

# UNDERSTANDING MISUNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>

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Wittgenstein seeks to throw light on our concept of understanding by looking at how misunderstandings arise and what kinds of failure they involve. He discerns a peculiar kind of misunderstanding in the writings of the social anthropologist James Frazer.<sup>2</sup> In Frazer's hands, the anthropological project of enabling us to understand human behaviour seems to yield the paradoxical result that there are certain forms of human behaviour that simply cannot be understood. The source of Frazer's misunderstanding, according to Wittgenstein, is that he places narrow requirements on what could count as meaningful, prior to, and independently of, his encounter with the subjects of his interpretation. Frazer, similar to some of the philosophers who Wittgenstein addresses in his other works, succumbs to nonsense in his very attempt to draw the limits of sense.

My aim in this paper is to clarify the connections between Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer and his criticism of his fellow philosophers, in particular of Frege. The materials I draw on stem from various periods in Wittgenstein's career, and they reveal, in my mind, an important

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein (1993a). Henceforth abbreviated as RFGB.

continuity in Wittgenstein's thought: addressing misunderstanding, in Wittgenstein's view, is fundamentally an ethical problem, not a theoretical one.

## 1. The Anthropologist's Misunderstanding

Frazer, as Wittgenstein interprets him, occupies the position of an observer of human behaviour who declares himself unable to properly understand his fellow humans, not through any fault of his own, but because his interlocutors' thoughts and behaviours are allegedly inherently defective.<sup>3</sup> The element in Frazer's thought that Wittgenstein highlights is representative of a larger trend in early anthropology, within the context of which the mindset and mentalities of the members of various non-Western, so-called primitive societies have been treated as irrational; and Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer is in this sense comparable to later developments in anthropology, in which the tendency to pit the allegedly rational observer against the allegedly irrational subjects of his study has been criticized and debunked.<sup>4</sup>

Frazer's inability to understand the subjects of his study testifies, in Wittgenstein's eyes, to Frazer's own confusion:

Frazer's account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory: it makes these views look like *errors*.

Was Augustine in error, then, when he called upon God on every page of the *Confessions*?

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<sup>3</sup> My primary concern here is with Wittgenstein's diagnosis of the general shape of an intellectual failure, of which Frazer's is merely a particular instance. I shall not attempt to evaluate to what extent Wittgenstein's interpretation of Frazer is justified.

<sup>4</sup> Of particular relevance is Lévi-Strauss' (1962) criticism of what he calls 'the totemic illusion'; see also Lloyd (1990).

But—one might say—if he was not in error, surely the Buddhist holy man was—or anyone else--whose religion gives expression to completely different views. But *none* of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory. (RFGB, 119)

No *opinion* serves as the foundation for a religious symbol.

And only an opinion can involve an error. (RFGB, 123)

One could almost say that man is a ceremonial animal. ...[Humans] also perform actions which bear a characteristic peculiar to themselves, and these could be called ritualistic actions.

But then it is nonsense for one to go on to say that the characteristic feature of these actions is the fact that they arise from faulty views about the physics of things. (Frazer does this when he says that magic is essentially false physics or, as the case may be, false medicine, technology, etc.). (RFGB, 129)

The nonsense here is that Frazer represents these people as if they had a completely false (even insane) idea of the course of nature, whereas they only possess a peculiar interpretation of the phenomena. That is, if they were to write it down, their knowledge of nature would not differ *fundamentally* from ours. Only their *magic* is different. (RFGB, 141)

In the view Wittgenstein imputes to Frazer, there are only two ways of evaluating an instance of human behaviour: either it expresses a truth-evaluable belief concerning the course of nature, in which case it may be either true or false, or it betrays confusion, a 'faulty' view, or 'a completely false (even insane) idea of the course of nature'. Frazer thus presupposes that one

can draw a line, dividing the entire sphere of human behaviour. On the one side of the line will fall all those types of behavior that we can understand in terms of the kinds of theoretical observations of nature that they presuppose or convey. Everything which falls on the other side of the line cannot be properly understood, except as a defective attempt to frame such theoretical observations; as Frazer puts it, 'Magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide to conduct' (Frazer 1994, 26).

On the one hand, Frazer purports to understand the intentions underlying his subjects' behaviour. What underlies the behaviour of the magician or priest, according to Frazer, is a set of principles for the construction of beliefs, all of which would be evaluable as error. But on the other hand, since the facts fly in the face of those beliefs, and since this tension is so obvious that the subjects themselves could not miss it, Frazer (as Wittgenstein portrays him) implies that one cannot truly understand his subjects. Their mistakes are not accidental but pervasive; indeed, in holding on to magical beliefs alongside the correct beliefs that they and all reasonable people share about the world that surrounds them, they seem to affirm what logic excludes. It is therefore irrational of them to do so, which is why Wittgenstein states that Frazer makes their views seem 'even insane'.

Thus, Frazer, in Wittgenstein's view, wants to have it both ways: his subjects' behaviour, on his view, does have sense, but this sense makes no sense – it is an impossible sense. Wittgenstein's criticism is that the line Frazer draws, the criterion he appeals to in distinguishing sense from nonsense, reflects a misunderstanding. Four brief remarks by Wittgenstein will help us begin to assess the great distance that separates Frazer's approach to the limits of understanding from his own:

In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic. (Wittgenstein 1960, 5.473)<sup>5</sup>

...we *cannot* think illogically. (TLP 5.4731)

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

When a sentence is called senseless, it is not, as it were, its sense that is senseless. (Wittgenstein 2009, §500)<sup>6</sup>

There are two issues to which I wish to draw attention. The first concerns the nature of the impossibility expressed in Wittgenstein's statements about what we cannot do. As I understand it, this is not meant to point out a psychological or a metaphysical impossibility, but to reveal the incoherence of the very notion of transgressing the limits of thought (cf. TLP p. 26). The lesson to be drawn is that whenever it appears to us that an illogical thought has occurred, it must be our interpretation of the situation that is at fault. I shall return to this issue below.<sup>7</sup>

The second issue is the nature of the 'we' to which Wittgenstein appeals. Wittgenstein's 'we' is much wider than that which is implicit in Frazer's observations, and it is meant to include both what Frazer would consider 'we' and what Frazer would treat as 'the other'. It is we who cannot give a sign of the wrong sense, or think illogically – and yet, if Frazer's view of the matter is correct, some of us seem to do just that. And if Frazer is mistaken here – indeed, if it is nonsense to think that anyone can commit errors in logic, of the kind that Frazer ascribes to his subjects, then how can we – both Frazer and us – coherently think such nonsense? What is it that *we* do when we purport to draw the line between sense and nonsense in Frazer's way, and then accuse someone of crossing it?

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<sup>5</sup> Henceforth abbreviated as TLP. References to this work are given by citing the paragraph number, except when citing the Preface, 26–27.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth abbreviated as PI.

<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this issue see Nir (2021).

Frazer's approach pits *us* against *them*. It might appear, however, that Wittgenstein's critique of his fellow philosophers is not fundamentally different. Typical philosophical theses, on his view, are not false but nonsensical (TLP 4.003; PI §119); that is, they do not consist in sentences that we can understand and evaluate as correct or incorrect but rather in merely apparent sentences that purport to convey truths, but, in fact, lack meaning and, hence, cannot be understood at all. Thus, the worry arises that Wittgenstein criticizes Frazer for something that he himself is guilty of. This is a worry to which I shall seek to respond throughout the course of this paper. To begin with, note that Wittgenstein is not interested in pointing out these confusions as though they were the accidental faults of some particularly unfortunate tribe of philosophers. Rather, he is interested in seeking the sources of philosophical misunderstanding in deep human tendencies, in temptations which he himself is able to feel, and which we should be able to feel as well (PI §111). Wittgenstein's project is in this sense a humanistic one. Stanley Cavell's characterization of Wittgenstein's approach is illuminating in this regard:

If philosophy is the criticism a culture produces of itself, and proceeds essentially by criticizing past efforts at this criticism, then Wittgenstein's originality lies in having developed modes of criticism that are not moralistic, that is, that do not leave the critic imagining himself free of the faults he sees around him, and which proceed not by trying to argue a given statement false or wrong, but by showing that the person making an assertion does not really know what he means, has not really said what he wished. (Cavell 1999, 175)

In noting that it is not the statement but the person who is to be criticized, and in saying that the shape of the criticism Wittgenstein aims to exercise is not moralistic, Cavell highlights the underlying ethical dimension of Wittgenstein's work. It might however seem that an ethical engagement with our confused interlocutors would become superfluous, if we could draw a

distinction between sense and nonsense and apply it at the level of statements. This is the temptation with which, I shall argue, Wittgenstein himself is struggling, and it is to this temptation to which he believes Frazer is succumbing.

## **2. The Logician's Misunderstanding**

As we have seen, Frazer allows for two kinds of behaviour: rational behaviour, which can be taken to convey truth-evaluable claims, and irrational behaviour, which conveys pervasive error and confusion. Yet Wittgenstein objects that there can also be behaviour that does not purport to convey truth-evaluable claims at all, and hence need not be thought of as committing one to error or confusion. As he puts it in the remarks on Frazer, 'none of them was in error, except when he set forth a theory' (RFGB, 119) and 'if they were to write it down, their knowledge of nature would not differ fundamentally from ours. Only their magic is different'. (RFGB, 141).

It is illuminating to observe that Wittgenstein makes a similar gesture within the context of his confrontation with Gottlob Frege's view of the necessary status of logic – that is, Frege's own construal of the limits of rationality (Wittgenstein 1978, Part I, §§143–153).<sup>8</sup> When Frege rejects the possibility of illogical thought, he does this by raising the possibility of creatures whose thought obeys laws that contradict our own, and then proceeding to say 'here we have a hitherto unknown kind of insanity' (Frege 2013, xvi. Translation emended). To this Wittgenstein replies: 'but he never said what this 'insanity' would really be like' (RFM I §152). Wittgenstein thereby aims to cast doubt on the impression that Frege has managed to coherently

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<sup>8</sup> Henceforth abbreviated as RFM.

specify a genuine possibility. The implied claim is that Frege could not say in a determinate way what he meant, because there is no such thing to mean.<sup>9</sup>

To bring out the incoherence of Frege's appeal to the possibility of encountering behaviour that could count as a manifestation of illogical thought, Wittgenstein proceeds to develop a scenario of his own, in which we encounter people whose monetary transactions make no sense to us, since there is no clear correlation between the amount of money paid and what is gained in return. Of this Wittgenstein says:

It is perfectly possible that we should be inclined to call people who behaved like this insane. And yet we don't call everyone insane who acts similarly within the forms of our culture, who uses words 'without purpose'. (Think of the coronation of a King.) (RFM I §153)

What makes the described behaviour seem insane is that we presuppose, in our interpretation of it, that these people do use words *with purpose*, that what they do does constitute a monetary transaction, and when we observe that their behaviour does not match how we would pursue such purposes, we impute a contradiction, an illogical thought, to *them*. Wittgenstein then reminds us of rituals in our own culture in which words are used differently, as if without purpose, and notes that we do not treat these rituals as signs of insanity (Similarly, in his remarks on Frazer, Wittgenstein repeatedly reminds us of various forms of everyday behaviour that resemble the behaviours Frazer takes to reflect irrational beliefs, and yet do not normally raise our suspicion. See e.g. RFGB 131, 137, 141). The implication is that the appearance that

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<sup>9</sup> The issues here are quite complex, and I cannot pretend to give them the full treatment they deserve. For an illuminating discussion of Wittgenstein's response to Frege, see Conant (1992).



the scenario must be taken to involve logically defective thought stems from our own, incoherent manner of portraying it.

Consider again Frege's scenario. Frege suggests that we might encounter something which would be identifiable as thought, and hence, as contributing to the characteristic purposes of thought, which, on Frege's narrow definition of it, essentially involves a concern with truth.<sup>10</sup> Yet, simultaneously, for this to be a scenario in which we encounter behaviour interpretable as manifesting *illogical* thought, Frege asks us to imagine that these characteristic purposes of thought are completely defeated by the creatures' thought – theirs would be thought that inherently undermines itself. Should we not, in such a case, simply abandon the assumption that what we are interpreting is truth-evaluable thought? It is the inconsistent requirements Frege places on his scenario that create the impression that there can be thought that we could not understand. And in general, it is to our tendency to place similar requirements that our misunderstandings can be traced.

### **3. The Varieties of Misunderstanding**

Both in the remarks on Frazer and in his response to Frege, Wittgenstein points out that misunderstanding can assume a wider variety of forms than these scholars assume. Indeed, in order to understand misunderstanding, we must always consider whether the interpreter's assumptions of the observed behaviour match, or fail to match, what the behaviour, as intended by the interlocutor, amounts to. Consider the nine possible types of interpretative encounters represented in the following table:

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<sup>10</sup> As Frege puts it, 'I mean by "a thought" something for which the question of truth can arise at all'. See Frege (1984, 353).

	(A) a truth-evaluable claim	(B) nonsense	(C) a non-truth-evaluable expression
The subject's utterance is:			
The interpreter takes the utterance to be:			
(1) truth-evaluable	A1	B1	C1
(2) nonsense	A2	B2	C2
(3) non-truth-evaluable	A3	B3	C3

Encounters of type A1 are ordinary cases of mutual understanding in which information can be successfully exchanged and civilized debate may ensue concerning the actual truth or falsity of the claims made. Here, there is no problem of understanding, but at most a problem of knowledge. Encounters of type B1, by contrast, include the kind of situation that Wittgenstein takes philosophers to typically find themselves in: Philosophers treat their own nonsense as if it conveyed sense. Type A2 represents encounters that result from uncharitable interpretation: a meaningful utterance is treated as nonsense, even though it does, in fact, make sense. Type B2, by contrast, represents how Wittgenstein sees his own situation vis-à-vis philosophers: he recognizes their nonsense for what it is.

The symbolic expressions and ritual behaviour that Frazer treats as error all belong in the C column. Two kinds of interpretative encounters may be taken to fit Frazer's characterization of his own situation vis-à-vis his subjects: C1 and C2. In both cases, the subjects' behaviour is not expressive of belief at all, though Frazer does not acknowledge this. Frazer (as Wittgenstein portrays him) is not entirely clear as to whether this behaviour should be understood as error, in which case it would fall under type C1, or as nonsense, in which case it would fall under type C2. In his response to Frege, too, Wittgenstein portrays a situation which falls under type C2: what we initially think is illogical thought, or nonsense, might, in fact, be a non-truth-

evaluable expression. Both types C1 and C2 would constitute cases of misunderstanding, insofar as they involve a mismatch between what the behaviour actually conveys and how the interpreter sees it – and this is in contrast to the three virtuous forms of interpretative encounters, represented on the diagonal of A1, B2 and C3. Wittgenstein often invites us to imagine the possibility of situations such as A3 and B3 – encounters with alien tribes within the context of which it would be difficult for us to tell whether their utterances, be they meaningful or nonsensical, serve any purpose, or whether they are merely part of some ritual (cf. PI §200, §282, RFM V §5). Wittgenstein’s own approach to ritual and religion fall under C3.

Another interesting case to consider is Wittgenstein’s approach to ethical language in the ‘Lecture on Ethics’ (Wittgenstein. 1965). Though part of his point there is that, when judged according to the canons of truth-evaluable thought, ethical statements count as nonsense, he is also intent on emphasizing that such statements play an important role in our lives that is independent from the question of whether or not they are reducible to truth-evaluable claims. Therefore, I believe that the approach to ethics he advocates there should be taken to fall under C3. I shall return to this below.

Two caveats are in order. First, the schema I present here is oversimplifying, in that the entire range of human expression it portrays as falling under the single column C may, in fact, involve several distinct phenomena, including rituals, religious practices and ethical and poetic expressions. For instance, one may wish to distinguish more clearly between cases in which a religious pronouncement is treated as such and no misunderstanding ensues, and cases in which a religious pronouncement is treated as a poetic expression, in which case what ensues is arguably a grave form of misunderstanding, which one might consider blasphemous. Yet, in my schema, both would fall under C3, and that difference is covered over. Nonetheless, for the

present purposes of clarifying Wittgenstein's diagnosis of cruder forms of misunderstanding such as Frazer's, I believe we can disregard these subtler distinctions.

Second, although it is a basic precondition for proper understanding that there be a match between the functions that the subjects' expressions are intended to serve and the function the interpreter takes them to have (and although a mismatch is a sure sign of misunderstanding), there is much more to understanding than meeting this basic precondition, and much more is needed to make an interpretation successful. Discussion of these further issues falls beyond the scope of the present investigation.

We are now better prepared to appreciate Wittgenstein's judgement that 'Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages' since '*His* explanations of primitive practices are much cruder than the meaning of these practices themselves' (RFGB, 131). Frazer's fault lies in his failing to identify the role played by symbolic expressions in the lives of his subjects; he imposes on them an interpretation that effaces the differences between distinct forms of expression and distinct domains of meaning. As we shall soon see, it is no accident that Wittgenstein says something very similar about philosophers: 'When we do philosophy, we are like savages, primitive people, who hear the way in which civilized people talk, put a false interpretation on it, and then draw the oddest conclusions from this' (PI §194). Indeed, Wittgenstein's later philosophy is replete with warnings against the tendency of philosophers (including his earlier self) to disregard the irreducible variety of ways in which language is used (e.g., PI §23).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> An important question to raise in this connection is whether and in what sense the *Tractatus* fails to take account of that. I shall very briefly touch on this issue below.

#### 4. The Anthropology of Philosophy

Wittgenstein's conception of his own task puts him in the position of an interpreter of a specific type of human behaviour – the behaviour we engage in when philosophizing – which seems to him to involve pervasive error. This raises the question of whether we should not take Wittgenstein to impute illogical thought to the subjects of his observations. The answer, which I shall develop here and in the following section, is no. For what Wittgenstein ascribes to the subjects of his study are not thoughts, but confusions. It is not the requirements he sets in advance that they fail to meet; rather, it is the setting of such requirements by philosophers that he criticizes.

Philosophers themselves, as Wittgenstein understands them, are also interpreters of sorts, though their interpretations are defective. For Wittgenstein takes philosophers to misinterpret the nature of their own language, the nature of the problems that they are supposed to respond to, and the nature of the expressions they propose in response. Similar to Frazer, who takes his subject's non-truth-evaluable expressions to convey an implicit, spurious theory, philosophers take their own nonsensical expressions to convey theoretical claims. Philosophical confusion involves, according to Wittgenstein, a misunderstanding of the logic of language (TLP, 26 and 4.003; PI §93). Philosophers tend to be misled by the outer form of language, to ignore the ambiguities of expressions that convey distinct meanings (TLP, 3.323–4) and to elide the important differences that are disguised by superficial analogies between distinct forms of expression (PI §90; Wittgenstein 1993b, 164). In their state of confusion, philosophers might not even notice that they use signs whose meanings they have failed to determine, since such failure to assign meaning may occur 'Even if we believe that we have done so' (5.4733). Their misuse of language thus reveals them to be subject to a state of illusion (PI §110), or 'bewitchment' by language (PI §109). Indeed, Wittgenstein construes his own role in terms of

helping break the spell that holds such philosophers (including, in some respects, his own past self) captive (PI §115).

The attraction of nonsensical philosophical theses can be traced back to the confusion in the framing of the problems (the '*Fragestellung*') to which these theses are meant to respond (TLP p. 26). Philosophers expect that the problems that captivate them be solvable, and they expect the solutions to consist in theoretical assertions, which one may assess as true or false. They thus treat the nature of the philosophical challenge to reside not in a difficulty of understanding, but in a difficulty of acquiring knowledge – similar to how Frazer mischaracterizes the problems to which his subjects respond. In response, Wittgenstein seeks to remind philosophers that not all intellectual difficulties take this form. The kind of problems that philosophical difficulties resemble most, he suggests, are not theoretical questions but riddles (TLP 6.5), that is, problems the solutions to which consist not in learning new facts but in transforming our understanding of the words used to frame the problem. Indeed, when we shift our attention to the framing of the problems, we may even discover that the conundrums that have occupied us for so long have no solution at all, and that what we thought we meant by our words, in posing these problems was, in fact, nothing at all (PU §350, §§463–4 and §§516–7).<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, as Wittgenstein understands his own task, it does not consist in setting forth a theory ('*Lehre*') but in an activity whose goal is the elucidation of thought (TLP, 4.112). This is why he says that genuine philosophy, a philosophy that does not misunderstand its own nature, would never pretend to put forth theses with which anyone could argue (PI §128). Wittgenstein's philosophical elucidation is not meant to replace the confused theories propounded by traditional philosophers with correct ones, but to make the philosophical problems lose the appearance of being the kind of problems the solution to which requires any

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<sup>12</sup> For further discussion see Nir (2021), as well as Diamond (1991, 267–289).

theories. Philosophical problems would thereby be made to disappear (TLP 6.521; PI §524; Wittgenstein 1993b, 181–2), and as a result, we would be able to stop philosophising (PI §133).

In saying that philosophers may find themselves in the situation of being misled by language, and misunderstand their own words, Wittgenstein illuminates a significant dimension of our life with language, and provides us with an important clue about the nature of our relation to language (cf. PI §125). Language is part of our inherited culture, the result of cumulative historical processes and a living testament to the complexity of human life (TLP 4.002; PI §18, §203). Thus, even if language is always ‘my language’ (TLP 5.6), it is far from being completely perspicuous to me: ‘Language disguises the thought’ (TLP 4.002), since its expressions do not wear their logical form on their sleeves (cf. Wittgenstein 1993b, p. 185). Nonetheless, and crucially, Wittgenstein (both early and late) thinks that colloquial language is ‘logically completely in order’ (TLP 5.5563). Thus, reaching philosophical clarity, even in the approach Wittgenstein pursues in the *Tractatus*, is not a matter of revising our natural language or deserting it in favour of an artificial, logically perfect language. This is, to be sure, a point which comes out much more explicitly in his later writings: ‘Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language [...] It leaves everything as it is’ (PI §124).

If we are to overcome philosophical misunderstanding, it is not language that stands in need of reform, but ourselves, our ways of misusing language. The responsibility for our confusions lies squarely with us and cannot be delegated to any theory, not even to the theories propounded by authors of books such as the *Tractatus*. We are the ones who must learn to overcome our tendency to feel dissatisfaction when we realize that our metaphysical expressions do not make sense, and Wittgenstein does not pretend to be able to do this for us (TLP 6.53).

## **5. On the Limits of Misunderstanding**

Cavell proposes that the philosophical fantasies that Wittgenstein teaches us to resist are precisely those that promise to relieve us of our responsibility for maintaining the meaningfulness of our own words, and for attending to the meaningfulness of the words of others.<sup>13</sup> This is precisely the kind of fantasy which seems to me to underlie Frazer's attitude. His interpretation imposes on his subjects the requirement that their words be taken as conveying theoretical claims, and hence be amenable to logical combination with any other theoretical observation. Such combinations, Frazer holds, would be contradictory, and this leads him to take his subjects' expressions as a manifestation of a spurious system of knowledge, which must ultimately be superseded by modern science. For Frazer, this is where his responsibility to the subjects of his interpretation stops.

Wittgenstein's critique, similar to Frazer's, appeals to a distinction between sense and nonsense, and there is a strong temptation, particularly among readers of Wittgenstein's early work, but also his later work, to portray his appeal to this distinction in ways that Cavell would consider to reflect an abdication of our ethical responsibilities. My aim in what follows is to show that Wittgenstein avoids going down this path. Both in his later and in his early work, the task of drawing a distinction between sense and nonsense is subordinated to the ethical endeavour of overcoming misunderstanding, and the distinction itself is not meant to provide us with a theory that will relieve us of our ethical obligations to ourselves and to one another.<sup>14</sup> Given the complexity of the issues and the limitations of scope, I shall restrict myself to a few cursory remarks.

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<sup>13</sup> Cavell (1999, 109, 351); the relevance of Cavell's point to the subject of our present discussion is illuminated in Minar (2011, 276–293, 285).

<sup>14</sup> Cavell and Minar (in the texts cited in the last footnote) are primarily concerned with how this is done in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. For an illuminating interpretation of Wittgenstein's early philosophy that construes the struggle to attain clarity in thought and language in ethical terms, see Kremer (2013, 451–485).



Wittgenstein's later philosophy makes room, much more so than his earlier work, for acknowledging that contingent historical and social factors play a role in determining what makes sense in our language. Mutual understanding (*Verständigung*) and agreement in the judgements we draw in our ordinary use of language constitute the foundation upon which meaning is founded (PI §242). Indeed, there is no independent, objective touchstone outside of our communal practices against which adherence to and deviation from the rules of language can be checked (PI §206, §211). This might give rise to the temptation to think that Wittgenstein simply replaces realism with some kind of linguistic relativism, and that appealing to the criteria and rules that govern our ordinary linguistic practices should provide us with all we need to rule out the misuses of language that philosophical misunderstandings involve.<sup>15</sup>

When dealing with misunderstanding, we may indeed sometimes appeal to the rules governing the language games in which we engage, and we may, indeed, hope that our interlocutors will correct their ways and align their behaviour with ours. However, as Wittgenstein makes clear, even within the context of non-philosophical disagreement, there is no guarantee that this will always work. If our interlocutor refuses to conform to our rules, and no amount of training seems to wean them off of their deviant ways, there may sometimes be nothing we can do about it (PI §143). The success of our attempts to initiate our interlocutors into our practices and maintain their adherence to our rules ultimately depends on how these interlocutors will react to us and how we respond. Indeed, Wittgenstein leaves open the possibility that, in cases of disagreement, we might be the ones who eventually come to realize that the defect lies in our own system of rules and would be moved to modify it.<sup>16</sup> Even with respect to issues about

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<sup>15</sup> One interesting example for this tendency is Winch (1964, 307–324). For a critique of Winch's approach, see Diamond (2013, 114–132).

<sup>16</sup> See Wittgenstein (1976, 97); and see also PI xii §366.

which we seem to be absolutely certain, we may come to realize that it was we, not the interlocutor, who were not competent to judge.<sup>17</sup>

The later Wittgenstein thus resolutely resists the fantasy that we could delegate the responsibility each of us bears for making sense to some independent court of appeals. Neither an ideal realm of meaning, nor the mundane realm of communal agreement, nor even the grammar of our ordinary language provides us with indisputable criteria, by reference to which philosophical confusion could be excluded, once and for all.<sup>18</sup> Philosophical misunderstanding must be treated case-by-case, by attending to the underlying confusions and attempting to help our interlocutors identify the temptations that mislead them, resist them, and transform their use of language. There are different therapies in which we could engage to achieve this, but none of them provides a guarantee that we could demonstrate to the interlocutor the nonsensicality of their words (PI §133). The limits of sense are not drawn prior to and outside of our interaction with our fellow humans but within it.

I now turn to Wittgenstein's early work. The *Tractatus* explicitly thematizes the temptation to think that what we need, in order to overcome philosophical confusion, is a theory of meaning, a logical syntax, by reference to which any combination of words could be determined to be either sense or nonsense. In the putative language introduced by means of such a theory, each word would be assigned a logical role; nonsense will only arise in such a language if its users combine meaningful words in illegitimate ways. But it turns out that in order to frame a theory that says what can make sense and what cannot, language must be used in ways that should be excluded by that very theory (cf. TLP 4.1272). Many interpreters think that Wittgenstein was willing to accept this bizarre consequence. Importantly, such interpreters proceed as though,

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<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein (1969, §645). On the issues raised in this paragraph, see also Diamond (2019, 300–306).

<sup>18</sup> For a critical discussion of the tendency to read Wittgenstein in these ways see Putnam (2012, 404–420).

even though Wittgenstein knew that a theory of meaning governing our language cannot be coherently stated, he took the theory to be correct, and took the incoherent expressions of the theory, which amount to nonsense, to be nonetheless capable of conveying that theory. A piece of philosophical nonsense, on this approach, is the result of the philosopher's attempt to say things that cannot be said, by combining words in illegitimate ways.<sup>19</sup>

However, when Wittgenstein explains his own conception of nonsense, he presents a very different picture of the relation we bear to our language. He explicitly rejects the notion that there can be such a thing as an illegitimately constructed proposition, or a piece of nonsense whose nonsensicality is owed to the impossibility of the combination of the meanings which are assigned to the words in advance, by some theory of meaning. Here, again, it is Frege with whose views Wittgenstein contrasts his own:

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.) (TLP 5.4733)

Nonsense, as Wittgenstein presents it here, can result only from our own failure to assign our words meaning, not from there being some impossible combination that a theory can specify and then exclude, some thing which cannot be meant but which philosophers can nonetheless mean. Our failure to assign meaning to words may occur, moreover, 'even if we believe that we have done so', meaning that in uttering nonsense we might be subject to an *illusion* of sense.

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Hacker (2001, 98–140). For a critique of this line of reading, see Diamond (1991b, 179–204) and Conant (2002, 174–217).

Thus, in distinguishing sense from nonsense, Wittgenstein is not drawing a distinction between two kinds of propositions, the legitimate and the illegitimate ones, or between two kinds of senses, the sensical and the senseless senses (cf. PI §500). He is distinguishing between sentences and merely apparent sentences, between sense and the mere appearance of sense. The defective use of language that creates the appearance of sense, but fails to amount to sense, is *parasitical* on the proper use of language. Even though it resembles it to the point of indistinguishability, it has a completely different source – just as an illusion is parasitical on the veridical perception it purports to be, while having a completely different source.<sup>20</sup> Two issues are worth noting in this regard before I conclude.

First, as the term ‘nonsense’ is not used to highlight propositions that fail to make sense, but to address those who fail to utter propositions, in criticizing nonsense, it is these people and their motivations that we must address, not the expressions they misuse. We encountered one way of doing that in discussing the later Wittgenstein’s responses to Frege and Frazer, and a similar idea can be discerned in the *Tractatus*’ account of the ‘only strictly correct method of philosophy’ (TLP 6.53). It consists in inviting our interlocutor to spell out in greater detail what the scenario they are speaking about would really look like, and in offering them alternative expressions, by comparison with which they might be able to clarify their own.<sup>21</sup> The success of this method will depend in part on our ability to identify the analogies that mislead our interlocutor, but it will mostly depend on the interlocutor’s own willingness to question distinctions they normally take for granted, and to learn to resist the tendencies that prevent them from reaching clarity.

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<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein’s approach to the relation between sense and nonsense is in this sense ‘disjunctivist’. On this see Nir (2021) well as Moore (2020, 27–45).

<sup>21</sup> See, in this connection, Wittgenstein’s discussion of the usefulness of inventing ‘intermediate links’, through which we may reveal connections between disparate phenomena that would otherwise remain hidden (RFGB, 133; PI §122).

Second, the parasitical nature of nonsense implies that as a term of criticism, ‘nonsense’ properly applies only where we can discern a purport to make sense – for example, a purport to set forth a theory. It is this purport that Wittgenstein observes both in the cases of Frazer and Frege, and in the case of philosophers advancing metaphysical theses. What needs to be done to help each of these scholars overcome their confusion, is not to provide them with a more correct theory which prescribes the limits of sense, but help them overcome the impression that their problems have been clearly stated, and that the solution that these problems require must take the form of presenting a theory.

The absence of the purport to set forth a theory is precisely what Wittgenstein notes in the case of Augustine and the Buddhist holy man, as well as in the case of the symbolic expressions of Frazer’s subjects. As I noted above, in Wittgenstein’s reflections on ethics, particularly in the ‘Lecture on Ethics’ but arguably also in the *Tractatus*, he puts on display the struggle, within the mind of the philosopher, between the temptation to relegate the assignment of meaning to a theory which would exclude all ethical language in advance and label it nonsensical, and the undeniable human need to give expression to the ethical dimension of our existence. In the Tractarian remark that ‘there can be no ethical propositions’ (TLP 6.42) we can see a way of resolving this struggle. Wittgenstein does not propose to legislate what can or cannot be said in ethics, but rather acknowledges the wider variety of things that can be done with words, beyond the narrow construal of propositions which fits the domain of theoretical thought. Indeed, this remark can be taken to make the same point that Wittgenstein makes with respect to Frazer’s subjects: What is confused is not their expressions, but our tendency to treat their expressions as statements of opinions.

Having overcome this tendency, we are left with the equally difficult tasks of attending to the significance of our interlocutors’ expressions, discerning the roles they play in our

interlocutors' lives, and appreciating their connection to expressions that play similar roles in our lives. Therefore, overcoming the kinds of misunderstanding Wittgenstein discerns in the works of Frazer does not guarantee that we shall succeed in reaching understanding. But it is a start.

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