Wittgenstein's Ladder: The *Tractatus* and Nonsense

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I. Introduction

It is a commonplace to say that the image that inspired Wittgenstein in his early work was that of a perfect and complete crystalline structure underlying language, and that this is in contrast to the exhortation he gives himself later: 'back to the rough ground!' Neither position, however, is characterized correctly with a sentence such as 'Wittgenstein thought in his early period that the logical structure of language expresses – shows but does not say – the unchanging and entirely determinate structure of reality, but later insisted that there was no such backing for language, and that the workings of language have to be seen in the untidiness and messiness of its application in our lives'. Such a statement ignores two important features of the *Tractatus*. The *Tractatus* insists that logic is what shows itself in the application of the language that we already use and understand, and not in some as-yet-unrealized ideal language: here we see both the concern with language as an activity and the respect for language as it is that are often ascribed to his later work. And the *Tractatus* takes a strong anti-metaphysical stand, one that is most explicit in Wittgenstein's statements in the book's preface and concluding remarks, that the apparently metaphysical sentences that compose the book are nonsense. The importance of this second

point has recently been argued in a number of articles by Cora Diamond and James Conant.[2]

The metaphysical reading of the *Tractatus* skips the preface and has little to say to make sense of the closing remarks: with its frame removed, the book begins with what appears to be an account of the ultimate constituents of any possible world; then it moves to what appears to be an account of the logic required by any language that will have the capacity to represent any possible world; it closes with what appears to be a recommendation that one adopt a mystical attitude towards what lies beyond the limits of the expressive powers of any language. What could this suggest to the reader if not the idea that logic has its foundation in the metaphysical structure of reality, and the idea that the ineffable nature of that metaphysical structure is a consequence of the nature of language?

The fundamental problem with this reading, apart from the fact that it contradicts the book's preface and closing assertions that it is

2. The second point (about the status of the propositions of the *Tractatus* as nonsense) is argued by Cora Diamond in her 'Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*', in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), pp. 179–204, 'Introduction II: Wittgenstein and Metaphysics', in ibid., pp. 13–38, and 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in *Bilder der Philosophie*, ed. Richard Heinrich and Helmuth Vetter, Wiener Reihe 5 (Vienna: R. Oldenbourg, 1991), pp. 55–90; it is also emphasized by James Conant in his 'Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder', *Yale Review* 79 (January 1991), pp. 328–364, 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?' in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Fleming and Michael Payne (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989), pp. 242–283, 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense', in *Pursuits of Reason*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1992), pp. 195–224, 'The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege, and the *Tractatus*', *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1991), pp. 101–166, 'Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors', in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief,* ed. Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 248–331, and 'The Method of the *Tractatus*', forthcoming in *Wittgenstein in America,* ed. Peter Winch and Timothy McCarthy. Some of these arguments appeared earlier in H. O. Mounce, *Wittgenstein's* Tractatus*: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), Chapter 11 ('The Propositions of Philosophy'), pp. 101–109. The first point (about the application of logic in language) is the subject of Winch, 'The Unity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy', in *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), pp. 1–19, and 'Language, Thought and World in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 3–17, and is emphasized in Rush Rhees, ' "The Philosophy of Wittgenstein",' in *Discussions of Wittgenstein*, pp. 37–54, especially p. 39.

All citations to the *Tractatus* in this paper are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922).

nonsense, is that, as Conant and Diamond argue, it is unintelligible on the *Tractatus* view to say that there is something that is true but that is, nonetheless, impossible to state. It is no help to speak of contemplating these metaphysical features of the world in thought, as Anscombe does when she writes,

> There is indeed much that is inexpressible – which we must not try to state, but must contemplate without words.[3]

Since thought for Wittgenstein is, as far as this question goes, on precisely the same level as written or spoken sentences.[4] Thought is a matter of operating with mental symbols, and these mental symbols in their combination in thought-sentences stand in the same sort of representing relation to the world as written or spoken symbols in their combination in written or spoken sentences. So there is no comfort to be found in the idea of allowing a great cacophony in the head concerning that which one is supposed to pass over in silence.

Conant and Diamond argue that the preface of the book and its closing comments are designed to emphasize the idea of plain nonsense. There is no such thing as deep and important nonsense, the

3. G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's* Tractatus, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 19.
4. Ramsey points this out in his review, and calls it a great advance (*Mind* 32, 128 (1923) 465–78). The point about the logical parity of thought and language remains highly controversial; some commentators hold that Wittgenstein thinks of thought as being able to accomplish logical feats that language itself is incapable of. Norman Malcolm most prominently argues that thought, the structure of which cannot fail to mirror correctly the structure of the world, plays a necessary role in mediating the relationship between language and the world – without which mediation the signs of language are dead – in *Nothing is Hidden: Wittgenstein's Criticism of his Early Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 63–82. P. M. S. Hacker takes a different view of the logically necessary role of thought in *Insight and Illusion*, pp. 73–80, where according to what he calls Wittgenstein's 'Doctrine of the Linguistic Soul', the transcendental subject endows names with meaning through mental acts. This is something of an elaboration on the view presented in Anscombe's *Introduction*; she argues that 'thinking the sense of the proposition' is a matter of correlating the names with objects (pp. 68–69) and is an essential step in making a picture into an assertion. H. O. Mounce, in his *Wittgenstein's* Tractatus*: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 30–33, argues the opposite, as does Peter Winch in 'Language, Thought and World in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 3–17, and James Conant and Cora Diamond in the articles cited above, p. 98 n. Wittgenstein's comment 'Does a *Gedanke* consist of words? No! But of psychical constituents that have the *same sort of relation to reality as words*' (my italics) in a letter to Russell seems decisively in favour of this reading, which claims no greater logical powers for representation in thought than for any other representation (*Letters to Russell, Keynes, and Moore*, edited by G. H. von Wright, translated by B. F. McGuinness [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974], p. 72).

Tractatus says; there is only one kind of nonsense, and it is fundamentally uninteresting, since it has no logical structure. So there is no such thing as grasping the propositions of the *Tractatus*, no such thing as saying that they are true, but that they nonetheless cannot be stated. To say 'the world is everything that is the case' is no better than to say 'piggly-wiggle': both are simply noises to which no meaning has been assigned.[5] What Wittgenstein says in the closing comments is not that the person who understands the propositions of the *Tractatus* sees them as nonsense, but that the person who understands the author sees them as nonsense. According to Diamond and Conant, we do not understand the author of the *Tractatus* unless we throw away the ladder, unless we discard any claim to have understood his text.

Diamond and Conant treat the metaphysical reading as being either simply the result of ignorance of the fact that the *Tractatus* claims itself to be nonsense or simply the result of commentators willfully refusing to go the extra step.[6] But to treat the metaphysical reading as a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's intentions, to treat it as a failure to read what is given on the page, requires us to take Wittgenstein's intentions as coherent, and to believe that what is given on the page is not itself the product of philosophical confusion. The frame contains not just the statements Conant and Diamond rely on, but also the assertion that in this work 'thoughts are expressed', and that 'the *truth* of the thoughts communicated here seems to [Wittgenstein] unassailable and definitive' (p. 29).[7]

The metaphysical reading of the *Tractatus* gets a foothold precisely because the method of the *Tractatus*, and the ladder image as an expression of that method, provide it one. To recognize this is not to say that the metaphysical reading is correct: we can keep the aim of criticizing metaphysics at the centre of our understanding of the *Tractatus* without insisting that its account of nonsense and its grasp of its own methodology are sound.

5. See Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 64.
6. See, for example, Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 56.
7. My thanks to Nehama Verbin for her refusing to let me forget that the preface also contains these statements.

II. Falsehood vs. Nonsense

The *Tractatus* is, according to Diamond and Conant, aimed at a goal that is quite different from that of convincing a reader of a thesis, where a thesis is something that can be stated and understood, something for which, or against which, there might be arguments. The attempt to convince someone that what he says is nonsense requires a different approach than does the attempt to convince someone that what he says is false. One can hardly treat what someone who speaks nonsense says as something that can be supported or contradicted by the evidence, as something that fits into the logically articulated structure of an argument. The goal in disputing a piece of nonsense is not to convince the one who utters it that he is saying something false, even something necessarily false, but that he is saying nothing at all. Conant and Diamond claim to draw this view from the *Investigations*:

> When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.[8]

They then argue that Wittgenstein throughout his life conceived of the proper task of philosophy in the face of metaphysical claims to be that of demonstrating not that such claims are false, but that they are nonsense.

It should not be particularly surprising that there is the possibility for a kind of mistake in our use of language that cannot be corrected by arguing the person in error into a thesis that is contrary to the mistaken one in the sense in which not-*p* is contrary to *p*. A curious feature of language – or something about language that appears curious given a natural and initially compelling view of what the function and nature of language is – is that it is something whose right exercise encompasses what might be called, from another point of view, the making of mistakes. When someone says something false, her use of language has not gone *awry*: in her false statement, the words in their particular combination mean precisely what they would mean if her statement were true. It is because a statement represents what it does represent whether it is true or false that we can

8. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, R. Rhees, and G. H. von Wright; trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), §500.

tell, when the statement is false, *what* it is that is false. A conception of the nature of language ought not *begin* with the idea that its purpose is to capture truths: saying something without knowing its truth or falsity, or without being committed to its truth or falsity, arguing for or against it, finding out that it is false, attempting to deceive someone into thinking it true when it is false, and mistakenly thinking something true are all things that happen within what is in an important sense the *correct* use of language. It should not be surprising, then, that there should be ways that we might go wrong in using language that are different from those provided for by the notion of falsehood, and that there should be mistakes that cannot be treated as mistakes about matters of fact. We might describe this kind of error as a kind of error for which the 'mistaken' person needs to be shown not that what he says is false, but that his use of language is confused, or that he says nothing.

   Furthermore, where there is a possibility of error not in the sense of saying something false, but in the sense of failing to master the technique of using language to say things that are either true or false, there will be a complementary possibility of misunderstanding the nature of language by failing to notice the difference between these two kinds of error – by understanding a statement that is nonsensical, a statement that demonstrates a failure to master the technique of using language, as a statement of a particularly false kind of falsehood, for example – a falsehood made false not by the facts as they happen to be, but by logic or the structure of reality itself preventing the very possibility of its truth.

   The *Tractatus* cannot, of course, be putting forward the view that there is only one sort of error, the error of falsehood, and that there is no such thing as mastery of the technique of using language to say things that are true or false, a mastery that is an achievement, something at which one can fail. The critique I summarized above of the ideal of language according to which language works correctly only in one sense, that is, when it states truths – so that its function, its meaningfulness, its connection to reality when it is doing anything but stating truths becomes philosophically problematic – is what the *Tractatus* teaches. Its central thought is that language makes its connection to reality through propositions that mean what they do whether they are true or false: this insight provides Wittgenstein with materials to criticize both the idea in Frege and Russell that there is a logical structure to the world that we appeal to in the justi-

fication of inference, and the idea that there must be presuppositions of the sort Frege accepted that names have reference before propositions achieve the capability for having truth-values, the sort of presupposition Russell tried to fill in with the idea of knowledge by acquaintance.[9]

The term 'nonsense' has its home in these linked criticisms of points where Frege and Russell supposed logic to be in need of some nod of approval from reality. I take it that Conant and Diamond are right that the rejection of the idea that language as such needs nods of approval from reality is the essential aim of the *Tractatus*.

I have characterized mistakes about meaning as being different from mistakes about matters of fact. Conant and Diamond believe that there is a fundamental difficulty we encounter when we set about describing what it is like to fail to master the technique of using language to say things that might be true or false, that is, when we set about describing nonsense. In order to see why it might seem that we cannot simply specify and describe the mistakes we make when these are mistakes about meaning and not about matters of fact, let us return to something I said above: nonsense cannot be treated as something to be argued for or against in the logically articulated structure of an argument. This appears to be the case because of the close fit between what it is for something to be the sort of thing that can be true or false and what it is for something to be capable of playing a logical role in an argument. Patterns of reasoning are patterns of truth-possibilities, to use a phrase from the *Tractatus*. If something is a piece of nonsense, that is, not the sort of thing that is capable of being true or false, it can hardly play a role in an argument. Furthermore, according to the tradition to which Frege is giving birth when Wittgenstein is writing the *Tractatus*, the internal articulation of a proposition is also identified in terms of the truth or falsity of the whole proposition. If we follow Frege's specification of reference in terms of contribution to the truth-value of a proposition, we can hardly say that a proposition is nonsense *because* the object meant by some part of it does not admit of combination with the concept meant by another part of it. A name will only mean an object, and a concept-expression will only mean a function, in a proposition that makes sense, that is, in a proposition that

9. I give this reading of the *Tractatus* in my dissertation, 'The Determinacy of Logic in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*' (unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois, 1996).

succeeds at being the sort of thing that might be true or false. Here we can see an opposition developing between something's being the sort of thing that is capable of being true or false and something's being entirely out of the realm of logic. It is this opposition that makes it appear impossible to describe the achievement of making sense and the failure of uttering nonsense. If something is just noise, it can hardly be a part of an argument. If something is just noise, it can hardly be composed of parts that have semantic characteristics. Similarly, to describe someone as thinking that something makes sense when it in fact does not seems to require us to treat it at one and the same time as being both the sort of thing that can be true or false – the sort of thing to which logical and semantic terms apply – and as being mere noise. In Frege's terms, such an item must somehow be a mere fact about human psychology with no logical significance whatsoever, and yet at the same time, insofar as we describe it as something that is believed by someone, it must belong to the realm of thoughts.[10]

Conant and Diamond believe that this opposition between the merely psychological and the logical is necessary to the *Tractatus*' conception of nonsense and its attendant rejection of metaphysics, and that it is essential to Wittgenstein's rejection of metaphysics throughout his entire philosophical life.[11] In the next section, I describe what I take to be important problems that arise if we attempt to take the propositions of the *Tractatus* to be plain nonsense, problems that remain even if we think of ourselves as 'completely' throwing away the ladder once we have climbed it. In Section IV, I argue that Wittgenstein himself was not clear in the *Tractatus* about what in the work needs to be kept and what needs to be thrown away, and I suggest this is related to a lack of clarity about what it is to discard something as nonsense. In Sections V and VI, I look at how Conant and Diamond apply what they take to be the *Tractatus*' account of nonsense to specific examples, and argue that the philosophical requirements, drawn from Frege and the *Tractatus*, that they employ in treating these examples distort our understanding of them, rather than provide illumination. In Section VII, I indicate briefly the sources of the criticisms I advance in Sections V and VI in the

10. See Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 67.
11. See ibid. pp. 65–66.

Investigations, and so challenge the idea that the *Tractatus*' account of the relationship between rejecting metaphysics and recognizing something as nonsense is preserved in Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

III. Throwing Away the Ladder

Wittgenstein's image of the ladder that the reader must discard after she has climbed it captures the thought that her coming to see something as nonsense means, not coming to have certain true beliefs about an object where previously she had false beliefs, but coming to abandon the whole attempt to have beliefs, true or false, like the nonsensical ones she once attempted to hold. Conant and Diamond consider the ladder image to be the key to a proper understanding of the *Tractatus*: we are told that the ladder must be *completely* thrown away, that we must throw away the *top* of the ladder, and so on. It is important, then, to ask whether we can think through the application of this image to the process of realizing that something is nonsense, or to the process of abandoning the attempt to do metaphysics. The ladder image is one of three that Sextus Empiricus invokes in defence of the skeptic's use of argument to establish the irreality of argument:[12]

> For there are many things which do to themselves the same thing as they do to other things. For example, just as fire consumes its fuel and then destroys itself along with it, and just as purgative medicines expel fluids from the body and then eliminate themselves as well, in the same way the argument against demonstration is able to wipe itself out after having destroyed all demonstration. And again, just as it is not impossible for someone, after climbing up a ladder to a higher place, to knock down the ladder with his foot after he gets up there, so too it is not unreasonable for the skeptic, after arriving at the establishment of his point by using the

12. 'The irreality of argument' means the irreality of arguments that purport to lead to conclusions that are non-evident (Sextus Empiricus, PH I.27) – which thesis amounts to an argument for the irreality of argument altogether, as the skeptics understood argument, since an argument to what is already evident was not considered an argument (for much the same reasons that Mill complained of the circularity of the syllogism), and that an argument can take you to what is not already clear is what is being denied. (Burnyeat, 'Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy', *Philosophical Review* 85, 1 [January 1976], pp. 44–69; Sextus Empiricus PH II.13.)

argument which demonstrates that there is no demonstration as a kind of step-stool, thereupon to destroy this argument itself.[13]

This is in response to the charge of self-refutation that the stoics advance against skepticism: the stoics argue that the very attempt to *argue* for the skeptic's thesis demonstrates a commitment to argument that belies their conclusion. The skeptic advocates accepting this charge of the stoic, in a certain sense: the good skeptic should accept that he can really no more believe the conclusion for which he himself argues (there is no such thing as argument) than the opposite of the conclusion.

Sextus Empiricus responds to the stoic's charge with these analogies, which deny the central feature of argument on which the stoic relies. A purge removes itself by the further exercise of the same power which it uses to remove what it has been administered to remove; fire (as it is conceived here) similarly accomplishes first the destruction of the material that it burns and then moves on to its self-destruction. A ladder has the power to take us somewhere before we toss it away. The initial accomplishment is self-sufficient, and what happens at the end does not reflect back on the identity of the process that brought us the accomplishment. Nothing we do with the ladder once we have climbed it can change the fact that we have climbed it. According to the stoic, this is not possible in the case of argument: the skeptic's argument, if we are convinced that it is right, has the effect of convincing us that its supposed power, the power of any argument to accomplish anything, is – and *was* – illusory. It isn't that an argument, to begin with, accomplishes its destructive goal, and then *after* that has been accomplished, also destroys itself: once it destroys itself, we look back at the initial 'accomplishment' of the argument and its own 'self-destruction' in a different light. We realize that nothing was accomplished. To recall the terms of the last section, given that argument is not a purely psychological phenomenon, but one subject to logical evaluation, we can rightly refuse to be convinced of anything by the skeptic's argument: according to the skeptic himself, he has not even given us an *argument*.

The skeptic, however, understands his goal to be simply to get you to stop engaging in this activity of arguing. He does not particularly care that you cease to care about arguments *because of* a

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13. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, ed. and trans. Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), M 8.480–81.

commitment to any particular argument about why you must stop arguing – he would even prefer that you have no such basis for giving up argument, since such a basis would indicate a failure in the end to grasp the illusory nature of argument. He simply wants you to stop making all this noise. Sextus Empiricus justifies the skeptic's indiscriminate use of all arguments, good or bad, in this way: his goal is to get his opponent to stop – to stop *completely* (PH 3.280–281). If a skeptical argument is successful, that means that one particular string of noises has the effect of making you stop the production of any further similar strings of noises; if the skeptical argument brings you in addition to lose any taste you might have had for repeating this one particular string of noises itself, the one that brought you to stop, then so much the better.

The problem for the skeptic with characterizing argument in this psychologistic fashion is that he loses the ability to characterize the very thing that he opposes: if he wants you to treat any point about which there is dispute with the attitude of *isostheneia*, then what is the understanding of argument that he expresses in his determination of what does and does not count as dispute about a point? Does the skeptic simply withhold assent from everything that is in fact disputed? This stand would give the stoic an easy way to reduce the skeptical argument to a different kind of absurdity, an absurdity in practice. The skeptic wants to preserve belief in plain, indisputable matters of fact; the stoic can simply dispute these each in turn until the skeptic is left with nothing.

The same problem arises for the *Tractatus*. When Conant and Diamond say that we must throw away the ladder *completely*, they are saying we must make the retrospective move that expresses an understanding of argument in the logical and not the psychologistic sense: we must reject the idea that the book has taught us anything, throw away the idea that through this book we have grasped anything. That is to say that we realize that we now need to withdraw our assent to the argument as a whole: we must recognize that the results of the argument of the *Tractatus* do reflect back on the process we have gone through and lead us to re-evaluate it. The problem shows itself with two faces.

First, this withdrawal of assent to the whole text is something we are driven to do by our acceptance of the argument. What can discarding the ladder *be*, if discarding it is what it brings us to do – if throwing it away is still, in the logical sense, 'keeping' it? If

withdrawing our assent to these propositions is an act we take that is expressive of our grasp of these propositions, if it is the logical result of the propositions that lead up to the one telling us to discard them all, how can we 'throw them away' in the sense of withdrawing not just our assent to them but our claim to have understood them at all, without also 'keeping them' in the sense of taking this action as the result of these propositions, that is, an action which is expressive of our grasp of them?

Second, we are left with the *Tractatus* version of the skeptical problem: the *Tractatus* loses the ability to characterize that to which it objects. Nonsense negated is still nonsense: 'there is no such thing as a standpoint outside the form of representation' is no better than 'there is a standpoint outside the form of representation'. What good does it do to say that the *Tractatus* is anti-metaphysical, if we cannot understand what 'metaphysical' means?

IV. 'Exiguous' metaphysics

Our first inclination might be to look for a solution to how we are to understand the *Tractatus* by asking whether there are *parts* of the *Tractatus* that are not to be jettisoned as nonsense. If we understand a philosophical stand to be 'metaphysical' insofar as it involves one in legislating on *a priori* grounds what can and cannot be, we might think that one can be metaphysical about the world, on the one hand, or about language, on the other. So we might think that Wittgenstein makes self-consciously metaphysical statements about the world in the *Tractatus* only in order to bring us to the point of ceasing to make such statements, and we might think that this procedure relies on him making metaphysical demands on language – on what can count as a proposition, a name, a thought, and so on – about which he is not self-conscious. It might be that Wittgenstein's intention to do away with metaphysics about the world depends on a great deal of unacknowledged metaphysics about language. Diamond says that this metaphysics about language is only 'metaphysics' in an extremely exiguous sense.[14]

14. Diamond at one point includes the propositions of logic in what Wittgenstein means us to jettison ('Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 79), but says that there is an unselfconscious metaphysics about language in the *Tractatus* ('Throwing Away the Ladder', pp. 181, 182, and in 'Wittgenstein and Metaphysics', pp. 19–20).

While it is indeed a commitment to the end to analysis, and not (for example) a brute metaphysical commitment to atomism, as Fogelin would have it,[15] or a metaphysical commitment to the fundamental reality of possibility, as Bradley would have it,[16] that guides the *Tractatus*' talk about the nature of objects and the distinction between objects and facts, the *Tractatus* itself does not maintain a neat dividing line between metaphysical assertions about reality and metaphysical assertions about language. A number of Wittgenstein's statements about language, statements that legislate about what it is for a sentence to have a use, what makes it a determinate combination of signs, seem to have the same feature of coming apart and dissolving into uninformative emptiness that the metaphysical statements about objects and facts do, and they do so in various ways. Some do so in a self-conscious way, and are spelled out in some detail: his understanding of the significance of the truth-table notation is like this, although the general applicability of the point is insufficiently considered. The truth-table notation demonstrates clearly that the combination of elementary propositions, that is, propositions that make some demands on reality, into 'necessary truths' results in propositions that no longer make any demands on reality whatsoever.[17] In some, the details are spelled out in an unsatisfactory fashion, as is the case in his discussion of how the values of a variable are given (see pp. 125–8 below). And some of his statements about what makes up the world – the primacy of facts over objects – are not entirely ironical.

15. Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987).
16. Raymond Bradley, *The Nature of All Being: A Study of Wittgenstein's Modal Atomism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
17. Conant, in an attempt to preserve an intelligible and systematic distinction in the *Tractatus* between nonsense and senselessness, excludes tautologies from being the sort of nonsense the *Tractatus* itself is ('The Method of the *Tractatus*'). In 4.4611, Wittgenstein does say that tautologies and contradictions are senseless but not nonsensical and that they are part of the symbolism. But in 4.466 he describes them as being 'the limiting cases of the combinations of symbols, namely their dissolution'. That is, as he explains in 4.4661 and 4.462, because the expressions that are internal to the propositions that make up tautologies and contradictions are inessential to the symbol, they no longer stand in representing relations to the world at all. This is a somewhat startling claim – that in 'either it is raining or it is not raining', 'it is raining' does not stand in any representing relation to reality – but it is Wittgenstein's claim. We might compare it to a similar move he makes in the *Investigations*, where he insists that the apparent truth of a statement of the form 'p or not-p' does not endow sense on p in all possible contexts (§ 352).

In some cases this process of dissolving philosophical theses into emptiness happens in such a way that it is hard to see any explanation for it but the existence of conflicting tendencies of thought in the *Tractatus*. Let us take the claim that analysis must come to an end in elementary propositions. This claim is the one that Diamond and Conant isolate as a piece of metaphysics to which Wittgenstein is unselfconsciously committed in the *Tractatus* and which he came to criticize later. However, the *Tractatus* already contains another line of thought that places the apparently metaphysical appearance of this commitment into question.

Analysing a complex proposition, according to the *Tractatus*, involves breaking it down into its truth-conditions: we ask ourselves, 'under what conditions would we call this true? under what false?' But the *Tractatus* already admits that to think that making such a list is at the heart of analysis is to have a superficial understanding of logical analysis. The achievement of logical clarity comes not in making such a list as long and detailed as possible, according to the *Tractatus*: rather, logical clarity comes when we recognize that when some questions arise, we do not treat them as more conditions to add to the list, but instead see that treating such questions seriously would mean destroying the context in which the proposition under analysis makes sense as a serious assertion. For example, it is perfectly in line with what Wittgenstein says about complete analysis in the *Tractatus* to say that an analysis of 'the pile of sand in the back yard is a heap' would not involve answering the question, 'would we call it a heap if there were 4,177 grains of sand and not if there were 4,176?' and including the answer to this question amongst the truth conditions. It would instead involve recognizing that such a question does not arise in the contexts in which talk about heaps has an application. Ruling out such a question belongs to – is characteristic of – the form of representation in question. It is this moment in analysis that the *Tractatus* refers to when it says that philosophical analysis does not clarify propositions in the sense of introducing clarity where there was none before, but shows us that they are already clear as they stand: our scruples about their clarity are misunderstandings. Wittgenstein puts this point in the *Tractatus* by saying:

> The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions', but to make propositions clear.
> Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred. (4. 112)

This suggestion that thoughts are 'otherwise opaque and blurred' is qualified by 'as it were'. Why does he qualify it? Wittgenstein's letters to Ogden entirely (if inelegantly) disambiguate what is being said here:

> I think it cannot be the RESULT of philosophy 'to make prop[osi-tion]s clear': this can only be it⟨'⟩s TASK. The *result* must be that the prop[osition]s *now have become clear* that they ARE clear.[18]

This is to say not that 'all the possible questions', in the sense in which that is understood by traditional discussions of the sorites paradox, are already answered in the proposition, and philosophical analysis uncovers the implicit specifications. Rather, our grasp of the proposition in its application involves ruling out some 'possible' questions as worse than irrelevant to the sense of the proposition under analysis. We do not, through analysis as the *Tractatus* understands it, come to see that the line between a heap and a non-heap is 4,176 grains of sand, but that the sense of '*x* is a heap' does not require such a question to be raised and answered.[19]

  The fact that the *Tractatus* contains this anti-metaphysical perspective on the problem of vagueness and analysis is often missed because commentators rely on the *Notebooks* idea that a proposition divides the world into two: *all the states of affairs* that make it true, and *all the states of affairs* that make it false. This view does not actually occur in the *Tractatus*; instead, he speaks in 4.023 of the proposition leaving reality only two alternatives: yes or no. It does not restrict reality to these two alternatives at the level of the elementary propositions, which we reach at the end of analysis, by giving us a list of all possible states of affairs and saying which mean 'yes' and which mean 'no' –

18. *Letters to C.K Ogden, with Comments on the English Translation of the* Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, ed. by G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 49. The Pears and McGuinness translation, despite its claim (p. v) that it has been done with an eye to the Ogden letters, gives 'Philosophy does not result in "philosophical propositions", but rather in the clarification of propositions', which is not bad; but then for the next sentence gives a translation directly in contradiction with what Wittgenstein writes to Ogden: 'Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries'. (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961].)
19. Throughout this paragraph I have said that we 'rule out' talk about the numbers of grains of sand: this way of speaking is in accordance with the tone of the *Tractatus*, but it is not entirely satisfactory. The *Investigations* approach would be to point out that such questions simply do not arise.

that is how we give the meaning of a complex proposition, not the meaning of an elementary proposition – but by bringing us to realize that there is a point at which the attempt to further specify truth-conditions expresses a misunderstanding of the proposition.[20]

The analysis of a proposition that appears simple on its surface into what is clearly a truth-functionally complex proposition is a small part of the story of achieving logical clarity. But the *Tractatus* gives such analysis pride of place in its account of logic, and in its rejection of Frege's and Russell's metaphysics. Wittgenstein does not in the *Tractatus* come to terms with this issue in a satisfactory fashion.[21] Here, anti-metaphysical slogans and pictures muddy the waters. Wittgenstein's insouciance about what the real simple objects or elementary names are hardly qualifies as a well-thought-out anti-metaphysics. His refusal to face the question of what the end of analysis would look like is licensed precisely by his opposition to philosophy as a super-physics: when the question is raised, he says that it is not up to philosophers to say what does and does not exist in the world (the 5.55s). Wittgenstein appeals to the special status of logic to license his setting aside the question of what the real objects are; and he understands this license to extend to setting aside the project of considering what it would be like to come to the point of finding out what the real objects are.

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20. At the level of the elementary proposition, the *Tractatus* can hardly be said to have a 'truth-conditional theory of meaning', as is often claimed.
21. Conant tries to save Wittgenstein from contradiction here by saying that the use of a correct logical notation in presenting a thought does nothing but ward off philosophical confusion and does this by ensuring that the true logical structure of the thought is presented perspicuously in the notation ('The Method of the *Tractatus*'). But the philosophical mistake Wittgenstein is making in the *Tractatus*, surely, is to think of logic as something to be gathered from the notation at all. If the logic of our language is perfectly in order as it is, it is not something that needs to be laid bare by a notation (which marks the object/concept distinction, for example); logic just is the pattern of human life with language, and warding off philosophical confusion means removing the philosophical blinders that prevent us from seeing patterns of human life and that lead us to look instead at 'logic' or the 'world'. Even if Wittgenstein understands his use of symbolic notation in the *Tractatus* to be merely elucidatory, the idea that clarity is achieved through the notation laying out the logical form, rather than through moving our attention away from the bare notation and toward the patterns of human life in which languages have their home, panders to this confusion and does not cure it. Insofar as Wittgenstein is committed already in the *Tractatus* to the idea that ordinary language does not need to answer to any logical scruples – that looking at logic just means looking at patterns of human life with language – this commitment is at odds with the *Tractatus* idea that we might achieve philosophical clarification through notational reform.

The opening of the *Tractatus* with 'the world' appears to be metaphysics of the purest sort, but it has the same mixture of motivations that his talk of the end of analysis does. Conant and Diamond take it to be a lure that draws us into a metaphysical view that the work will have us throw away at the end: while such talk of the world is metaphysics through and through, it is not metaphysics to which the *Tractatus is* committed, because Wittgenstein lures us into it only to get us to reject it.[22] But this starting point has the very anti-metaphysical goal, against Frege and Russell, of insisting that it is through ordinary propositions describing the world, propositions that say what they do whether they are true or false, and not through logical laws describing the structure of reality, that logic makes its contact with reality. All we need to suppose exists in the world in order to account for language, meaning, and logic, are the ordinary facts that propositions state – that is to say, we do not suppose the *existence* of *anything* in order to account for language, since any of those ordinary facts might not have obtained. This is the point of opening the *Tractatus* with talk about the world as composed of facts instead of talk about its logical structure or its ontology in the sense of a catalogue of the kinds of objects and relations that must exist. 'The world is everything that is the case' is not a lure to get us to suppose that we can see 'everything that is the case', but a statement that the world contains nothing more, nothing over and above, ordinary facts. And it is also a statement beginning the diagnosis of one philosophical confusion that leads to metaphysics: it stands in opposition to the idea that the world is composed of objects. These are not points we are meant to throw away: our rejection of Fregean and Russellian metaphysics, if we are convinced by the *Tractatus*, is an expression of our grasp of these points.

There does not, then, appear to be a neat dividing line between a metaphysics about language, to which Wittgenstein is unselfconsciously committed, and a metaphysics about the world, into which he lures us only in order to have us discard it at the end. It should not be particularly surprising that his talk both about language and about the world shows such a mixture of motivation: we can hardly expect there to be a neat dividing line between metaphysics about language and metaphysics about the world. Whatever problems there are with the *Tractatus* idea of 'nonsense' or 'complete analysis' (or the

22. See Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', pp. 71–2n.

other linguistic terms towards which Conant and Diamond think that Wittgenstein has a 'metaphysics' in an exiguous sense) will not exist in isolation from problems in his understanding of the other central terms – ones that are metaphysical in the ontological sense. A central anti-metaphysical lesson of Wittgenstein's writing early and late is that gathering up all the philosophical puzzles into one term is not the route to philosophical understanding. To make the term 'nonsense' bear all the weight of dissolving philosophical problems while insisting that Wittgenstein is clear about the anti-metaphysical status of his talk of 'object', 'reality', 'fact', and (perhaps?) a little shaky on his grasp of the status of his talk of 'language', 'proposition', 'name', is to ignore the centrality of the anti-metaphysical point in the *Tractatus* and throughout Wittgenstein's thought that these terms are all internally related to one another in such a way that any attempt to create a philosophical theory out of, or to locate *the* philosophical solution in, any one of these terms is like playing conjurers' tricks. (The *Tractatus* analogy of logic as a mirror already suggests this point.) We cannot understand the power of the term 'nonsense' to express what is going on when we reject metaphysics, or the strengths and limitations of Wittgenstein's understanding of that power, if we take it to be isolated from what is solid *and what is confused* in his use of the terms 'object', 'fact', and so on. If Wittgenstein is unclear about the status of his talk of nonsense, and the extent to which what he says involves him in legislating illegitimately what can and cannot count as a significant use of language, then there is little reason to expect that this problem exists in isolation from a tendency also to legislate – metaphysically – about what can and cannot count as an object, a fact, an element of the world. Wittgenstein did not maintain neat dividing lines between 'nonsense about language' and 'metaphysical nonsense' in the *Tractatus* because there cannot be such neat dividing lines.

V. Nonsense and category mistakes

Conant and Diamond express their account of nonsense in the *Tractatus* primarily in discussions of propositions 5.473 and 5.4733, which they read as applying the *Tractatus*' version of Frege's context principle to the nature of nonsense: the person attempting to use a nonsensical combination of words is not doing something made

impossible by the meanings of those words, but is perfectly free to give the words meaning in their new combination.[23] This account of nonsense is important to the view that Wittgenstein is attempting to bring us up against the incoherence of our own desires in doing metaphysics. If nothing about the structure of the world or the logical categories of language rules out our doing anything we like, then Wittgenstein can treat the metaphysical urge by saying to us 'go ahead and do anything you like'. We can be brought to give up metaphysics, the thought goes, without our having to do so on the basis of a proof that the thing we desire is impossible: instead, we are brought to realize that there is nothing that we desire. I will return to this application of their account of nonsense in the next section; in this section, I will discuss the use Diamond and Conant make of Frege's context principle in their reading of the 5.47s.

I said in Section III above that the *Tractatus* is committed to the idea that there can be two different kinds of mistake in the use of language – one not a kind of mistake at all, but the correct use of language to say something false, and the other a kind of mistake in which one fails to master the technique of using language to make any claim at all. The question naturally arises: what is the person making this second kind of error mistaken about? It is clear that the *Tractatus* rejects the view that nonsense is a super-false kind of falsehood.[24] Making a mistake in the use of language is not a matter of saying *something* that not only is not true, but could not be true. That is, our failure to mean something by the words we say is not because the fact we state is impossible. After all, what we are seeking to understand is the kind of error that consists in our not saying anything at all. We cannot legislate what can and cannot be said on the basis of what we know exists or does not exist in the world. Diamond argues further that if we take the context principle seriously, nonsense cannot be the result of violating logical categories. According to her reading, the roots of Wittgenstein's view of nonsense lie in Frege:

23. Diamond discusses this view of nonsense in greatest detail in her papers on Frege ('Frege and Nonsense', and 'What Nonsense Might Be'). It is not entirely clear to me the extent to which she intends to ascribe these views to Wittgenstein. Conant ascribes these views to Wittgenstein in 'The Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', while leaving open the extent to which he ascribes them to Frege.
24. See Diamond, 'What Nonsense Might Be', pp. 95–96.

> The discovery that, although we can put words together so that
> they make no sense, there is no such thing as putting together
> words with a certain role in language, or with certain logical pow-
> ers, so that on account of these roles or these powers, the whole is
> nonsense – this is surely one of the great things in Frege, and one
> of the most important things owed to him by Wittgenstein.[25]

People have read into Frege the view that there are propositions that
are syntactically correct, composed of words that have meanings and
logical roles, but that are nonsense, insofar as there is something
about the meanings of the component parts of the proposition, or
something about the logical categories to which the words belong,
such that they do not – cannot – fit one another. Nonsense would,
on this view, be the result of a 'category clash'. In opposition to this,
Diamond points out that Frege's context principle commits him to
the view that the meaning of a name and the logical category to
which it belongs can only be established where the whole sentence
of which it is a part has a sense: where the whole is nonsense, the
parts cannot be distinguished and questions about their meanings
and logical categories cannot be raised.[26] In Section III above, I
pointed out that Wittgenstein is commenting on the birth of the
semantic tradition that specifies the meaning of a part of a proposi-
tion in terms of the contribution it makes to the truth-value of the
whole; where there is no such thing as the truth-value of the whole,
the part can hardly have a meaning, such that it is something about
the nature of the meaning of the part that dictates the whole's inabil-
ity to carry a truth-value. Taking the context principle seriously,
according to Diamond and Conant, enables us to have a perspective
on nonsense that does not require that we legislate either on the
basis of the world or on the basis of logical categories what can and
cannot be said.

If nonsense is not the result of violating logical categories, then
what is it? The only kind of error about meaning there can be,
Diamond says, is confusion encouraged by the superficial forms of
language. For example, 'Chairman Mao is rare' and 'Sandhill cranes
are rare' are two sentences that appear to share the same predicate.
This, however, is a superficial appearance: 'x is rare' in the former
sentence is a first-level predicate, while in the latter it is a second-

25. See Diamond, 'Frege and Nonsense', p. 91.
26. This connection to the context principle is developed in detail in 'What
Nonsense Might Be', pp. 96–114.

level predicate. There is a form of error that builds on this kind of equivocation: if we do not see the possibility of such equivocation, we can think that whatever goes into establishing the meaning of '*x* is rare' for the second sentence will accommodate the first too. So 'Chairman Mao is rare', according to Diamond, is nonsensical because the reference of the first-level predicate '*x* is rare' has not been established, and this might escape our notice, because its meaning as a second-level predicate has been established. Hence the illusion that something has sense when it is nonsense. But nothing in the logical nature of the term '*x* is rare' rules out our assigning meaning to it as a first-level predicate. So, Diamond argues, there is no such thing as category clash; rather, what we think is category clash is really equivocation where we fail to notice that a term is being used in two different logical roles, and where we fail to notice that one of the two meanings between which we equivocate has not been settled. The meaning of '*x* is rare' has been settled only for contexts in which it operates as a second-level predicate, and we fail to notice that it needs a new meaning as a first-level predicate if it is to be applied to 'Chairman Mao'. Conant similarly describes the person speaking nonsense as equivocating between different alternative possibilities of meaning, and hence failing to mean anything at all.

Diamond and Conant seem to be following the *Tractatus* here: Wittgenstein describes nonsense as equivocation that hides the failure to establish meaning, first in 5.473:

> Logic must take care of itself.
> A *possible* sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted. ('Socrates is identical' means nothing because there is no property which is called 'identical'. The proposition is senseless because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol is in itself unpermissible.)
> In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic.

And then in 5.4733:

> 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 we have done so.)
> Thus 'Socrates is identical' says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word 'identical' as *adjective*. For when it occurs

as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way –
the symbolizing relation is another – and therefore the symbol is
in the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign
in common with one another only by accident.

He is here attempting to characterize nonsense in such a way as to
avoid legislating metaphysically about what we can and cannot do.
But these passages and their context say nothing about the context
principle. In the rest of this section, I shall discuss two questions
about Conant's and Diamond's reading. Does Conant's and
Diamond's reading of this passage successfully establish a perspective
that enables us to recognize nonsense without legislating metaphysi-
cally in advance what can and cannot make sense? And what, if not
Wittgenstein's commitment to Frege's context principle, is the
source of what Wittgenstein says in the 5.473s?

According to Conant's and Diamond's view, that 'x is rare' is a
second-order predicate does rule out its being used with the same
meaning where a first-level predicate is required. When we describe
our failing to notice that 'Chairman Mao is rare' has no meaning as
an error of equivocation combined with failure to settle meaning,
we do say that if the meaning of 'x is rare' as a second-level predicate
is settled, that is, if its meaning is settled in connection with activities
of individuating and counting objects, then what has been settled
does not extend to the case where it is employed as a first-level
predicate, that is, outside of the context of such activities, or in a
case where we cannot figure out how to extend such activities. We
cannot use 'x is rare' *with the same meaning*, with its ordinary mean-
ing, when we use it as a first-level predicate. Extending 'x is rare' to
a newly discovered species of bird on Baffin Island would be a
matter-of-course, ordinary extension of the use of 'x is rare'. Its
meaning would not change; it would not lose the meaning it has in
'Sandhill cranes are rare'. But extending 'x is rare' to 'Chairman
Mao' is different. New provisions have to be made. The equivoca-
tion problem with 'x is rare' is not merely that its application has not
been settled for the context 'Chairman Mao is rare' – for nothing
would count as extending this expression with its meaning as a sec-
ond-level predicate to this context. The new thing that must be
settled is an entirely different meaning of 'x is rare', such that we
might as well not use the sounds 'is rare' here at all (the 3.32s).
Logical categories of the terms in question play a role in our descrip-
tion of this sort of error, no less when it is an error of failure to

assign meaning, masked by equivocation, than when it is an error of 'category clash'. When Wittgenstein says that the symbol is not impermissible, but that we haven't settled its meaning, this under-emphasizes the fact that the necessity of settling a new meaning for the sign in this particular case is part of what it is for the symbol to be the symbol that it is. It makes little difference to our understand-ing of the status of logic whether we say that in 'Chairman Mao is rare' we have a second-level predicate that is being used wrongly here in a sentence that requires a first-level predicate, or say that in this case the proposition (and hence the part of it 'is rare') doesn't mean anything, for if '*x* is rare' were a first-level predicate, its mean-ing wouldn't be settled; if it were a second-level predicate, then the reference of 'Chairman Mao' would not be settled as a suitable concept-expression of the sort that completes second-level predi-cates. In either case we still want an understanding of what it is for the meanings of words to clash, an understanding that is anti-metaphysical in the sense of not legislating in advance.

Perhaps it appears that Conant and Diamond are doing no legislat-ing here because in the example under discussion – 'Chairman Mao is rare' – it would be hard to imagine there being any point to insist-ing that 'is rare' is being used in precisely the same sense in which it is used in 'Sandhill cranes are rare'. But the example under discussion is philosophically contrived. James Conant discusses a very good real example: in the 1988 vice-presidential debate, Lloyd Bentsen says to Dan Quayle: 'Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy'. Conant describes our ability to make sense of this linguistic innovation, which has the form of using a proper name as a predicate, in terms of our ability to see through the surface grammar, according to which 'Jack Kennedy' appears to be a proper name, to 'what Bentsen really is saying' – which lets us see the real logical form of the expression, in which it is operating as a concept-expression. So, Conant states, Bentsen must be saying something like 'Senator, you're no instance of exemplary statesmanship'.[27]

Let us ask ourselves, as far as we can without philosophical pre-conceptions, what might go into answering the question of whether 'Jack Kennedy' is, in this example, being used as a proper name or, contrary to appearances, as a concept-expression. One thing that might guide us is our grasp of grammatical distinctions of the sort we

27. See Conant, 'The Method of the *Tractatus*'.

are taught in school. Another thing that might guide us is a theory like Frege's according to which we ought to be able to segment sentences that make sense into proper names and concept-expressions, or first-level concept-expressions and second-level concept-expressions, and so on. Another thing that might guide us is the context: what does Lloyd Bentsen say before he says this? Another thing that might guide us in our decision is what it looks like to explain what Lloyd Bentsen means here with this (to us philosophers) curious-sounding predicate 'is no Jack Kennedy' to someone who does not understand it. These criteria need not all speak in the same way. If we consider one, we might say it is a proper name; if we consider another, we might say it is a concept-expression. If we let the grammatical form of the sentence and Frege guide us, we will say that it must be a predicate, a concept-expression, and we will cast about for some way to construct concept-expressions out of proper names, some general logical form of doing so.[28] And then we will do what Conant does: we will give some Theory of Descriptions-like account of the meaning of predicates constructed with proper names; so we will work from a list of true descriptions of Jack Kennedy, and choosing some salient description, we will say that, 'surface appearances' to the contrary, what Lloyd Bentsen really meant to say was something like 'Senator, you're no instance of exemplary statesmanship'.

If we look at the context, things will appear quite different. What Lloyd Bentsen said, in full, was: 'Senator, I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was my friend. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy'. I suppose Lloyd Bentsen might have tried saying: 'Senator, I knew an instance of exemplary statesmanship. Senator, an instance of exemplary statesmanship was my friend. Senator, you're no instance of exemplary statesmanship'. But then he would not have been saying anything very much like what he did in fact say. He might also have said 'Senator, I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was my friend.

28. Diamond also discusses the idea of a general possibility in language of transforming words from one logical use to another for example, by the device of treating proper names as concept expressions, as in 'Another Anastasia lives in Charlottesville' ('Frege and Nonsense', pp. 81–83). How, on the Tractarian view, there can be that general possibility in language, the possibility of creating new possibilities, new logical forms, is not at all clear. In any case, that possibility can't be what is suggested in the 5.473s. How can we avoid reading the 5.473s together with 3.322, with the implication that the newly defined 'is identical' might just as well – and should, in the interests of clarity – employ a sign other than 'is identical'?

Senator, you're no instance of exemplary statesmanship'. Then he would have been saying something that satisfies Frege's scruples, and again, he would not have been saying anything like what he did in fact say. The context here does everything in its power to move us away from thinking of 'is no Jack Kennedy' as a concept-expression. The particularity of what it is for something to be a proper name – a name of an individual human being with whom one enters into individual human relationships – is emphasized twice in the immediate context of this phrase where Conant, with Frege's logical scruples in mind, wants to say 'Jack Kennedy' cannot possibly be used as a proper name. If we take another of the approaches I have suggested, and ask what it would be to explain to somebody who does not understand Bentsen's use of 'is no Jack Kennedy', again I will be inclined to say that 'Jack Kennedy' *is* being used as a proper name here, if a decision must be made.[29] What we will do in our explanation is describe who Jack Kennedy was, in all his particularity. We might also talk about what it is to attempt to wrap oneself in someone else's mantle: the 'is' here is the 'is of attempting to wrap oneself in someone else's mantle', if we must classify it, and that has a logic all its own, one which we ought not expect will reduce to something that appears in Frege's logical taxonomy. We can describe that logic by describing, for example, how claims about cloaking oneself in another man's mantle go when spoken before television audiences, on the one hand, and when spoken before someone who was a friend of the man whose mantle one claims for oneself, on the other hand. Our explanation of what Bentsen is doing with language will also involve some description of the entire change in American political life that he is suggesting between the generation that included Jack Kennedy and the generation that includes Dan Quayle.

   All of these descriptions of different possible ways to answer the question whether 'Jack Kennedy' is or is not a proper name here will be far more logically interesting than any attempt to classify what Lloyd Bentsen says in the terms in which Frege thinks we must classify all uses of language. Conant might say that what I am doing here is what Carnap does with Heidegger when he criticizes the way

29. And here by 'inclined to say' I do not mean what Diamond suggests this phrase means ('Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 72). I do not mean that I feel some psychological attraction to speaking this way, but that I recognize it as nonsensical; I mean this really is how I would be inclined to speak.

he uses the word 'nothing' – I am simply taking what comes before and what comes after (the 'merely psychological surroundings') to dictate my logical analysis, instead of taking the logical structure of the judgment 'you're no Jack Kennedy' as my guide in analysis. To say this, however, is to suppose that we have some access to what 'the logical structure of the judgment' is that is better than the features of the surroundings that I have brought out in my description.

Indeed, it seems difficult to imagine that Wittgenstein could have thought there was much anti-metaphysical progress to be made in moving from saying that a proposition makes no sense because it consists of parts that do not, logically speaking, fit one another to saying that what looks like a proposition is not in fact one, because none of the possible logical segmentations of it into subject and predicate give us a subject whose meaning is determined for that kind of predicate, or a predicate whose meaning is determined for that kind of subject. It is as though Conant and Diamond are saying that we cannot have category clash because we *cannot* combine or even think we are combining words that do not fit. And if we look at the context of the 5.4s, we do not see the issue of the internal articulation of the proposition into names and concept-expressions mentioned here at all, and we see no discussion of the context principle. The topic of this section is the nature of the logical constants, and the confusion between truth-functions and material functions. The specific equivocation discussed in 5.473 and 5.4733 is an equivocation between a logical constant (identity) and something that contributes to what we ask of the world in determining the truth-value of the proposition (which could be any internal component of a proposition; in this case, an adjective). One of the anti-metaphysical stands of the *Tractatus* is that logic cannot judge in advance what the internal articulation of fully analysed propositions will be:[30] contrary to Frege and Russell, who think it essential to the nature of representation that a proposition segment into subject and predicate of some sort, the *Tractatus* denies that there is any point in discussing in advance whether elementary propositions will consist of names and concept-expressions, or *n*-termed relation-expressions, or anything else. The only interest logic takes in the internal components of propositions is that they contribute to what we ask of the world in determining whether propositions are true or false; logic

30. I argue this point in Chapter 6 of my dissertation, 'The Determinacy of Logic in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*'.

only interests itself in this because this is how they contrast with log-
ical constants, and confusing these two is the primary error that gives
birth to metaphysics. A name is any point in the proposition at
which reality might fall short of it; propositions are entirely com-
posed of names. This means that, having established whether or not
a meaning has been settled for a name, there cannot be a further
question of the sort Conant and Diamond occupy themselves with,
the question of which logical category this meaning belongs to:
whether to names, concept-expressions, second-level concept-
expressions, and so on. This point appears anti-metaphysical
precisely because it dispenses with *all* talk of logical categories like
'proper name' and 'concept-expression', and because it brings us
back to the central feature of propositions which is supposed to save
us from metaphysics at many different points in the *Tractatus*: since
propositions say what they do whether they are true or false, their
meaning is prepared for the world to be entirely different from how
it is; that is, their meaning in and of itself makes no demands on the
world whatsoever.

It might appear that such a view is again too obviously unsatisfac-
tory to be Wittgenstein's. If we have a system for describing the
distribution of colour in space, a proposition will need spatial coor-
dinates and colour specifications. Even if there is no demand of logic
that there be something that is the bearer of these properties, or that
we treat one of the two as the object that bears the other of the two
as a property, it will still be the case that two specifications of colour
with no specification of spatial location will fail to express a thought
– because, we might say, a specification of colour needs a specifica-
tion of spatial location (see *Tractatus* 2.0131). But allowing this kind
of internal logical articulation of the proposition is still different from
(for example) Frege's idea that the proposition must contain an
unsaturated part and one or more saturated parts that complete the
unsaturated concept-expression. What is necessary to the proposition
will depend on the particular methods of representation we employ,
and not on requirements that logic lays down in advance for those
methods of representation to meet – that, for example, they contain
expressions both for particulars and for universals, or something of
that kind. Wittgenstein tends in the *Tractatus* to think that anything
logically significant in the internal articulation of the proposition will
ultimately be analysable into its proper truth-functional form (see
Tractatus 6.3751). Of course, this was the first aspect of his thinking

in the *Tractatus* that he rejected on his return to philosophy: the logical independence of elementary propositions. His satisfaction with what he has achieved in rejecting some of Frege's metaphysics in the *Tractatus* turns him away from detailed discussion of the kind of logical demand that is internal to a system of representation.

Another anti-metaphysical view that Wittgenstein came to see as unsatisfactory shortly after his return to philosophy plays a role in Diamond's application of the context principle. Another way Diamond has of putting the lesson she draws from the context principle is this.[31] She says that when 'Sandhill cranes' is removed from its argument place in 'Sandhill cranes are rare' to form 'x is rare', 'x is rare' remains a second-order predicate, i.e. an expression with a logical category. But with 'Chairman Mao is rare', according to Diamond, we cannot perform the same feat: when 'x is rare' is formed from this statement, it is no longer an expression with a logical category. It is not a second-order predicate (one that does not fit the name 'Chairman Mao') since the whole from which it is derived means nothing. Hence we cannot say that 'Chairman Mao is rare' is nonsense *because* 'x is rare' is *here* a second-level predicate. What it means to speak of removing part of a sentence and still having an expression *in its application* is unclear here. Diamond tries to describe 'x is rare' as a variable expression formed by removing a word – 'Sandhill cranes' in the one case, 'Chairman Mao' in the other. This suggests that mere temporal sequence determines the logic of the expression 'x is rare'. But this cannot be right. Perhaps I say 'Sandhill cranes are rare', in an ordinary context – we have been noting the birds we've seen on our road trip, and I've looked in a bird book to see which are rare and which not; now I'm telling you what I've found. If I should then utter 'x is rare' after that, this settles very little about how 'x is rare' is being used. In discussing Conant's example above, I suggested that we might do well in looking for the logical structure of 'Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy' to look at what Lloyd Bentsen said before he said this; in the case of 'x is rare', the context does not seem to help us to the same extent. Here the criticism of Carnap can be applied: what comes before does not settle the logic of 'x is rare'. This is, in part, because 'x is rare' is not something anyone says outside of a philosophical context.

31. This is an adaptation of what she says about the examples 'Another Anastasia Lives in Charlottesville' and 'Another The King of France Lives in Charlottesville' in 'Frege and Nonsense', pp. 83–4.

Here are two possibilities for how we are to understand the meaning of variable expressions like '*x* is rare'. One is that it has no meaning apart from the meaning of individual instances of its completion with concept-expressions in contexts where assertions are being made about things that are rare. The other is that it has some reference to human activities that are not reducible to these individual assertions in their contexts; rather, these activities have logics of their own, related to individual assertions. That is, where philosophers are inclined to employ a variable expression like '*x* is rare', they might instead look at concrete human activities in which an assertion like 'Sandhill cranes are rare', despite its apparent particularity, has some kind of generality to it. It might have some kind of generality if it is given by a teacher in the course of a lesson teaching the classification of species as rare or endangered, or if it is elicited from a pupil in the process of testing. Or it might have some kind of generality if it is given as a sample in a dictionary entry for 'rare'. There might be a concrete procedure we could describe for generating sentences like this and some place these procedures occupy in the life of a human community, and by invoking the variable expression, we might mean to refer to these procedures. The former is the *Tractatus* view; the latter is the view Wittgenstein came to very soon after his return to philosophy.

In the *Tractatus*, consideration of the application of '*x* is rare' consists only of consideration of the application of the propositions that would result from completing the expression with a name. In 3.317 and 5.501, Wittgenstein says that the description of the possible values of the variable might be accomplished in a number of different ways, but that it is anyway unimportant how it is done. In 5.501, after saying this variety is inessential, he then lists three possibilities: direct enumeration, by function, by formal law. Immediately upon his return to philosophy, Wittgenstein takes an interest in this list as an example of *logical* variety. In 1929 we find Wittgenstein suggesting the idea that the interdefinability of universal and existential quantification works differently in the case where we are in a position to list all the possible values of the variable and the case where we are not.[32] There can be many different kinds of application of expressions with variables in them, a variety that cannot be captured

32. See, for example, *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, edited by B.F. McGuinness from the notes of Friedrich Waismann (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1984), pp. 38–41.

on the *Tractatus* conception, with its two ingredients: elementary propositions, and the single logical operation.

The part Wittgenstein's treatment of the logical constant plays in the *Tractatus* cure for metaphysics stands in the way of his recognizing this logical variety: how we describe the propositions that are values of the variable expression is inessential, according to the *Tractatus*, because all that is essential to stop someone from doing metaphysics is that we make him realize that propositions can only be built out of other propositions by logical operations, and that the logical constants that are marks of those operations *do not represent*. Wittgenstein's focus on the anti-metaphysical power of this point – its power to get us to stop supposing that *p* or not-*p* is something we read off the structure of the world – blinds him to the metaphysical commitment that generality and particularity can only be related in one way.

From the point of view of the *Investigations*, whatever activities '*x* is rare' suggests, these do have logical connection with the real application of a sentence like 'Sandhill cranes are rare'. But the logical nature of the propositional variable is not exhausted by a list of the sentences in application that are the values of that propositional variable. Whatever activities stand behind our talk about variable expressions and the applications of variable expressions have their own peculiar logics and need to be described. Here is one possibility: to speak of '*x* is rare' as having an application is to say that there are activities in which we take the statement 'Sandhill cranes are rare' not as a statement about Sandhill cranes, but as one of many possible applications of the second-order predicate '*x* is rare', that is, activities in which we occupy ourselves with meaningful statements using the predicate *as examples of* statements that make sense. Such an activity will have some connection with the real application of particular sentences in the contexts of their assertive use, but describing that activity will not be identical to describing the application of particular sentences in context. If we read Diamond's statement that '*x* is rare' has no meaning when it is formed from 'Chairman Mao is rare' while keeping in mind the idea that we have to spell this out by speaking of some activity that is the application of '*x* is rare', then what she says must mean that whatever activity is gestured at with '*x* is rare' involves treating 'Sandhill cranes are rare' as an example of a permissible statement, and cannot involve interesting ourselves in something like 'Chairman Mao is rare' as one of many impermissible

applications of the second-order predicate 'is rare'. It seems curious that we should be allowed an activity of taking 'Sandhill cranes are rare' as a sample of the sort of statement in which a second-order predicate may be used – but not an activity of taking 'Chairman Mao is rare' as a sample of the sort of statement in which second-order predicates may not be used. Why does an activity of exploring a method of representation, of describing a method of representation in its application, involve looking at what it is like to get the activity right, and not involve looking at what it is like to get the activity wrong?

From the *Tractatus* perspective, the fact that we cannot look at 'Chairman Mao is rare' as an example of a sentence in which '*x* is rare' is applied *improperly* does not seem odd: the distinction between falsehood and nonsense, according to the *Tractatus*, lies precisely in the fact that we interest ourselves in sentences that fail to come up to the standard of being true, but do not interest ourselves in sentences that fail to come up to the standard of making sense. In *Tractatus* terms, sentences that are false have an application; sentences that are nonsense have no application. When we find that a statement is false, we do not throw it in the garbage heap. We 'keep' false statements, by adding negation signs to them. Insofar as we thereby say some-thing true by means of the false proposition, we preserve the false statement. We are stating a truth that could not be stated without using the false statement (the 4.06s). We continue to interest our-selves in pictures that are false, they engage our attention, we perform logical operations on them. We (so the *Tractatus* story goes) do not take any such interest in nonsensical statements. We *do* simply toss them in the garbage heap. But this talk of 'tossing statements on the garbage heap' is metaphorical: what does it look like to rule out some things as nonsense, or to treat some things as nonsense? That is a question the *Tractatus* does not and cannot face – and not because of its penetrating and convincing grasp of the impossibility of doing so, as that impossibility is given in the nature of nonsense. ('There is *nothing* that we cannot do here!') This conception of anything's being plain nonsense comes in for criticism in the *Investigations*: there we have descriptions of what it looks like to treat something as non-sense, what it looks like to 'throw it in the garbage heap'. What throwing something in the garbage heap looks like *is* a logical ques-tion: the features of nonsense are logical features. That is, they characterize our relationship to language. It is the problematic

understanding the *Tractatus* has of the centrality to language of what can be true or false, the role that plays in its understanding of what the logical application of language is, that keeps it from seeing the features of nonsense as logical.

It seems quite unlikely on the face of it to say that any activity of considering examples of sentences that make sense will involve only sentences like 'Sandhill cranes are rare', and will not involve sentences like 'Chairman Mao is rare', but there are different possibilities here for how and whether nonsensical sentences will come into any activity that we might be thinking of when we employ the variable expression. We teach children how to talk about heaps by talking about the heap of sand in the sand box, and not by engaging in activities of counting sand grains with them – so in our description we can note that the nonsensical reasoning about heaps that I described in Section IV simply does not come up. Or we might want to describe what the exclusion of such activities of counting grains of sand looks like – how someone is treated if she does raise such questions. The descriptions of the recalcitrant learner in the *Philosophical Investigations* are, again, explorations of *various* possible patterns of human life in which we see what it is to master – and what it looks like to fail to master – a technique of language. At the end of §143, for example, Wittgenstein describes the different ways we might encompass the responses of the student who does not respond to training in a normal fashion: where the *Tractatus* suggests a realm that is plain nonsense in an undifferentiated sense, the *Investigations* gives us descriptions of the various different 'faces of nonsense', one might say (to adapt a phrase of Diamond's). To call something 'nonsense' is to treat it in *this* way; for 'nonsense' to stand in some sort of relationship to sentences that make sense is for there to be *these* activities that bring them together – where *this* and *these* are filled out with real descriptions of patterns of human life.[33] But these sorts of descriptions will only satisfy us if we let go of the *Tractatus*' strong Fregean distinction between the psychological and the logical. I shall return below in Section VII to the ways in which the *Investigations* challenges that distinction.

33. See Winch, 'Persuasion', in *The Wittgenstein Legacy*, ed. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling Jr., Howard K. Wettstein, Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 17 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 123–137, on the description of language games as a form of overcoming the problem of the *Tractatus'* conception of nonsense.

VI. Frustrated intentions, confused desires, and the imagination

In the last section, I discussed how Diamond and Conant build on one idea that is central to the modern semantic tradition instituted by Frege. The idea is that the parts of a proposition have their meanings insofar as they contribute to the truth-value of whole propositions. That idea is central to the division between psychology and logic, and it is the source of their view that we cannot say anything having to do with logic as such about the parts of a 'proposition' that makes no sense. The modern semantic tradition invokes the nature of the proposition as the sort of thing that can be true or false not only in its account of the internal structure of the proposition, but also, more centrally, in its account of the employment of propositions in larger contexts: in the context of an argument, most centrally, and in the context of the attribution of thoughts, beliefs, and so on to human beings. Noises human beings make can play roles in arguments only insofar as they can be identified as the vehicles for the possibilities of truth or falsity; they can only be taken as the grounds for attributing beliefs to a person insofar as they are, similarly, understood as vehicles for truth-possibilities. We cannot identify the parts of a proposition and their logical roles where that 'proposition' fails to achieve the status of being the sort of thing that might be true or false; we also cannot speak of such a series of noises as playing a role in an argument, being what someone believes, convincing someone of something, or contradicting what someone says. So if the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense, then they cannot form an argument that takes us from the point of believing one thing to believing something else instead. And if everything that falls outside of making claims that express truth-possibilities is merely psychological, then it seems like we cannot say anything having to do with logic about attributing 'beliefs' in or 'thoughts' involving nonsense sentences either.

This is Conant's and Diamond's central criticism of traditional readings of the *Tractatus*: traditional readings suppose that the great problems there are about how we are to 'understand' the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself can be solved with the idea that we somehow 'grasp' the thoughts which, we are told, it is nonetheless impossible to express, and that we somehow commit ourselves to their truth; but, Conant and Diamond object, if they are nonsense,

they cannot be grasped, on the one hand, and they cannot fit into truth-functional structures, and be spoken of as being 'true', on the other. What, then, do Conant and Diamond have to say about the problem of how we are to understand the process of reading the *Tractatus*? They point out that Wittgenstein does not say that one must understand the propositions of the *Tractatus* in order to see that they are nonsense; he says in 6.54, 'one who understands *me* finally recognizes *them* as senseless'.[34] We are not to understand the doctrine expressed by these propositions, but the point of Wittgenstein's activity as a person who is seeking to free us of illusion: *activity*, not doctrine, and *illusion*, not error. The *Tractatus* does not tell you that there are certain truths beyond the limits of language, or even that there are not truths beyond the limit of language, but that the desire one wants to express as a desire for such truths is no desire at all.[35]

Any account of what this process is like, according to Diamond and Conant, must recognize and accommodate the fact that it asks us at some point to do something that is impossible to do – which description, again, is impermissible; there is no *thing* that we cannot do. Although they emphasize that we are being asked to understand Wittgenstein and not his propositions, they point out that understanding human beings is, for the author of the *Tractatus*, understanding what they say.[36] Similarly, they emphasize that we are being asked to acknowledge the confusion of our own desires, and not the nonsense of the propositions we utter; but understanding what someone desires is, again, understanding something that is given in a proposition that makes sense. They say that understanding the author of the *Tractatus* is understanding the intention with which he says what he does, the intention to get us to stop doing meta-

34. 6.54. The italics are mine – or, rather, Mounce's (*Wittgenstein's* Tractatus, p. 101), Diamond's ('Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: p. 57; 'Introduction II: Wittgenstein and Metaphysics', p. 19), and Conant's ('Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder', p. 344, 'The Search for Logically Alien Thought,' p. 145, and 'Putting Two and Two Together', pp. 270, 285–6).
35. Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 68; Conant, 'Putting Two and Two Together', pp. 267, 273–75, 282, and the parable of 'The Search for Logically Alien Thought', pp. 146–47.
36. Conant recognizes that making the distinction between understanding a person and understanding what he says is necessary to understanding the *Tractatus* in the course of his review of McGuinness's biography: he does not, however, actually say what that distinction might amount to, since he uses this only to point out that McGuinness does not come near dealing with this issue. ('Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder', p. 347.)

physics. But understanding the intention with which a proposition is uttered, an intention such that it might be in accord with or stand in conflict with the proposition, or even with any possible interpretation of the proposition, is again understanding something that can only be given in a proposition that makes sense; if we cannot specify in a proposition that makes sense what it is he wants us to stop doing, then we cannot specify the content of his intention. And what purchase is there to the idea of understanding an activity? Understanding an activity again will presumably have either a psychologistic or logical sense. Understanding a form of representation, in the terms of the *Tractatus*, is understanding an activity in which human beings represent and measure the world; this will be a logical matter, and so cannot encompass what stands outside of the realm of logic – that is, nonsense. But if we describe an activity in purely psychological terms, we will again not capture the sense in which this activity appears to be a logical one, while not really being such. Diamond appeals to the idea of imagination: the *Tractatus* is about achieving a certain kind of imaginative understanding of human beings. This kind of imaginative activity involves imagining the illusory viewpoint from which one thinks that one can catch glimpse of such things as 'the world'. Conant warns against the illicit treatment of 'the literary' as a category that can solve our problems here;[37] with this warning in mind, we can't but be conscious of the question whether appeal to 'the imaginative' clarifies our problem or merely postpones it yet again. After all, what are we to imagine? This presumably has to be given in a proposition, and understood. Diamond points this out: it is further proof for her that there is no getting at these things without entering into the activity of imaginatively taking nonsense for sense. Indeed she does describe it as 'a very particular use of imagination'[38] – but to describe something as a 'very particular' instance of its kind ought always in philosophy to introduce a description of the particularities in question. Diamond, however, would take any such description to be mere empirical psychology, unless the description also does this impossible thing of describing something that does not belong to logic as though it did belong to logic.

37. See Conant, 'Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder', pp. 334–6.
38. See Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 68.

I have traced out no consequences in the last paragraph that Conant and Diamond would not embrace; one can hardly argue, against the view that reading the *Tractatus* with understanding is recognizing that we are being asked to do something impossible, that what this view asks us to do is impossible. It is not clear why we who have been successfully persuaded by Diamond and Conant that the idea of a fundamentally ineffable truth is hopeless should welcome the idea of a fundamentally ineffable form of imagination, or activity, or aspiration; but their reading has to recommend it that it sees a deep and serious puzzle in the *Tractatus* where commentators have traditionally accepted solutions that are obviously inadequate. The questions I am raising are whether it is a good idea to embrace this claustrophobic feeling as what is best in the *Tractatus*, and whether it is continuous with his later thought.

The author of the *Tractatus* attempts to convince us that the claustrophobia we feel at this point is not real claustrophobia, because, after all, the one fundamental proscription for the use of language he gives is merely that we use it to say things that might be true or false, and that appears to the author of the *Tractatus* to be no proscription at all; after all, one can say anything one likes. Wittgenstein differentiates his view from Frege's (in the 5.47s discussed above) by saying that for Frege some of what is possible is impermissible, while for him, whatever is possible is permissible. Whether or not that still involves Wittgenstein in legislating metaphysically will be seen in how restrictive his notion is of what is possible. Wittgenstein came to think that the *Tractatus'* method for treating this feeling of claustrophobia was mistaken. The sharp distinction between logic and psychology that goes with it is based upon a distorting emphasis on truth and falsity as of the essence to language: what is possible in language is whatever is an instance of, or stands in some transparent relationship to, the practice of making pictures that can be true or false, according to the *Tractatus*.

The *Tractatus* countenances one set of terms for intellectual criticism: what someone says can be praised for its truth or condemned for its falsehood. Parasitic on this, the *Tractatus* recognizes a kind of criticism one makes when one says that what someone says is nonsense: what he says contains some element or elements that have not been given any bearing on the truth or falsity of the whole. And one can criticize a line of thought by pointing out that some term is being used in an ambiguous way: it sometimes makes a contribution

to the truth-value of the whole in one way, and sometimes in another way. In saying these things, and in describing examples in the previous section, I have been following this very schematic way of describing what goes on in the use of language. I am speaking as a philosopher who has a certain view about what the essential nature of language is, and who uses the word 'nonsense' to label any apparent use of language that fails to meet that condition. How things people say confront one another, stand in relation to one another, follow from one another, contradict one another: these all essentially take one form, according to the author of the *Tractatus*. Anything that falls outside that form is not real contradiction at all. A philosopher who approaches language like this will take things that look like contradictions but appear not to be related as *p* and not-*p* are, and show that, appearances to the contrary, they really are contradictions about matters of fact, or, appearances to the contrary, they are merely illusions of contradiction. Similarly, all intentional attributions have the same transparent form, according to the *Tractatus*:

> But it is clear that 'A believes that *p*', 'A thinks *p*', 'A says *p*', are of the form ' "*p*" says *p*' . . . (5.542)

It is essential to the transparency the *Tractatus* requires of logical terms that the attribution of a thought to a particular person cannot disturb the patterns in which we employ terms like 'true', 'false', 'sense', and 'meaning'. This contrasts with the approach of a philosopher who can describe with sensitivity a broad range of cases of human understanding and misunderstanding, of harmony, discord, cases in which not only words like 'true', 'false', and 'nonsense' are exchanged between human beings in particular contexts, but also a great number of other terms of intellectual criticism, and who can describe a variety of patterns of action and response that express understanding and misunderstanding. This latter philosopher is, of course, the later Wittgenstein. In *Zettel*, §328, he writes: 'In philosophy it is significant that such-and-such a sentence makes no sense; but also that it sounds funny'.[39]

I discuss first a comment Diamond makes about intentional attribution, and then Conant's discussion of a case of disagreement that does not fit the form of *p* disagreeing with not-*p*.

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39. *Zettel*, Second Edition, eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright; trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

Diamond gives the *Tractatus'* view of understanding what a person says with the following example:

> . . . if you cannot make sense of the sentence 'God is three persons' then you can say that Smith uttered the words 'God is three persons' and you can say that he uttered them with the intonation of asserting something, but you cannot say of him that he said that God is three persons. 'Smith said that *p*' is itself nonsense unless what we put for '*p*' makes sense.[40]

She says that an understanding of someone as asserting something is the same thing as the capacity to assert what he does yourself in your own language. The particular example she has chosen ought immediately to make us suspicious of the *Tractatus'* account: particularly in matters like this, we very often find ourselves attributing beliefs to people that we could never imagine ourselves being in a position to hold. I might say all sorts of things in describing to you views Peter Winch expressed in the last philosophy of religion seminar he taught, and I might even discuss these views intelligently, some with understanding, and some with a sense that I cannot quite see what he was saying; I am quite certain that I cannot imagine myself being in a position to assert the same things he did on this topic. One might object that the sense in which I claim that I cannot imagine myself saying what Winch did is merely psychological and irrelevant to logic: in the logical sense, I *can* imagine it, if I suppose myself to take on some relevant characteristic that Winch had and I lack. What Diamond says in characterizing what it is for something to be a sentence in my language – 'i.e., a sentence with its logical relationships to other sentences of [my] language and its possibility of being either true or false' (p. 67) – rather uncharacteristically places logical categories in control of the possibility of a real human being making or understanding an assertion in context, rather than the other way around. To say that I could say what Winch did if I shared some of his characteristics is to say that I could imagine myself saying what he did if I imagined myself to be him instead of me – and if this is how logic takes the idea of what it is for *me* to say something, then I might wonder what logic had to do with me anyway. In a remark published in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein writes to himself:

40. Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 65.

> It is important for our view of things that someone may feel concerning certain persons that their inner life will always be a mystery to him. That he will never understand them. (Englishwomen in the eyes of Europeans.)[41]

It might seem fruitful to say that in cases where we understand another but cannot imagine ourselves saying what he does, or in cases where we feel like we could never understand him, our attribution of beliefs to him is 'different' than it is in the case where we can ourselves assert the same thing he does. Probably there are differences here; we will have to see the differences and similarities by describing cases, which we cannot do if we have a view of language that tells us that one of the things we want to describe here is fundamentally impossible. Furthermore, it is important to note that in a great number of cases, the question of whether I can *really* imagine myself to assert what the other person does when I am reporting his views simply does not arise.

With the philosophical schema of the *Tractatus* in hand, Conant describes Kierkegaard's attack on the 'monstrous illusion' of Christendom, an attack that employs a method of uncovering confused desires that he claims Kierkegaard shares with Wittgenstein. The disagreement there is between Kierkegaard and those whose definition of 'Christian' he wants to dispute cannot be a 'straightforward disagreement about matters of fact', but if it is not that, it seems that there must be some fundamental difficulty about characterizing Kierkegaard as disputing with them. Conant characterizes the 'disagreement' like this:

> Kierkegaard . . . does not take himself to be differing with his countrymen about what the word 'Christian' means. His claim is simply that by *their own lights* – if they reflect upon what it is to become a Christian and if they reflect upon their lives and get into focus how much of a claim Christianity actually exacts upon them – they will find that they are not Christians. They are tempted into various (categorical) confusions in order to disguise this fact from themselves. But, if provided with a perspicuous overview of the category of the religious, he thinks, they themselves will be in a position to acknowledge their confusions as confusions. . . .

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41. *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright; trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 74e. Winch often said in conversation that he would now translate '*Betrachtung*' not as 'view of things' but as 'considerations', or 'argument', in order to bring out the importance of this remark for Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Kierkegaard's procedure here closely resembles what Wittgenstein calls a 'grammatical investigation'.[42]

According to this passage, both Kierkegaard and his countrymen understand (on some level) what it is to be Christian. The demands of true Christianity being arduous, there is a temptation to disguise from oneself the fact that one fails to satisfy them: in this case there is a kind of systematic error available to one. One can think of the Christian life as a matter of following a set of commandments, and not as a matter of struggling with the significance of these command-ments within the relationship one has to the one who gives these commandments. I have said, summarizing Conant, that those Kierkegaard criticizes understand 'on some level', but obviously they do not understand on all levels. That is to say, they (for example) acknowledge in words that the gospel demands an attitude of love towards their neighbours – a task that is difficult and whose fulfil-ment makes demands on their entire way of living – but they live their lives most of the time as though they think nonetheless that they achieve the status of being Christians merely by virtue of being citizens of Denmark. This fact that they (sometimes at least) profess one thing and (at the same time) live another is presumably what leads Conant to say in this passage that they know by their own lights – these lights being ones that Kierkegaard shares – that they are not Christians, and in other passages to say either that they are completely confused about what it means to be a Christian (p. 273) or that what they mean and what Kierkegaard means are entirely different things (p. 274). Between thought and deed there is an equivocation: Kierkegaard merely needs to point out that defining a Christian both as one who lives in relationship with Christ and as one who lives in Denmark leaves us with 'Christian' an equivocal term. If you mean the one thing by 'Christian', you are not a Christian; if you mean the other, you are. Clarifying which one you mean might well involve a change in your whole way of speaking and living. It might not be possible to go on living life as you do and mean a certain thing by 'Christian'. Such a change might involve not so much counting claims you once made as false, but withdrawing them. It might, for example, involve handing the authority to judge whether you are or are not saved to someone else – there would, so to speak, no longer be a first-person conjugation for that particular verb.

42. Conant, 'Putting Two and Two Together', p. 267.

I am suggesting that there is a simplicity in this disagreement, such that it does not require any heavy consideration of the nature of attempting to do something that is not only impossible to do, but that is no thing at all (possible or impossible), but the simplicity must not be over-emphasized. What does make it look impossible to describe these cases where a person means sometimes one thing and sometimes another by his words is that our description of him as meaning the one or the other on any particular occasion must have reference to much that goes beyond each particular occasion. I can only establish that someone means one thing or the other by 'Christian' if I can refer to how he uses the word on a variety of different occasions, or, at least, if I can tie his use of the word to its use by a number of different people on a number of different occasions. If he uses the words differently on different occasions, I may have difficulty establishing exactly what he does mean on a particular occasion. But here there is no fundamental philosophical barrier to describing such a situation: I can say that, insofar as some considerations go, he means the one thing by 'Christian', and insofar as other things are taken into consideration, he means something else. Where criteria seem to clash like this, judgments will differ as to what it is a person does in fact mean by 'Christian'. There may well be cases where there is such a degree of inconsistency that we say he doesn't mean one thing or the other by his words: he is simply too confused to mean anything. Cases where criteria conflict and there is an indeterminacy in what we are going to say about them are not at all uncommon in our practices of speaking language and ascribing beliefs to one another. It is part of the fabric of our lives with concepts of belief and understanding, and not a violation of the fundamental logical structure of our life with language.[43] As Wittgenstein says in the *Investigations* of a case in which our definition of a proper name is unsettled:

> Should it be said that I am using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so am talking nonsense? – Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them there is a good deal that you will not say.) (§79)

The criterion 'lives in Denmark' is one whose application is tremendously different than the criterion 'lives in the light of the

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43. See Hertzberg, 'The Indeterminacy of the Mental', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 57 (1983), pp. 91–109.

gospels'. It is the depth of this difference that leads Conant to speak
of the error of confusing the two as 'categorical'. In order to describe
the 'categorical' difference, it is natural to speak in this context in
terms of internal and external perspectives: there is a fairly simple
procedure whereby I or anyone else can settle the question of
whether I am (or am not) a Dane; it is something that goes on
whether I pay attention to it, or cultivate it, or not; whether I treat it
as a source of pride or humility, whether or not I reflect on what it
means to be a Dane and live in accordance with the struggle that is
that reflection, and so on. None of those things could be said of
'living in accordance with the gospels'. Perhaps the depth of this dif-
ference makes it appear that we have here a real difference of logical
kind that any grammatical description of the different kinds of uses
of language ought to mark: what we have here, perhaps, is what the
later Wittgenstein tells us to classify as two different language-games.
But this would be a misunderstanding of the later Wittgenstein.
When the idea of classifying words into different kinds of uses
comes up early in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein objects: 'But how
we group words into kinds will depend on the aim of the classifica-
tion – and on our own inclination' (§17). Kierkegaard's aims are
served by such a distinction between the internal and the external,
but the 'internal/external' distinction cannot be pushed too far. A
deeper understanding of what it is to be a citizen of a country would
similarly bring in some of these 'internal' elements: I have little grasp
of what it means to be Canadian, for example, if I don't understand
what it is to live with the perpetual and over-stated identity crisis
that the question expresses; and it might be said that I have little
grasp on the nature of citizenry if I don't see it as demanding from
me a certain kind of engagement with my fellow-citizens, one that
has little to do with merely possessing a passport and much to do
with the form my life takes from day to day. It would still be wrong
to identify having such a relationship to the people around me with
being a Christian, of course; and there *might* still be such a tremen-
dous difference between being a citizen and being a Christian that
we would speak of it as categorical.

Perhaps it seems that the aim of our classification could be simply
to avoid confusion: a grammatical investigation, we might think,
needs to mark the distinction between (for example) religious con-
cepts and other concepts because people are inclined to confuse
them. But a philosophical exploration of what it is to be a member

of a religious community or a citizen of a country would be one that encompassed not just the characteristic disagreements surrounding it, but *also* the characteristic *confusions* surrounding it – not just what the disputed or confused points are, but what confusion looks like in these cases. Even more significantly, philosophical exploration will bring out the characteristic disagreements about what counts as disagreement and what counts as confusion. Such disagreements are absolutely typical of human conflict and human community. We can see this more clearly if we give a description of what it is for someone to utter a proposition that makes sense that is slightly more substantial than 'to make a claim about the world that might be true or false'. It draws us somewhat closer to the application of language in human life if we say that making sense of a proposition is a matter of seeing it as something that someone might seriously assert in conversation with another human being or in her own thoughts. Then we can see that struggles over whether something can or cannot be taken seriously as a contribution to debate are extremely common. The leader of the marginal Confederation of Regions party attempts to introduce the idea of a 'trial separation' to the unity debates in Canada; the mainstream political parties respond with 'Nonsense!' And the discussion turns to other possibilities. One might have had the same reaction ('Nonsense!') when the Parti Québecois introduced the term 'sovereignty association' in the 1970s. After all, it seemed to have nothing more going for it than that it attempted to combine two incompatible ideas. But that struggle played out differently, and 'sovereignty association' is now one of the only two options playing a serious role in the debate. A woman objects that a course of action planned by her husband will be a source of grief for their families; he responds with 'nonsense!' We might say that here he is expressing his determination that those sorts of responses in the people around him will not count as considerations in his own deliberations. Is that because he means something different by the word 'grief' than his wife does when she uses the word? He certainly uses it differently, and in particular reasons with it differently. But it would be highly artificial to say that he must therefore mean something different by it; it would in any case falsify the character of their disagreement to insist that logical clarity requires that she use one word where they now both use 'grief' and he use another. If it would falsify the character of their disagreement, it would not give us logical clarity. An investigation that describes sensitively particular

cases in order to remove philosophical blinders that prevent us from seeing the character of such disputes is a 'grammatical investigation' as understood by the later Wittgenstein. Conant's characterization of what a grammatical investigation would accomplish in the case of 'Christian' does indeed sound like the *Tractatus*, or the period of the *Blue and Brown Books*: the idea seems to be that philosophy will uncover where the boundary lines are settled, so that the question 'are you in or out?' can be faced properly, without illusion, etc. – and the answer to that question will then go however it goes, given the facts of the matter. Such an approach is, however, in opposition to the understanding expressed in the *Investigations*, according to which the variation in what might or might not count as coherence, meaning, contradiction and so on is part of the pattern of our lives with the concepts in question, the religious concepts *and* the concepts of meaning, coherence, understanding and so on, and the philosopher who arrives on the scene to 'sort things out' with his notions of meaning and coherence distorts rather than illuminates what we seek to understand. We can tell someone, as Conant seems to recommend in this article, that he commits a 'category-error' when he uses the same word for his feelings for his wife of twenty years' standing, for the place that the erotic occupies for them and its history in their marriage, and for his feelings for a woman he glimpses on the street or encounters in some brief sexual exchange, that he is using it both 'inside' and 'outside' 'the language-game' in which it has its home: or we can accept that it *is* for us characteristic of the terrain of these concepts that forms of human interaction that are in some ways fundamentally different should be brought together and into relation with one another under one word. And no grammatical investigation is going to sort out what it is to live coherently this dimension of our lives.

VII. Psychologism and the *Investigations*

Frege explicitly takes psychologism to be the idea that logic describes thoughts in the sense of 'what happens to run through people's heads', but his reasons for excluding 'the inner' from logic are reasons that exclude much more than that.[44] What Frege really sees

44. See 'Thoughts', in *Collected Papers*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 351–2.

as irrelevant to logic is any description of how people as a matter of fact happen to reason. Such things, Frege says in many places, are irrelevant to logic. Logic describes how people ought to think: people happen to think in all sorts of mistaken ways, and logic gets nowhere by describing that. Frege uses the notion of truth to draw a dividing line between logic and psychology: logic is interested in language insofar as its employment is aimed at the assertion of truths.

The *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* both agree with Frege in rejecting the view that meaning is constituted by some peculiar mental act from which the logical properties of language flow. And Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* too casts his net wider than this in hunting down the philosophical error of psychologism: no other mysterious mental act (for example, of thinking of *all* the uses of a word) constitutes meaning either.[45] But his net is not Frege's. Frege casts his net wider by saying that not only is what happens to be running through a person's head at a given time irrelevant to logic, any description of what goes on in a particular case as a particular person reasons (even if he should happen to reason correctly) is irrelevant to logic. Wittgenstein too would say that no description of what happens at a particular place and time describes what constitutes meaning – that is, describes what it is that endows words with logical powers. But such descriptions *are*, according to Wittgenstein and in opposition to Frege, descriptions of meaning. In the *Tractatus*, what has meaning is a part of a system of representation, and it is mastering that system of representation, a mastery that is demonstrated in its application, that is grasping meaning. The *Tractatus* view of the purpose of language suggests that there can be no such thing as a *description* of language in its application. His idea in the *Tractatus* is that there can only be translation from one application of language to another logically equivalent one. That is, one demonstrates one's mastery of a method of representation in applying it, which is a matter of making and evaluating assertions about the world; the attempt to say anything about the method of representation itself results at best in translations of assertions about the world made using that method of representation into assertions about the world made using another, logically equivalent, method of representation. The idea that there is something here that it is impossible to do – describe the application of a method of representation – goes along with the

45. See Diamond, 'Frege and Nonsense', p. 79.

Tractatus' view of the function of language: the general form of the proposition is 'such-and-such is the case'.

The *Tractatus* wants to understand this 'impossibility' in a non-metaphysical way: there is nothing about the meaning of individual words, and nothing about the nature of the world, and nothing about the powers of the human mind that rules out our being able to do some determinate thing here; on the contrary, the problem is that there is no determinate thing we are trying to do. To do this it must suppose a tight fit among all of the terms that we might use in these attempts to say what it is that rules out our doing what we imagine we want to do here. Making sense of an assertion is making sense of the demands it makes on the world in terms of its own truth or falsity: this is fundamental to language. All of the other terms must stand in transparent relationship to that: understanding a human being comes to no more than making sense of her assertions; understanding the meaning of a part of a proposition, again, is no different from understanding the demands made on the world by a great number of propositions that share that part in common; grasping an argument comes to no more than grasping the demands made on the world by the individual assertions that are truth-functionally combined in the argument. This is how the *Tractatus* denies that we can get anything out of logical considerations, or considerations about the capacity of the human mind, or considerations about the nature of reference, that can act as an a priori limitation on the possibility of our making sense of assertions. Making sense of assertions is fundamental; all the rest is parasitic on it. I have emphasized that Conant's and Diamond's reading of the *Tractatus* maintains as central to our understanding of it certain ideas at the heart of the modern semantic tradition: the close fit between what it is for something to express a possibility for truth or falsehood, and for it to be the sort of thing that enters into patterns of reasoning that are of interest to logic, and enters into our descriptions of human beings as thinking, and the close fit between the idea of the meaning of a word and the truth-values of the propositions in which it appears. Wittgenstein's goal in the *Tractatus* is to throw us back on our capacity for making sense of assertions in context whenever we want to look instead at the world, or logic, or names and the objects they stand for, or the capacities of the human mind for answers to philosophical questions: the emphasis on this in Conant and Diamond's work is well-placed. But for us to take the account of nonsense that underlies this approach to

rejecting metaphysics to be the best of the *Tractatus* and continuous with the *Investigations* requires us to accept many unlikely commitments about the transparency of terms like 'meaning', 'understanding', 'contradiction', 'argument', 'true' and 'false' – and, of course, the term 'nonsense'.

In each of the last two sections I took what Conant and Diamond had to say about these topics and how they said one had to apply words like 'meaning', 'argument', 'belief', and 'contradiction' in the descriptions of their examples. I approached their examples first by giving a somewhat fuller description of their surroundings than Conant and Diamond had given, or by giving a relevant simpler case and describing its surroundings, and reserving questions about the application of the semantic terms. When I came to those questions, I pointed out that some considerations might lead a person to apply these terms as Conant and Diamond do, and some might lead him in other directions. In this procedure I have been attempting to follow what Wittgenstein does in §1 of the *Investigations*: there he confronts philosophical statements about what the structures of language, meaning, etc. must be with a description of people using language, without raising or answering in the first instance the questions about meaning that drove the philosophical account.

The *Investigations* then moves in §2 to a description of a language that would be an affront to almost everything that the author of the *Tractatus* thought essential to language and to the *Tractatus'* understanding of what it is to refuse metaphysics: there is no such thing as making an assertion, and so no such thing as truth or falsity, and no such thing as negation; there is no such thing as attributing beliefs based on people's assertions; there are only single words, and so no composition of names into sentences. The builders' language contains nothing that the author of the *Tractatus* would recognize as a language. In §18, Wittgenstein blandly reassures the reader who thinks as he himself did in the *Tractatus*: 'Do not be troubled by the fact that languages (2) and (8) consist only of orders'. We might say that there is a commonality between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* in his concern to look at the application of language in human lives, and this is important. But then we must notice that he does not approach the idea of the application of language in human life with the instrument of the opposition between 'truth' and 'falsity' with which he is planning to distinguish between what is mere psychology and what properly belongs to logic or grammar.

It seems that we have nothing beyond the realm of empirical psychology in the builders' language-game, and nothing that has anything to do with logic, because we have nothing like the opposition between truth and falsity: that is, it seems that for the builders' language the only connection between the word and its meaning is simply that when people make these noises people respond to them in certain predictable ways. Falsehood – where the thing meant by the proposition does not exist, and so can hardly stand in a naturalistic relationship to what does the meaning – seems to mark the point at which empirical psychology can no longer give an account of language. What looks like falsehood first enters the builders' language in §41: there Wittgenstein imagines A giving B the name for a tool that is broken. In this language-game, with no distinction between single words and sentences, a name whose bearer is broken stands in for a proposition that asserts something false. There is no suggestion here in the *Investigations* that we have at this moment passed from psychology to logic: instead, Wittgenstein describes the different possible ways such an event might or might not be encompassed in the language, and gives descriptions no different from the descriptions that have come before. He imagines several cases in which one *might* say that the sign is now meaningless – where B stands at a loss, or shows A the broken tool, or where a name simply falls out of use when a new name is given to a tool. The italicized 'might' is Wittgenstein's: his entire philosophy does not hang on whether we say that the sign is meaningless or retains a meaning. If we do say it has become meaningless, it is because of these features of the lives of the people using the language, features which he has described, not because we have come through a process in which we come to realize that there is no thing we desire when we desire to say that they mean something by this word. On the other hand, B might shake his head in reply, and here we have something like the negation of the *Tractatus*, where we preserve a false sentence by using it with a negation sign to say something true. Wittgenstein imagines in the next section that made-up names for non-existent tools might be a kind of joke between the builders. Are we to count the response of laughter as a form of negation and so a logical operation, or is it purely psychological, or is it a response to nonsense, insofar as the one who laughs takes up the imaginary viewpoint from which the name that has been given no use appears to have brought one with it? The depth of the criticism given here of the *Tractatus* cannot be

over-emphasized: where the *Tractatus* saw an operation that brought us entirely out of the realm of psychology and into the realm of the logical, the *Investigations* poses a variety of possibilities, none of which is more fundamental to language than the other: a shake of the head, for example, or laughter. Even where one of the possibilities expresses the name's remaining a part of language (a shake of the head) and another expresses its no longer being a part of language (standing at a loss), there is no difference here in whether or not we can *describe* the application of language in the two cases.

Conant and Diamond appeal to this passage in the *Investigations* in support of their view of the undifferentiated nature of nonsense:

> When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation. (§500)

This passage comes at the end of a number of discussions that challenge the distinction between the psychological and the logical. The §§490s place in question the feeling that if a mechanism standing behind the response of a person to a command were described, the command would lose its character as a sentence. In §492, he writes:

> To invent a language could mean to invent an instrument for a particular purpose on the basis of the laws of nature (or consistently with them); but it also has the other sense, analogous to that in which we speak of the invention of a game.
> Here I am saying something about the grammar of the word 'language', by connecting it with the grammar of the word 'invent'.

What is being said about the grammar of the word 'language' here is that very different sorts of things are called 'language', in particular, things that are very differently related to the laws of nature, and so, presumably, to any science that gives those laws. But if we want to place a great deal of weight on the opposition that is apparently set up in this paragraph between rules for games and natural laws, we should remember what he writes in §54: one of the senses in which we say that a game is played according to a definite rule is that 'an observer can read these rules off from the practice of the game – like a natural law governing the play'. And when the interlocutor objects that (to give the point in philosophical jargon) this leaves normativity out, Wittgenstein appeals to 'the behavior characteristic of correcting a slip of the tounge'. The account of sense and nonsense

appealed to in §500 cannot be underwritten by a strong distinction between the psychological and the logical.

§500 is preceded by the following crucial discussion, which casts a light on it quite different from the one Conant and Diamond encourage us to see in it:

> To say 'This combination of words makes no sense' excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players be supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may shew where the property of one man ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for. (§499)

This does not of course simply say that we can have different motivations for excluding something as nonsense; it says that what it looks like, *what it is*, to exclude something as nonsense can vary. That this statement should be placed by Wittgenstein immediately before the statement that when a proposition is called senseless, it is not its sense that is senseless, but a combination of words is excluded from the language, seems to be a strong warning from the perspective of his later thought that the frame of the *Tractatus* is not the expression of a clear grasp on the part of the author of the *Tractatus* of what it is to label some use of language 'nonsense' – and to intend thereby to express an opposition to metaphysics. Where the *Tractatus* offers us only the options of 'rejecting' a proposition in such a way that we keep it by forming a true negated proposition from it (i.e. 'rejecting' it as false), or rejecting it in such a way that we completely lose interest in the combination of words, the *Investigations* says that the bare formula 'excluding a combination of words from the language' can signify many different ways of operating with, or not operating with, that combination of words. What §500 in combination with §499 gives us is not the idea of *einfacher Unsinn*, but the idea of *vielfältiger Unsinn*. And if nonsense is *vielfältig*, then it is not all essentially the same as 'piggly-wiggle'.

If 'nonsense' (and hence 'sense' and 'understanding' and so on) are not single things, and not all-or-nothing matters, then the question of whether we 'grasp' the propositions of the *Tractatus* does not need to land us in a paradox. In some ways, these propositions resemble

other propositions that we uncontroversially understand, in their appearances, in the ways we treat them, and how they enter into our conversations with one another; in some ways they do not.

Diamond can say nothing about our attraction to nonsensical phrases beyond the role that a psychologistic account of meaning plays in aiding and abetting such attraction, nothing that does not reproduce the claustrophobic feeling of the *Tractatus*.[46] What is missing in that account is how in the world we should ever have mistaken this attraction to words and this psychological association as *meaning* in the first place. Why should that appearance be the *appearance of meaning*? She speaks of illusion, but what is the illusion involved in simply mistakenly thinking that associating a mental image with a word is giving it a meaning? I am posing the issue of §§354–5 of the *Investigations*. Much of the *Investigations* is devoted to a deep consideration of what goes into the appearance of meaning being just that. People take what we might call meaningless words to have meaning because what really are criteria – logical features of language – in some contexts can be over-ruled in others and thereby appear to be 'mere psychological surroundings' (that is, symptoms) of language. As Wittgenstein says in §354:

> The fluctuation in grammar between criteria and symptoms makes it look as if there were nothing at all but symptoms.

That nothing on its own has the power to produce the logical properties of language – that we can imagine situations in which *this* criterion is given the lie by other considerations – makes it appear that all such phenomena are merely externally related to logic: permitting their description into logic would be psychologism. Rejecting that view gives one the perspective from which to see that the sources of our illusions that something means something are the sorts of features of language that are indeed logically significant. If we are to make any distinction between error and illusion, then surely we have to be able to speak of criteria, genuine criteria, as sometimes being given too much, or the wrong kind, or a distorting kind of emphasis.

A particularly interesting example of something the *Investigations* is willing to treat as a logical feature of language in opposition to the *Tractatus* appears shortly after our §§499–500. Diamond and Conant

46. See Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 71.

need to think that the tendency to use 'the same sign' where we have what are, in fact, logically distinct symbols is merely psychological and unimportant to logic. Where our application of the same word in rather different contexts is apt to confuse the philosopher, we can clarify things by substituting different words, or simply by pointing out that it is inessential that we use the same word in these contexts, the thought goes. The *Investigations* treats the fact that we care about words in such a way as to unify extremely diverse phenomena under them as a phenomenon of logical interest, that is, something that characterizes our relation to language in ways important to the treatment of philosophical puzzles. Wittgenstein writes:

> §531 We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)
> In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)
> §532 Then has 'understanding' two different meanings here? I would rather say that these kinds of use of 'understanding' make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding.
> For I *want* to apply the word 'understanding' to all this.

That we should *want* to apply the same word in these cases where logical investigation might tell us to distinguish different uses – and keep them clear with different signs (*Tractatus* 3.325) – is something that logical investigation in a deeper sense ought to note and respect as a phenomenon that characterizes what it is for us to speak a language.

VIII. Conclusion

Any attempt at *Tractatus* exegesis must come to some terms with its anti-metaphysical thrust and with its 'frame' that warns us that it speaks nonsense: coming to terms with them, however, might not mean taking them at face value. So far we have two anti-metaphysical slogans: 'the logic of language must be seen in its application', and 'the propositions of philosophy are simply nonsense'. We need to be conscious of the possibility that the application of these slogans by Wittgenstein in the period of the *Tractatus* – indeed, his very ten-

dency to insist on them and to expect them to bear great weight in dispelling philosophical problems – might be conditioned by a problematic understanding of their key terms, 'nonsense' and 'the application of language'. What we need is to maintain the measured appreciation of pictures and slogans in philosophy – how they can illuminate and mislead – that Wittgenstein's later writings teach us. It is hard to see what the *face value* of the central methodological image of the *Tractatus* is. The image of a ladder that, once climbed, must be thrown away is a problematic one. Conant and Diamond's suggestion for how to place this in the centre of our exegesis is that we must realize that the ladder must be *completely* thrown away at the end, that the propositions in question are *completely* nonsensical. But, as is often the case in philosophy, intensifiers mask more than they clarify. If we treat the question of how much weight the notion of nonsense can bear as the question of whether there is a part of the *Tractatus* that must not be jettisoned but must be kept, whether there is a part of the *Tractatus* that is nonsense without Wittgenstein's being aware that it is nonsense, or whether the whole thing must be discarded, the central problem is still slipping through our fingers. I have argued in this paper that the more important question is how we are to understand this metaphorical talk of 'throwing things away', 'excluding them' from language. The second question places in doubt one's sense of the importance of the first question.

While Conant and Diamond are right that it is wrong and misleading to say that we have to *grasp* the truth of the propositions of the *Tractatus* in order to reach the point of seeing that they cannot be stated, still we can note that one is not going to get very far in the *Tractatus* if one stops at the first line and asks when and where in human life we actually talk about 'the world' and what variety there is in the different cases that are brought together by the locution 'something's being the case'. The image of the ladder encourages a very different treatment of philosophical statements than the careful, repeated scrutiny of words and gestures and their contexts that is suggested by his later image of a traveller criss-crossing a landscape in various different directions, and the treatment encouraged by the image of the *Tractatus* must be treated critically, whether we call it 'grasping ineffable truths', or 'imaginatively entering into the taking of nonsense for sense', or anything else. This change in methodology from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* also implies a change in status for the question 'is this or is this not nonsense?'

The *Tractatus* meets its opponent on its opponent's ground: at the very least, it says that if one is going to make a choice between the world being composed of objects and the world being composed of facts, one must take the second option: the world is composed of facts. Whether Wittgenstein's motivation for saying that the world is composed of facts is linguistic rather than ontological, and whether we say that his commitment to it is part of the process that will lead us to reject all such talk of facts and objects, he requires our provisional commitment to it. If we dispute that point, and do not accept what Wittgenstein says here, we will never reach the top of the ladder, and never come to the point where we throw away the idea that it makes sense to dispute whether the world is composed of facts or objects at all. It is for this reason that I said at the outset that the *Tractatus* invites the metaphysical reading, the reading that says there is such a thing as substantive nonsense. The *Investigations*, on the contrary, describes a language from whose point of view it might make sense to say that the world is composed of objects (the builders' language-game); it also describes a language-game for which it might make sense to say that the world is composed of facts (the simples language-game of §48). It refuses to take the stand that if we are going to introduce this vocabulary of facts and objects, then we must say the one thing or the other about language as such, or about any particular language.

We do the *Investigations* a disservice if we read into it the *Tractatus'* problematic understanding of 'nonsense', and we do the *Tractatus* a disservice if we treat its treatment of the nature of nonsense as its most important and plausible feature. 'Passing from disguised to patent nonsense' as the *Investigations* conceives it (§464) is not showing that, as far as logic goes, 'everything is identical to itself' is *essentially the same* as 'piggly-wiggle'. We can set a piece of patent nonsense beside a bit of philosophy; we can discuss the similarities and differences between the two of them: the similarities will go however far they go, and the differences will go however far they go. How far this is has to be seen in particular cases, and people will to *some* extent differ in their responses. That we should accept that as much or more light should be shed on the philosophical utterance by comparing it to a piece of patent nonsense than could be had by refusing to see the former in comparison with the latter, that we should pass from disguised to patent nonsense in the sense of taking such a comparison to heart and finding it interesting: this is all the

Investigations asks of us with the phrase 'passing from disguised to patent nonsense'.[47]

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47. This is in disagreement with how Diamond reads this phrase in light of things Wittgenstein is reported to have said in 1935. 'What Nonsense Might Be', pp. 106–107.