

Ludwig Nagl/Chantal Mouffe (eds.)

The Legacy
of Wittgenstein:
Pragmatism or
Deconstruction



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world to their will, he also implies that human desire is distinguishable from, say, need or fixation - that the play of words can allow us to see beyond an inability to accept the world's independence from our will.

Take the evident but unacknowledged surreality of the shopkeeper as designed to reveal our capacity to take what is utterly extraordinary as ordinary, and the evident but unacknowledged familiarity of the shopper as designed to reveal our capacity to take what is ordinary as utterly extraordinary. Is this an ordinary, an everyday or familiar, notion of the ordinary? Is it Austin's? It does not seem that one can simply say of it, as Derrida says of Austin's, that it has 'metaphysical origins' (*Limited Inc*, p 18) - at least, not without acknowledging Wittgenstein's own implicit acknowledgement that metaphysics originates in opposition to, and hence is always already capable of marking, the ordinary. How, then, might one proceed with a deconstructive reading of a text which persists in seeing instruction for philosophy in the concept of the ordinary despite or beyond such an acknowledgement of its treacherousness?

James Conant

A prolegomenon to the reading of later Wittgenstein

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

Wittgenstein¹

.... Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

W. B. Yeats²

My aim in this paper will be to highlight some continuities in Wittgenstein's philosophy that I believe have not been sufficiently appreciated. My aim in doing so is not to suggest that there are no significant differences between the philosophies of the early and the later Wittgenstein, but only that we will not be in a position to appreciate what *is* genuinely new and original in Wittgenstein's later philosophy until we are first in a better position to appreciate what is not.

Most commentators approach Wittgenstein's early work with deeply rooted assumptions about the sorts of doctrines that are to be found in it. The guiding exegetical presupposition on the part of most commentators is that the central views of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* are precisely the ones which Wittgenstein is most concerned to criticize in *Philosophical Investigations*.³ Commentators, accordingly, approach the early work determined to find the relevant (especially, mentalistic) doctrines espoused somewhere within its pages, for the shape of their narrative of Wittgenstein's overall intellectual development requires that such views be there somewhere.⁴ (It is noteworthy in this regard that most of the commentators who furnish such readings of Wittgenstein's early work do so in

1 *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p.7.

2 *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: MacMillan, 1983); pp. 347-8. I am indebted to T. P. Uschanov for this epigraph.

3 A number of people have pointed out that this exegetical procedure has led to catastrophic misreadings of the *Tractatus*. On this topic, see, for example, Warren Goldfarb's "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab", (*Synthese* 56, 1983); especially pp.265, 281 n2; and H. O. Mounce's "Philosophy, Solipsism and Thought" (*The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 186, January, 1997), especially pp. 4-5.

4 See note 46 for a brief discussion of an instance of this phenomenon.

the early chapters of book-length narratives that aspire to explain Wittgenstein's later criticisms of philosophy by furnishing illustrations of its targets purportedly drawn from the early work.) This has led to the attribution of a great many views to the *Tractatus* which come in for criticism not only within the pages of the *Tractatus* itself, but which are subject to vehement and devastating criticism already in the writings of Frege. The irony of this situation is further intensified, if one comes to appreciate that these same pages from Frege's writings constitute a decisive (perhaps the single most important) influence on the early Wittgenstein, just because of the exceptional degree to which early Wittgenstein appreciated the devastating character of these criticisms; and these same pages of Frege also form perhaps the single most important target of the *Tractatus*, just because Wittgenstein thought that even "the great works of Frege" failed to think these criticisms all the way through – failed (to borrow a phrase of Wittgenstein's) "to carry [them] out strictly".⁵ Moreover, the views in question (so often attributed to early Wittgenstein and so severely criticized by Frege) are ones which – even if they are not held by either Frege or early Wittgenstein – very widely held by a great many other philosophers, thus leaving it something of a mystery why Wittgenstein would wish the notoriously difficult pages of his *Tractatus* (a book about which he himself declared: "Nobody will understand it; although I believe it's all as clear as crystal"⁶) to be bound together in a single volume with the pages of *Philosophical Investigations*, and why he would say – as he does in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations* – that "the latter could be seen in the right light only against the background of my old way of thinking." Why "only against the background of my old way of thinking", if the doctrines buried in the difficult pages of the *Tractatus* represent confusions easily found in the less difficult writings of a great many other philosophers?

This strategy of approaching Wittgenstein's early work with a set of assumptions about what *must* be in that work has led to drastic underestimations not only of the philosophical aspirations of that work, but equally of those of his later work. For in underestimating the philosophical achievement of the early work one underestimates the depth at which the investigations in the later work are prosecuted. If much of what is credited as the achievement of Wittgenstein's later work is anticipated, if not already transcended, in Wittgenstein's early work, and

5 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.64. All subsequent unspecified references to a section number are to the *Tractatus*. Quotations from the *Tractatus* will be drawn from either the Pears and McGuinness translation (Routledge: London, 1981) or the Ogden translation (also Routledge: London, 1981), or some emendation or combination thereof.

6 Letter to Russell, 13.3.19; *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 68.

if it is, nonetheless, true that his later work marks a significant break from his early work, then it still remains for us to inquire: Wherein does that break consist?⁷

The presence of the "only" in Wittgenstein's remark in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations* – about how the new way of thinking is to "be seen in the right light *only* against the background of my old way of thinking" – suggests that, if we want to see his new way of thinking in the right light, we need first to see it against the background of features of his "old way of thinking" that he takes to be *peculiar* to that way of thinking. Which features of his old way of thinking are at issue here? And how do they serve to form the background against which his new way of thinking can be seen in the right light? Are they features of his old way of thinking that he takes to be mistaken in a respect peculiar to that way of thinking? Or are they ones that he takes to be essentially correct in a respect peculiar to that way of thinking? Is what is at issue here that which he is concerned to inherit or that which he is concerned to repudiate in his old way of thinking?

Both. We can only see what Wittgenstein is most concerned to repudiate in his old way of thinking – and, thereby, what is most original in, and thus peculiar to, that way of thinking – against the background of that which he is most concerned to inherit in his earlier way of thinking. Having failed to identify the latter, we are in no position to identify the former. The aim of this paper is to attempt to bring into focus an aspect of his old way of thinking which is peculiar to, and which he is concerned to inherit from, that way of thinking. It forms a part of that background which, if only we could get it into view, Wittgenstein thought might enable us to see his new way of thinking in the right light, thus enabling us to see what in his old way of thinking he seeks to overcome and thus what in his "new" way of thinking is, indeed, *new*.

The famous penultimate section of the *Tractatus* runs as follows:

My propositions serve as *elucidations* in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as *nonsensical*, when he has used them – as steps – to climb out through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)⁸

7 I do not think that any of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein currently available contains a satisfactory answer to this question.

8 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.54.

Wittgenstein says of Carnap that he failed to understand this passage and *therefore* failed to understand "the fundamental conception of the whole book".⁹ What did Carnap fail to understand, and how did that failure lead him to misunderstand the fundamental conception of the whole book? We are told in §6.54 that the author's propositions serve as elucidations by *our* – that is, the reader's – coming to *recognize* them as nonsensical. But how can the recognition that a proposition is *nonsense* ever elucidate – ever shed light on – anything? Evidently we need a better understanding of how this work thinks about nonsense.¹⁰ This is what the *Tractatus* has to say about what is distinctive about its own conception of nonsense:

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts. (§5.4733)

Wittgenstein here contrasts a formulation of Frege's¹¹ with one of his own. At first blush, it is hard to see how they differ. The critical difference between Frege's formulation and the one which the *Tractatus* endorses is that the former implicitly distinguishes between those propositions that are legitimately constructed and those that are not, while the latter rejects the idea that there is such a thing as a logically illegitimately constructed proposition: "Every *possible* proposition is legitimately constructed."

9 "I cannot imagine that Carnap should have so completely and utterly misunderstood the last sentences of the book – and therefore the fundamental conception of the whole book" (Wittgenstein, Letter to Moritz Schlick, August 8, 1932; quoted in *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, ed. M. Nedo & M. Ranchetti (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983); p. 255). For further discussion of this remark, see my "On Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors" (in *The Grammar of Religious Belief*, edited by D.Z. Phillips; St. Martins Press: NY, 1995).

10 Ogden mistranslates *unsinnig* in §6.54 as "senseless", and indeed throughout conflates the distinction between *unsinnig* and *sinnlos*. (When I refer in this paper to Wittgenstein on nonsense, my topic throughout will be – unless otherwise stated – what is treated in the *Tractatus* under the rubric of *Unsinn*.) If the propositions of the work were only *sinnlos*, then they would have the same logical status as the propositions of logic (rather than having the same logical status as the "pseudo-propositions" of the philosophers).

11 For Frege's own formulation, see *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, translated by Montgomery Furth (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1967), §32.

I have argued elsewhere¹² that Wittgenstein saw a tension in Frege's thought between two different conceptions of nonsense, which I call the *substantial conception* and the *austere conception* respectively. The substantial conception distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible – it expresses no thought. Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way – it expresses a logically incoherent thought. According to the substantial conception, these two kinds of nonsense are logically distinct: the former is mere gibberish, whereas the latter involves (what commentators on the *Tractatus* are fond of calling) a "violation of logical syntax".¹³ The austere conception, on the other hand, holds that mere nonsense is, from a logical point of view, the only kind of nonsense there is. Along with these two different conceptions of nonsense go two different conceptions of elucidation: according to the substantial conception, the task of elucidation is to "show" something which cannot be said; according to the austere conception, it is to show that we are prone to an illusion of meaning something when we mean nothing. The *Tractatus* is standardly read as championing the substantial conception. This is to mistake the bait for the hook – to mistake the target of the work for its doctrine. On the reading of the *Tractatus* I have defended elsewhere¹⁴, the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving the tension in Frege's thought between these two conceptions of nonsense in favor of the austere view.¹⁵

Almost all commentators on the *Tractatus*, either implicitly or explicitly, attribute to that work a commitment to the substantial conception. In seeking to emphasize their differences from one another, proponents of different interpretations of the *Tractatus* will tend to articulate the details of the substantial conception in apparently distinct ways. It may therefore help to distinguish between two (apparently distinct) variants of the substantial conception. I shall term these the

12 See my "The Method of the *Tractatus*" (in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Erich H. Reck; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [henceforth TM]) from which parts of this paper are drawn.

13 In the entry entitled "Nonsense" in *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996; pp. 259-260), Hans-Johann Glock is helpfully explicit in attributing the substantial conception of nonsense to the *Tractatus*.

14 For a fuller discussion, see TM.

15 The claim that the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving a tension in Frege's thought (between these two different conceptions of nonsense) raises interpretative questions about how Frege is to be read that cannot be explored here. I mean here to take sides on these questions only in so far as it bears on claims about Wittgenstein and how he read Frege.

positivist variant and the *ineffability variant*.¹⁶ According to the former variant, violations of logical syntax are a kind of *linguistic* phenomenon: identifying a violation of logical syntax is a matter of isolating a certain kind of (logically ill-formed) linguistic string. According to the latter variant, a violation of logical syntax is a kind of phenomenon which can transpire only in the medium of thought and necessarily eludes the medium of language. Though proponents of the ineffability variant hold that language is powerless to express such thoughts, they nonetheless deem language an indispensable tool for "conveying" them. They hold that language can "hint" at what it cannot say.¹⁷ The positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception therefore appear to differ over where the violation transpires when a transgression of logic occurs – and hence apparently over what the transgression itself really consists in. These two variants of the substantial conception lean towards opposite metaphysical doctrines. The former fits comfortably with the doctrine that the limits of thought cannot outrun the limits of language. The latter presupposes the doctrine that thought not only can but (as putatively evidenced by our capacity to frame in thought such transgressions of logical syntax) demonstrably does outrun these limits.

Most commentators on the *Tractatus* do not explicitly distinguish between these two variants of the substantial conception. Proponents of the ineffability interpretation, however, do seek to distinguish, in some way or other, between what counts for the *Tractatus* as *misleading nonsense* and what counts as *illuminating nonsense*.¹⁸ The tendency among commentators who do so distinguish is to characterize misleading nonsense in terms which accord more comfortably with the positivist variant of the substantial conception¹⁹ and to characterize

- 16 I distinguish between these two variants because proponents of the substantial conception tend to present themselves as *prima facie* distinct. As we shall see, however, these variants cannot in the end be clearly distinguished from one another in the manner that I am here pretending that they can be.
- 17 Some commentators, in their expositions of Tractarian doctrines, simply waver between the positivist and the ineffability variants of the substantial conception of nonsense.
- 18 And, surely, it is right to think a viable reading of §6.54 requires such a distinction. The question is: how is it to be drawn?
- 19 I am allowing myself to gloss over certain complexities here. It would be more accurate to say: They waver between characterizing misleading nonsense in terms which accord more comfortably with the positivist variant of the substantial conception and characterizing it in terms which accord more comfortably with the austere conception. Such wavering is, as we shall see, an inescapable feature of the positivist variant. In some cases, however, the waver has an additional source in a commentator's wanting, on the one hand, to be able to maintain that misleading nonsense and illuminating nonsense are logically distinct kinds of nonsense; yet not wanting,

illuminating nonsense in terms which presuppose the ineffability variant.²⁰ Thus misleading nonsense is characterized as a strictly linguistic affair, while illuminating nonsense is characterized as a vehicle for grasping that which cannot be said. Here is Peter Hacker's description of how illuminating nonsense is supposed to illuminate:

[W]ithin the range of philosophical ... nonsense we can distinguish ... between ... illuminating nonsense and misleading nonsense. Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to *apprehend what is shown* by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who *grasp what is meant*, its own illegitimacy...

[T]he *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseudo-propositions. Of course, what Wittgenstein *meant* by these remarks is, in his view, quite correct, only it cannot be said. Apparently what someone *means* or *intends* by a remark can be *grasped* even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense.²¹

Hacker here attributes to the *Tractatus* the idea that there is a kind of thought (a kind of "grasping" or "apprehending" what is "meant" or "intended") which outruns the limits of language.²² This reading of the *Tractatus* invokes the idea of a kind of substantial nonsense – a violation of logical syntax – to solve the problem of how a piece of nonsense can so much as "intend" something (which it fails to say but which the reader is nonetheless "meant" to "grasp"). According to the ineffability variant of the substantial conception, these violations arise through attempts to express fundamental features of the logical structure of language *in* language.²³ These attempts, as Peter Hacker puts it, "unavoidably

- on the other hand, to have all cases of "illuminating nonsense" turn out (along with misleading nonsense) to be (only apparently illuminating) cases of mere nonsense.
- 20 That their account of *Unsinn* should be thus distributed over these two variants is, as we shall see, unsurprising. It is not uncommon, however, for commentators to hover between the variants even *within* their characterizations of misleading and illuminating nonsense respectively.
- 21 My emphases; *Insight and Illusion* (Revised Edition, Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 18 - 19, 26.
- 22 This will not deter Hacker and many other commentators from saying that they agree that, for the *Tractatus*, "the limits of language are the limits of thought". They may attempt to remove the apparent contradiction by explaining that what is thus *meant* or *intended* by nonsense is not, strictly speaking, a "thought" – and thus is not, strictly speaking, "meant" or "intended" either. On the use, on the part of commentators, of such devices for begging the question, see my "The Search for Logically Alien Thought" (*Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 20, No. 1) *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5.
- 23 Thus Hacker: "Categorical necessities are reflected in the formation-rules of language. Any attempt to express them involves ... the violation of rules of logical syntax" (*op. cit.*, p. 106).

violate the bounds of sense, misuse language, and produce nonsense."²⁴ The rules of logic render the "it" (which such nonsense is attempting to express) unsayable. The logical structure of language keeps us from being able to say "it". When we try, we come out with bits of nonsense. But these bits of nonsense are, nonetheless, useful; they can convey the unsayable thing our words were after but could not reach.

So much, for the moment, for the ineffability variant. Let us now briefly consider the other variant of the substantial conception. One commentator who attributes to Frege a version of the positivist variant is Michael Dummett. There is never any reference in Dummett's exposition of Frege to thoughts which can only be gestured at or to that which Frege's elucidations might be attempting – but failing – to express.²⁵ Yet, in other respects, Dummett's account of substantial nonsense in Frege parallels the account offered by most commentators on the *Tractatus* of what "a violation of logical syntax" consists in. Here is Dummett on Frege's theory of how such violations arise:

[It] is a theory of what expressions can be accepted as significant: only certain functions – those of the appropriate type – can "occur significantly" as arguments of other functions; expressions which violate the theory of types are simply meaningless...

We, therefore, have to have some conception of logical valency, of different categories of expression, governed by rules determining that expressions of certain categories will fit together to form a sentence, while expressions of certain other categories will not.²⁶

Dummett employs here the chemical metaphor of valency: just as certain elements can be combined so as to form a compound while others cannot be so combined, so items of certain logical categories can be combined so as to form a proposition and others cannot be so combined. Underlying this conception of logical valency is the idea that we get a very special kind of nonsense when we abortively attempt to combine incompatible logical items – that is, when we

24 Ibid, p. 21.

25 Dummett himself never, in his discussion on Frege on nonsense, makes an explicit connection between the conception of nonsense he ascribes to Frege and the doctrine that there are things which can be "shown" but not said. But, Dummett's remarks elsewhere (in particular, his responses to related aspects of Geach's work on Frege, his vehement attribution to Frege of the thesis of the priority of thought over language, and his occasional asides about the "self-refuting" character of "the Tractarian doctrine" that there are inexpressible thoughts) leave little doubt that he would not favor the attribution of an ineffability variant of the substantial conception to Frege.

26 Frege: *Philosophy of Language* [henceforth FPL], 2nd edition (Duckworth: London, 1983); pp. 50, 62.

attempt to combine logical items from logical categories which do not *fit* together. Dummett is certainly right that Frege often speaks in ways which encourage the attribution to him of the view that there are instances of this sort of nonsense. The following three passages furnish some examples of Frege's willingness to talk in these ways:

For not all the parts of a thought can be complete; at least one must be 'unsaturated', or predicative; otherwise *they would not hold together*. For example, the sense of the phrase 'the number 2' *does not hold together* with that of the expression 'the concept prime number' without a link.... [T]hey hold aloof from one another ...; however we put them together, we get no sentence.²⁷

Take the proposition 'Two is a prime number'.... [T]he two parts of the proposition are ... essentially different; and it is important to realize that this difference cuts very deep and must not be blurred. The first constituent 'two', is a proper name of a certain number; it designates an object, a whole that no longer requires completion. The predicative constituent 'is a prime number', on the other hand, does require completion and does not designate an object.... An object, e.g. the number 2, *cannot logically adhere* to another object, e.g. Julius Caesar, without some means of connection. This, in turn, cannot be an object but rather must be unsaturated. A logical connection into a whole can come about only through this, that an unsaturated part is saturated or completed by one or more parts.... Now it follows from the fundamental difference of objects from concepts that *an object can never occur predicatively* or unsaturatedly; and that logically, *a concept can never stand in for an object*. One could express it metaphorically like this: There are different logical places; in some only objects can stand and not concepts, in others only concepts and not objects.²⁸

We can analyze the proposition '3 is a prime number' into '3' and 'is a prime number'. These parts are essentially different: the former complete in itself, the latter in need of completion. Likewise, we can analyze the proposition '4 is a square number' into '4' and 'is a square number'. Now it makes sense to fit together the complete part of the first proposition with that part of the second proposition which is in need of completion (that the proposition is false is a different matter); *but it makes no sense to fit together the two complete parts; they will not hold together*; and it makes just as little sense to put 'is a square number' in the place of '3' in the first proposition.²⁹

In passages of Frege's such as these there is the idea of a kind of nonsense that arises from an impermissible combination of logical categories – a kind of nonsense which results because "it makes no sense to fit together" the parts which we are attempting to combine.

27 My emphases; Frege, *Collected Papers* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1984 [henceforth CP]), p. 193.

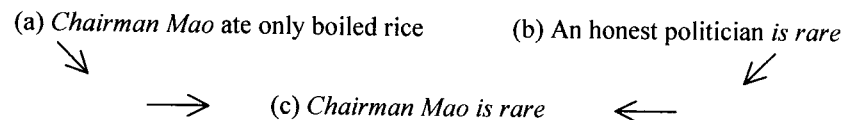
28 My emphases; CP, pp. 281-282.

29 My emphases; Frege, *Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1980 [henceforth Corr]), pp. 141-2.

Frege in these passages seeks to draw attention to examples of this kind of nonsense in order to elucidate the distinction between object- and concept-expressions. Such an elucidation can only be conducted in ordinary language. In a proper *Begriffsschrift* such illegitimate combinations can not be constructed. Here is Dummett's account of the kind of nonsense which ordinary language permits but a proper *Begriffsschrift* excludes:

[P]recisely because natural language violates the principle that each expression incomplete in sense must carry with it its argument-place(s), it does become possible within natural language to form meaningless but grammatically correct sentences which violate the distinctions of type and in the symbolic language could not be constructed at all. For instance, the sentence 'Chairman Mao is rare', while perfectly grammatical, is meaningless because 'rare', though in appearance just like a first-level predicative adjective, has the sense of a second-level predicate. The diagnosis and explanation of such failures of significance in natural language can easily be accomplished by reference to the impossibility of constructing a corresponding sentence in the symbolic language.³⁰

Let us consider Dummett's example here.³¹ "Chairman Mao is rare", Dummett says, is meaningless because 'rare' ("though in appearance just like a first-level predicative adjective") here actually expresses a second-level function (a function which takes first-level functions as its arguments). Sentences which involve "such failures of significance" can be constructed in natural language, thus sometimes leading us to mistake sense for nonsense. We are able to see clearly and to explain precisely how a sentence such as the one which figures in Dummett's example involves the particular sort of "failure of significance" it does by reflecting on "the impossibility of constructing" such a sentence (i.e., one which involves the "corresponding" failure of significance) in a proper *Begriffsschrift*. Dummett's picture of why this sentence is nonsense can be illustrated through the following diagram:



The proposal is to combine the underlined portions of propositions (a) and (b) so as to form a third proposition which, if there could be such a proposition,

³⁰ *FPL*, p. 51.

³¹ The ensuing discussion of this example is indebted to Chapter 2 of Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit*.

would be expressed by (c).³² We attempt to combine the 'Chairman Mao' of (a) [the 'Chairman Mao' that denotes *that* individual] and the '___ is rare' of (b) [the '___ is rare' that denotes *that* second-level function] and we thus arrive at (c), which, according to Dummett's Frege, is a concrete instance of a special type of meaningless sentence – one which involves a violation of logical category: we have tried to put a proper name into an argument place into which only a first-level function fits. Moreover, what we have here is (alleged to be) a case of *fully determinate* nonsense: (i) it is *logically distinct* from other fully determinate cases of substantial nonsense; (ii) each of the "parts" of this proposition has a *fully determinate sense*; and (iii) though the sense of the resulting whole is flawed, it is a flawed in a *determinately specifiable respect* – it involves a determinate kind of "failure of significance" (whereas other cases of substantial nonsense each involve some other equally determinate "violation" of logical principles). That we have here to do with a logically determinate example of nonsense can be seen from the fact that other natural languages, unlike a proper *Begriffsschrift*, permit the construction of substantially nonsensical sentences which "correspond" (in the sort of flawed sense they each possess) to this one. The determinately specifiable respect in which Dummett's case of substantial nonsense possesses a flawed sense is the following: it represents "an attempt" to put *that* proper name into *that* argument place for a first-level function. But it won't fit – (in Frege's words) "the parts cannot logically adhere", "it makes no sense to fit them together", "they will not hold together" – thus we get nonsense; but not mere nonsense, but a special variety of nonsense which arises from attempting to do something logically impossible. Wittgenstein's critique of Frege turns on his critique of this idea – an idea which is common to both the positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception: the idea that we can so much as try to put a logical item into an argument place in which it doesn't fit – the idea that we can have a proposition that has a fully determinate kind of sense but the kind of sense that it has is nonsense.

Is it possible to identify an expression as being of a particular logical category if it occurs in the wrong place? It is here, in its response to this question, that the *Tractatus* sees a tension in Frege's view. A number of Frege's doctrines and a great deal of his own methodological practice suggest that the answer to this question should be: No! It is reflection on these aspects of Frege's thought and practice that leads Wittgenstein to embrace the austere conception of nonsense.

³² This way of describing the proposal involves a fudge. It isn't quite correct to say that the proposal is to combine the underlined portions of propositions (a) and (b) since the underlined portion of (b) lacks an argument-place.

Frege warns in "On Concept and Object" (and elsewhere) that the same word in ordinary language can be used in some contexts as a proper name and in others as a concept word. Frege's favorite example of such a word is 'moon'.³³ It can also happen in ordinary language that an object-expression which has *never* been previously used to express a concept can suddenly be used, for the first time, as a concept-expression; and that we can understand what is meant by such an unprecedented usage.³⁴ Frege offers as an example of this sort of creative use of language the lovely sentence "Trieste is no Vienna":

We must not let ourselves be deceived because language often uses the same word now as a proper name, now as a concept word; in our example ["There is only one Vienna"], the numeral indicates that we have the latter; 'Vienna' is here a concept-word, like 'metropolis'. Using it in this sense, we may say: "Trieste is no Vienna".³⁵

In this example, Frege says, we encounter a word which usually functions as a proper name playing the role of a concept-expression. Frege's reading of this sentence is arrived at through reflection upon what possible use this combination of words might have; that is, by asking himself: in what context would one utter such words and what thought would one then be expressing? If we reflect on when we would utter such a sentence and what we might mean by it, Frege suggests, we will see that 'Vienna' here could mean something like 'metropolis' (or perhaps even beautiful or majestic metropolis) – and thus that the sign 'Vienna' used in this way should be expressed in a proper logical symbolism by a completely different kind of symbol than that which we would use to express the occurrence of the word 'Vienna' in the sentence "Vienna is the capital of Austria". Notice that Frege does not conclude that what we have here in his lovely sentence about Trieste is a piece of nonsense – one which results from trying to put a proper name where a concept-expression should go. He concludes instead that what appears in the guise of a concept-expression here *is* a concept-expression –

33 As, for example, in §51 of *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1959 [henceforth *FA*): "With a concept the question is always whether anything, and if so what, falls under it. With a proper name such questions make no sense. We should not be deceived by the fact that language makes use of proper names, for instance Moon, as concept words, and vice versa; this does not affect the distinction between the two". (*FA*, p. 64)

34 A famous example of a proper name suddenly being used as a concept expression is Lloyd Bentson (in the 1988 vice-presidential debate) saying to Dan Quayle: "You're no Jack Kennedy." Bentson's point was not that two individuals (Quayle and Kennedy) are not identical, but rather that there is a concept (of, say, exemplary statesmanship) which Quayle does not fall under.

35 *CP*, p. 189.

and then makes a suggestion about what the sentence as a whole might mean (and hence about *which* concept might be meant). Thus Frege's methodology here is to begin with our *understanding* of the proposition as a whole and to use that as a basis for segmenting it into its logically discrete components.³⁶

This raises a question about how Frege's context principle – "never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition"³⁷ – is to be interpreted. Here is how Dummett explains the principle:

[T]he assignment of a sense to a word, whether a name or an expression of any other logical type, only has significance in relation to the subsequent occurrence of the word in sentences.... [A] sentence is determined as true under certain conditions, which conditions are derivable from the way in which the sentence is constructed out of its constituent words; and the senses of the words relate solely to this determination of the truth-conditions of the sentences in which the words may occur.³⁸

This is fine, as far as it goes. But what Dummett says here is consistent with a weaker and a stronger interpretation of the context principle. Dummett himself goes on to expound the principle in such a way as to attribute to Frege (what we shall see to be) the weaker version of the principle. For Dummett, Frege's principle forms part of "a general and systematic account" of the part played by each sub-sentential expression in determining the truth-conditions of each meaningful sentence in which it may appear.³⁹ The meaning of an expression specified by such "a general and systematic account" is the meaning it has even when it occurs in a construction which, as a whole, has no meaning (and hence no truth-conditions). The idea here is that there are (so-called) "general rules" of the language, and it is these rules that determine the meaning of an expression; and the meaning thus determined is the meaning that the expression has, regardless of

36 This is not to say that, in general, any proposal which yields a possible segmentation of a string is equally tenable. In real life cases of interpretation, we are obliged, on the one hand, to make sense of the way a sentence occurs within a larger stretch of discourse. ("Understanding without contextuality is blind.") To commit oneself to a segmentation of the string, on the other hand, is to commit oneself to patterns of inference (see note 126) which are a function of how these words (of which the string is composed) occur in other propositions. ("Understanding without compositionality is empty.") The attribution of the endorsement of inferences of certain patterns to a speaker is governed by those considerations of charity and relevance which govern all aspects of interpretation. These considerations generally uniquely determine a segmentation (and, where not, they at least severely constrain the range of reasonable proposals).

37 *FA*, p. x.

38 *FPL*, pp. 193-4.

39 *FPL*, p. 195.

whether or not the sense of the whole in which the expression in question occurs is nonsense. Since, on this (weaker) way of interpreting Frege's context principle, everything that fixes the meaning of an expression is external to any particular context in which it occurs, it permits the possibility of cases of substantial nonsense – that is, cases in which the general rules of the language fix the meanings of each of the expressions occurring in a nonsensical construction (so that each expression makes a "contribution" to the "meaning" of the whole) even though the resulting whole has no (proper) meaning. The stronger way of interpreting Frege's principle does not permit there to be constructions that have a sense, even though the sense that they have is nonsense. The stronger way of interpreting Frege's principle does not take it merely to be declaring that a word has meaning if it contributes to the sense of any sentence in which it occurs in accordance with certain general rules of the language. Rather it takes it to declare that it is through the sense of the whole, and only through the sense of the whole, that each of the expressions which make up that whole acquire their meaning.⁴⁰

My aim here is not to adjudicate between these two different ways of reading Frege⁴¹, but only to claim that Wittgenstein, first in the *Tractatus* and then later in the *Philosophical Investigations*, subscribes to the stronger version of the principle. That Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, means to be embracing the stronger version – and rejecting the weaker version – of the context principle is precisely what is indicated by the presence of the word "only" in the remark (quoted above) in which he contrasts his own view with that of Frege:

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts. (§5.4733)

This second and more severe way of understanding the import of Frege's context principle is developed in the *Tractatus* through its deployment of the distinction between sign [*Zeichen*] and symbol [*Symbol*]. The distinction might be summarized as follows:

40 Indeed, Frege says: "It suffices if the sentence as a whole has a sense; it is through this that the parts also acquire their content." [my translation] *FA*, §60. This would seem to rule out the possibility of the parts acquiring a content despite the fact that the whole lacks a sense.

41 For a reading of Frege along these lines, see Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1991), chapter 3.

* sign – an orthographic unit, that which the perceptible expressions for propositions have in common (a sign design, inscription, icon, grapheme, etc.)⁴²

* symbol – a logical unit, that which meaningful propositions have in common (i.e. an item belonging to a given logical category: proper name, first-level function, etc.)

Armed with the Tractarian distinction between sign and symbol, we can formulate the contrast between the two conceptions of nonsense (which Wittgenstein sees Frege as torn between) in a more precise manner. To recall, the two conceptions of nonsense were:

* the substantial conception – which holds that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense: *substantial nonsense* and *mere nonsense*

* the austere conception – which holds that there is, from a logical point of view, only one kind of nonsense: *mere nonsense*

The underlined terms in the above formulations can now be defined as follows:

* substantial nonsense – a proposition composed of signs which symbolize, but which has a logically flawed syntax due to a clash in the logical category of its symbols

* mere nonsense – a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax

I have, until now, pretended to be able to distinguish between the positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception. But, armed with the distinction between symbol and sign, we can start to see why the distinction

42 For purposes of simplifying the exposition, I have restricted my definition to (what the *Tractatus* calls) "written signs" – the *Tractatus* explicitly allows for "sound signs" (see §3.321) and implicitly for other sorts.

between these two variants is an inherently unstable one.⁴³ Any attempt clearly to articulate the positivist variant will lead to its collapse either into the ineffability variant or into the austere conception. Either the proponent of the positivist variant holds that a violation of logical syntax involves an impermissible combination of symbols or he holds that it involves an impermissible combination of signs. If he holds the former, then the positivist variant collapses into the ineffability variant; if the latter, then he abandons the substantial conception altogether. To take an example of the former case, Dummett's account of "Chairman Mao is rare" teeters throughout on the brink of collapse into a version of the ineffability variant. The items combined in Dummett's example – items which (in Frege's words) "cannot logically adhere", which "it makes no sense to fit together", which "will not hold together" – can not be mere *signs*. For the four signs 'Chairman', 'Mao', 'is', and 'rare' can be combined (as can any four signs). What cannot be combined, says Frege, is that which the signs *symbolize*: items belonging to incompatible logical categories. The expressions of which the example is composed are taken by Dummett to be incompatible (not because of their typographic properties, but) because of what he takes these expressions to symbolize: an object and a second-level function respectively. But if the flaw lies in what is symbolized by the resulting combination, then, it would seem, there is *something* which these words, so combined, symbolize – an "it" which logic debars but which Dummett is nonetheless able to frame in thought and identify as involving a violation of logic. If, on the other hand, the proponent of the positivist variant holds that a violation of logical syntax involves an impermissible combination of (mere) signs, then he teeters on the brink of abandoning the substantial conception altogether (in favor of the austere conception). For if his account of the impermissibility fails to turn on any logical feature(s) of the alleg-

43 My self-defeating exposition of the alleged distinction between the two variants of the substantial conception mirrors, albeit in a highly summary fashion, the first half of the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus*. Half of the central point of the *Tractatus*, on my reading, is to show that once one has bought into the substantial conception one has implicitly committed oneself to a conception on which there are ineffable thoughts – thoughts which we can gesture at (with the aid of nonsensical language) but cannot express in language. (A central part of the interest of Frege's work for Wittgenstein, as he read him, is that Frege recognized and drew this consequence.) The second half of the point of the work is to show that the way to escape this consequence is to abandon the substantial conception of nonsense altogether (not, according to Wittgenstein, an easy thing to do). My exposition of the alleged distinction between the substantial and austere conceptions of nonsense aims to mirror, in equally summary fashion, this second (and largely unnoticed) half of the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus*.

edly impermissible string, then he has deprived himself of the resources requisite for claiming that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense.⁴⁴

In order to begin to see why this is so, it will help to look more closely at the distinction between sign and symbol as it is drawn in the *Tractatus*. The distinction is introduced as part of the commentary on §3.3 (which is the *Tractatus*'s reformulation of Frege's second principle⁴⁵). §3.3 runs as follows: "Only the

44 The *Tractatus* is not concerned to argue that there are no ways to distinguish between kinds of nonsense – or even that there is no distinction to be drawn in the neighborhood of the distinction sought by the proponent of the substantial conception (i.e. one which marks off cases of "philosophical" nonsense from (other) cases of mere nonsense) – but only that there are no logically distinct kinds of nonsense (or more precisely: that talk of "logically distinct kinds of nonsense" is itself to be recognized as (mere) nonsense). The coherence of the entire procedure of the work, indeed, rests upon the assumption that there is a distinction to be drawn in the neighborhood of the distinction sought by the proponent of the substantial conception; but, as we shall see, the *Tractatus* takes it to turn on psychologically distinct kinds of nonsense. Early Wittgenstein here retains something that the later Wittgenstein comes to view with increasing suspicion: namely, Frege's broad (what we might call) "garbage-can" conception of the psychological (which encompasses everything which does not count, for Frege, as "strictly logical").

45 I say "reformulation of Frege's second principle" (rather than re-statement of it) because the *Tractatus* is concerned to refashion Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. §3.3 is worded as it is precisely in order to mark a departure from Frege in this regard. Just what sort of departure from Frege is here being marked, however, is far less clear (at least to me). In Friedrich Waismann's *Thesen* (which is an attempt to furnish the members of the Vienna Circle with an overview of the main ideas of the *Tractatus*, based on detailed conversations with Wittgenstein), we find the following: "A proposition has *Sinn*, a word has *Bedeutung*" (*Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, edited by Friedrich Waismann; Oxford: Blackwell, 1979). Should this be taken to mean that words do not have *Sinn* or that propositions do not have *Bedeutung*? Enigmatic as this remark may seem, it is straightforward compared to anything to be found anywhere in the *Tractatus* itself on the subject. §3.3 (along with §3.144) does appear to seek to exclude the applicability of *Sinn* to any kind of symbol other than a *Satz*. When read in the light of §3.3, a number of earlier passages (§§3.142, 3.144, 3.203, 3.22) also appear to be worded in a manner suggesting that the overall doctrine of the work indeed is that (at least) *names* – i.e. the constituent parts of a fully analyzed sentence – do not have *Sinn*. The corresponding principle in regard to *Bedeutung* does not obviously hold, however: the application of *Bedeutung* in the *Tractatus* does not appear to be restricted (as the passage from Waismann's *Thesen* might seem to imply) to the sub-judgmental components of propositions. Throughout the *Tractatus*, the term '*Bedeutung*' is employed in a (relatively non-technical) manner so as to suggest that any sign (including a *Satz*, i.e., a propositional sign) with a determinate linguistic function can be said to have a *Bedeutung* (see, e.g., §5.451 for the claim that the negation sign has a *Bedeutung*), and, as such, is to be contrasted only with a sign which has no *Bedeutung* or (as the

proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning." Then, beginning immediately thereafter (with §3.31), comes the following commentary:

Every part of a proposition which characterizes its sense I call an expression (a symbol).

(The proposition itself is an expression.)

Everything essential to their sense that propositions can have in common with one another is an expression.

An expression is the mark of a form and a content.

An expression presupposes the forms of all propositions in which it can occur. It is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions... (§§3.31-3.311)

An expression has meaning only in a proposition... (§3.314)

I conceive the proposition – like Frege and Russell – as a function of the expressions contained in it... (§3.318)

The sign is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses. (§3.32)

Two different symbols can therefore have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common – they then signify in different ways. (§3.321)

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

We could therefore equally well choose two different signs [to symbolize the two different objects] and where then would remain that which the signs shared in common? (§3.322)

The point of the commentary is in part to clarify the notion of 'proposition' which figures in the context principle (only the *proposition* has sense; only in the context of a *proposition* has a name meaning⁴⁶). The relevant notion is one of a

Tractatus prefers to say) to which no *Bedeutung* has been given (see, e.g., §§5.4733, 6.53).

46 A number of commentators have attributed to the *Tractatus* the view that a special mental act (of intending to mean a particular object by a particular word) is what endows a name with meaning. If textual support for this attribution is adduced at all, it is usually through appeal to texts outside of the *Tractatus*. There is no reference anywhere in the *Tractatus* to such a distinct *act* of meaning (through which a *Bedeutung* is conferred on a sign). The passage from the *Tractatus* most commonly adduced to provide a semblance of textual support for this psychologistic attribution is §3.11 which Pears and McGuinness translate as follows: "The method of projection is to think of the sense of the proposition." So translated, this remark can be taken to refer to an act of thinking and to ascribe an explanatory role to such an act. The Ogden translation is more faithful: "The method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition." Rush Rhees glosses this (quite properly, I think) as: "The method of projection is what we mean by 'thinking' or 'understanding' the sense of the proposition." (*Discussions of Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1970; p. 39). Acknowledging the justice of Rhees's criticism, and finding it more natural in English to place the *explandum* on the left, McGuinness later recanted his

certain kind of a symbol – not a certain kind of a sign – something which only has life in language.⁴⁷ The sign, Wittgenstein says, "is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses" (what is now sometimes called the sign design). The symbol is a logical unit, it expresses something which propositions – as opposed to propositional signs – have in common.⁴⁸ Thus the sentences "Trieste is no Vienna" and "Vienna is the capital of Austria" have the sign 'Vienna' in common. These two sentences taken together offer an instance of what Wittgenstein means when he says (in §3.321) "two different symbols can have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common – they then signify in different ways". The sentences "Trieste is no Vienna" and "Vienna is the capital of Austria" have no symbol in common – all they have in common are the signs 'Vienna' and 'is'.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that there will always be room for a question as to whether a given sign, when it occurs in two different sentences of ordinary language, is symbolizing the same way in each of those occurrences. And this question cannot be settled simply by appealing to the fact that the same word (sign) ordinarily occurs (symbolizes) as a name⁴⁹ (for example, as a name

and Pears's original translation of §3.11 and proposed the following translation instead: "Thinking the sense of the proposition is the method of projection". McGuinness goes on to offer the following lucid summary of the actual point of the passage: "Thinking the sense into the proposition is nothing other than so using the words of the sentence that their logical behaviour is that of the desired proposition" ("On the So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*", in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Irving Block; Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1981; pp. 69-70).

47 Although the notion of *Satz* which figures in the context principle (only the *Satz* has sense; only in the context of a *Satz* has a name meaning) is of a certain kind of a symbol, the term '*Satz*' in the *Tractatus* floats between meaning (1) a propositional symbol (as, e.g., in §§3.3ff and 4ff) and (2) a propositional sign (as, e.g., in §§5.473 and 6.54). It 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. Consequently, at certain junctures, the method of the *Tractatus* requires that the reference of *Satz* remain provisionally neutral as between (1) and (2). At the corresponding junctures in my own discussion, I leave *Satz* untranslated.

48 Wittgenstein's distinction between *propositional sign* and *propositional symbol* parallels the distinction between *string of words* and *proposition* which Geach draws in the following passage:

"Recognizing repeated occurrences of the same proposition is not merely mechanical; the identity of a proposition is not the identity of a string of words. The proposition "Socrates was bald" occurs over again in "Socrates, who taught Plato, was bald", but does not occur in "A philosopher whose teacher was Socrates was bald".' ("Kinds of Statement", in *Intention and Intentionality*, edited by Cora Diamond and Jenny Teichman; Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY, 1979; p. 221-2)

49 This is not to claim that it is possible to understand a sentence, if *none* of its constituent signs symbolize in the same manner in which they symbolize in other senten-

of the capital of Austria). How can this question be settled? Wittgenstein says: "In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the context of significant use" (§3.326). We must ask ourselves on what occasion we would utter this sentence and what, in that context of use, we would then mean by it. (This is what we saw Frege do in his handling of the example "Trieste is no Vienna".) In asking ourselves this, we still rely upon our familiarity with the way words (signs) ordinarily occur (symbolize) in propositions to fashion a segmentation of the propositional sign in question.⁵⁰ (One standard way of contrasting early and later Wittgenstein is to say that later Wittgenstein rejected his earlier (allegedly truth-conditional) account of meaning – in which considerations of use have no role to play in fixing the meaning of an expression – in favor of (what gets called) "a use-theory of meaning".⁵¹ Our brief examination of §3.326 should already make one wary of such a story.) The point of §3.326 can be brought out by returning to Dummett's example. If, for example, we attempt to provide a context of significant use for "Chairman Mao is rare", it becomes possible to see the symbol in the sign in ways which Dummett does not consider. There are two equally *natural* ways to segment this string: (1) to construe 'Chairman Mao' as

ces. (Hence *Tractatus*, §4.03: "A proposition must use old expressions to communicate new senses.") It is only to claim that not *all* of the constituent signs must symbolize in a precedented fashion. But an unprecedented usage of a sign will only be intelligible if the constituent signs which symbolize in the "old" manner determine a possible segmentation of the propositional sign – where such a segmentation specifies both (i) the logical role of the sign which symbolizes in an unprecedented manner and (ii) the position of the resulting propositional symbol in logical space (see note 55).

- 50 In the absence of any familiarity with the way words (signs) ordinarily occur (symbolize) in propositions, we would have no basis upon which to fashion possible segmentations of propositional signs, and hence no way to *recognize* (rather than simply fantasize) the symbol in the sign. (This is the situation we find ourselves in when faced with a sentence of a language which we do not know and which does not in the least resemble any which we do know.)
- 51 The popularity of this story rests largely on an additional piece of potted history, according to which the *Tractatus* advances the doctrine that it is possible (and indeed, according to most readings, semantically necessary) to fix the meanings of names prior to and independently of their use in propositions (either through ostensive definition or a through some special mental act which endows a name with meaning). This putative teaching of the *Tractatus* is standardly taken to be the primary target of the opening sections of *Philosophical Investigations*. But the whole point of §3.3-3.344 of the *Tractatus* is that the identity of the object referred to by a name is only fixed by the use of the name in a set of significant [*sinnvolle*] propositions. An appeal to use thus already plays a critical role in Wittgenstein's early account of what determines both the meaning of a proposition as a whole and the meanings of each of its "parts".

symbolizing a first-level function⁵², (2) to construe 'rare' as symbolizing a first-level function⁵³. These are "natural" ways of "reading" the string because each reading segments the string along lines dictated by an established usage (i.e., an established method of symbolizing by means) of signs.⁵⁴ The expression '____ is rare' has an established use in the language (in sentences such as "An honest politician is rare") as a second-level function; the expression 'Chairman Mao' has an established use in the language (in sentences such as "Chairman Mao ate only boiled rice") as a proper name. Each of these established uses dictates a possible segmentation of the string – each of which excludes the other.⁵⁵ There isn't anything which is simultaneously segmenting the string along both lines at

- 52 On the model of "You're no Jack Kennedy". On this reading of Dummett's example, the sentence might mean something like "The kind of exemplary statesmanship Chairman Mao exhibited is rare".
- 53 The second reading is more readily available in this case than it might otherwise be for a reason to which Dummett is strangely oblivious: there is already an established English usage in which 'rare' expresses a first-level function (as in "That piece of meat is rare!"). Admittedly, it still requires a bit of a stretch to bring Chairman Mao under *that* concept. But one might try to prepare the way for such a use with: "Chairman Mao is going to get a terrible sunburn [i.e. will soon be well done] if he doesn't come in out of the sun soon!"
- 54 Our established conventions for employing signs *underdetermine* the segmentation of the propositional sign 'Chairman Mao is rare': there is no *single* reading that our established conventions (for employing the signs 'Chairman', 'Mao', 'is', and 'rare') naturally favor. That our established conventions, in this case, favor to an equal degree two alternative readings based upon logically distinct segmentations, will play a crucial role in the Tractarian account of what is (not logically, but rather psychologically) distinctive about cases such as this (of apparently substantial nonsense).
- 55 The segmentation of a propositional sign, for Frege and Wittgenstein, is a function of its position (or better: the position of the proposition it symbolizes) in a network of inferential relations – its position in (what the *Tractatus* calls) logical space. To fix the position of a proposition in logical space is to fix how its logical constituents occur in other propositions. To segment 'Chairman Mao is rare' in accordance with the first proposal is to take it to express a judgment which licenses inferences of certain patterns; e.g., the inference from the conjunction of (1) "Chairman Mao is rare" and (2) "The sort of politician that Dan Quayle is (an example of) is not rare" to (3) "Dan Quayle is no Chairman Mao". To segment 'Chairman Mao is rare' in accordance with the second proposal is, again, to take it to express a judgment which licenses certain inferences of certain patterns; e.g., the inference from the conjunction of (1) "Chairman Mao is rare" and (2) "This steak is rare" to (3) "There are (at least) two things that are rare!". The conjunction of (1) and (2), on the other hand, is logically inert: it licenses no inference because these two propositions have no symbol in common.

once.⁵⁶ Segmenting it either way, we supply a possible context of significant use and thus confer upon the string 'Chairman Mao is rare' a sense. According to the *Tractatus*, until we have done this, we have yet to confer any method of symbolizing on any of the signs which make up the string.⁵⁷

There is here an important continuity in the views of Frege, early Wittgenstein and later Wittgenstein concerning the nature of ordinary language: in ordinary language we are constantly extending the uses of our words and thereby creating new possibilities of meaning for them. The expressions of ordinary language can be – and indeed constantly are – used in logically (later Wittgenstein prefers to say: grammatically) unprecedented yet perfectly intelligible ways. For all sorts of bizarre forms of words for which there is at present no language-game, we can dream up a context of significant use (in Wittgenstein's later idiom: a language-game) in which we would be drawn without loss of intelligibility to call upon that particular form of words.

In §3.326, "the context of significant use" translates *sinnvollen Gebrauch*; "recognize" translates *erkennen*, which might also be translated "perceive". The latter is the same word that occurs in §6.54: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually *perceives* them as nonsensical." It is a condition of being able to perceive the symbol in the sign that the string in which the sign occurs be *sinnvoll*. To recognize a *Satz* as nonsensical [*Unsinn*] is to be unable to recognize the symbol in the sign. For the

56 Or, to put the point in a way which brings out the incoherence in question more vividly – in Frege's idiom: there isn't anything which is a proposition's simultaneously standing in two logically distinct sets of inferential relations with respect to other propositions – in the idiom of the *Tractatus*: there isn't anything which is a proposition's occupying two different positions in logical space at the same time. "The proposition determines a place in logical space: the existence of such a place is secured through the existence of its constituent parts alone, through the existence of the significant [*sinnvollen*] proposition" (§3.4). The determination of the logical segmentation of a propositional sign (and thus the conferral of a method of symbolizing on each of its constituent signs) is the specification of a determinate position in logical space. If the "proposition" in question is not *sinnvoll* then it determines no place in logical space. Thus one way of putting the illusion which underlies the substantial conception would be to say that it imagines that logical segmentation can proceed outside logical space.

57 Our familiarity with previous occurrences of the expressions 'Chairman Mao' and '_____ is rare' furnish alternative natural proposals (without determining any single proposal) for conferring sense upon the propositional sign "Chairman Mao is rare"; but, according to the *Tractatus*, we only determine the sense of these expressions in a particular occurrence of the propositional sign "Chairman Mao is rare" when we adopt one of these proposals for determining a *possible* method of logically segmenting the string.

Tractatus, these two forms of recognition eclipse one another. To recognize a *Satz* as nonsensical [*Unsinn*], for the *Tractatus*, is not a matter of recognizing that it is attempting to say something that cannot be said, but rather a matter of recognizing that it fails to say anything at all. Building on Frege's own methodological practice, the *Tractatus* argues that in the case of a piece of nonsense – that is, in the absence of the provision of a context of *sinnvollen Gebrauch*: a possible logical segmentation of the *Satz* – we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a proposition. One can identify the contribution the senses of the parts of a proposition make to the sense of the whole only if the whole has a sense – if it stands in some identifiable location with respect to the other occupants of logical space. According to the *Tractatus*, there are no examples of a proposition's failing to make sense because its parts do not "fit" together.⁵⁸ Thus there are no examples of the sort Dummett was looking for – examples of putting a proper name where a concept word belongs – for if one can properly make out that what belongs in that place is a concept word, then that is a sufficient condition for treating whatever is in that place as a concept word. There isn't anything, on the conception of nonsense which the *Tractatus* advances, which corresponds to a proposition's failing to make sense because of the meaning which the parts already have taken in isolation.⁵⁹ On the Tractarian conception, the *only* way a sentence can be *Unsinn* is by its failing to symbolize.⁶⁰ This conception does not rule out the possibility of *Sätze* (such as tautologies and contradictions) which have logical structure and yet are devoid of

58 This Tractarian insight becomes a pervasive theme of Wittgenstein's later thought. Here is a representative example:

'You want to say that the use of the word 'not' does not fit the use of the word 'apple' ... that *apple* is one thing or idea which is comparable to a definite shape, whether or not it is prefaced by *negation*, and that *negation* is like another shape which may or may not fit it: ... We cannot ask whether the uses of these two words fit, for their use is given only when the use of the whole phrase "not apple" is given. For the use they have *they have together*... [I]f negation is to be defined by its use, it makes no sense to ask whether 'not' fits 'apple'; the idea of fitting must vanish. For the use it has is its use in the combination'. (*Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935*, edited by Alice Ambrose, University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1979; pp. 63-64).

59 We can now begin to see how misleading the standard attribution to early Wittgenstein of (what gets called) a "logical atomist theory of meaning" is. It is just such a theory that is under indictment in passages such as §§3.3, 3.314, 3.341 and 3.344.

60 Again, this is the point of the 'only' in "[I]f [a proposition] has no sense this can *only* be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts" [my emphasis] (§5.4733). Most commentary on the *Tractatus*, in attributing to that work the substantial conception of nonsense, leaves that 'only' here looking as if it must be a slip of the pen.

Sinn.⁶¹ It only rules out a sentence's having a fully determinate yet logically impossible sense – a sense that it *cannot* have because of the logically determinate but logically mutually incompatible senses that its parts already have.

Most readings of what the *Tractatus* means by 'nonsense', when it declares in its famous penultimate section that the reader is to recognize its sentences as "nonsense", attribute to the book a doctrine which presupposes just the possibility that the *Tractatus* is most concerned to repudiate: the possibility of identifying the logical category of a term outside the context of legitimate combination – of identifying the manner in which a sign symbolizes in a context in which the reference of the parts of a sentence does not determine the reference of the whole. This repudiation is perhaps most explicit in the series of remarks which lead up to the passage in which Wittgenstein locates the difference between his own conception of nonsense and that of Frege. Here is the full context of that passage:

Logic must take care of itself.

A possible sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted. ("Socrates is identical" means nothing because there is no property which is called "identical". The proposition is nonsensical because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol itself is impermissible.)

In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic. (§5.473)

We cannot give a sign the wrong sense. (§5.4732)

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts.

(Even if we believe that we have done so.)

Thus "Socrates is identical" says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word "identical" as *adjective*. For when it occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way – the symbolizing relation is another – therefore the symbol is in the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign in common with one another only by accident. (§5.4733)

These remarks express in an extremely compressed fashion some of the central ideas of the *Tractatus*. Let us begin by looking at the example of *Unsinn* ("Socrates is identical") and the commentary on it which Wittgenstein offers here. It is the sort of combination of words that Dummett might be tempted to analyze as an instance of substantial nonsense – as an attempt to employ the

61 To think that it did would be to lose sight of the distinction between that which is *Unsinn* and that which is *sinnlos*. In order to count as *sinnvoll* a *Satz* has to be able to serve as a vehicle of *communication*: it has to make a *statement* about how things are – it has to *assert* what is the case [*der sinnvolle Satz sagt etwas aus*] (§6.1264). Such a *Satz* is characterized by both a form [*Form*] and a content [*Inhalt*] (§3.31). A *Satz* which is *sinnlos* possesses a (logical) form but no content. *Unsinn*, on the other hand, possesses neither a form nor a content.

identity sign (i.e. an expression which symbolizes the relation of identity between objects) as if it were a concept-expression. Wittgenstein says in this passage that the nonsensicality of the string is due not to an impermissible employment of a symbol, but rather to our failing to make a determination of meaning. Wittgenstein says: "If it has no sense this can *only* be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts." The "only" here signals that for Wittgenstein all apparent cases of substantial nonsense are (in the words of §6.54) "eventually to be recognized as" cases of type austere nonsense.

According to the *Tractatus*, there isn't anything which is an instance of a proposition's containing two logical elements which are incompatible. What there can be is a case in which there are two natural directions in which to seek a sense for a sentence whose sense is as yet undetermined, as is the case with Dummett's example. Each of the available readings of Dummett's sentence eclipses the other – as each reading of a duck-rabbit figure eclipses the other. There isn't anything which is having a part of the sentence as it is segmented on one reading illegitimately combined with a part of the sentence as segmented on the other reading – anymore than one can have only the eye of the rabbit taken from one reading of a duck-rabbit figure occur in combination with the face of the duck. To see the drawing as a picture of the face of a duck *is* to see the, as it were, argument place for an eye in the picture filled by the eye of a duck – that is what it is to see the dot (that sign) *as* an eye of a duck (*as* that kind of a symbol).

If we have not made the necessary assignments of meaning to cure Dummett's example of its emptiness then, according to the *Tractatus*, what we have before us is simply a string of signs – a string which has a surface resemblance to propositions of two distinct logical patterns. For Wittgenstein, the source of the clash is to be located in *our relation* to the linguistic string – not in the linguistic string itself. The problem, according to the *Tractatus*, is that we often believe that we have given a meaning to all of a sentence's constituent parts when we have failed to do so. We think nonsense results in such cases not because of a failure on our part, but because of a failure on the sentence's part. We think the problem lies not in an absence of meaning (in our failing to mean anything by these words) but rather in a presence of meaning (in the incompatible senses the words already have – senses which the words import with them into the context of combination). We think the thought is flawed because the component senses of its parts logically repel one another. They fail to add up to a thought. So we feel our words are attempting to think a logically impossible thought – and that this involves a kind of impossibility of a higher order than ordinary impossibility.⁶²

62 Here, again, we have the anticipation of a recurring theme of Wittgenstein's later thought:

Wittgenstein's teaching is that the problem lies not in the words, but in our confused relation to the words: in our experiencing ourselves as meaning something definite by them, yet also feeling that what we take ourselves to be meaning with the words makes no sense. We are confused about what it is we want to say and we project our confusion onto the linguistic string. Then we look at the linguistic string and imagine we discover what *it* is trying to say. We want to say to the string: "We know what you mean, but 'it' cannot be said." The incoherence of our desires with respect to the sentence – wishing to both mean and not mean something with it – is seen by us as an incoherence in what the words want to be saying. We displace our desire onto the words and see them as *aspiring* to say something they never quite succeed in saying (because, we tell ourselves, "it" cannot be said). We account for the confusion these words engender in us by discovering in the words a hopelessly flawed sense. "We ... hover", Wittgenstein says, "between regarding [a sequence of words] as sense and regarding it as nonsense, and hence the trouble arises."⁶³

The context of this latter remark runs as follows:

Different kinds of nonsense. Though it is nonsense to say "I feel his pain", this is different from inserting into an English sentence a meaningless word, say "abracadabra" (compare Moore last year on "Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford") and from saying a string of nonsense words. Every word in this sentence is English, and we shall be inclined to say that the sentence has a meaning. The sentence with the nonsense word or the string of nonsense words can be discarded from our language, but if we discard from our language "I feel Smith's toothache" that is quite different. The second seems nonsense, we are tempted to say, because of some truth about the nature of things or the nature of the world. We have discovered in some way that pains and personality do not fit together in such a way that I can feel his pain. – The task will be to show that there is in fact no difference between these two cases of nonsense, though there is a psychological distinction, in that we are inclined to say the one and be puzzled by it and not the other. We constantly hover between regarding it as sense and regarding it as nonsense, and hence the trouble arises.

Wittgenstein's description here of the task – to show that there is in fact no logical difference between these two cases of nonsense – is equally accurate as a description of the task of his early and his later work. Certain passages in the

"The difficulty is in using the word "can" in different ways, as "physically possible" and as "making no sense to say ..." The logical impossibility of fitting the two pieces seems of the same order as the physical impossibility, only more impossible!" (*Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932- 1935, op. cit.*, p. 146)

63 The quotation is from Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Personal Experience* (Michaelmas Term, 1935, recorded by Margaret MacDonald, edited by Cora Diamond; unpublished manuscript).

later work, however, in which Wittgenstein speaks, e.g., of "excluding certain combinations of words from our language", might seem to contradict this, inviting a reading of Wittgenstein along the following lines: certain combinations of words are to be identified as impermissible on the grounds that these combinations violate the principles governing which combinations of words are grammatically well-formed.

It is precisely such a reading of his work which Wittgenstein seeks to fend off in §500 of *Philosophical Investigations*:

When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.

The preceding section (§499) begins as follows:

To say "This combination of words makes no sense" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason.

This raises the question: what are Wittgenstein's reasons for proposing that we exclude particular combinations of words from the language? In the *Philosophical Grammar*, we find this:

How strange that one should be able to say that such and such a state of affairs is inconceivable! If we regard a thought as an accompaniment going with an expression, the words in the statement that specify the inconceivable state of affairs must be unaccompanied. So what sort of sense is it to have? Unless it says these words are senseless. But it isn't as it were their sense that is senseless; they are to be excluded from our language as if they were some arbitrary noise, and the reason for their *explicit* exclusion can only be that *we are tempted* to confuse them with a proposition of our language.⁶⁴

Wittgenstein proposes that we explicitly exclude an expression from the language – not because its sense is senseless (i.e., because it violates some set of principles for the legitimate combination of signs) – but because "*we are tempted to confuse*" one kind of sign for another.⁶⁵ We are tempted to confuse sentences in which words figure senselessly (because we have not given them a sense) with sentences in which each word has been given a determinate sense. Thus the only

64 *Philosophical Grammar*; Blackwell: Oxford, 1974 p. 130; I have amended the translation.

65 And if measures can be taken to prevent us from being thus tempted into confusion, then there is no reason not to introduce these forms of words back into circulation: "Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning – then it can be put back into circulation." (*Culture and Value, op. cit.* p. 39)

sort of *Sätze* that Wittgenstein ever talks of excluding are propositional *signs* – not propositional *symbols* – ones (1) whose exclusion from the language is *optional*, and (2) whose exclusion is proposed on *pragmatic* grounds (namely, that they incline us to mistake a mere sign for a propositional symbol). Instead of excluding them, we could retain these sentences and give them a sense:

In speaking of that which is impossible it seems as though we are conceiving the inconceivable. When we say a thing cannot be green and yellow at the same time we are excluding something, but what?... We have not excluded any case at all, but rather the use of an expression. And what we exclude has no semblance of sense. Most of us think that there is nonsense which makes sense and nonsense which does not – that it is nonsense in a different way to say "This is green and yellow at the same time" from saying "Ab sur ah". But these are nonsense in the same sense, the only difference being in the jingle of the words.... The word "nonsense" is used to exclude certain things, and for different reasons. But it cannot be the case that an expression is excluded and yet not quite excluded – excluded because it stands for the impossible, and not quite excluded because in excluding it we have to think the impossible. We exclude such sentences ... because we do not want to use them. Of course we could give these sentences sense.⁶⁶

When Wittgenstein argues in his later writings that we cannot give a word a "senseless sense" (e.g., *Philosophical Investigations*, §500), he is refashioning the Tractarian point that we cannot give a sign "the wrong sense". Not only does Wittgenstein never speak in the *Tractatus* of "violations of logical syntax", but later Wittgenstein only occasionally mentions the idea of "violations of grammar", and always in the service of encouraging the reader to be puzzled by what such a thing could be – as, for example, in the following passage:

How can one put together *logically* ill-assorted concepts (in violation of grammar [*gegen die Grammatik*], and therefore nonsensically) and significantly ask about the possibility of the combination?⁶⁷

The continuity in Wittgenstein's thought to which I am seeking to draw attention here is roughly the opposite of the one usually remarked upon by commentators. The following passage from Baker and Hacker offers a fairly standard story of how an appeal to rules of logical syntax in the *Tractatus* gives way in later Wittgenstein to an appeal to rules of grammar:

Wittgenstein had, in the *Tractatus*, seen that philosophical or conceptual investigation moves in the domain of rules. An important point of continuity was the insight that philosophy is not concerned with what is true and what is false, but rather with what makes

66 *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935; op. cit.*, pp. 63-64.

67 *Philosophical Grammar* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1974), p. 392.

sense and what traverses the bounds of sense... [W]hat he called 'rules of grammar' ... are the direct descendants of the 'rules of logical syntax' of the *Tractatus*. Like rules of logical syntax, rules of grammar determine the bounds of sense. They distinguish sense from nonsense... Grammar, as Wittgenstein understood the term, is the account book of language. Its rules determine the limits of sense, and by carefully scrutinizing them the philosopher may determine at what point he has drawn an overdraft on Reason, *violated the rules for the use of an expression*, and so, in subtle and not readily identifiable ways, traversed the bounds of sense.⁶⁸

I agree with Baker and Hacker that the later conception of grammar is the heir of the earlier conception of logical syntax. But I disagree with their characterizations of these conceptions – e.g., as turning on an aspiration to formulate rules that will "determine the limits of sense" and thus "determine at what point" the philosopher has "traversed the bounds of sense" – a point reached when the philosopher "violate[s] the rules for the use of an expression".

It would be a mistake to think that the crucial difference between my interpretation of Wittgenstein and that of Baker and Hacker is that, whereas they, on the one hand, think that when Wittgenstein wrote his early work he thought that there were ineffable truths that cannot be stated in language and later came to see that this is misconceived, I, on the other hand, think that already in his early work he thought this misconceived. The more important difference between their reading and mine is that I think that Wittgenstein (early and late) thinks that the view that they attribute to later Wittgenstein is a disguised version of the view that they attribute to early Wittgenstein. I take the continuity in Wittgenstein's thought to lie in his espousal of the austere conception of nonsense; they take it to lie in his espousal of the substantial conception. Within this overarching difference, it is a matter of secondary importance which variant of the substantial conception they attribute to which Wittgenstein. As it happens, they attribute the ineffability variant of the substantial conception to early Wittgenstein and the positivist variant to later Wittgenstein. This is not, by my (early or later) Wittgenstein's lights, a story of philosophical progress. Indeed, by his lights, their version of "early Wittgenstein" is bound to seem in some respects philosophically more acute than their version of "later Wittgenstein". For he comes closer to appreciating that the two variants of the substantial conception are only apparently distinct; whereas their "later Wittgenstein", in exchanging the ineffability

68 [Their emphasis] G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) pp. 39-40, 55. I should say that I gather from conversations with Gordon Baker that he no longer espouses the reading of Wittgenstein that (the authors I am here referring to as) "Baker and Hacker" defend in this book.

variant for the positivist variant of the substantial conception, takes himself to have made an important advance.

Consider the following pair of passages from Baker and Hacker:

Wittgenstein's 'rules of grammar' serve only to distinguish sense from nonsense... They settle what makes sense, experience settles what is the case.... Grammar is a free-floating array of rules for the use of language. It determines what is a correct use of language, but is not itself correct or incorrect.

What philosophers have called 'necessary truths' are, in Wittgenstein's view, typically rules of grammar, norms of representation, i.e., they fix concepts. They are expressions of internal relations between concepts... Hence they license (or prohibit) transitions between concepts, i.e. transitions from one expression of an empirical proposition to another.⁶⁹

Each of the phrases italicized in the above passages mark a moment in which Baker and Hacker attribute to later Wittgenstein an instance of the very misunderstanding that he was already seeking to exorcize in his early work – one which conceives of the possibilities of meaningful expression as limited by “general rules of the language” (be they called “rules of logical syntax” or “rules of grammar”) and which imagines that by specifying these rules one can identify in advance which combinations of words are licensed and which prohibited.

The heart of the Tractarian conception of logic is to be found in the remark that “we cannot make mistakes in logic” (§5.473). It is one of the burdens of the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus* to try to show us that the idea that we can violate the logical syntax of language rests upon a conception of “the logical structure of thought” according to which the nature of logic itself debars us from being able to frame certain sorts of “thoughts”. Wittgenstein says: “Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted” (§5.473). If a sentence is nonsense, this is not because *it* is trying but failing to make sense (by breaking a rule of logic, or grammar), but because *we* have failed to make sense with it: “the sentence is nonsensical because *we* have failed to make an arbitrary determination of sense, not because *the symbol in itself* is impermissible” (my emphases; §5.473). The idea that there can be such a thing as a kind of proposition which has an internal logical form of a sort which is debarred by the logical structure of our thought rests upon what Wittgenstein calls (in the Preface) “a misunderstanding of the logic of our language”. In ascribing to the *Tractatus* a commitment to the substantial conception of nonsense, commentators have ascribed to that work a commitment to the very misunderstanding which the elucidatory strategy of the work as a whole is centrally concerned to exorcize.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 269. I am indebted to Martin Gustafsson for drawing these two passages to my attention.

In §4.1212 of the *Tractatus*, we are told that a work of philosophy “consists essentially of elucidations”. “Philosophy” here means: philosophy as practiced by the author of the *Tractatus*. The notion of elucidation is tied in §4.1212 to the idea of philosophy being a certain kind of activity:

Philosophy is not a theory [*Lehre*] but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. (§4.112)

The word '*Lehre*' – which Ogden translates as 'theory' – is rendered as 'body of doctrine' by Pears and McGuinness. The elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus* depends on the reader's provisionally taking himself to be participating in the traditional philosophical activity of establishing a doctrine through a procedure of reasoned argument; but it only succeeds if the reader fully comes to understand what the work means to say about itself when it says that philosophy, as this work seeks to practice it, results not in doctrine but in elucidations. And the attainment of this recognition depends upon the reader's actually undergoing a certain *experience* – the attainment of which is identified in §6.54 as the sign that the reader has understood the author of the work: the reader's experience of having his illusion of sense (in the “premises” and “conclusions” of the “argument”) dissipate through its becoming clear to him that (what he took to be) the *philosophische Sätze* of the work are *Unsinn*. The “problems of philosophy” that the *Tractatus* sets itself the task of “solving” are all of a single sort: they are all occasioned by reflection on possibilities (of running up against the limits of thought, language or reality) which appear to come into view when we imagine ourselves able to frame in thought violations of the logical structure of language. The “solution” to these problems (as §6.52 says) lies in their disappearance – in the dissolution of the appearance that we are so much as able to frame such thoughts. The mode of philosophy which this work practices (as §4.112 says) does not result in “philosophical propositions”: the “philosophical propositions” we come out with when we attempt to frame such thoughts are to be recognized as *Unsinn*. Thus the aim is the same as that of Wittgenstein's later philosophy; as he puts it in *Philosophical Investigations*, §464:

My aim in philosophy is to take you from something which is disguised nonsense to something which is undisguised nonsense.

The sign that this passage from latent to patent nonsense has been achieved by a reader – of either the *Tractatus* or the *Philosophical Investigations* – comes when the reader's phenomenology of having understood something determinate

by a particular form of words is suddenly shattered. The reader undergoes an abrupt transition: one moment, imagining he has discovered something, the next, discovering he has not yet discovered anything, to mean by the words. The transition is from a psychological experience of entertaining what appears to be a fully determinate thought – *the* thought apparently expressed by *that* sentence – to the experience of having that appearance (the appearance of there being any such thought) disintegrate. No “theory of meaning” could ever bring about the passage from the first of these experiences (the hallucinatory one) to the second (the experience of discovering oneself to be a victim of a hallucination).

As long as we retain the relevant phenomenology (as long as it appears to us that, by golly, we *do* mean something determinate by our words), our conviction in such an experience of meaning will always lie deeper than our conviction in anything we are told by a theory of meaning concerning what sorts of things we are and are not able to mean by our words.⁷⁰ Both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* seek to bring their readers to the point where the reader can recognize sentences displayed within the pages of the work as nonsensical, not by means of a theory which legislates certain sentences out of the realm of sense, but rather by bringing more clearly into view for the reader the life with language he already leads – by harnessing the capacities for distinguishing sense from nonsense (for recognizing the symbol in the sign and for recognizing when no method of symbolizing has yet been conferred upon a sign) implicit in the everyday practical mastery of language which the reader already possesses. As the Preface of the *Tractatus* says: “The limit ... can only be drawn *in language* and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.” Just as, according to the *Tractatus*, each propositional symbol – i.e., each *sinnvoller Satz* – shows its sense (§4.022), so the *Tractatus* shows what it shows (i.e., what it is to make sense) by *letting language show itself* – not through “the clarification of sentences” but through allowing “sentences themselves to become clear” (through *das Klarwerden von Sätzen*, §4.112). The work seeks to do this, not by instructing us in how to identify determinate cases of nonsense, but by enabling us to see more clearly what it is we do with language when we succeed in achieving determinate forms of sense (when we succeed in projecting a symbol into the sign) and what it is we fall short of doing when we fail to achieve such forms of sense (when we fail to confer a determinate method of symbolizing on a propositional sign).

⁷⁰ Hence the ineffectuality of someone like Carnap’s methods.

In *Tractatus*, §5.5563, we find :

All propositions of our everyday language are actually, just as they stand, logically completely in order.

The *Tractatus* wants to show how Frege’s theory of *Begriffsschrift* – his theory of a logically perfect language which excludes the possibility of the formation of illogical thought – is in fact the correct theory of symbolism *überhaupt*. Language itself, the *Tractatus* says, prevents the possibility of every logical mistake (§5.4731).⁷¹ Ordinary language is in this respect already a kind of *Begriffsschrift*. What for Frege is the structure of an ideal language is for early Wittgenstein the structure of all language. In his remarks clarifying his emendations of Ogden’s initial attempt to translate §5.5563, Wittgenstein explains:

By this [i.e., §5.5563] I meant to say that the propositions of our ordinary language are not in any way logically *less correct* or less exact or *more confused* than propositions written down, say, in Russell’s symbolism or any other *Begriffsschrift*. (Only it is easier for us to gather their logical form when they are expressed in an appropriate symbolism.) [emphases in the original]⁷²

Already in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s interest in a logical symbolism is not that of someone who seeks to overcome an imprecision in ordinary thought through recourse to a more precise medium for the expression of thought.⁷³ The *Tractatus* is interested in successors to Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* (in what the *Tractatus* calls “logical grammars”) because such systems of notation exclude a multiplicity of kinds of use for individual signs, allowing one to see in a more perspicuous manner what kind of logical work (if any) a given term in a given sen-

⁷¹ This, of course, does not mean that language itself prevents us from ever making “logical mistakes” in the ordinary (non-philosophical) sense of the expression “logical mistake” – i.e., that it keeps us from ever contradicting ourselves! Indeed, the possibility of forming contradictions is, according to the *Tractatus*, a constitutive feature of any symbolism (which, for the *Tractatus*, means any system capable of expressing thought). What this passage refers to rather is the prevention of the possibility of the (peculiarly philosophical) sort of “logical mistake” that Russell’s theory of types or Carnap’s theory of logical syntax sought to exclude. This latter notion of “a violation of logic” depends upon a philosophical *theory* (which seeks to draw a limit to the sorts of thoughts that are so much as possible).

⁷² *Letters to C. K. Ogden* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973); p.50.

⁷³ Thus what is standardly put forward by commentators as a criticism later Wittgenstein directs against his earlier work is in fact already developed in the *Tractatus* as a criticism of Frege and Russell.

tence is doing.⁷⁴ It allows us to see *how* – and, most importantly, *whether* – the signs we call upon (in giving voice to the thoughts we seek to express) symbolize. The advantage of a logical symbolism, for the *Tractatus*, lies not in *what* it permits (or forbids) one to say, but in the perspicuity of its mode of representation: in how it allows someone who is drawn to call upon certain words to see what it is (if anything) he is saying.⁷⁵ The reason ordinary language can lead us philosophically astray is not to be traced to its (alleged) capacity to permit us to formulate illogical thoughts (i.e. to give a sign the wrong sense).⁷⁶ Rather, it is to be traced to the symbolic imperspicuity of ordinary language – our inability to read off of it what contribution, if any, the parts of a sentence make to the sense of the whole. It is this lack of perspicuity in our relation to our own words which allows us to imagine that we perceive a meaning where there is no meaning, and which brings about the need for a mode of perspicuous representation of the possibilities of meaning available to us.

74 It is perhaps worth mentioning that this employment of *Begriffsschrift* (as a tool for the perspicuous representation of the logical structure of sentences of ordinary language) for the purposes of philosophical clarification – though by no means Frege's primary reason for developing his ideography – was nonetheless envisioned by him from the start as one of its possible applications:

'If it is one of the tasks of philosophy to break the domination of the word over the human spirit by laying bare those misconceptions which through the use of language all but unavoidably arise, then my ideography, if it is further developed with an eye to this purpose, can become a useful tool for the philosopher.' (*Begriffsschrift*, Preface, eighth paragraph; my translation.)

And, when advertising the virtues of his *Begriffsschrift*, Frege not infrequently remarks upon the value it could have in this regard for philosophy:

'We can see from all this how easily we can be led by language to see things in the wrong perspective, and what value it must therefore have for philosophy to free ourselves from the domination of language. If one makes the attempt to construct a system of signs on quite other foundations and with quite other means, as I have tried to do in creating my concept-script, we shall have, so to speak, our very noses rubbed into the false analogies in language.' (*Posthumous Writings* [Blackwell: Oxford, 1979], p. 67)

75 The *Tractatus* sacrifices all the other ends to which Frege and Russell sought to put a *Begriffsschrift* to the sole end of notational perspicuity. Early Wittgenstein champions a logical syntax which avoids a plurality of logical constants because such a plurality frustrates the sole application which the *Tractatus* seeks to make of a logical syntax: to allow the logical form of propositions to appear with "complete clarity". A plurality of logical constants frustrates this end in two ways: (i) it permits the same thought to be rendered in diverse ways, and (ii) it obscures the logical relations between propositions.

76 See also §3.03 and §5.4731.

Both early and later Wittgenstein trace our philosophical failures of meaning to our tendency to transfer an expression without transferring its use (in the language of the *Tractatus*: to employ the same sign without transferring the method of symbolizing). Thus both have an interest in finding a mode of perspicuous representation – a mode of representation which makes perspicuous to a philosophical interlocutor (1) the contexts of use within which a word has a particular meaning (in the language of the *Tractatus*: the contexts within which a sign symbolizes in a particular way), (2) how the meaning shifts as the context shifts, (3) how "it very often happens" in philosophy that we are led into "confusions" by "the same word belonging to two different symbols" without our realizing it (§§3.323-3.234), and (4) how nothing at all is meant by a word – how one "has given no meaning to certain signs" (§6.53) – as long as one hovers indeterminately between contexts of use. The underlying thought common to early and later Wittgenstein is that we are prone to see a meaning where there is no meaning because of our inclination to imagine that a sign carries its meaning with it, enabling us to import a particular meaning into a new context merely by importing the sign.⁷⁷

The assumption underlying Tractarian elucidation is that the only way to free oneself from such illusions is to fully enter into them and explore them from the inside. This assumption – one which underlies both Wittgenstein's early and later work – is nicely summarized in the following remark (from a 1931 manuscript of Wittgenstein's):

In philosophy we are deceived by an illusion. But this – an illusion – is also something, and I must at some time place it completely and clearly before my eyes, before I can say it is only an illusion.⁷⁸

The illusion that the *Tractatus* seeks to explode, above all, is that we can run up against the limits of language. The book starts with a warning about a certain

77 Though the conception of philosophical elucidation remains in many respects the same (one of taking the reader from latent to patent nonsense), there is also an important difference here between early and later Wittgenstein: on the later conception, once one has completed the work of perspicuously displaying the possible contexts of significant use, there is no elucidatory role left for a *Begriffsschrift* to come along and play. What the *Tractatus* sees as a preliminary task in the process of elucidation (namely, the consideration of contexts of significant use) becomes for later Wittgenstein a comparatively central exercise – one which usurps the role previously played by the rendition of sentences into a perspicuous logical symbolism.

78 *Manuscript 110* of Wittgenstein's *Handschriftlicher Nachlass*, p. 239 (quoted by David Stern in *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995; p. 194).

kind of enterprise – one of attempting to draw a limit to thought. In the body of the text, we are offered (what appears to be) a doctrine about "the limits of thought". With the aid of this doctrine, we imagine ourselves to be able both to draw these limits and to see beyond them. We imagine ourselves able to do what the Preface warns we will fall into imagining ourselves able to do (once we imagine ourselves able to draw a limit to thought): we imagine ourselves able "to think both sides of the limit" (and hence "able to think what cannot be thought").⁷⁹ The aim of the work is to show us that beyond "the limits of language" lies – not ineffable truth, but rather – (as the Preface cautions) *einfach Unsinn*.⁸⁰ At the conclusion of the book, we are told that the author's elucidations have succeeded only if we recognize what we find in the body of the text to be nonsense. In §6.54, Wittgenstein does not ask his reader here to "grasp" the "thoughts" which his nonsensical propositions seek to convey. He does not call upon the reader to understand his sentences, but rather to understand *him*, namely the author and the kind of activity in which he is engaged – one of elucidation. He tells us in §6.54 how these sentences serve as elucidations: by enabling us to recognize them *as* nonsense.⁸¹ One does not reach the end by arriving at the last page, but by arriving at a certain point in an activity – the point when the elucidation has served its purpose: when the illusion of sense is exploded from within. The sign that we have understood the author of the work is that we can throw the ladder we have climbed up away. That is to say, we have finished the work, and

79 "The book will, therefore, draw a limit ... not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought)." (*Tractatus*, Preface)

80 "The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be *simply nonsense*." [my emphasis] (*Ibid*)

81 In §6.54, Wittgenstein draws the reader's attention to a kind of employment of linguistic signs which occurs within the body of the work. Commentators fail to notice that what Wittgenstein says in §6.54 is not: "all of my sentences are nonsensical" (thus giving rise to the self-defeating problematic Geach has nicely dubbed *Ludwig's Self-mate*). §6.54 characterizes the way in which those of his propositions which serve as elucidations elucidate. He says: "my sentences serve as elucidations in the following way: he who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical"; or better still – to quote from the English translation of §6.54 that Wittgenstein himself proposed to Ogden: "my propositions elucidate – *whatever they do elucidate* – in this way, he who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical" (*Letters to C.K. Ogden*, p. 51). The aim of the passage is (*not* to propose a single all-encompassing category into which the diverse sorts of propositions which comprise the work are all to be shoehorned, but rather) to explicate how those passages of the work which succeed in bearing its elucidatory burden are meant to work their medicine on the reader.

the work is finished with us, when we are able to *throw* the sentences in the body of the work – sentences about "the limits of language" and the unsayable things which lie beyond them – *away*.

The section preceding §6.54 describes what it calls "the only strictly correct method" of philosophy; and it turns out to be quite different from the method actually practiced by the *Tractatus*. The practitioner of the strictly correct method eschews nonsense, confining himself to displaying what can be said and to pointing out where the other has failed to give a meaning to one of his signs; whereas the practitioner of the elucidatory method of the *Tractatus* permits himself to be engaged in the production of vast quantities of nonsense. The former method depends on the elucidator always being able to speak second; the latter attempts to achieve the aims of the former but in a situation in which the interlocutor is not present. The actual method of the *Tractatus* is thus a literary surrogate for the strictly correct method – one in which the text invites the reader alternately to adopt the roles played by each of the parties to the dialogue in the strictly correct method. As the addressees of this surrogate form of elucidation, we are furnished with a series of "propositions" whose attractiveness we are asked both to feel and to round on.

The tale told in this essay is a prolegomenon to the reading of later Wittgenstein. To understand why Wittgenstein's later writing comes to assume the particular form that it does – that is, why later Wittgenstein's writing involves a very different kind of literary surrogate for philosophical dialogue than does his earlier writing – we need to understand how the *Tractatus's* conception of its *method* unwittingly relies upon the very metaphysical doctrines it seeks to undermine, and thus why Wittgenstein thought that his earlier choice of an elucidatory method could never fully succeed in its aim. And to understand this requires understanding why it is that, by the lights of his later philosophy, the very idea of "a strictly correct method" – of an elucidatory method which aspires to the ideal of being able to hold all nonsense at arm's length, treating philosophical questions from a position which involves having achieved immunity to the forms of perplexity that they involve – itself presupposes these same metaphysical doctrines. To understand this is to understand why Wittgenstein comes to think that philosophical elucidation ought not to assume the form of a ladder (that one climbs up and throws away). To draw the reader into the illusion that there is a ladder to be climbed up is already to direct his attention in the wrong direction, away from the place at which he needs to arrive in his philosophizing – the place where he already is and which he (needs to come to recognize he) has never left. It is the place which Wittgenstein, in his later writings, sometimes calls the *ordinary* or the *everyday*. To understand what Wittgenstein means by these words requires not only understanding what it is to arrive at such a place in one's phi-

osophizing but why it is that later Wittgenstein thinks that the method of the Tractatus necessarily obstructs the possibility of such an arrival. To understand all this – that is, to understand why, in Wittgenstein's later work, the aim of elucidation becomes that of returning us to the ordinary, yet in such a way that we are, under the pressure of philosophy, able to recognize it *as* ordinary (as if seeing it for the first time) – is to understand what is genuinely *new* in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. But that is a tale for another occasion.⁸²

82 This paper inherits many of the intellectual debts acknowledged in the final endnote of *TM* – the most pervasive and profound of these being to Cora Diamond.

Chantal Mouffe

Wittgenstein and the ethos of democracy

The aspect of Wittgenstein's legacy that I want to stress in this intervention concerns his contribution to what I take to be an urgent issue today: how to envisage a new way of theorizing about the political. There are several ways in which I could have approached this question. For instance I could have traced the influence of Wittgenstein in the transformation of disciplines like cultural anthropology or the history of political ideas. Here one would have to mention the 'new history' pioneered by Quentin Skinner who envisages political writing as a way of acting with words and insists that political thought cannot be grasped without being situated within the politico-historical context in which this acting took place. And with respect to anthropology the work of Clifford Geertz and James Clifford who following the lead of Wittgenstein have criticized the homogeneous and bounded view of identity dominant in modern political theory and proposed to replace it by a new vocabulary of identity in terms of 'family resemblance', as an overlapping of similarities and differences. This kind of anthropology has important consequences for envisaging the task of a new political theory which as Clifford Geertz has recently argued should not be an 'intensely generalized reflection on intensely generalized matters, an imagining of architectures in which no one could live, but should be, rather, an intellectual engagement, exact, mobile, and realistic, with present problems'.¹

The strategy I have chosen to follow is a different one. I have decided that a good way to bring to the fore Wittgenstein's relevance for political theory would be to tackle some of the most disputed issues in political theory today and to show how several of his insights play an important role, even if it is in a way that is not always clearly acknowledged, in the debates currently central in political theory. My aim is to highlight the fact that, on the most important issues discussed nowadays, it is the political theorists who are inspired by Wittgenstein who represent the more promising alternative and who are likely to come up with adequate answers.

1 Clifford Geertz, 'What is a Culture if not a Consensus?', conference given in June 1995 in Vienna at the Institute for Human Science, mimeo, p.23.