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Resolute Readings of Wittgenstein and Nonsense

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The aim of this paper is to show that a corollary of resolute readings of Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense cannot be sustained. First, I describe the corollary. Next, I point out the relevance to it of Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblance concepts. Then, I survey some typical uses of nonsense to see what they bring to an ordinary language treatment of the word "nonsense" and its relatives. I will subsequently consider the objection, on behalf of a resolute reading, that "nonsense" is a term of philosophical criticism. Finally, I conclude that resolute readings have not sufficiently accounted for how nonsense behaves in our language; they have failed to heed Wittgenstein's warning: "don't think, but look!"

On Reading Wittgenstein Resolutely:
A Guide to the Shibboleth

Anti-Climacus

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. (Judges 12:6)

Resolute readers of Ludwig Wittgenstein form a guild through strict adherence to several corollaries and a unique manner of speaking. Obedient members use the corollaries and vernacular to distinguish frauds from loyal members. Let me outline four important touchstones of the guild.

First, resolute readers of Wittgenstein share an august intellectual pedigree, and they were for many years largely confined to Emerson Hall of Harvard University. Resolute readings were a product of Stanley Cavell, Burton Dreben, and Hilary Putnam and their acolytes: James Conant, Alice Crary, Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, and Edward Minar. Others were granted entry into the guild, such as Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Stephen Mulhall, and Rupert Read.

Second, the genesis of resolute readings may be traced to Stanley Cavell's (1962) excoriating review of David Pole's *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (1958). No one remembers Pole's book but they certainly cannot forget the negative reception it received. What stands out in Cavell's review is the vernacular, its emphasis upon Wittgenstein's *Bemerkungen* style and dispersed dialogues.

This brings me to a third point, the peculiar vernacular employed by resolute readers:

- "What Wittgenstein wishes us to see . . . " (Cavell 1982, 169; 2000, 21)

- ". . . is what, as I read him, Wittgenstein wishes us above all to grasp." (Cavell 1982, 175)

- "Wittgenstein fights the picture of meanings as rule-like items. . . . by pointing to its emptiness . . . " (Minar 1991, 204)

- "Wittgenstein tries to show that we look away, do not see the significance of, what is open to view." (Diamond 1989, 31)

- "One of Wittgenstein's larger ambitions in making such remarks is to discredit a deeply engrained philosophical understanding . . . " (Crary 2003, 205)

Resolute readers identify members or non-members by the way that they speak of Wittgenstein and his works. One cannot speak of Wittgenstein's views directly because, so the reading goes, he has no views. On resolute readings, we read Wittgenstein to understand *him*. If one attempts to criticise or challenge resolute readings without taking up the proper register, then the criticism will be ignored. This shibboleth is as inclusionary as it is exclusionary, and it would serve one well to take up the dialect of a skilled craftsman.

One final curiosity about resolute readings concerns whether they put forward any philosophical theses or arguments. Surprisingly, no resolute reader offers an argument, a view, a thesis, or philosophical theory. Theirs is a "no-theory" approach. So, it is only natural for someone to ask why we bother with it at all. We are to read Wittgenstein to understand *him* and the kind of activity in which he engages. The importance of Wittgenstein, according to resolute readings, is therapeutic. The point of understanding is inner change.

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1. Introduction

There is a well-known approach to Wittgenstein that has gained quite a bit of traction over the past three decades. Proponents of the approach have been named the *New Wittgensteinians*, following on a published collection of essays entitled *The New Wittgenstein*,[1] but adherents have preferred to say that they offer a "resolute" reading of Wittgenstein's work (Bronzo 2012, Ricketts 1996).

This paper considers a corollary of resolute readings that the *Tractatus* rejects any substantial conception of nonsense, i.e., that "all nonsense is plain nonsense" or "there is only one kind of nonsense" (Conant 2007, 44–47; Conant and Bronzo 2017, 180–81).[2] For resolute readings, nonsense arises through violations

of the principle of logical syntax, such as "piggly wiggle tickle" and "Julius Caesar is a prime number" (Conant 2001c, 13). First, I describe a corollary of resolute readings befitting of criticism. Next, I point out the relevance to it of Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblance concepts; resolute readings, I suggest, read Wittgenstein uncharitably in that they have failed to appreciate that "nonsense" is a family resemblance concept. Then, I point out that resolute readers evidently have forgotten the insights Wittgenstein hoped to convey in the early sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter "*PI*"), §§10–20. I survey some typical uses of nonsense to see what they bring to an ordinary language treatment of the word "nonsense" and its relatives. I subsequently consider the objection, on behalf of resolute readers, that "nonsense" is a term of philosophical criticism. Also, I consider an objection on behalf of resolute readings to the effect that the "view", properly understood, is not a *view*, or a doctrine, at all. Finally, I conclude that resolute readings have overlooked how nonsense behaves in our language. Resolute readings have failed to heed Wittgenstein's warning: "don't think, but look!" (*PI* §66).[3]

2. The Substantive, the Resolute, and Nonsense

The interpretation of Wittgenstein that resolute readings use as a foil has it that nonsense can be used to express ineffable truths.[4] In this section, I begin by describing the foil's view of Wittgenstein's account of nonsense. Then I describe a corollary of

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[1] See Alice Crary and Rupert Read (2000). There is debate over who may claim to be the originator of resolute readings of Wittgenstein. Forerunners include: Hide Ishiguro (1969), Brian McGuinness (1981), and Peter Winch (1987). For many years their center was Harvard University's Philosophy Department. Influential figures in this group include Warren Goldfarb, and, formerly, Stanley Cavell and Burton Dreben.

[2] By grouping together a significant assortment of Wittgenstein interpreters under one heading, I am not supposing that *all* of them fall together. While resolute readings of Wittgenstein share in some basic commitments, there is not necessarily one (and only one) resolute reading. Warren Goldfarb (2011), for example, has done a splendid job of clearly distinguishing between two strands of resolute readings: *Jacobin* and *Girondin*. See also Rupert Read and Robert Deans (2003) and Rupert Read (2006). The term "resolute reading" itself might be a family resemblance concept, and there may be members of the family who have not committed themselves to what I regard as its corollaries.

[3] Hans-Johann Glock (2004, 221–45) has argued for a heterogeneous view of nonsense. My approach is distinguishable from his because I show how an austere conception of Wittgenstein's views on nonsense would not be possible, given what Wittgenstein has said about "private languages". For a good overview of the debate between Glock and resolute readers, see Edmund Dain (2008).

[4] The list of those who subscribe to such an interpretation of Wittgenstein's work includes: Frank Ramsey, Bertrand Russell, Norman Malcolm, David Pears, and P. M. S. Hacker.

resolute readings of Wittgenstein on nonsense. Finally, I explore some consequences of reading Wittgenstein resolutely.

The foil's interpretation of Wittgenstein has been called the *substantive view* or the *metaphysical view*.[5] On this view of Wittgenstein, there are things that a person cannot say but can only show. Nonsense can show what cannot be said.[6] Thus, nonsense can be illuminating, deep, and important.

The substantive view thus distinguishes between illuminating nonsense and plain nonsense. Plain nonsense is simply gibberish. On the substantive view's interpretation of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (hereafter "*TLP*"), the sense of a sentence determines when a sentence is true and when it is false. Since tautologies are true under all conditions, there is no way for a tautology to be false. Since contradictions are false under all conditions, there is no way for a contradiction to be true. So, tautologies and contradictions lack sense (are *sinnlos*), without being mere nonsense (*unsinnig*). Lacking sense means that a proposition fails to sort out the possibilities; a proposition that lacks sense still allows it an ineffable content. If Wittgenstein thought that we see through intelligible nonsense to its ineffable content, and if Wittgenstein says that his work contains nonsense, then his readers should respond to this brand of nonsense by trying to do just that. The ineffable truths about reality are the only thing "one is left holding on to . . . after one has thrown away the ladder" (Hacker 2000, 357).

Resolute readers see the substantive view as diluting what Wittgenstein says about nonsense by insisting that he does not

really mean what he says. We are advised to throw away the ladder *completely*, which amounts to rejecting the notion of ineffable truths, per the substantive view's interpretation. On resolute readings, what cannot be shown cannot be said, either. Of course, nonsense can be shown and can be said, but what the nonsense *says* can be "neither shown nor said" (Conant 1989, 1990b, 1993, 2000; Diamond 2000, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d, 1991e, 2000).

Notice that some claims about nonsense would be philosophical theses, on anyone's view. Resolute readers hope to bring us to abandon philosophical theses and philosophical arguments. Thus, when we are told that nonsense is neither profound nor interesting, charity requires us to construe the claim as a philosophical thesis.

Resolute readings construe any interpretation of Wittgenstein as thoroughly misguided if it attributes to him the view that nonsense can be illuminating, that is, shown but not said. We must take Wittgenstein at his word because, in the *TLP*, Wittgenstein has offered no argument about the limits of thought. His own sentences, his "elucidations", are "nonsense" (Floyd 1998, 83). There is nothing about nonsense sentences that even approach sense, i.e., "nonsense is only ever sheer lack of sense" (Conant and Dain 2011, 72). This claim finds expression again and again in the writings of resolute readers:

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

> [T]he attempt to say what is shown leads to nonsense, to what we on reflection recognize to be plain gibberish.   (Ricketts 1996, 93)

> [T]he author of the *Tractatus* recognized only one species of nonsense—mere gibberish.   (Mulhall 2007, 2)

Any interpretation of Wittgenstein on which nonsense conveys some ineffable truth about reality is "chickening out", that is, "to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or

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[5]Cf., e.g., P. M. S. Hacker (1972, 2000, 2003). Some substantive interpretations of Wittgenstein may be said to be outside of what resolute readers take to be their foil. Among them we may include, e.g., Schroeder's transcendental approach (2006).

[6]This is a relatively common rendering of the substantive view. Advocates of the substantive view will likely point to textual evidence in the *Tractatus* that only sinnvolle and sinnlose Sätze show anything. Moreover, according to the *Tractatus*, by coming to see that and why certain unsinnige Sätze neither say nor show anything, we are supposed to grasp what is shown by sinnvole and sinnlose Sätze.

as firmly as one can, on it" (Diamond 1991e, 194–95).[7] "Chickens" surrender to the illusion of profound nonsense because they have been seduced into thinking that nonsense shows us something even though it fails to say anything. For the substantive view of the *TLP*, membership in this or that logical category can be reflected in distinctions between signs, even though such distinctions cannot be put into words (Hacker 1972, 22–24).

Resolute readers often point to *PI* §500 in support of the reading that all nonsense is plain nonsense:

When a sentence is 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.

If nonsense is unintelligible, and if all nonsense is equally nonsense, then nonsense does not divide into different species. Cora Diamond says, "Nonsense is nonsense; there is no division of nonsense" (Diamond 2000, 153). She continues:

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

[T]here are no nonsense-sentences that are as it were closer to being true than others. (Diamond 2000, 158)

[T]he Tractatus does not recognize any categories of nonsense, good nonsense and bad nonsense, illuminating nonsense and dark murky muddle. (Diamond 2000, 160)

[F]or Wittgenstein there is *no* kind of nonsense which is nonsense on account of what the terms composing it mean—there is as it were no 'positive' nonsense. *Anything* that is nonsense is so merely because some determination of meaning has *not* been made; it is not nonsense as a logical result of determinations that have been made. (Diamond 1991b, 106)

Elsewhere, James Conant says that the austere conception of Wittgenstein's nonsense:

holds that mere nonsense is . . . the *only* kind of nonsense there is.
(Conant 2001a, 97)

is a kind of nonsense in which we cannot discern sufficient syntactic structure to even identify any part of the string as being the place for an item of a certain logical category. Mere nonsense is not, as it were, even trying to play by the rules of logic. (Conant 1992, 153)

is sometimes put by saying that the *Tractatus* aims to show that there is no such thing as substantial nonsense. (Conant 2007, 44)

is sheer lack of sense, a string of signs which have not been given a meaning in that context and to date, and nothing more than that; it is "plain," "mere," or "simply" nonsense.
(Conant and Dain 2011, 72)

Resolute readers follow on a so-called technical notion of nonsense that Wittgenstein introduced in *TLP* 5.4733: a proposition "has no sense" because "we have given no meaning to its constituent parts". There is nothing that nonsense can show, and so nonsense fails to gesture at ineffable truths in the way the substantive view claims it does.[8]

Given that the metaphysical view argues that ineffable truths lie behind what appears to be nonsense and this implies that nonsense comes in different species, and given that resolute readers claim that nonsense fails to say or show anything and given that nonsense cannot be distinguished into types, there are two consequences of resolute readings that deserve consideration, if for no other reason than that they imply it is a queer view. First, we might think that a resolute reader's austere conception of nonsense is a philosophical thesis, even though resolute readers say that all attempts at philosophical theses are nonsense (e.g., Floyd 1998, 83–84). If resolute readers are correct, then Wittgenstein offers no philosophical theses and fails to provide philosophical arguments for his view. Resolute readers might adopt the view—and some of them do adopt it—that their own

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[7]One might compare Diamond's discussion of "chickening out" with the irresolute reading outlined in Goldfarb (1997).

[8]Elsewhere, Conant and Diamond (2004) have rejected the idea that the *Tractatus* holds there are two distinct kinds of nonsense.

conception of nonsense is among the things that count as nonsense (cf. Bronzo 2012, Conant and Bronzo 2017, Read 2006, Read and Deans 2011).

Since philosophical theses compose philosophical arguments, a second consequence of resolute readings is that there are no philosophical arguments. Since there are no philosophical arguments, there are no arguments for resolute readings either. So, it is only natural for someone to wonder why their view is philosophically compelling. Not, it is suggested, because we are supposed to accept conclusions Wittgenstein has advanced. Rather, we are to read his works to understand *him* and the kind of activity in which he engages, and all this in the service of reevaluating ourselves. The importance of Wittgenstein, according to resolute readers, is therapeutic. The point of understanding is inner change (cf. Hagberg 2008).

3. Any Continuity in Early and Late Wittgenstein?

There is a tradition in Wittgenstein scholarship to question whether the lessons from early and later works of Wittgenstein should be seen as continuous or discontinuous (cf. Koethe 1996; Stern 2006). On the continuity view, interpreters argue that there is a continuity of Wittgenstein's thought from his early work to his later work. On the discontinuity view, interpreters aver that the later work of Wittgenstein is a radical departure from earlier work.

Resolute readers appear to be divided on the question of continuity. For some, such as Mulhall (2007) and Hutchinson (2007), when we come to appreciate that Wittgenstein offers up a therapy (*TLP* Preface and 6.54; *PI* §133) that will cure us of the illusion of meaning something where we really mean nothing, we learn that what we believed to have been philosophical theses or the content of a philosophical argument was just among the bits of nonsense, the rungs on the ladder, we have to discard. Mulhall (2007) and Hutchinson (2007) seek for us to appreciate that ther-

apy, a term usually associated with later Wittgenstein (*PI* §133 among other sections), is continuous with the lessons of the Preface and 6.54 of *TLP*. Mulhall (2007) has employed *PI* §374 and *PI* §500 to show how the later Wittgenstein's notion of nonsense is as austere as the views we find in *TLP*. Phil Hutchinson (2007) has even suggested, according to Wittgenstein, that outside of their use words do not have any meaning, which includes words such as "nonsense". Since on this strand of resolute readings the austere conception of nonsense is continuous from early to late, my argument draws on what is—at a suitably deep level—one view.

For other resolute readers, early and later works of Wittgenstein should be seen as discontinuous, and resolute readings are a radical new approach to the early work—specifically *TLP*. This strand of the resolute reading may appreciate "therapeutic" continuity between *TLP* and *PI* but need not rule out discontinuity between the early and later works. Silver Bronzo and James Conant, for example, have said that "there is no unresolvable tension in both stressing the strong continuity in the therapeutic *intent* of early and late Wittgenstein, whilst claiming that *TLP* nonetheless contains a set of substantive philosophical theses that are exposed and criticized by later Wittgenstein" (Bronzo 2012, 60; see also Conant 2007, 66–83). Since this strand of resolute readings thinks that there is discontinuity in a set of substantive philosophical theses, their view is a reading of early Wittgenstein. On this reading, the later Wittgenstein rejected the view that resolute readers are reconstructing, and in subsequent sections, I am laying out his reasons for so doing.[9]

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[9]I am grateful for constructive feedback from an anonymous referee that led to improvements of this section.

4. Nonsense as a Combination of Words that Has Not Been Given a Use

Resolute readers want us to appreciate that nonsense neither says nor shows anything. Nonsense lacks ineffable content. Since there is nothing mysterious about nonsense, and there is a clear distinction between those utterances we deem nonsense and utterances we think have sense, nonsense, on resolute readings, is just when a combination of words has not been given a use.

In this section, I remind the reader of Wittgenstein's lesson that there need be no essence to language; "language" itself is a family resemblance concept. Doing so places the resolute reading in a precarious position. If "nonsense" is a family resemblance concept, then many different sorts of nonsense, sharing no single common feature, will be grouped together by a network of similarities. Likewise, as will be claimed elsewhere in the paper, the resolute reading will not be able to treat "nonsense" as a term of philosophical criticism or as a bit of ordinary language. When resolute readings say that nonsense is words not having been given a use, they have to say what sort of use (not just any use will do, as is made clear by their writing!) and they are not in a position to do that.

It is well known that Wittgenstein uses games to show that there is not one and only one feature that makes a game a game (*PI* §71). Looking at different kinds of games, for example, card games, board games, street games, etc., it is tempting to think that there is something common to all of them. However, every time one is tempted to think that one has found the common and defining property of all games it fails to appear in one of the examples. The implicit claim is that, for any candidate set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a game, we can find (or create) a game that does not satisfy those conditions. Wittgenstein's alternative proposal is that games are grouped together by many and varied overlapping similarities; that games have a family resemblance to other games (*PI* §§66, 71, 164).

Since each bit of language shares something with other bits of language, what arises from these bits is a sort of linguistic conglomeration. The bits of language form a heterogeneous mass that we call language. Wittgenstein writes, "We see that what we call 'sentence' and 'language' has not the formal unity that I imagined, but is the family of structures more or less related to one another" (*PI* §108). Therefore, we should be alert to the possibility that "nonsense" too is a family resemblance concept.

Just as there are many different types of games that do not seem to share all the same characteristics, there are different types of nonsense, which possess characteristics that are not common to all of the types. Wittgenstein allows as much in passing: "even a nonsense-poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babble of a baby" (*PI* §282). Nowhere have we seen any advocate give an account of nonsense having not been given a use. So, resolute readings owe us an account of what the relevant sorts of use are.

The further Wittgensteinian cautionary point is that the way nonsense looks and sounds is likely to mislead us into thinking that there is only one kind of nonsense. Once we have reminded ourselves of a well-known Wittgensteinian lesson, we should expect nonsense to come in different functional types.

Objects are built for our use. If objects are built for our use, then it is likely that their user interfaces will look pretty much the same. A favourite example of Wittgenstein's is the contents of a toolbox (*PI* §11), but I will use a more contemporary example—office machinery. Computers, business telephones, and copy machines have keypads whose construction is meant to accommodate the way we are built: the size of the keys on the keypad is approximately the width of an average finger. Things that look the same might have radically different functions. Think here of Wittgenstein's example of looking into the cabin of a locomotive and finding similar looking handles with various functions (*PI* §12). One of the lessons we ought to have learned from Wittgenstein is that different bits of language may look the same, but have different sorts of functions. We are confused by "the uni-

form appearances of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print" (*PI* §11). I take it that Wittgenstein uses primitive language-games, such as the ones he presents in *PI* §§2 and 8, to show that once our attention is drawn to the diversity of function among these primitive languages we cannot fail to notice a similar diversity within the language we actually speak.

Perhaps, then, even if nonsense looks and sounds pretty much of a piece as well, this is misleading. There is no single characteristic that permits one to say, for instance, "that *that* is what makes a game a game", or "that *that* is what makes nonsense nonsense". According to resolute readings, "nonsense" is univocal. Given what Wittgenstein wants us to appreciate in his treatment of the locomotive, we should not be surprised if nonsense proves to have many different functions, even when it has a uniform outward appearance. I will now sketch a relatively straightforward taxonomy of nonsense in plain language to substantiate my suspicion that nonsense can be employed in various ways.

5. Nonsense in Ordinary Language

We have seen so far that there is reason to think that "nonsense" is a family resemblance concept, and that nonsense may well not be plain nonsense in a way that aligns with a corollary of resolute readings. We will now consider these different functions—the different employments of nonsense. If resolute readings have been fixated on one austere conception of nonsense, for example: "There is an object" or "Caesar is a prime number", then they may have failed to heed Wittgenstein's warning that nonsense is a family resemblance concept. It is not a coincidence that Wittgenstein was sometimes called an "ordinary language philosopher", and in this section I follow Wittgenstein's lead by turning to an exploration of ordinary usage. We will see that nonsense fails to behave, in ordinary language, in the way that resolute readers presume.

Let me survey a few types of nonsense. Nonsense has a complex array of uses. This will be in accord with what Wittgenstein has taught us about family-resemblance concepts. Resolute readings seem to have become fixated on an exotic species of nonsense whose function is to serve as a *paradigm* of nonsense.

One subgroup of paradigmatic nonsense—and perhaps the most amenable to resolute readings—is gibberish. Gibberish *is* unintelligible speech or writing, and it is easy to think that it serves no linguistic function. But we have just observed that there is a use for gibberish: it serves as a paradigm of meaningless discourse. Gibberish exemplifies nonsense, and as Nelson Goodman noticed, exemplification does not require a sample to exemplify all its properties (Goodman 1968). A swatch of carpet, for example, exemplifies its colour but not its size.

Next, another subgroup of paradigmatic nonsense works as a literary device. We find familiar occurrences of this functional variety in nonsense verse. While some iconic nonsense has the appearance of trying to say the unsayable—"Bradley took a front seat at the back"—and so conforms to the resolute caricature of their opponents, very similar-looking nonsense does not lend itself to this sort of construal. For instance, when Lewis Carroll replaces meaningful terms with nonsense words in a grammatically well-structured sentence:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
> All mimsy were the borogroves,
> And the mome raths outgrabe.   (Carroll 1998, 34)

Carroll is exploring the phenomenology of a dream; recall that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* recounts young Alice's dream (Carroll 1994, 35; 1998). When Alice attempts to recite her verses, they come out wrong: she tries to say one thing, but something else—something that makes no sense—comes out of her mouth. Nonsense here functions to create the impression of realism.

It is a mistake to suppose that all nonsense must be like paradigmatic nonsense. The science fiction of Philip K. Dick is peppered with nonsense words, as when he named phenomena: "life-protek", "flapples", or "snirt" (Dick 2012a, 12; 2012b, 24;

, 114; respectively). We experience something like Barthes's "reality effect", for something like the following reason: future English will contain new words for new gadgets, and these words could not be part of our language now. In a very different way, nonsense is adding verisimilitude—it is once again being deployed as a literary device.

There is no point in trying to imagine what gibberish describes. "Imaginable" nonsense, however, is nicely exemplified in the limericks of Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense*:

> There was a Young Lady whose chin,
> Resembled the point of a pin;
> So she had it made sharp, and purchased a harp,
> And played several tunes with her chin.   (Lear 1992, 16)

It is worth remarking that Lear's limericks are truth-evaluable at the sentence level. Philosophers who assume that a sentence is not nonsense if it has a truth-value have not been paying attention to ordinary uses of "nonsense".

Another form of nonsense comes from the Hall of Fame baseball catcher Yogi Berra. His popular quotations function to silence the listener. Berraisms include, for example, "I didn't really say everything I said" and "I usually take a two-hour nap from 1 to 4". Most Berraisms take a Gricean explanation, on which what is conveyed diverges from the literal meaning of the words. Grice calls what is conveyed but is not a literal meaning "implicated" (Grice 1989, 25).[10] Conversational implicatures exploit the willingness of participants in a conversation to follow the Cooperative Principle, that one should further the goals of the conversation. Grice mentions subsidiary rules of cooperative conversational behaviour: the Maxim of Quality, that the speaker should convey true and justified information; the Maxim of Quantity, that the speaker should be as informative as possible; the Maxim of Relation, that the speaker should convey relevant information; and, the Maxim of Manner, that the speaker should be clear and try to be brief. For instance, if Mickey asks Yogi for directions to his house, then Yogi will give Mickey directions to his house rather than Yankee Stadium (relevance), Yogi may give Mickey more than one way to get to his house to be as informative as possible (quantity), Yogi will give Mickey the correct directions to his house (quality), and Yogi will do this efficiently (manner). If, at some point in their conversation, Yogi says to Mickey, "when you come to a fork in the road, take it", the implicature is: *you can take either road to get to where you want to go*. Implicatures like that of Yogi's utterance are explained in terms of Grice's subsidiary Maxims of Relation and Quantity: the information conveyed is relevant, in that it tells Mickey how to get to Yogi's house, and satisfies the quantity requirement, by giving Mickey more than one route to use. Briefly, Berraisms are nonsense that function according to Gricean rules of ordinary conversational implicature, precisely to convey straightforwardly paraphrasable information. Unlike metaphysical nonsense that resolute readers dislike, here nonsense is conveying what *can* be said.

There is a related type of nonsense found in some children's stories; these are nonsense at the sentence level, but have clearly paraphraseable morals. I will call these types of nonsense *Seussisms*, after their perhaps most beloved author Dr. Seuss (Ted Geisel). For instance, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* relates the story of a child who tells his father about what happened on Mulberry Street (Seuss 1937). The child's tale becomes more outlandish as the book nears its conclusion. By the end of the story, the boy's father realizes that the child's story is a lie. The child learns that lying is wrong, since telling one lie leads to telling another lie, and so on. The outlandishness of the story does not make it nonsense, but the nonsense sentences do.[11]

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[10]Berraisms are nonstandard instances of Gricean conversational implicatures because the sentence may not *have* a literal meaning.

[11]Of course, the primary function of Seuss's nonsense prose is to teach children a skill, in particular how to read. *The Cat in the Hat* was Dr. Seuss's answer to Dick-and-Jane readers.

Another type of nonsense serves as a memory aid as when mnemonics associate complex lists of information with easy-to-remember constructs. A favourite mnemonic of primary school teachers is "Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally" where the beginning letter of each word stands in for an arithmetical operation and, moreover, for the order in which one is to complete them. Sometimes nonsense functions as a placeholder in conversation. Phrases can be used as propositional variables, for example, when someone says, "if the sun rises and blah, blah, blah, then I will go to school". The "blah, blah, blah" acts as a substitutional variable for one or more propositions—a function which logicians cannot afford to dismiss. Fashionable expressions function to indicate group membership, and some of these expressions are good examples of nonsense. "BFF", "IMHO", or "LOL"[12] is nonsensical for a person who is not a member of the group who understands the use and meaning of acronyms in mobile texting, e.g., a luddite (like myself). Euphemisms include nonsense phrases that serve to voice frustration, disappointment, or anger such as "gosh darn it" or "heck".[13] Or, again, some plays or novels are nonsense, for example, absurdist drama or Dadaism, meant as an insult to literature and its consumers.[14]

There are many different uses for nonsense in ordinary language: paradigmatic nonsense is used to exemplify nonsense; Berraisms convey paraphrasable contents via Gricean implicatures; Seussisms convey morals; mnemonic nonsense provides memory aids; fashionable nonsense marks group membership; placeholder nonsense serves as an ordinary language version of propositional variables; and so on. Resolute readings fail to reg-

ister these diverse uses: they see that Wittgenstein's *TLP* rejects any conception of nonsense that is not paradigmatic nonsense, the species of nonsense that is simply unintelligible. But their austere conception of plain nonsense is merely one kind of nonsense. Like games, different kinds of nonsense are related by a network of similarities. If "nonsense" is a term of ordinary language—as this section has incidentally demonstrated—then it is unclear whether Wittgenstein's austere conception of nonsense must reject all of its various forms, except one: paradigmatic nonsense.

6. Nonsense as Technical Term

Understanding what Wittgenstein has taught us about what we ordinarily call "nonsense" should come with an appreciation that it comes in many functionally distinct varieties. Resolute readers would likely claim that my survey is irrelevant because "nonsense", as they are using it, is a technical term. In this section, I want to briefly spell out that objection and remind them that one thing we have learned from Wittgenstein is that not all attempts to introduce technical terms are either effective or philosophically legitimate.[15]

Resolute readers write as though "nonsense" is a technical term, and it means that the words do not have a use. They are, after all, committed to nonsense being plain or mere nonsense. If resolute readers are to sidestep the many ordinary language uses, they are committed to treating "nonsense" as a technical term.

Wittgenstein repeatedly reminds us that the introduction of a technical term is a philosophically dangerous moment. In his discussion of "mental processes" he says,

How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviourism arise? . . . We talk of processes and

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[12]They stand for *Best Friends Forever*, *In My Humble Opinion*, and *Laugh Out Loud*, respectively.

[13]However, euphemisms sometimes become taboo words and phrases through a process called the "euphemism treadmill"; see Stephen Pinker (2003). When this occurs, we need to remove them from the nonsense roster.

[14]For instance, see Alfred Jarry (2003), which is an anarchic parody of the Victorian style acceptable during his time.

[15]The Wittgensteinian lesson: "technical term" is a family resemblance concept, too!

states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them—we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.) (*PI* §308)

The new technical term "mental process" is by no means innocuous. Consider also Wittgenstein's treatment of sensation. Russell, Moore, and many other philosophers had introduced one or another variation on the term "sense-datum".[16] But Wittgenstein teaches us that the introduction of such terms is illegitimate: this is one of the lessons of the so-called "Private Language Argument". A suitably general way of characterizing the difficulty is that there has not been enough setup to underwrite the introduction of the term. Sense-data are supposed to be private experiences, and there are no criteria for ascribing private experiences.

I am not suggesting that Wittgenstein wants to abandon all technical terminology. On the contrary, there are legitimate technical terms. Two cases of Wittgenstein's own come immediately to mind: "language-game" and "form of life". That there can be legitimate introductions of a technical term is implied by Wittgenstein's comparison of languages to cities:

> Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. (*PI* §18)

By the boroughs, he means the specialized idioms of, for example, new technical and bureaucratic disciplines, which constitute the suburbs with straight regular streets and newly developed subdivisions.

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[16]We observe that things can look different than they actually are, so we introduce "quale" or "appearance" or "sense-datum" as a technical term for the way they look.

Wittgenstein's view is that the introduction of technical terms is legitimate in some cases and illegitimate in others. If this paper merely presented a series of examples of how nonsense functions without so much as presenting how they were not just superficially similar, then one could argue that my paper is unhelpfully homogenising and reminiscent of the disastrous moment in Derrida's *Limited, Inc* (1988) where he runs two crucially different things together by talking of an example of agrammaticality as if it were just the same kind of phenomenon as a use of language in the common sense of that word. It would be to overlook Wittgenstein's motto "I'll teach you differences" (attributed to Wittgenstein by C. R. Drury, Rhees 1981, 171), or to talk of a punch in the stomach as having the same "function" as a meal to diminish hunger. I will now show how resolute readings introduce the technical term "nonsense" in an unacceptable way.

Resolute readers have wished to restrict what counts as nonsense to paradigmatic cases, but, we have seen, even these repeatedly turn out to have some function or other. They give examples of nonsense, which thereby have the function of being examples. So, they cannot allow just *any* function to remove items from the roster. Their own examples resemble sentences in Seuss stories. This suggests that the Seuss sentences are nonsense, by resolute readers' own lights. But Seuss stories look to be nonsense at one scale and not at another.

If an austere conception of nonsense can have a function, then resolute readings fail to specify *which* function they mean when they legislate that nonsense is a combination of words that fail to have a function. Not just any use will do because that would leave us in an awkward position that is inconsistent with other lessons that Wittgenstein has taught us. It seems that resolute readings must be able to modulate whether nonsense has a use. They have not yet told us what mere or plain nonsense is.

If they are to resolve this problem, resolute readers owe us a distinction between uses that count and uses that do not count as the functions whose absence makes a combination of words into

nonsense. The standard label for this is: the semantic/pragmatic distinction. But to adopt this strategy is to forget that Wittgenstein hoped "for a large class of cases" that we would cease thinking of the meaning of a sentence as something apart from its use.

> For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (*PI* §43)

What Wittgenstein ultimately wishes us to realize is that in many cases (but not all) the meaning of a word amounts to its use, and that the semantic/pragmatic distinction cannot be universally preserved. So resolute readings cannot use that distinction to make good on the obligation to explain which functions of language they have in mind.

An alternative here is for resolute readers to distinguish between a logical sense of nonsense and a psychological one. Stephen Mulhall has summarised this view recently:

> According to the 'resolute' reading, the author of the *Tractatus* recognized only one species of nonsense—mere gibberish; from the point of view of logic, mere nonsense is the only kind of nonsense there is. From the point of view of psychology (or culture, or history), however, one *can* distinguish between various kinds of nonsense; in particular, one can distinguish between those strings of empty signs which we are inclined to regard as substantially nonsensical from those which elicit no such inclination. In other words, certain such strings tempt us to regard them as composed from intelligible elements in unintelligible ways, and so can tempt us to think that the specific way in which they fail to make sense offers us a glimpse of (a special aspect of) the ineffable essence of language, thought, and reality. (Mulhall 2007, 2)

If Mulhall's estimation is correct, then there are no sub-species of nonsense other than the *logical* view of nonsense. For nonsense to be individuated by distinct sub-species amounts to viewing nonsense from the "psychological" *point of view* as opposed to the "logical" *point of view*.[17] For such a distinction to be upheld, however, resolute readers would not be able to maintain that all nonsense is plain nonsense because the so-called "logical" nonsense could be isolated from other elements of language that appear to be nonsensical but on their own view are not. To maintain the distinction between the logical and psychological view of nonsense, we would have to grant that resolute readers may pick and choose what kinds of use give a sentence meaning. For such a liberty to be granted to resolute readers would be too superficial an understanding of what Wittgenstein means by use to be plausible. Nowhere does Wittgenstein permit us to arbitrarily choose to restrict the use of "nonsense", for example, to those expressions where the word obviously does not have a meaningful use.

7. The Resolute Reading *Is* Nonsense

Someone might protest I have forgotten a lesson of the resolute readers that their own conception of nonsense *is* a piece of nonsense. Resolute readers remind us that Wittgenstein provides directions for reading *him*. Conant has claimed, "The only

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[17]Diamond seems to believe that one of the lessons Wittgenstein taught us regarding nonsense concerns that what we ought to be "looking for has to be discussed without reference to psychology" (1991c, 98). She distinguishes the psychological point of view from the logical point of view: "It is perfectly true that if I say "Caesar is a prime number" my state of mind, my intentions, and so on, may be exactly the same as when I use the word "Caesar" to refer to some or other person. ... We can then see that from the fact that my state of mind or intentions are the same, it does not follow that the word "Caesar" as it occurs in the context "——— is a prime number" has the logical role of standing for a person, the role it does have if for example I ask you when it was that Caesar crossed the Rubicon" (1991c, 98). If this is correct, then any two pieces of nonsense that are identical from a logical point of view needn't entail that they be identical from a psychological point of view. This is, after all, a lesson of Frege's three principles appearing in the *Grundlagen*, one of which is the context principle. What I call into question about resolute readings is the conversion from the context principle to the austere conception of nonsense.

"insight" that [*TLP*] imparts therefore is one about the reader himself: that he is prone to such illusions" (Conant 1992, 157; 1994, xlii; 2000, 197). Moreover, Diamond has said, "Wittgenstein does not ask that his propositions be understood, but that *he* be" (Diamond 2000, 19). Reading Wittgenstein resolutely, accordingly, is to come to understand ourselves—nothing more and nothing less.

We may call upon the following passages from Wittgenstein in support of reading the *TLP* and *PI* resolutely: *TLP* 4.112 ("Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity . . . A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations."); *TLP* Preface ("[This book's] purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it."); *TLP* 6.54 ("My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands *me* eventually recognizes them as nonsensical." [emphasis added]); and *PI* §484 ("My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."). This amounts to an accusation that proponents of the substantive view (and what I offer here too) have not thrown away the ladder, because they have held onto the notion of ineffable truths.

On resolute readings, the activity we are engaged in is "one of showing that we suffer from the illusion of thinking we mean something when we mean nothing" (Conant 1990a, 344). In *PI* §115, Wittgenstein writes, "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably." Conant explains:

[P]art of what Wittgenstein means by saying that a *picture* holds us captive is that we cannot recognize our picture of things as a picture—a fixated image that we have imposed—and it is our inability to recognize this that renders us captive. The fly is trapped because he does not realize that he is in a fly-bottle; in order to show him the way out, we first need to show him that we have an appreciation of where he thinks he is, that we are able to understand his view from the inside. . . . Wittgenstein's aim in philosophy was

to *change* his readers and with them the tradition in which they participate—this is something that can only be undertaken from within the tradition. (Conant 1990b, liii)

Since proponents of the substantive view are suffering from an illusion of sense, the only way out is a psychological conversion, one that emphasizes not coming to terms with the philosophical content of some proposed theory but to better understand the author and his or her particular approach. Resolute readings are supposed to evoke an "inner change" in the reader. Conant expands upon this theme elsewhere:

The ladder we climb is one which draws us into an illusion of occupying a certain sort of perspective—a perspective from which we take ourselves to be able to survey the possibilities which undergird how things are with us, holding our necessities in place—a perspective from which we can view the logical structure of the world "from sideways on." But the point of the work as a whole is to show us—that is, to lead us up a ladder from the top of which we are able to see—that the "perspective" that we thus occupy is only an illusion of a perspective. (Conant 1994, xlii)

What is it that we are supposed to be seeing according to Conant? Is it something that can be said, or something that cannot be said? Whatever *it* is, the illusion affecting substantive readers has been identified by resolute readers.

Cora Diamond, for example, has said that to understand certain things as plain nonsense is a "particular activity, the imaginative taking of what is nonsense for sense" (Diamond 2000, 158), whereby "you are to understand not the propositions but the author" (2000, 155). Conant adds, "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" (Conant 2001a, 127). Conant has a story to tell about what it is to "explore nonsense from the inside":

The reader [of Wittgenstein's work] 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 . . . disintegrate. (Conant 2002a, 423)

In a footnote, Conant reiterates what he says here:

The aim of this passage is . . . to explicate how those passages of the work that succeed in bearing its elucidatory burden are meant to work their medicine on the reader. (Conant 2002a, 457 n 135)[18]

Conant revives this theme elsewhere:

The author's 'propositions' serve as elucidations by *our*—that is, the reader's—coming to *recognize* them as nonsensical. . . . [E]verything depends on the reader doing something—attaining a certain kind of recognition—on his own. . . . [Wittgenstein] 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. An understanding of this activity can be achieved only by the reader who engages in this activity himself, that is, who practices elucidation on himself, as Wittgenstein practices it—as the author of the *Tractatus* exhibits the practice of it—on himself. (Conant 2002b, 98)

Those who try to distinguish Wittgenstein's life from his philosophy have failed Wittgenstein. Conant writes, "Wittgenstein neither wanted to, nor thought he could, separate the task of becoming the sort of human being he wanted to be from the task of becoming the sort of philosopher he wanted to be" (Conant 2001b, 29). Conant is suggesting that our inner experience should move from imagining one thing (the content of the work) to another (the author himself) when we read Wittgenstein's work, and that this is what it is to read Wittgenstein with understanding.

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[18]Conant (2001b) compares writing about Wittgenstein to writing about Socrates. For him, the philosopher's life is as relevant as the philosopher's expression of his/her thoughts.

This move is not nonoptional. If a corollary of resolute readings is not an ordinary language treatment of nonsense, then it consists in some propositional form or in the imaginative recapitulation of a transition in inner experience. As we have seen above, resolute readers are not giving us an ordinary language treatment of nonsense despite what they might say in print (Read and Deans 2011, 152). If the lesson we are supposed to take away is a proposition, then resolute readings have joined the ranks of the substantive view in postulating ineffable truths. But resolute readers want us to take up that nonsense is neither shown nor said; it's simply incoherent. Thus, the Wittgensteinian lesson must consist of the imaginative recapitulation of a transition in inner experience.

So, the resolute lesson—and this is confirmed by the quotations given above—gestures at an inner experience. If resolute readings of Wittgenstein are correct, it has to be committed to treating understanding as an inner experience instead of something with propositional content. The inner experience has to do with the unusual inner effects that come of reading Wittgenstein properly. According to resolute readers, those people who have this inner change understand Wittgenstein's works. But recall Wittgenstein's objection to the idea of a private language, one containing terms for inner experiences that only you can use (*PI* §§243 and 258).[19] One suitably neutral way of putting that objection is that gesturing at one's inner experience is not what understanding consists in. Whatever is wrong with a private language is also wrong with resolute readings of Wittgenstein on nonsense.

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[19]One might point out that my view seems tacitly committed to behaviorism and that that reading is inconsistent with a resolute reading; however, the supposition that I have lapsed into behaviorism is ill-conceived as one need not read the private-language argument as behaviorism. What I am suggesting here is a very awkward moment for resolute readers who accept the points that Wittgenstein was trying to make about understanding. For the irony to be lost on the resolute reader is for them not to have understood the very point they were wishing to draw against their opponents in favor of their own view.

Wittgenstein has taught us that you cannot just say, "I mean *that*—my inner experience!" (and presumably, "I mean *that*—*your* inner experience") and have succeeded in pointing something out. The gesture at the inner effect that resolute readings tell us that we should experience on reading *TLP* tries to do exactly that. Thus, we cannot accept a resolute reading without also thumbing our noses at Wittgenstein.

8. Conclusion

Either Wittgenstein's "nonsense" is a bit of ordinary language or it is a technical term employed by resolute readings. Resolute readings are not in a position to treat nonsense as a technical term. If Wittgenstein's "nonsense" is a bit of ordinary language, then it does not behave the way that resolute readers propose. Therefore, either way, resolute readers cannot charitably attribute their view to Wittgenstein.

Resolute readings, then, have not looked at what we actually say about nonsense and especially at how the word behaves in our language game. This is *very* surprising, given that that is what some think *the* resolute reading is:

> The task for the philosophical therapist is to break the grip this picture has over her interlocutor, that is, to show him there are other ways of seeing things. This is effected by the Wittgensteinian philosophical therapist *facilitating* her interlocutor's realization that other pictures are equally valid. The interlocutor then *freely* accepts the new picture (of, say, "meaning") as valid. The acceptance of new pictures serves to loosen the thought-constraining grip of the old picture, the picture that had led the philosopher to the seemingly insurmountable philosophical problem, and thus to suffering the resultant mental disturbance. (Hutchinson 2007, 710)

By the resolute reading's own lights, the properly Wittgensteinian way to proceed is to examine actual usage, to see what we call "nonsense" and on what occasions. When we do, we find that there is nothing common to all nonsense, just like there is nothing common to all games, all numbers, or all language. Wittgenstein warns us, "don't think, but look!" (*PI* §66). Resolute readers have not heeded this warning. To my mind, it is clear enough that they are doing the very thing that Wittgenstein worked so hard to convince us not to do.

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