this ideally, since it was now placed on a square that was inaccessible to the opponent, so that the bishop could neither be exchanged nor attacked. He annotated this move as follows:

> > **Bh8** I like this move a lot: **Bj10** would have been even stronger. (2011, 40-41)

Conant and Dain's response is to deny that this is, in fact, nonsense on the grounds that 'we do know what to do with' this combination of signs:

> [W]e know, for instance, where the piece would be placed (and which piece it would be) if we laid a standard 8x8 chessboard over a 10x10 (or larger) board; … we know some of the ways in which we would need to supplement the rules for specifying moves (and for making them) to take account of this new, larger board; … [and] we know how to parse the sign into component parts … [G]iven that we do know these things, given that we can in all these ways see how the signs are being used, see how they are symbolizing, it is implausible to maintain that the sentence is nonsense if that is supposed to mean that it is merely an empty string of signs. (2011, 71)

I think Conant and Dain are right to argue that this is not a compelling example of nonsense, though my reason for believing that is not that it is implausible to see the remark in question as 'merely an empty string of signs'. Conant and Dain claim that 'White's examples are clearly at odds with the sentences of the *Tractatus*' (p. 71), a claim I doubt. But in making it, they acknowledge that '[t]he sentences of that book certainly do not at first sight appear to be nonsense' (p. 71) and – one might add - certainly don't in the sense of appearing to be 'mere empty strings of signs'. So where then does the difference lie?

Conant and Dain point out what one might call the 'naturalness' with which we imagine a perfectly useable system of representation at work in Bronstein's remark, one which could be extended to ever larger 'chess' boards, to games we don't - but perfectly well could - play. White's claim that an 'explanation of the chess notation' 'assign[s] no meaning to the letter "j" or numeral "10"' seems somehow less than forceful, as he – in a way – acknowledges when he concedes that 'we instantly perceive "**Bj10**" as having a sense' (2011, 41, 42). He goes on to insist that 'the resulting surreal train of thought lapses of course into incoherence'. But it's not that clear that it does, and this is my reason for agreeing with Conant and Dain that the Bronstein case is not a compelling example of nonsense. For example, one doesn't feel that there is a contradiction waiting to reveal itself as we elaborate this new way of talking and the new games we now imagine playing, a tension that will leave us sooner or later uncertain how to go on.[43] This – I suggest - is where the difference lies.

In a much briefer discussion, Conant and Dain claim that another of White's examples fails. It is Wemmick's description of Jaggers in Chapter XXIV of *Great Expectations*:

> 'Deep' said Wemmick, 'as Australia'. Pointing with his pen at the office floor, to express that Australia was understood, for the purpose of the figure, to be symmetrically on the opposite of the globe.
> 'If there was anything deeper', added Wemmick, bringing his pen to paper, 'he'd be it.' (Dickens 1996, 199)

Conant and Dain propose that Wemmick 'uses his pair of sentences to communicate to Pip his belief that Jaggers is as deep as they come' (Conant and Dain 2011, 70);[44]

there is also a clear sense in which we 'see how [these signs] are symbolizing' and indeed in which 'it is implausible to maintain that the[se] sentence[s are] nonsense if that is supposed to mean that [they are] merely … empty string[s] of signs'. But it seems to me that one feels more of the presence here of a 'wavering in our relation to our words', a 'fail[ure] to make genuine determinations of meaning' (Conant, quoted above).

Here is a possible gloss on our reaction to Wemmick's talk of someone (or something) being 'deeper than Australia'. It seems to me that our 'imagination' does indeed 'waver' here, presenting us with something both 'above' and 'below' that region of the earth. On the one hand, there is a depth beneath Australia – one can dig down to it; but that 'it' lies in the 'wrong' direction, as it were, for it to be 'deeper than Australia' for us (in Dickens' England). On the other hand, to proceed on 'beyond' that deepest of depths for us that Australia represents, we find ourselves floating in space above Australia; and that seems not a *depth* at all.

So when Conant and Dain insist that these sentences 'cannot be simply nonsense' (2011, 70), I am inclined to agree: they aren't 'simply nonsense', if that means 'merely [being] empty string[s] of signs'. But they are 'nonsense', nonetheless, indeed in very much the way the 'equivocation' reading of 'austerity' suggests: our sense that this particular case is a case of nonsense arises out of a sense of a tension between the two readings that our words encourage, a felt clash of implications they would dictate.

Conant and Dain go on to attempt to argue that, 'for all his claims that he too means plain nonsense by this term', White's depicts his examples as 'nonsense' because he actually has a 'preconceived' and theory-laden conception of 'nonsense', one based on a theory of metaphor to which he is already committed (p. 78, 77). But it seems to me that there is something very natural in describing at least this second example as 'nonsense', whether or not one endorses that theory. Diamond insists that the *Tractatus* does not operate with a 'special notion of nonsensicality' but 'only the ordinary idea of not meaning anything at all', 'the ordinary idea of having, perhaps unwittingly, failed to say anything' (Diamond 2004, 205, 219). It is not that clear that there is much to be gained by arguing over whose conception of nonsense is more 'plain', more 'ordinary' and less 'preconceived' than whose.[45] But if a commitment to the 'sheer lack' reading makes Wemmick's and the White King's remarks 'sensical', then it is not clear to me that that notion is the notion with which Wittgenstein himself

operates, a notion which fits much more naturally the 'equivocation' reading and according to which – indeed – this second example *does* appear to be nonsense.

Let me express a further note of caution about Conant and Dain's treatment of these examples. In my elaboration on White's Wemmick example, there is a clear sense in which we 'see how [these signs] are symbolizing'. Ought that to have persuaded me that this cannot be 'austere nonsense'? Only, and crucially, I think, if it is a relatively straight-forward business to decide whether that elaboration was my finding a way to be 'inside' some genuine thoughts or instead my 'enter[ing] imaginatively into' mere (pseudo-)'thoughts'. As a resolute reader I need to allow for 'enter[ing] imaginatively into the seeing of nonsense as sense', 'treat[ing] that person's nonsense in imagination as if I took it to be an intelligible sentence of a language I understand, *something I find in myself the possibility of meaning*' (Diamond, quoted above) and that presumably is 'treating it in imagination' as something 'with which I know what to do'; the illusion is precisely one of 'know[ing] how to parse the sign into component parts', 'see[ing] how the signs are being used, see[ing] how they are symbolizing' (Conant and Dain, quoted above). If it were easy to distinguish this from 'being inside' some genuine thoughts then there would be no need for anything like the resolute *Tractatus*, and there is, of course, a certain irony in Conant and Dain's confidence here, reminiscent as it is of the philosopher who finds the depiction of the *Tractatus* as nonsense comical - 'Of course, you can understand it! Can't you follow the argument?' – and its depiction as 'pure gibberish' absurd. It also has to be said that Conant and Dain make pretty quick work with White's examples despite the fact that Conant talks elsewhere of the need for 'an arduous process of clarification' if we are to settle '[w]hether we are really making sense or not', a question that 'admits of no fast or simple answer' (2007, 71).[46] Now how 'arduous' the process of clarification needs to be depends, of course, on the character of the particular cases to be clarified. But I suspect that what gives Conant and Dain their confidence is their reliance on the intuition that nonsense is 'sheer lack', an intuition which will serve them much less well in understanding the process of 'enter[ing] imaginatively' into mere 'thoughts' and 'climbing the Tractarian ladder'. If we allow ourselves to be captivated by that intuition, then, I suspect, we are in danger of throwing the baby – and the 'ladder' - out with the bath water after all.

Is the conception of nonsense I have offered still entitled to the honorific, 'austere'? Are my examples 'real nonsense, plain nonsense'? I am inclined to think so.

These strings of signs do not have what one might call 'senses of their own' - as Mulhall might say, '*intrinsic* senses'.[47] Instead – as the 'equivocation' reading requires - they are the occasion of illusions of sense generated by a conflation of particular sets of meaningful propositions and the impression that they have a sense of their own is dependent upon those particular conflations.[48]

There is no doubt that the 'sheer lack' reading might, from this perspective, seem doubly austere, but there are reasons to regard its brand of 'austerity' as a step too far. Not only does it encourage the worries we have examined above – about person-relativism, psychologism and the question of how one 'climbs the ladder' - it also seems a more extreme interpretation of 'austerity' than Conant and Diamond themselves require. They have recently stressed that the core commitments of 'resolution' present a programme for how *not* to read the *Tractatus*: in particular, not reading Wittgenstein's nonsensical 'elucidations' as conveying ineffable 'insights', nor as espousing a theory of meaning. They have presented the 'austere' conception of nonsense as a corollary of the latter rejection, underlining the 'ordinariness' – the 'plainness' and un-theory-ladenness – of the notion of nonsense that Wittgenstein uses.[49] But both the 'sheer lack' and 'equivocation' readings are consistent with that specification of 'austerity'. If mere equivocations are what have led one to speak in the perplexing ways we philosophers do, then one has failed to latch on to some mysterious ineffable truth, ineffable feature of reality or glimpsed some inexpressible theory of meaning; instead one has simply been misled by surface grammar and have come to talk nonsense in what at least seems to be a reasonably 'plain' and 'ordinary' sense. If one can come to be persuaded that one's philosophical claims arise out of such equivocations, then one will have concluded that they are simply confusions.[50]

We come here to where I would disagree with White. As I've indicated, while I think Conant and Dain may be right about some of his putative examples of nonsense, they are wrong about others. What I find most puzzling about White's story is why he thinks that the kind of account of nonsense that he gives – and which resembles in many respects that given in my 2006 – is specifically fit to explain how Wittgenstein's remarks might convey 'ineffable features of reality' (2011, 52) but *not* how one might understand a resolute 'therapeutic … use of nonsense' (White 2011, 39). The account that depicts our philosophical claims as nonsense by virtue of being created by 'overlapping' 'surface grammars' requires significant supplementation to explain the former (which it is not clear that White really provides) but little – I have

suggested - to explain the latter. Rather than pursue these issues, the penultimate section of the paper will examine what might seem a limitation of the account I have given. I will argue that it is no such thing but that it does point to a limitation of White's account, burdened as that is with a further explanatory ambition.

10.   'Language-relativity'

One of the reasons why Frege draws the logical/psychological distinction as he does is a concern to make sense of the possibility of our sharing thoughts; such a possibility seems to be undermined if we identify thoughts with the mere 'mental accompaniments' of the sentences we use, which Frege saw as essentially owned such that no two individuals might share them.[51]

From this perspective, the allocation of philosophical confusion to the realm of the 'merely psychological' certainly would deny us the basis on which to understand these confusions as 'wide-ranging' (White, quoted above), as they are manifestly are. But our deeper worry arises out of the 'de-psychologizing of psychology', that leads to the 'merely psychological' falling into the realm of 'the logically arbitrary'. We seem to be denied a basis on which philosophical confusions can be *grasped*, *appreciated* – even if we resist the word 'understood'; they are phenomena which do not fall within the realm of *verstehen* but instead - at best - that of *erklaren*, viewable only from 'outside' – by an 'alienist' - because 'there is as it were no inside'. Diamond and Conant recognize that placing 'austerely nonsensical' confusion on either side of the 'logical'/'psychological' distinction thus drawn is inadequate and the kind of story that White and I offer suggests a basis for something like an 'internal' 'intelligibility' to philosophical confusion or perhaps a fleshing out of Diamond's 'very particular use of imagination'. It also provides a basis for seeing these confusions as sharable; but, I will argue, its explanation of their 'wide-ranging' character is less powerful than White seems to assume. In particular, White's insinuation that it explains how philosophical illusions can be 'universal illusions' is mistaken.

Let me say first that I do not want to deny that there is *something* right in a person-relative and psychologistic emphasis in a description of our engagement with the *Tractatus*. Firstly, it is indeed Wittgenstein's view that when we talk of a sentence

as nonsensical, we are talking about a tendency on the part of certain readers to take it as saying something when it doesn't. Secondly, such confusions are capable of being 'deeply personal' in that that certain deep spiritual or existential urges may find expression in our latching on to the confusions that our language makes possible.[52] The conflations in question can become vehicles, as it were, for fantasies that serve, in this sense, deeply personal purposes. But they may do so for any speaker of the relevant language and are, in this way, not person-relative; nor need the fantasies for which they become vehicles be. Thirdly, we must each individually undergo the *Tractatus'* therapy, rather than simply taking away what one might think of the book's 'results' or 'conclusions'. I recall once being told by someone that they felt Wittgenstein wasn't of interest because he provided no real help with 'the real metaphysical issues' and it is indeed an implication of the *Tractatus'* conception of philosophical confusion that its discussion of sign/symbol confusion will seem irrelevant to those concerns. It is a familiar experience, while reading psychopathology textbooks, to find oneself thinking that one has each and every one of the conditions described; bringing one to the conclusion that the 'real metaphysical issues' are 'illusions of sense' arising out of a lack of clarity about how we use words is, on the other hand, clearly a tougher business, that of eliciting a certain shocking and anything-but-initially-plausible self-knowledge: a recognition that I myself actually *have* this peculiar condition that Wittgenstein describes, coming to *see* that *my* 'real metaphysical issues' arise out of my confusing sign and symbol, and that what *I* have taken to 'the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all' (TLP 4.003).

But the early Wittgenstein traces our vulnerability to these confusions to our use of particular signs in particular systems of representation. In 1931, Wittgenstein described language as 'an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings' which 'sets everyone the same traps':

> [H]ence we see one person after another walking down the same paths and we know in advance the point at which they will branch off, at which they will walk straight on without noticing the turnings, etc., etc. (CV 25)

I have suggested that the philosophical confusions Wittgenstein examined can be seen as possessing a recognizable logic and that I am rendered vulnerable to them by virtue

of my speaking particular languages, a feature which is clearly not a peculiarity of me as an individual. Rather than 'the only "insight" the work imparts [being] one about the reader himself (Conant 1991a, 157, quoted above), the *Tractatus* identifies some of 'the same traps' that language 'sets everyone' by tracing the confusing influence on our thinking of particular, multiple sources of items of pseudo-sense to which we speakers of that language are vulnerable.[53]

But, of course, in this sense, 'the same traps' are precisely not set for *everyone*. Just as Carroll's humour cannot be translated into some languages, neither can the speakers of certain languages succumb to some of the confusions that Wittgenstein targets and his early dream of a *Begriffsschrift* would seem to be that of a language into which such confusions cannot be 'translated'. Consider the following explanation in the *Big Typescript* of why 'the same philosophical problems that had occurred to the Greeks are still occupying us':

> The reason is that our language has remained the same and seduces us into asking the same questions over and over. As long as there is a verb 'to be' which seems to function like 'to eat' and 'to drink', as long as there are adjectives like 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible', as long as one talks about the flow of time and an expanse of space, etc., etc., humans will continue to bump up against the same mysterious difficulties. (TS 213, 424)

Both White's and my own account stress this 'language-relativity' of philosophical confusions. But, as the early Wittgenstein understood it, that very relativity would exclude the possibility of 'universal illusions', illusions to which *anyone* might be vulnerable *irrespective* of the languages that they speak. Hence, White is mistaken in thinking he *can* account for such illusions. He claims

> *[E]very* language will create sentences in which there is a word corresponding to "thing" in which it is apparently functioning as a genuine predicate which is true of everything. Similarly, *every* language will have an identity sign that apparently functions as a relational expression. (White 2011, 43)

While this may be true, it appears to have been the intention of Frege and the early Wittgenstein to set in place notations which dispensed with precisely those features:

there is a clear sense in which Fregean predicate logic eliminated that 'verb "to be" which seems to function like "to eat" and "to drink"' and the *Tractatus* promises a similar treatment for 'adjectives like "identical", "true", "false", and "possible", along with nouns like 'object' and 'proposition'. Wittgenstein certainly comes to lose faith in the prophylactic efficacy of these kinds of notational changes and sees such responses as underestimating the complex difficulties that we face in 'finding our way about' (PI sec. 123) within our own language. But this change comes about for complex reasons which Wittgenstein only comes to appreciate later in his career.[54]

11.   Conclusion

> The only way … for us to avoid prejudice – or vacuity in our claims, is to posit the ideal as what it is, namely as an object of comparison - a measuring rod as it were – within our way of looking at things, and not as a preconception to which everything must conform. This namely is the dogmatism into which philosophy can so easily degenerate. (CV 30)

The case I have presented above calls for caution regarding claims that play a central role in the promotion and criticism of 'resolution' and, in particular, regarding the rhetoric of 'sheer lack'. It seems to me that this rhetoric has got away from its users. It has done so in ways which evoke - to use an expression of Conant and Diamond's - '*metaphysical insistence*' (2004, 83). It represents, I think, a forced, unnatural demand and perhaps a variety of that 'dogmatism into which philosophy can so easily degenerate'. It has left some of their less sympathetic readers *understandably* baffled, understandably *incredulous*: they thump their own tables now and cry out 'These *interpreters* – these *readers* – of the *Tractatus cannot* mean what they are saying; they *cannot* be serious!' Conant has argued that the mysticism that some have seen in the *Tractatus* actually represents the penultimate stage of the dialectic into which that work draws us, a 'rung' to be climbed up upon and then thrown away. I suspect that we might be best to regard in a similar light the table-thumping insistence on nonsense as 'sheer lack', and acknowledge - in a perhaps final stage – the *kind* of meaningfulness that philosophical confusions and Wittgenstein's elucidatory 'propositions' possess, along with the distinctive *kind* of reading they

require. I have no doubt that there is a stage in the dialectic – and that there was a stage in the scholarly debate – at which these table-thumping insistences were the right things to say, the *helpful* things to say. But there may be a further stage.

The resolute press the distinctiveness of their reading by stressing the 'sheer lack' reading of 'austerity'; but to make their view plausible – and answer the above worries about psychologism and 'climbing the ladder' – they must instead stress the 'equivocation' reading, or so I have argued. The reason I think they are not thereby simply – or in a serious way - inconsistent is that I suspect that the 'sheer lack' reading does less work than it seems to: in actuality, it is the 'equivocation' reading that – to use Witherspoon's expression – 'does the heavy lifting' (2000, 318). This may now raise doubts about the distinctiveness of the resolute approach. But, as I have indicated, I believe resolute readings and non-resolute readings might indeed significantly overlap and we do not make those differences that remain clearer by expressing them in confusing or misleading ways. Both similarities and differences have been made more difficult to hear by the deafening sound of the thumping of tables.

Another contributing factor has been the temptation to which resolute readers have perhaps characteristically succumbed to focus on the perspective one attains on the last rung of the ladder: for understandable reasons, to which I will turn in a moment, they have leapt to the top of the ladder. But, as Conant acknowledges when he talks of every reader of the *Tractatus* needing to 'begin life … as a standard reader' (quoted above), some significant proportion of one's account of what it is to read the book must come in the form of an account of one's – at least partially - confused journey up the 'ladder', one's confused progress through what one takes – at least initially - to be philosophical argument. From the resolute perspective, sharing in that journey must take the form of an 'imaginative entering into' confusion, a process which itself 'issue[] in nonsense-sentences' (Diamond 2000b, 161). But in presenting this nonsense, there is reason to think that the resolute reader will draw on just the kinds of reflections that non-resolute readers have cited in giving their own accounts of progress up 'the ladder', even if the 'framing' understanding of what this 'progress' is differs. My suspicion is then that significant parts of resolute and non-resolute readings will overlap, talking, for example, of consequences of claims about 'objects', 'facts', 'names', 'propositions' etc. The resolute reader's 'imaginatively entering into'

(pseudo?-) inferences from one set of (pseudo?-) claims to another will here shadow the non-resolute reader's tracing of an argument from one set of claims to another.[55]

These two modes of engagement with the text will *look* then essentially the same. In both cases, it is a story told in the language of ideas, so to speak, even if they turn out in the resolute case to be *illusions of* ideas.[56] Conant insists that

> For the author of the *Tractatus*, not only should we not confuse the order of events in a psychological episode of thought with the order of steps in a logical chain of thought, but we should also not identify either of these with the order of clarification in an elucidatory train of 'thought'. (2007, 56)

While this seems correct, it must not blind us to the possibility that what we offer in articulating at least the lower rungs of the ladder must *look like* 'steps in a logical chain of thought'. This will be the result of our 'imaginatively entering into' the nonsense; but the illusion into which we enter is an illusion *of* 'steps in a logical chain of thought'; and, in putting it into words which others who speak our language are very likely also to feel as similarly resonant with meaning, we will use the language of ideas.[57] Indeed the therapy/ladder is *for* those who 'hear ideas' here and not for those who don't; and only the former *can* climb the 'ladder'.

The 'sheer lack' interpretation might perhaps make such a reading seem a perplexing possibility: it may seem like walking on water or climbing on thin air, since there are no thoughts there to be thought, no ideas to be entertained and no inferences to be followed. But this is another misleading aspect of the 'sheer lack' interpretation: our progress – and our capacity to recognise particular steps within it as appropriate – rests on patterns of shared readiness to become confused in particular ways, to succumb in response to particular combinations of signs to particular illusions of sense (of which a central part is a readiness to see the same (pseudo-) inferential relations linking those same illusions). Different speakers of the relevant languages can be brought to experience these same illusions –they will 'walk down the same paths' (CV 25, quoted above) - and, in this way, these illusions take on a kind of 'objectivity' – or 'inter-subjectivity' at least. As the 'equivocation' reading would have it, the sense of the sentences that make up the 'ladder' may be under- (or perhaps over-) determined; but that does not entail that 'the ladder … turns out to be an illusion' (McGinn, quoted above) or that the remarks that constitute it do not act

upon us '*as* words' (Sullivan, quoted above). Rather we will all see much the same (pseudo-) sense - articulated in the language of ideas – in the same 'nonsense-sentences', as a result of our being 'bewitched' by, or 'imaginatively entering into', these confusions.[58] We 'draw[] on the same sources in us' (Diamond 2000b, 164) - 'on our own similar impulses and intentions' (p. 163); and only those with these 'same sources' of confusion within them can climb this ladder.

Other commentators have questioned how distinct resolute and non-resolute readings really must be,[59] though often in worrying that the former category may be ill-defined. So, given my story, where does the difference between such resolute and non-resolute accounts of our 'climbing the ladder' lie? It lies where an interpretive temptation I mentioned above suggests it would lie: the final step of our 'climbing', at which we begin to 'see through' the language of ideas.[60] One might say – under the influence of the 'sheer lack' reading – that we come to see that what we took to be symbols were mere signs. But I would prefer to say – in line with the 'equivocation' reading - that we come to see that it was common signs, not common symbols that maintained what apparent coherence our thoughts had.

I think it is very difficult to characterise this event, in which our words seem to flicker between bearing expressive faces and being blank, 'wooden' masks? Here what we took to be thoughts reveal themselves as nothing of the sort; before our very eyes the status of the objects of our reflections flicker – between being seemingly profound claims and being mere 'word-constructions' (Diamond 2000b, 157, quoted above) – as does the mode of understanding they call for. In as much as Conant's discussion of 'climbing the ladder' might be thought to shed light on this, it is surely right to see this last step as one it would be odd to characterise as inference from premises to conclusion. But it is not clear to me that one says anything particularly illuminating about this step when one describes it as 'triggered' or 'enabled' through 'dialectical pressure'. All I myself have done here is give examples of what I think are analogous steps, for example, that in which we 'get' Carroll's joke, and see that what has led us up the perplexing path of talking about the comings and goings of 'Nobody' was sign/symbol conflation.[61] Can we expect more by way of explanation than the offering of such analogies? This seems to me to be an important question, though not one to which I feel confident I have an answer.[62]

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[1] Compare Diamond's recent insistence that confused philosophical remarks 'contain words with no meaning and are nonsense' (unpublished, 23-24).

[2] For example, Glock identifies 'austerity' with the 'sheer lack' reading: 'according to the austere conception, nonsense is always a matter of *privation*' (2004, 222).

[3] I won't consider here whether Hacker's case against Baker is just, though Sec. 10 will return to one issue on which I feel the former has an important point to make (cf. n. 53).

[4] Cf., e.g., Conant's enthusiastic comments on the dust-jacket of Baker 2004.

[5] Cf. also Conant 1998, 247-48 and 250 and 2007, 54.

[6] Works by Wittgenstein are referred to using abbreviations given in the references. I have used both Ogden's and Pears and McGuinness's translations of passages from the *Tractatus* and, on occasion, my own.

[7] I touch on this claim again in n. 56 below.

[8] Cf. also Conant 2011, 630 ('For a resolute reader, the charge of nonsense is directed not at the propositional sign itself, but rather at the character of the relation in which a particular speaker stands to a propositional sign.') and Conant 1998, 224 ('Nonsense as a term of criticism is … taken to apply to acts of assertion rather than propositions.')

[9] Cf. also Crary 2000, 12-13.

[10] That 'a critique of psychologism' also requires 'a critique of psychology', that is, a reassessment of what we think 'the psychic' is, is a view also expressed by Heidegger (Heidegger 1976, 88).

[11] Cf. TLP 3.03: '[w]e cannot think anything unlogical, for otherwise we should have to think unlogically'.

[12] Cf., e.g., 'Thoughts' in his 1984.

[13] In what follows, I will follow the resolute practice of talking of 'standard readers'. I do so for convenience, not because I think that practice anything but questionable, as Sec. 11 will make clear.

[14] Despite the place this claim has had in criticising standard readings, this claim is not a view peculiar to the resolute: cf., e.g., White 2011, 56: 'if … sentences are nonsense, there is no such thing as understanding them, and equally it makes no sense to talk of them as "implying" anything whatever'. Glock even calls this 'a standard assumption' (2004, 243).

[15] For example, it's not clear to me that Diamond's 'empirical psychologist' really is in a position to ascribe to someone 'intentions to have effects'.

[16] Cf., e.g., his 1893,13.

[17] E.g., Conant, in his 2011, 638 n. 15, continues to direct us to Diamond 2000b for discussion of this proposal.

[18] Cf. also Conant 2007, 43.

[19] Cf. also Reid 1998, 107–8.

[20] McGinn uses this question in her 1999 paper in an attempt to mark out a space for a rival to both standard and resolute readings; but it is an odd feature of her later book (McGinn 2006), which attempts to explain this third possibility in detail, that it fails to return to that question. This is all the more odd, given that she herself endorses the 'austere' conception of nonsense (p. 243 n. 4 and also pp. 18, 19, 100, 246 and 270) and, in the discussions that come closest to her 1999 question (pp. 158-59, 252-54), also seems to endorse the notion that Wittgenstein's own propositions are nonsensical: she states that the 'work' that these 'perform does not depend upon their possessing a sense, but upon their enabling the reader to see clearly what the use of language makes clear'; '[t]his nonsense has indeed been useful' in 'serv[ing] to bring about a clarified vision of the logical order that – Wittgenstein believes – is there in

language insofar as it represents states of affairs' (p. 253). But her question in 1999 – or a close relation of it - asked: how can climbing a 'ladder' made up of strings of signs in which 'nothing has been expressed' (p. 18) be 'useful' or 'enable' one to see anything (including, for example, 'bringing about' a 'vision' of a kind of logical order)? To that, it seems to me, McGinn offers no answer. (For further discussion of McGinn 2006, cf. McManus 2008.)

[21] Cf. also Conant 2011, 630-31.

[22] In many of his recent works, Conant focuses his attention on the *possibility* of a resolute reading of the *Tractatus* and in 2007 and 2011 the possibility of a variety of such readings is a theme. But these rather programmatic texts won't allow one to settle the issues to which I refer above.

[23] Witherspoon has accused those who endorse a 'substantial' conception of nonsense of having to 'stipulate a realm of meaninglessness with a tremendously rich structure', one which 'has all the hallmarks of genuine meaning', and one of its features is that it entitles one to talk of 'quasi-understanding' and 'quasi-logical roles' (2000, 339-42). My suspicion is that resolute readers will need to do much the same.

[24] Cf. also Conant 2007 p. 114, his talk in earlier papers of the stages of the dialectic through which we must climb including a stage at which we come to believe in ineffable truths, and his claim that 'the entire activity of Tractarian elucidation depends upon the reader's willingness to' 'try to take the remarks put forward in the *Tractatus* as theses' (2007, 68).

[25] Cf. also Conant and Diamond 2004, 59 and 60.

[26] Cf. also Conant 1993, 217 ('[T]he philosopher (typically) suffers from an illusion of understanding, from the projection of an illusory sense onto a (pseudo-) proposition which lacks a (*clear*) sense.' (italics added))

[27] Cf. Diamond 2004, 203: 'in the case of a nonsensical proposition, … there is no particular use of the propositional sign that is clearly in focus; there is no way in which the sign is being meant'. Cf. also perhaps the preface of TLP: 'What can be said at all can be said clearly.'

[28] Cf. also Conant 1993, 224.

[29] Cf. also NB 84, TLP 6.3611, and TS 213 424 below.

[30] I can't make good on this claim here, and must direct the reader to my 2006 where I attempt to do so. But I will give examples in a moment that clearly echo confusions

surrounding the conflation of quantifiers with names. What might appear to be a counter-example is Wittgenstein's insistence that 'Socrates is identical' is nonsense by virtue of the fact that 'we have given *no* meaning to the word "identical" as *adjective*' (TLP 5.4733); one might suppose that this case does fit the 'sheer lack' reading of nonsense rather well. But Diamond herself (2001, 110-11) suggests that understanding Wittgenstein's reaction to that sentence requires that we recognize it as inspired by a conflation of what she calls 'transitive' and 'intransitive' uses of 'identical'.

[31] This is sufficiently important indeed that it casts doubt on the previous paragraphs' very straight-forward story of what one might call 'visual similarity'; but I set that worry aside for now.

[32] Indeed it does so more obviously than philosophical nonsense does, though that is a worry about the power of Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical hypothesis, not my analogy.

[33] White uses this analogy (cf. 2011, 42), as do I in my 2006, 137-38.

[34] For similar reasons, there is something potentially misleading in talk of our '*failing* to see the symbol in the sign' (Conant, quoted above) and of 'the enquiry com[ing] apart in our hands' (White 2011, 32, cf. also Moore's claim that we understand Wittgenstein 'by discovering that we cannot in the end make sense of the book', that 'it falls apart in our hands' (2003, 190)).

[35] This may also give some account of how we '*operate with* latent nonsense in order to transform it into patent nonsense', as Glock puts it in his critique of the 'austere' conception (2004, 223, italics added). Cf. also pp. 237, 241-43.

[36] In barest of bare outlines, we come to see that doctrines like realism and transcendental idealism, for example, invoke 'logical spaces' – and a 'logical multiplicity' in our thoughts – that they must also deny. We feel we grasp the explanatory *ambitions* of such doctrines when 'we take ourselves to be able to 'contemplate the laws of logic as they are, as well as the possibility of their being otherwise', to 'survey the possibilities which undergird how things are with us, holding our necessities in place' (Conant 1991a, 157, quoted above). But our conception of what it would be for these doctrines to *succeed* – to provide the envisaged explanations – is, at the same time, one of a situation in which we *cannot* have grasped these 'spaces' of 'possibly being otherwise'. Once this is recognized, we

are driven to question whether we have a sense of the laws of logic as 'being as they are', of 'our necessities' being 'held in place', or of the explanatory ambitions of these doctrines. One might articulate this worry by saying that names and propositions must be 'internally related' to one another, so that we cannot conceive of ways of combining our words that would represent states of affairs incompatible with the requirements of 'our' laws of logic (or the laws of logic 'as they are'). But this way of articulating the collapse of the explanatory 'space' we felt we glimpsed merely represents a step on the road 'from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense' (PI 464), as what the word 'relation' giveth, the word 'internal' taketh away. Ultimately, encouraged by the metaphilosophical hypothesis that gives a crucial role in our confusion to sign/symbol conflation, we come to see that what gives to these confused 'thoughts' their apparent content and logic is a confused 'blurring' of different readings of our words, one encouraged by 'surface grammatical' commonalities that hide differences in 'depth grammar': in imagining we can make sense of what one might call 'explanations of how words must be used to make sense' - which we might imagine explaining just 'how the bounds of sense lie' - we 'establish' standards of correct use by conceiving of our words as symbols, and 'imagine' their use in these ways as a contingent fact about them by conceiving of our words as signs. What we realise is not that we *cannot* give sense to the notion that the laws of logic or 'the bounds of sense' 'are as they are' but that we *haven't*. (These brief comments represent a hugely compressed version of some ideas that McManus 2006 spells out.)

[37] Cf. also pp. 85-86 and his critical comments on Ricketts at p. 57.

[38] Relatedly, are we entitled to call this 'pressure' 'dialectical'? And why not 'the illusion of dialectical pressure'? Or 'quasi-dialectical pressure'?

[39] Might we be playing a misleading 'game of division' that parallels the 'multiplication game' in which Hacker supposedly indulges in talking of Wittgenstein's philosophical 'message' as one 'which *strictu sensu* cannot be said' (Hacker 2001*a*, 19)? One is also reminded of Conant and Diamond's oscillation between talk of philosophical nonsense as possessing 'no meaning' and 'no determinate meaning' pointed out in Sec. 6.

[40] There are passages in Conant's writings that might seem to endorse the kind of 'person-relativity' he rejects here. For instance, in his 2000, Conant proposes that

'whether a given remark is *Unsinn* or not' 'depends on us' – 'on our managing (or failing) to perceive … a symbol in the sign' - and that '[t]here can be no fixed answer to the question what kind of work a given remark within the [*Tractatus*] accomplishes':

> [The work] will depend on the kind of sense a reader of the text will (be tempted to) make of [the given remark]. Many of the remarks are carefully designed to tempt a reader to find a (substantially) 'nonsensical sense' in them. Certain remarks in the *Tractatus* can be seen to have a triple-aspect structure: liable to flip-flop between (1) (apparently) substantial nonsense, (2) mere *Sinn*, and (3) (what the *Tractatus* calls) *Unsinn* … What sort of foothold(s) a given remark provide(s) a given reader in her progress up the ladder thus depend(s) upon the sort(s) of aspect it presents to her, and that will depend on *her* – on the use(s) to which she is drawn to put it in the course of her ascent. (2000, 216-17)

This might indeed seem to encourage a strongly 'person-relative' reading of the *Tractatus*: what kind of foothold its remarks provide the reader depends on *her* and one might indeed then wonder whether an account of her progress up the 'ladder' could provide 'anything of possible general interest to us'. But this is misleading. The reader's response to the text may depend on the 'stage' in 'therapy' at which she finds herself, but the considerations just quoted give no reason to think that this process will be different for different readers. In fact, these consideration don't really support the claim that there can be 'no fixed answer to the question what kind of work a given remark within the [*Tractatus*] accomplishes'. Instead it suggests that an answer to that question must tell a story of how a given remark works at the different stages. Here as elsewhere, I believe the impression of 'person-relativity' is superficial.

[41] Cf. 1991b, 346-47 and 1993, 218-19. Cf. also Conant and Diamond's depiction of '[t]he kind of attempt to clarify what someone has said, *which can reveal in its failure, that she had nothing really in mind*' as taking a number of forms including 'offering possible paraphrases, and through inviting paraphrases', using 'translations of some of what is said into some supposedly more revealing linguistic form', and

'*attempts to follow through on inferential patterns involving the proposition*' (2004, 78, italics added).

[42] I make no claim to a greater originality here as parts of White's paper have clearly been in existence for some time (e.g., Sullivan cites the 'alienist' passage quoted above in his 2003, 214 n. 36.)

[43] The later Wittgenstein sometimes expresses a perplexingly relaxed attitude to the possibility of contradictions emerging in our use of a calculus but I won't concern myself with that here.

[44] This alone would not undermine White's claim as he claims to be showing how we can indeed communicate using nonsense sentences.

[45] For example, it is hard to argue with Glock's claim that there are several perfectly 'ordinary' uses of the term. Cf. his 2004, 226, 238-40.

[46] Conant and Diamond also claim that 'an "austere" conception of nonsense … does not tell us how far, and in what way, we may in some particular case be able usefully to employ forms of expression that we might recognize as nonsensical' (2004, 79)

[47] I will not attempt here to engage fully with Glock's critical discussion of the 'austere' conception of nonsense but it may be useful to comment on one issue: do the examples I give turn out ultimately to be instances of what Glock calls 'combinatorial nonsense', which he juxtaposes to 'austere' nonsense and defines as 'the nonsensical combination of meaningful signs' (2004, 235)? My sense is that they aren't, and that a better way to characterise them is as cases in which we do not settle on any one particular construal of the signs in question. So it is not that we have a settled understanding of the signs that we then attempt to combine; rather we fail to assign *a* reading to them.

[48] In this regard, I would agree with Moore when he claims that 'where illusions of sense are concerned, there are always relevant concepts', reflection on which 'is required to recognize the illusions as illusions' (2003, p. 187) (This also has a bearing on the worry regarding 'visual similarity' to which n. 31 alludes.)

[49] Cf., e.g., Conant and Diamond 2004, 47 and Conant 2007, 42-43 and 116 n. 25. The typical way in which it is argued that the 'austere' conception is 'theory-laden' is by presenting it as a consequence of a version of the 'context principle'. Cf., e.g., Glock 2004, Sullivan 2003 and Witherspoon 2000.

[50] A question I will not explore here is what significance there might be in the fact that White's examples and my own are all jokes. Even for the most easily amused, philosophical confusions are not very funny, though there is perhaps something comic – or tragic-comic – in discovering that what one took to be 'the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all' (TLP 4.003). One is, of course, reminded of Malcolm's recollection that 'Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist only of jokes' (1984, 28), as well as of Wittgenstein's remark on the *depth* of 'grammatical jokes', which he equates with 'the depth of philosophy' (PI 111). But I will not pursue these matters further here.

[51] Notoriously, Frege goes on to express what seems like a Platonism about thoughts and concepts.

[52] This Cavellian intuition, which is prominent in Conant's discussions in particular, is one that I share. Cf. McManus 2006, chs 14-15.

[53] There are similarities between the case against person-relativity that my 2006 offered and which I have sketched here, and that which Hacker (in his 2007) makes against the later Baker. He cites some of the same passages as I did and adds others that add further support. In both cases, an argument for a certain kind of 'language-relativity' is made.

[54] For discussion, cf. McManus 2006, Appendix A.

[55] In sec. 5.1 of McManus 2006 I note the overlap between my discussion of the picture analogy and Anscombe's, and White notes a similar pattern in his remarks on Ricketts and Diamond (White 2011, nn. 31 and 32.). The shadowing I describe above offers an explanation of this kind of overlap.

[56] It is noteworthy that when Conant and Diamond deny that Wittgenstein's challenge to the philosopher comes in the form of 'ascribing to her a desire to take up a perspective on language, or anything of the kind' (2004, 77-78, quoted above), they also state that 'such ascriptions may serve a genuinely elucidatory purpose in attempting to achieve clarity about what leads one to say certain things in philosophy' and hence 'can play an important role in characterizing some of the philosophical targets of the *Tractatus*' (2004, 95 n. 66).

[57] This opens up the possibility that one might mistake a resolute 'imaginative entering in' for a more conventional reading – according to the resolute, that is precisely what the standard reading does – or that one might not be sure which of

these forms of engagement with the text stands before one. An interesting case to consider here is Diamond 2000b's discussion of ethical themes in the *Tractatus*. She stresses there that in 'entering into' nonsense we are ourselves forced to talk nonsense: efforts to understand the utterer of nonsense 'issue[] in nonsense-sentences' and '[t]he understander of an utterer of nonsense is [herself] someone who can be understood only by further imaginative activity' (2000b, 161). But when Diamond 'enters into' the reflections in question, it becomes strikingly difficult to resist the thought that there is something - in some sense - difficult (ineffable?) that she is trying to intimate or convey. (Compare White's comments on this same discussion (2011, 61 n. 23).) Now, in one way, that is exactly what is to be expected because she is 'entering into' just the kind of nonsense that elsewhere in the *Tractatus* might be (and, by the standard reader, is) taken to point to such insights. But the cathartic, resolute moment in which we see that 'it was all plain nonsense' doesn't seem – at least to me - to come. In 'imaginatively entering into' this nonsense, it precisely does not 'feel' like 'austere' nonsense, and one can come to wonder whether it *really is* and whether instead it might not in some way 'intimate' something.

[58] Another reason why one might doubt the appropriateness of the term, 'imagination', here is that the 'activity' of 'entering into' these confusions once we have recognized them as such seems more a matter of giving in to temptations that we find within ourselves; these are precisely the same ones as those to which those who are still confused are victim and there is no need to summon what one might think of as an *additional*, *active* faculty to experience that confusion once again. Indeed these temptations would seem to reflect tendencies that anyone who would be 'at home in language', so to speak, must display.

[59] Cf., e.g., Moore 2003.

[60] Cf. Conant and Diamond's remarks on the term '*Satz*' in the *Tractatus* 'float[ing] between meaning (1) a propositional symbol … and (2) a propositional sign' and their claim that '[i]t is important to the method of the Tractatus that the recognition that certain apparent cases of (1) are merely cases of (2) be a recognition that the reader achieve on his own' (2004, 88 n. 6).

[61] My exploration of the picture analogy in ch. 5 of my 2006 provides further – and perhaps more obviously relevant examples. In particular, I demonstrate there how we

flip from contemplating what we think are perplexing possibilities never hitherto entertained to recognizing illusions of sense conjured up by sign/symbol conflation.