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ELUCIDATION AND NONSENSE IN FREGE AND EARLY WITTGENSTEIN

James Conant

This paper is excerpted from a manuscript in which James Conant argues that Wittgenstein's famous closing description of sentences of the Tractatus as nonsensical draws on a conception of nonsense at odds with the conceptions at play in a couple of standard interpretations. Conant describes these interpretations as (i) positivist interpretations which depict Wittgenstein as furnishing a method for distinguishing meaningful from meaningless discourse and which depict him, further, as using this method to reveal metaphysical claims as inherently nonsensical and (ii) ineffability interpretations which agree with positive interpretations in characterizing Wittgenstein as furnishing a method for distinguishing meaningful from meaningless discourse but disagree with positive interpretations in so far as they suggest that he does so with an eye toward illuminating metaphysical claims which, while they cannot properly be put into words, nevertheless remain accessible to thought. Conant claims that we can arrive at a more faithful account both of how Wittgenstein uses "nonsense" as a term of philosophical appraisal and also of what he means when he says that the nonsensical sentences of the Tractatus serve as "elucidations" if we recognize that Wittgenstein's renderings of the notions of nonsense and elucidation are the product of his efforts to refashion Fregean construals of them. The part of Conant's manuscript included here isolates as far as possible his account of how the Tractatus can be understood as Wittgenstein's reshaping of lines of thought inherited from Frege.

A.C., ed.

This paper aspires to supply two of the pieces of the puzzle which need to be in place before we can make out the point of the famous penultimate section of the *Tractatus*:¹

My propositions serve as *elucidations* in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as *nonsensical*, when he has used them—as steps—to climb out through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)²

This passage tells a reader of the work what he must "eventually recognize" in order to understand its author. No understanding of the *Tractatus* is possible apart from an

understanding of what this passage asks of its reader—apart, that is, from an understanding of what the authorial strategy of the work as a whole is. Wittgenstein says of Carnap that he failed to understand this passage and *therefore* failed to understand “the fundamental conception of the whole book.”³ What did Carnap fail to understand, and how did that failure lead him to misunderstand the fundamental conception of the whole book? Two important terms occur in this passage. Not only Carnap, but several subsequent generations of commentators have paid insufficient heed to what the *Tractatus* itself has to say about how these terms (as deployed within the work) are to be understood. The two terms in question are:

- (1) to elucidate [*erläutern*]
- (2) nonsense [*Unsinn*]

This paper is about how to understand these two words in the *Tractatus*. Only once we understand the specific valence these terms have in this work will we be in a position to understand what the *Tractatus* says (in §6.54) about its method.

In §4.112 of the *Tractatus*, we are told that a work of philosophy “consists essentially of elucidations.” “Philosophy” here means: philosophy as practiced by the author of the *Tractatus*. The notion of elucidation is tied in §4.112 to the idea of philosophy being a certain kind of *activity*: “Philosophy is not a theory [*Lehre*] but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations” (§4.112). The word “*Lehre*”—which Ogden translates as “theory”—is rendered as “body of doctrine” by Pears and McGuinness.⁴ Wittgenstein claims that the work of philosophy, as he pursues it, does not consist in putting forward a doctrine but rather in offering elucidations.⁵ This provides a criterion of adequacy that must be met by any textually faithful account of what Wittgenstein means by “elucidation”: it must be able to illuminate how Wittgenstein could intelligibly have thought that the philosophical work accomplished by the *Tractatus* “consists essentially of elucidations”—where “elucidation” is the name of an activity which contrasts with the (conventional philosophical) activity of presenting the reader with a doctrine. When Wittgenstein says (in §4.112) that a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations, the term “elucidation” is a rendering of the same German word [*Erläuterung*] which occurs in §6.54 and which also, as we shall see in a moment, figures pertinently in Frege’s writings.⁶

We are told in §6.54 that the author’s propositions serve as elucidations by *our*—that is, the reader—coming to *recognize* them as nonsensical. But how can the recognition that a proposition is *nonsense* ever elucidate—ever shed light on—anything? Evidently we need a better understanding of how this work thinks about nonsense. We need to look closely at those passages in which the work tells us what it takes *Unsinn* to be and, in particular, what it tells us it takes it *not* to be. This is what the *Tractatus* has to say about what is distinctive about its own conception of nonsense:

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

(§5.4733)

Wittgenstein here contrasts a formulation of Frege's⁷ with one of his own. At first blush, it is hard to see how they differ. The critical difference between Frege's formulation and the one which the *Tractatus* endorses is that the former implicitly distinguishes between those propositions that are legitimately constructed and those that are not, while the latter rejects the idea that there is such a thing as a logically illegitimately constructed proposition: "Every *possible* proposition is legitimately constructed." It is this difference (that Wittgenstein sees between his own view and Frege's) that we need to understand. As this passage suggests—and as the preface of the *Tractatus* makes clear—a good place to seek further understanding is "the great works of Frege."⁸

1 The neglect of Frege?

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has captured the interest and excited the admiration of many, yet almost all that has been published about it has been wildly irrelevant. If this has had any one cause, that cause has been the neglect of Frege.... In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein assumes, and does not try to stimulate, an interest in the kind of questions that Frege wrote about.

G.E.M. Anscombe⁹

How can the neglect of Frege be the reason why much of the commentary on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is wildly irrelevant to a proper understanding of that work? What more widely accepted platitude about the book could there be, than that it develops and responds to ideas put forward by Frege and Russell? But Anscombe's point presumably is not that Frege is seldom mentioned in discussions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Her point must rather be that we do not know who Frege is for the author of the *Tractatus*—an appreciation of that work presupposes an immersion in a certain philosophical background ("an interest in the kind of questions that Frege wrote about") which most of the commentary on that work has lost sight of. It is not that we are unfamiliar with Frege's or Wittgenstein's texts, but that we have failed to see what it is that is at issue in them. We fail to get hold of the questions which figure most centrally in these texts and of *the kind of questions* these questions are for Frege and for Wittgenstein. One aim of this paper is to draw attention to two aspects of that background (there are others¹⁰) of which we have lost sight: Frege's thought about the character of philosophical nonsense and Frege's conception of elucidation.

The central claim of this paper can be summarized as follows: Wittgenstein saw a tension in Frege's thought between two different conceptions of nonsense, which I shall call the *substantial conception* and the *austere conception* respectively. The substantial conception distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought. Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way—it expresses a logically incoherent thought. According to the substantial conception, these two kinds of nonsense are logically distinct: the former is mere gibberish, whereas the latter involves (what commentators on the *Tractatus* are fond of calling) a "violation of logical syntax." The austere conception, on the other hand, holds that mere nonsense is, from a

logical point of view, the only kind of nonsense there is. Along with these two different conceptions of nonsense go two different conceptions of elucidation: according to the substantial conception, the task of elucidation is to “show” something which cannot be said;¹¹ according to the austere conception, it is to show that we are prone to an illusion of meaning something when we mean nothing. The *Tractatus* is standardly read as championing the substantial conception. This is to mistake the bait for the hook—to mistake the target of the work for its doctrine. On the reading of the *Tractatus* I shall try to sketch here, the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving the tension in Frege’s thought between these two conceptions of nonsense in favor of the austere view.¹² The strategy of the *Tractatus* is to short-circuit Frege’s view from within, by bringing these two halves of Frege’s thought in immediate proximity with each other.

The substantial conception of nonsense represents the common ground between the positivist and ineffability interpretations of the *Tractatus*. (It is in opting for this conception, according to the *Tractatus*, that the crucial move in the philosophical conjuring trick is made and it is the one that we are apt to think most innocent.) This tiny patch of common ground can seem insignificant in comparison with the vehemence with which the ineffability interpretation laments the obtuseness of the positivist interpretation (epitomized by its failure to allow for the possibility of illuminating nonsense) and the equal vehemence with which the positivist interpretation rejects the mysticism of the ineffability interpretation (epitomized by its hankering after ineffable forms of insight¹³). In seeking to emphasize their differences from one another, proponents of the two interpretations tend to articulate the details of the substantial conception in apparently distinct ways. It will therefore help to distinguish between two (apparently distinct) variants of the substantial conception. I shall term these the *positivist variant* and the *ineffability variant* (after the readings of the *Tractatus* in which they respectively figure).¹⁴ According to the former variant, violations of logical syntax are a kind of *linguistic* phenomenon: identifying a violation of logical syntax is a matter of isolating a certain kind of (logically ill-formed) linguistic string. According to the latter variant, a violation of logical syntax is a kind of phenomenon which can only transpire in the medium of thought and necessarily eludes the medium of language. Though proponents of the ineffability variant hold that language is powerless to express such thoughts, they nonetheless deem language an indispensable tool for “conveying” such thoughts. They hold that language can “hint” at what it cannot say.

Before we turn to how the *Tractatus* seeks to resolve the tension in Frege’s thought between the substantial and austere conceptions of nonsense, it will help first to see that Frege can be read as a champion not only of the substantial conception *per se* but specifically of the ineffability variant.¹⁵ To see this requires that we see how what is typically taken to be the central and most original doctrine of the *Tractatus*—the doctrine that there are certain insights which can only be “shown” and cannot be said—can be discerned (by some readers of Frege) to be a central doctrine of Frege’s philosophy. That such a doctrine already figures in Frege’s thought has been argued particularly forcefully by Peter Geach; and, indeed, Geach attributes the occurrence of such a doctrine in the *Tractatus* to the influence of Frege:

[Reflection upon ‘the great works of Frege’...can never be out of place for anybody who seriously wants to understand Wittgenstein.... The influence of Frege on Wittgenstein was pervasive and life-long, and it is not of course just confined to places where Frege is mentioned by name or overtly referred to.... [Fundamental aspects of the Wittgensteinian saying/showing contrast are already to be discerned in Frege’s writings.¹⁶

I think Geach is right to think that Wittgenstein found in Frege a conception of what cannot be said but only “shown”—and that the *Tractatus* has therefore been credited in putting forward such a conception with an originality to which it cannot justly lay claim. Geach continues:

Paradoxical as is the doctrine of aspects of reality that come out but cannot be propositionally expressed, it is hard to see any viable alternative to it so long as we confine ourselves to philosophy of logic: and in this domain Wittgenstein revised Frege’s views without unfaithfulness to Frege’s spirit.¹⁷

Geach here attributes a certain doctrine to both Frege and the *Tractatus*: the doctrine that there are *certain aspects of reality* that cannot be expressed in language but can nonetheless be conveyed through certain sorts of employment of language. I think Geach is mistaken in supposing that the *Tractatus* seeks simply to incorporate this Fregean doctrine into its own teaching. That is to say, I think Geach is right to find this doctrine propounded where most commentators have failed to look for it (namely in Frege), and wrong to find it propounded where most commentators assume they are supposed to look for it (namely in the *Tractatus*). I shall therefore be concerned to argue that the *Tractatus*, in its criticism of Fregean doctrines, seeks to mount a criticism of the very doctrines which are standardly attributed to it.

In order to see this, we first need to refrain from speaking about the distinction between saying and showing in the usual loose fashion. Where most commentators on the *Tractatus* discern only one distinction, we need to see that there are two different distinctions at work. A version of each of these distinctions is already at play in Frege’s work. But these distinctions are drawn in Frege’s work in such a way as to be deeply entangled in one another, whereas they are refashioned in the *Tractatus* in a manner which allows them to become disentangled. The first distinction is drawn *within* the body of meaningful propositions. (Thus, according to this first sense, only meaningful propositions can *show*.) The second distinction marks off, from various ways of employing language, a particular way of employing (apparently meaningful) sentence-like structures—an employment which “takes as its object” (what Wittgenstein calls in his letter to Ogden) “philosophic matters.”¹⁸ (Thus, according to this second sense of “show,” nonsense can show.¹⁹) The first of these distinctions is (at least terminologically) the more familiar and notorious of the two: it is (the one which gets called in the *Tractatus*) the distinction between saying and showing (or more precisely, in Tractarian jargon, the distinction between what a *proposition* says and what it shows).²⁰ The second distinction is relatively neglected and is the one with which the rest of this paper is concerned. It is a distinction between two different kinds of use of language:²¹ constative uses,²² in which a proposition states what is the case (or, in Tractarian jargon, represents a state of

affairs) and elucidatory uses, in which an apparently constative use of language (one which offers an appearance of representing a state of affairs) is revealed as illusory.²³ It is primarily through the manner in which the *Tractatus* reshapes the second of these Fregean distinctions that the criticism of Frege is mounted. Only once we understand how the *Tractatus* seeks to modify Frege's conception of elucidation [*Erläuterung*] will we be in a position to understand what the *Tractatus* means to say about itself when it declares that it is a work which "consists essentially of elucidations."²⁴

2 Frege on concept and object

The style of my sentences is extraordinarily strongly influenced by Frege. And if I wanted to, I could establish this influence where at first sight no one would see it.

(Wittgenstein²⁵)

Here is how Geach summarizes the region of Frege's thought that is "revised without unfaithfulness" in (what he takes to be) the Tractarian distinction between saying and "showing":

Frege...held...that there are logical category-distinctions which will clearly show themselves in a well-constructed formalized language, but which cannot properly be asserted in language: the sentences in which we seek to convey them in the vernacular are logically improper and admit of no translation into well-formed formulas of symbolic logic.²⁶

Frege's favorite example of a logical-category distinction which clearly shows itself in a well-constructed formalized language (but which "cannot properly be asserted in language") is the distinction between concept and object—and it is an example which continued to exercise Wittgenstein throughout his life.²⁷ For something to be an object (or a concept), for Frege, is not for it to possess certain metaphysical or psychological characteristics, but rather for it to belong to a particular logical category. Frege takes it to be "a sure sign" of confusion if logic seems to stand in "need of metaphysics or psychology."²⁸

Frege's most famous discussion of the distinction between concept and object is his article entitled "On Concept and Object"—an article which is structured around his reply to an objection put forward by Benno Kerry.²⁹ Kerry objects to Frege's claim that concepts cannot be objects and objects cannot be concepts. Kerry proposes as a counter-example to Frege's claim the statement "the concept *horse* is a concept easily attained." This statement seems to assert that something—the concept *horse*—falls under a concept (namely, that of being a concept easily attained). Now anything which falls under a (first-level) concept must—on Frege's conception of an object—be an object. That is what it is to be an object for Frege—to be the kind of a thing of which concepts can be predicated. So, for Frege, the grammatical subject of Kerry's statement—the concept *horse*—(since it falls under a concept) must be an object. But, if what the statement says is true, then it is a concept easily attained; and if it is a concept easily attained then it is a kind of a concept. The two prongs of

Kerry's argument, based on his putative counter-example, can thus be summarized as follows: (a) given Frege's conception of what it is to be an object, we have reason (by virtue of its logical role in the statement) to conclude that "the concept *horse*" is an object; and (b) given the (apparent) truth of what the statement itself asserts, we have reason to conclude that it is a concept. So Kerry concludes that his statement furnishes us with an example of something—the concept *horse*—that is both an object and a concept.

Frege's article responding to Kerry begins with the following remark:

The word 'concept' is used in various ways; its sense is sometimes psychological, sometimes logical, and perhaps sometimes a confused mixture of both. Since this license exists, it is natural to restrict it by requiring that when once a usage is adopted it shall be maintained. What I decided was to keep to the strictly logical use.... It seems to me that Kerry's misunderstanding results from his unintentionally confusing his own usage of the word 'concept' with mine. This readily gives rise to contradictions, for which my usage is not to blame.³⁰

Frege insists here that he uses the word "concept" in "a strictly logical sense" and that Kerry's misunderstanding of his view is due to his failure to appreciate this. In particular, Frege will charge that Kerry's apparent counter-example is generated by equivocating between "a strictly logical" and (what Frege will call) a "psychological" sense of the term "concept."³¹ But what is it to use the word "concept" in a strictly logical sense? This question is best approached through a consideration of Frege's three principles (which he presents at the beginning of his *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*):

In the enquiry that follows, I have kept to three fundamental principles:

- [1] always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
- [2] never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition;
- [3] never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object.³²

Each of these principles is reworked and plays a central role in the *Tractatus*. These three principles are closely linked: to deny any one of them is to deny each of the other two. Frege himself immediately goes on to explicate how a denial of the first principle leads to a denial of the second:

In compliance with the first principle, I have used the word "idea" always in the psychological sense, and have distinguished ideas from concepts and from objects. If the second principle is not observed, one is almost forced to take as the meanings of words mental pictures or acts of the individual mind, and so to offend against the first principle as well.³³

If we disobey the second principle and ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, we shall look for an answer in the realm of the psychological—we shall explain what it

is for a term to have a meaning in terms of mental accompaniments (such as the psychological associations the word carries with it), or in terms of mental acts (such as the linguistic intention with which we utter it); and *that* will constitute a violation of the first principle.

Underlying these principles is a doctrine of the primacy of judgment. Frege writes: "I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form a thought or judgment; I come by the parts of a thought by analyzing the thought."³⁴ Frege here opposes an extremely intuitive view of how we come by a thought: namely, by taking hold of its independently thinkable components and putting them together so as to form a coherent whole.³⁵ The sort of "parts"³⁶ which are at issue here are only to be identified by comparing and contrasting the logical structure of whole propositions and seeing how the respective "parts" resemble and differ from one another in the contributions they make to the respective wholes.³⁷ Here is one of Frege's many exhortations to the reader not to lose sight of the primacy of the propositional whole over its parts:

[W]e ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning. It may be that mental pictures float before us all the while, but these need not correspond to the logical elements in the judgement. It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on the parts also their content.³⁸

In order to determine the meaning of a word, according to Frege, we need to discover what contribution it makes to the sense of a proposition in which it figures. We need to know what logical role it plays in the context of a judgment.³⁹ What we want to discover is thus not to be seen at all, if we look at the mere isolated word rather than at the working parts of the proposition in action.⁴⁰ Thus, for example, the mere fact that the words at the beginning of Kerry's sentence purport to refer to (something called) "the concept *horse*" hardly suffices, by Frege's lights, to ensure that they indeed successfully refer to a concept. When Frege insists that he is going to keep to a strictly logical use of the word "concept," he is declaring his interest in how a certain kind of working part of a judgment—what he calls the unsaturated or predicative part—contributes to the sense of a judgment as a whole.⁴¹

There are no symbols for terms such as "function," "concept" and "object" in Frege's *Begriffsschrift*. Nevertheless, these terms play an ineliminable role in his explanations of his symbolism. He thinks that an understanding of these terms is required if one is to master the notation of the symbolism and properly understand its significance. Yet he also insists that what he thus wishes to draw our attention to—when he employs, for example, the word "concept" in its strictly logical sense—is not something which can be properly defined. It can only be exhibited through (what Frege calls) an elucidation.⁴² Such elucidations, in turn, play only a transitional role: once they have successfully conveyed the logical distinctions which form the basis of Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, we are to see that there is no way to express the thoughts which they (appear to be attempting to) convey in a *Begriffsschrift*.⁴³ Yet if we appreciate the logically fundamental character of the distinctions upon which Frege's *Begriffsschrift* is based then we will see that anything which can be thought can be expressed in *Begriffsschrift*. In grasping the distinction between that

which can and that which cannot be expressed in a *Begriffsschrift*, we furnish ourselves with a logically precise articulation of the distinction between that which (“in a strictly logical sense”) is, and that which is not, a *thought*. Thus Frege’s elucidations are meant to play the role of a ladder which we are to climb up and then throw away.⁴⁴ Frege might have said about his own elucidatory remarks, echoing §6.54 of the *Tractatus*: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: he who understands me recognizes that my propositions cannot be expressed in my *Begriffsschrift*, once he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has used it to climb up to my *Begriffsschrift*”

3 Fregean elucidation

God can do everything, it is true, but there is one thing He cannot do, and that is speak nonsense.

(Leo Tolstoy⁴⁵)

The distinction between elucidation and definition in Frege rests upon a prior distinction between what is primitive and what is defined in a theory. Any theoretical term which is not susceptible of a formal definition requires elucidation. Every science must employ some primitive terms whose meanings must be presupposed from the outset. Even in a logically perfect language there will be some terms which are not (and cannot) be introduced by definition and which must remain undefinable. The purpose of elucidations is to convey the meanings of such terms:

Definitions proper must be distinguished from elucidations. In the first stages of any discipline we cannot avoid the use of ordinary words. But these words are, for the most part, not really appropriate for scientific purposes, because they are not precise enough and fluctuate in their use. Science needs technical terms that have precise and fixed meanings, and in order to come to an understanding about these meanings and exclude possible misunderstanding, we give elucidations [*Erläuterungen*] of their use.⁴⁶

In “On Concept and Object,” Frege is concerned with only one species of the genus elucidation, namely the activity of elucidating what is *logically* primitive.⁴⁷ When one is engaged in this particular species of elucidation Frege thinks one is compelled to come out with sentences which cannot be translated into a proper *Begriffsschrift*.

One might ask: doesn’t Frege furnish us with examples of statements which define what a concept or an object is? Frege will answer that nothing his own sentences (appear to) assert about the nature of concepts or objects can ever, without entering into a confusion, be taken as (a contribution to) a definition of what kind of a thing a concept or an object is.⁴⁸ For something to count as a definition, for Frege, it must be possible to invoke it in proofs. Wherever the *definiendum* occurs in a sentence, it must be possible to replace it with the *definiens*. Nothing of the sort is possible, Frege maintains, for those terms occurring in his elucidatory remarks which refer to logically primitive categories.⁴⁹ Their meaning must be presupposed from the outset. The most one can do is to

lead the reader to what is meant by such terms—what it is one's words are trying to gesture at—by means of a series of *hints*.⁵⁰ Early on in his reply to Kerry, Frege insists upon the ineliminable role of hints in offering an elucidation of that which is logically fundamental and hence indefinable:

Kerry contests what he calls my definition of 'concept'. I would remark, in the first place, that my explanation is not meant as a proper definition. One cannot require that everything shall be defined, any more than one can require that a chemist shall decompose every substance. What is simple cannot be decomposed, and what is logically simple cannot have a proper definition. Now something logically simple is no more given to us at the outset than most of the chemical elements are; it is reached only by means of scientific work. If something has been discovered that is simple, or at least must count as simple for the time being, we shall have to coin a term for it, since language will not originally contain an expression that exactly answers. On the introduction of a name for what is logically simple, a definition is not possible; there is nothing for it but to lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the word as it is intended.⁵¹

Yet only a few lines further on, Frege offers something which has the appearance of offering a specification of the meaning of the term "concept": "A concept (as I understand the word) is predicative. On the other hand, a name of an object, a proper name, is quite incapable of being used as a grammatical predicate."⁵² Frege immediately goes on to say: "This admittedly needs elucidation, otherwise it might appear false." The term "elucidation" here stands for the activity of leading the reader by means of hints to what is intended by a term which denotes something logically primitive. This requires not only that we count on the patience and goodwill of our audience while we encourage them to guess at our intended meaning, but also that—here in the antechamber to that most precise of all sciences: the science of logic—we resort to figurative modes of expression (for example, to talk about objects being "saturated" and concepts being "unsaturated"⁵³). Worse still, Frege thinks that in the elucidation of logically primitive notions (such as that of *concept* or *object*) there is an ineliminable role to be played by (the artful employment of) nonsense.⁵⁴ According to Frege, in elucidating the meaning of terms such as "object" and "concept," we attempt to help our audience to latch on to the intended meaning of a term for something logically fundamental by coming out with forms of expression that misfire, and then helping our audience to see how and why they misfire.

It is of crucial importance when offering such an elucidation, Frege goes on to say, that the originator of the elucidation himself understand the transitional character of the talk that he engages in, and that he know at every point what he means by a particular term and remain throughout in agreement with himself:

Since definitions are not possible for primitive elements, something else must enter in. I call it elucidation [*Erläuterung*]. . . . Someone who pursued research only by himself would not need it. The purpose of elucidations [*Erläuterungen*] is a pragmatic one; and once it is achieved, we must be

satisfied with them. And here we must be able to count on a little goodwill and cooperative understanding, even guessing; for frequently we cannot do without a figurative mode of expression. But for all that, we can demand from the originator of an elucidation [*Erläuterung*] that he himself know for certain what he means; that he remain in agreement with himself; and that he be ready to complete and emend his elucidation [*Erläuterung*] whenever, given even the best of intentions, the possibility of a misunderstanding arises.⁵⁵

Frege frankly concedes that such a process of offering hints and relying on guesswork might, in principle, never culminate in the desired meeting of minds between the elucidator and the audience of an elucidation. He hastens to reassure us, however, that it turns out that, in practice, we are quite good at guessing what another person means even when all we are offered is a series of such hints:

Theoretically, one might never achieve one's goal this way. In practice, however, we do manage to come to an understanding about the meanings of words. Of course we have to be able to count on a meeting of minds, on others guessing what we have in mind. But all this precedes the construction of a system and does not belong within a system.⁵⁶

This last sentence alludes to a point touched on earlier: once the elucidation is successful the recourse to figurative modes of speech and bits of nonsense can be dispensed with; the elucidations will have served their transitional pragmatic purpose and are to be thrown away. The activity of elucidation “has no place in the system of a science.” Its role is entirely that of a propaedeutic.⁵⁷

Frege's procedure in “On Concept and Object” relies on an understanding of the logical structure of language implicit in his reader's everyday command of ordinary language. Frege's purpose—when he introduces terms such as “concept” and “object”—is to isolate and coin terms for the logically discrete functioning parts of a judgment: parts that can be seen to play logically distinct roles in the antecedently understood content of the sentences of everyday language. In aiming to communicate the meaning of these terms he has coined, Frege (since he cannot resort to definition) appeals to “the general feeling” for our common language (our shared sense of the contribution which the parts of a proposition of ordinary language make to the sense of the whole).⁵⁸ It is through our general feeling for our common language that we achieve agreement on what is a proper logical segmentation of a sentence of our language and hence what is (and what is not) a concept or an object.

The elucidatory strategy of the essay “On Concept and Object” can (according to this reading of Frege in the spirit of Geach) be seen as proceeding in five steps: (1) to make explicit a logical distinction implicit in our everyday linguistic practices, (2) to demonstrate that Kerry's employment of the terminology of “object” and “concept” fails to track the distinction in question, (3) to furnish statements (employing the terminology of “object” and “concept”) that aim to track the distinction in question, (4) to elicit an appreciation of what is defective about such statements, and (5) to indicate how a recognition of the defective

character of such statements enables one to attain an insight (into, e.g., what a concept is) which could not have been communicated in any other way. Thus Frege might have said: he who *recognizes* my elucidatory remarks in “On Concept and Object” *as nonsense* understands me. Such a reading of Frege (in the spirit of Geach)—according to which Fregean elucidation is to be understood as a strategy for conveying insights into ineffable features of reality—as we shall see, closely parallels the reading of the *Tractatus* favored by proponents of the ineffability interpretation.

4 Elucidatory nonsense

Don't, for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.

(Wittgenstein⁵⁹)

By way of further response to Kerry's counter-example, Frege goes on in “On Concept and Object” to make a remark which is likely to cause even an inattentive reader to pause. He says: “The concept horse is not a concept.” This remark is evidently intended to be paradoxical. The self-defeating character of Frege's counter-thesis, which he opposes to Kerry's thesis, is meant to draw attention to what is already self-defeating (though less self-evidently so) in the form of words that Kerry calls upon to express his claim. If one is partial to a reading of Frege that aligns him with the standard reading of the *Tractatus* (as Geach is), then one will think that part of Frege's point here is to draw our attention to how Kerry's words represent an attempt to say something that cannot be said. Such a reading of Frege attributes to Frege a commitment to the ineffability variant of the substantial conception of nonsense. In a passage such as the following, Frege can be heard as pressing a claim (concerning how a primitive feature of the logical structure of language can never itself figure as the subject of a logically well-formed judgment) of a sort that many have taken to be a Tractarian claim:

[W]hat is...asserted about a concept can never be asserted about an object.
...I do not want to say it is false to assert about an object what is here asserted about a concept; I want to say it is impossible, senseless, to do so.⁶⁰

The idea that what such an attempt (to assert of a concept what can only be asserted of an object) ends up saying is not merely false, but senseless, is one which runs throughout Frege's writings.⁶¹ But what are we to make of such an admission? In claiming that what Kerry says is nonsensical, Frege commits himself to the conclusion that what he himself wants to say about concepts (both in response to Kerry and elsewhere) is also nonsensical.⁶² Indeed, Frege seems at various junctures to be disarmingly ready to embrace such a conclusion about the status of many of his own remarks:

In the case of a concept we can also call the unsaturatedness its predicative nature. But in this connection it is necessary to point out an imprecision forced on us by language, which, if we are not conscious of it, will prevent

us from recognizing the heart of the matter: i.e. we can scarcely avoid using such expressions as ‘the concept *prime*’. Here there is not a trace left of unsaturatedness, of the predicative nature. Rather, the expression is constructed in a way which precisely parallels ‘the poet Schiller’. So language brands a concept as an object, since the only way it can fit the designation for a concept into its grammatical structure is as a proper name. But in so doing, strictly speaking, it falsifies matters. In the same way, the word ‘concept’ itself is, taken strictly, already defective, since the phrase ‘is a concept’ requires a proper name as grammatical subject; and so, strictly speaking, it requires something contradictory, since no proper name can designate a concept; or perhaps better still [would be to say that], it requires something nonsensical.⁶³

Frege’s discussion here turns on the idea that we know *what* it is that we are trying to say (when we employ an expression such as “the concept *prime*”), but when we try to say “it,” we realize that what we are trying to say requires that what we actually say be something nonsensical. We have in passages such as this the idea that we can discern what a piece of nonsense is *trying* (but failing) to say. When we use such expressions as “the concept *X*” we are trying to refer to a concept, but in the mode of expression with which we end up—when we try to express our thought—there is not a trace of unsaturatedness left.⁶⁴ We are left with something that does not have a predicative nature and, Frege therefore concludes, we have failed to refer to a concept. An attempt to treat a concept as an object is an attempt to do something *impossible*, an attempt to do something we *cannot* do:

If I want to speak of a concept, language, with an almost irresistible force, compels me to use an inappropriate expression which obscures—I might almost say falsifies—the thought. One would assume, on the basis of its analogy with other expressions, that if I say ‘the concept *equilateral triangle*’ I am designating a concept, just as I am of course naming a planet if I say ‘the planet Neptune’. But this is not the case; for we do not have anything with a predicative nature. Hence the meaning of the expression ‘the concept *equilateral triangle*’ (if there is one in this case) is an object. We cannot avoid words like ‘the concept’, but where we use them we must always bear their inappropriateness in mind. From what we have said it follows that objects and concepts are fundamentally different and cannot stand in for one another. And the same goes for the corresponding words or signs. Proper names cannot really be used as predicates. Where they might seem to, we find on looking more closely that the sense is such that they only form part of the predicate: *concepts cannot stand in the same relations as objects*. It would not be false, but impossible to think of them as doing so.⁶⁵

This passage (and many others, in Frege’s work, like it) make reference to there being a *thought* underlying the nonsense we come out with (when we attempt to assert of a concept what can only be asserted of an object). Language itself obstructs us from expressing the thought we are after: “language, with an almost irresistible

force, compels me to use an inappropriate expression which obscures—I might almost say falsifies—the *thought*” The nonsense we come out with represents an unsuccessful attempt to put that (unsayable) thought into words. Thus, for example, in responding to Kerry, Frege says certain things that by his own lights are nonsense, and what we (his readers) are to do is attend not simply to what he says (since it is, after all, nonsense) but to “the thought” which his words fail to express but attempt to gesture at.⁶⁶

One such example of Fregean elucidation occurs in a letter to Russell:

In the proposition ‘Something is an object’, the word ‘something’...stands for a proper name. Thus whatever we put in place of ‘something’, we always get a true proposition; for a function name cannot take the place of ‘something’. Here we find ourselves in a situation where the nature of language forces us to make use of imprecise expressions. The proposition ‘A is a function’ is such an expression: it is always imprecise; for A stands for a proper name.... While I am writing this, I am well aware of having again expressed myself imprecisely. Sometimes this is just unavoidable. *All that matters is that we know we are doing it and how it happens.*⁶⁷

The proposition “A is a function” is here invoked as an example of the paradoxical character inevitably attaching to the sort of utterances one comes out with when one attempts to elucidate what a function is. Consider the following four propositions:

- (1) “A is an object.”
- (2) “Everything is an object.”
- (3) “A is a function.”
- (4) “Nothing is a function.”

In (1), the word “A” stands for a proper name; and so, by Frege’s lights, whatever we plug in for “A” will occupy the argument place for an object, and thus (according to Frege’s second principle) will be an object. Thus it would appear that no matter what we plug in for “A,” (1) will be true. But if (1) is true no matter what we plug in for “A,” it would seem to follow that (2) is true! Similarly, in (3), as in (1), the word “A” stands for a proper name; and so, once again, whatever occupies this argument place will be an object. Thus it would appear in this case that no matter what we plug in for “A,” (3) will be false. But if (3) is false no matter what we plug in for “A,” it would seem to follow that (4) is true! The point of this elucidation is not to secure the truth of the paradoxical claim that “Nothing is a function” (or “There are no functions”). On the contrary: it is to offer a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea that the proposition “A is a function” can just straight-forwardly *say* what Russell (for the sake of his argument with Frege) wants it to. The point is to show that sentences in which the expression “function” occurs misfire, and to show that—as long as we know what we are doing with such sentences—such self-defeating sentences can none the less be put to use to communicate an insight into what a function is. What matters when we employ such sentences, as Frege’s final sentence (in the passage quoted above) indicates, is that we know what we are doing (i.e., uttering nonsense)

when we come out with them, and that we know how it has come to pass that we find ourselves doing it.

The point of the paradoxical assertions that comprise the preceding elucidation is to show us (i) that we end up speaking nonsense when we try to say what a function is, (ii) that we here “find ourselves in a situation where the nature of language itself makes it impossible for us to say that which we want to say and (iii) that to grasp how it is that the nature of language itself thus stands in the way of saying what we want to say (when we want to say what a function is) is to grasp what a function is. The point is thus not *merely* to expose what we end up saying when we employ such a term as nonsense (in order to debar us from engaging in such ways of speaking) but, rather, to teach us how *self-consciously* to cultivate such ways of speaking (in order to allow us to attain insight into the nature of functions). The point of cultivating such ways of speaking is to enable us to recognize *why* it is that we end up with nonsense when we try to say such things. The attainment of such a recognition constitutes the sign that we have grasped an elucidation of the meaning of a term (such as “function”) which denotes something logically primitive.⁶⁸

Frege repeatedly says, when offering such elucidatory examples, that he is *forced or compelled* to express himself in an infelicitous manner: he is attempting to struggle against “an imprecision forced on us by the nature of language,” one which “compels” him “to use an inappropriate expression which obscures—falsifies—the thought.” Now, as I’ve already indicated, what is significant about such remarks for our purposes is that they reveal a parallel between a possible reading of Frege and a standard reading of the *Tractatus*. On this reading, Frege (1) takes himself in such cases to be trying to say something which, properly speaking, *cannot* be said, and (2) speaks in such cases of there being a *thought* which his words struggle but fail adequately to express. In a famous passage in “On Concept and Object” he writes:

I admit that there is a quite peculiar obstacle in the way of an understanding with the reader. By a kind of necessity of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my *thought*’, I mention an object when what I *intend* is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me half-way—who does not begrudge a pinch of salt, [my emphases]⁶⁹

His words miss his thought (and end up being nonsense); so there is a thought they are aiming at: an understanding of what his words intend to say depends upon his reader latching onto the thought his words fail properly to express. This failure is due, according to Frege, to “a kind of necessity of language.” If he is to convey the thought he here seeks to convey he has no alternative but to have recourse to (elucidatory) nonsense.

A reading of Frege (on the impossibility of asserting of a concept what can only be asserted of an object) such as the one sketched above involves attributing to Frege a commitment to the substantial conception of nonsense; that is, it involves attributing to Frege the very conception of philosophically illuminating nonsense which is standardly thought to be the innovation of the

Tractatus. Once one sees how this conception is at odds with other aspects of Frege's philosophy—those aspects of his philosophy that the *Tractatus* is most concerned to inherit—one is in a better position to see where the philosophical innovation of the *Tractatus* truly lies.⁷⁰

5 The Tractarian critique of the substantial conception

The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn't do.

(Wittgenstein⁷¹)

Is it possible to identify an expression as being of a particular logical category if it occurs in the wrong place? It is here, in its response to this question, that the *Tractatus* sees a tension in Frege's view. A number of Frege's doctrines and a great deal of his own methodological practice suggest that the answer to this question should be: No! It is reflection on these aspects of Frege's thought and practice that leads Wittgenstein to embrace the austere conception of nonsense. If one takes Frege's three principles to heart—as the author of the *Tractatus* does—then one will say: if you want to know whether a particular word in a proposition is an object-expression or a concept-expression, you cannot just rely on your previous commerce with that word; you have to analyze the logical structure of the judgment and see what logical role is played by that segment of the proposition—how it contributes to the sense of the whole.

Frege warns in “On Concept and Object” (and elsewhere) that the same word in ordinary language can be used in some contexts as a proper name and in others as a concept word. Frege's favorite example of such a word is “moon.”⁷² It can also happen in ordinary language that an object-expression which has *never* been previously used to express a concept can suddenly be used, for the first time, as a concept-expression; and that we can understand what is meant by such an unprecedented usage. A famous example of a proper name suddenly being used as a concept expression is Lloyd Bentsen (in the 1988 vice-presidential debate) saying to Dan Quayle: “You're no Jack Kennedy.” Bentsen's point was not that two individuals (Quayle and Kennedy) are not identical, but rather that there is a concept (of, say, exemplary statesmanship) which Quayle does not fall under. Frege offers as an example of this sort of creative use of language the lovely sentence “Trieste is no Vienna”:

We must not let ourselves be deceived because language often uses the same word now as a proper name, now as a concept word; in our example [“There is only one Vienna”], the numeral indicates that we have the latter; ‘Vienna’ is here a concept-word, like ‘metropolis’. Using it in this sense, we may say: “Trieste is no Vienna”.⁷³

In this example, Frege says, we encounter a word which usually functions as a proper name playing the role of a concept-expression. Frege's reading of this sentence is arrived at through reflection upon what possible use this combination of words might have; that is, by asking himself: in what context would one utter

such words and what thought would one then be expressing? If we reflect on when we would utter such a sentence and what we might mean by it, Frege suggests, we will see that “Vienna” here could mean something like “metropolis” (or perhaps even beautiful or majestic metropolis)—and thus the sign “Vienna” used in this way should be expressed in a proper logical symbolism by a completely different kind of symbol than that which we would use to express the occurrence of the word “Vienna” in the sentence “Vienna is the capital of Austria.”⁷⁴ Notice that Frege does not conclude that what we have here in his lovely sentence about Trieste is a piece of nonsense—one which results from trying to put a proper name where a concept-expression should go. He concludes instead that what fills the argument place for a concept-expression here *is* a concept-expression—and then makes a suggestion about what the sentence as a whole might mean (and hence about *which* concept might be meant). Thus Frege’s methodology here is to begin with our *understanding* of the proposition as a whole and to use that as a basis for segmenting it into its logically discrete components.⁷⁵ One can see Frege’s methodological practice here as illustrating the close relationship between his three principles. If we disobey the second principle in our approach to this example, we end up violating the third: when we consider the word in isolation we take “Vienna” for an object-expression, yet in this context it does not denote an individual; so if we fail to attend to the logical role of the word in this context, we mistake a concept for an object. What fuels such a mistake is one’s tendency to think that one already knows what “Vienna” means taken all by itself outside the context of that proposition—it means one presumes roughly what it means in a sentence like “Vienna is the capital of Austria.” Although we do not realize it, Frege thinks that what is really going on when we think in this way is that we succumb to the all but irresistible urge to transgress against his first principle. When we ask for the meaning of the word in isolation, we unwittingly end up looking for the meaning in what Frege wants to teach us to recognize as the realm of the psychological. It may well be true that when I utter the word “Vienna” in saying the sentence “Trieste is no Vienna” I intend to mean the same thing as when I utter the word “Vienna” in saying “The capital of Austria is Vienna”—the same mental image of the spires of the *Stefansdom* rising up over the skyline of the city of Vienna may float before my mind’s eye—but that, Frege thinks, does not bear on whether the word has the same meaning in these two sentences.

The methodological import of Frege’s three principles is developed in the *Tractatus* through the claim that in ordinary language it is often the case that the same sign symbolizes in different ways. The distinction between sign [*Zeichen*] and symbol [*Symbol*] which this claim presupposes can be summarized as follows:

- * sign an orthographic unit, that which the perceptible expressions for propositions have in common (a sign design, inscription, icon, grapheme, etc.)⁷⁶
- * symbol a logical unit, that which meaningful propositions have in common (i.e., an item belonging to a given logical category: proper name, first-level function, etc.)

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

- * the substantial conception which holds that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense: *substantial nonsense* and *mere nonsense*
- * the austere conception which holds that there is, from a logical point of view, only one kind of nonsense: *mere nonsense*

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

- * substantial nonsense a proposition composed of signs which symbolize, but which has a logically flawed syntax due to a clash in the logical category of its symbols
- * mere nonsense a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax

I have earlier pretended to be able to distinguish between the positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception. But, armed with the distinction between symbol and sign, we can start to see why the distinction between these two variants is an inherently unstable one.⁷⁷ Any attempt to clearly articulate the positivist variant will lead to its collapse either into the ineffability variant or into the austere conception. Either the proponent of the positivist variant holds that a violation of logical syntax involves an impermissible combination of symbols or he holds that it involves an impermissible combination of signs. If he holds the former, then the positivist variant collapses into the ineffability variant; if the latter, then he abandons the substantial conception altogether.⁷⁸

In order to begin to see why this is so, it will help to look more closely at the distinction between sign and symbol as it is drawn in the *Tractatus*. It is introduced as part of the commentary on §3.3 which is the *Tractatus*'s reformulation of Frege's second principle.⁷⁹ §3.3 runs as follows: "Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning." Then, beginning immediately thereafter (with §3.31), comes the following commentary:

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

(The proposition itself is an expression.)

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

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

An expression presupposes the forms of all propositions in which it can occur. It is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions...

(§§3.31–3.311)

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

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

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

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

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

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

The point of the commentary is in part to clarify the notion of “proposition” which figures in the context principle (only the *proposition* has sense; only in the context of a *proposition* has a name meaning⁸⁰). The relevant notion is one of a certain kind of a symbol—not a certain kind of a sign—something which only has life in language.⁸¹ The sign, Wittgenstein says, “is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses” (what is now sometimes called the sign design). The symbol is a logical unit, it expresses something which propositions—as opposed to prepositional signs—have in common.⁸² Thus the sentences “Trieste is no Vienna” and “Vienna is the capital of Austria” have the sign “Vienna” in common. These two sentences taken together offer an instance of what Wittgenstein means when he says (in §3.321) “two different symbols can have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common—they then signify in different ways.” The sentences “Trieste is no Vienna” and “Vienna is the capital of Austria” have no symbol in common—all they have in common are the signs “Vienna” and “is.” In (what Wittgenstein calls) a proper logical grammar, each sign would wear its mode of symbolizing on its sleeve. We can, somewhat anachronistically, use modern logical notation to illustrate this point:

- | | |
|---|------------|
| (a) Vienna is the capital of Austria | $v=c$ |
| (b) Trieste is not the capital of Austria | $t \neq c$ |
| (c) Trieste is not (identical to) Vienna | $t \neq v$ |
| (a') Trieste is no Vienna | $\neg Vt$ |
| (b') Trieste is no metropolis | $\neg Mt$ |
| (c') Trieste is a Vienna | Vt |

When written in ordinary language, sentences (a) and (a') have two signs ("Vienna," "is") in common; when expressed in a proper logical notation, they are inscribed in such a way that their lack of a common symbol is reflected in the absence of a common sign. When written in ordinary language, sentences (c) and (a') have three signs ("Trieste," "Vienna," "is") in common; when expressed in a proper logical notation, it is rendered perspicuous that they have only a single symbol in common. Wittgenstein comments on this feature of ordinary language:

In the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways—and therefore belongs to two different symbols—or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition.

Thus the word "is" appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence; "to exist" as an intransitive verb like "to go"; "identical" as an adjective; we speak of *something* but also of the fact of *something* happening.

(In the proposition "Green is green"—where the first word is a proper name and the last an adjective—these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*.)

(§3.323)

It is perhaps worth elaborating how Wittgenstein's example in the last paragraph illustrates the point of the first paragraph of §3.323. The prepositional sign "Green is green" can be naturally taken as symbolizing in any of three different ways⁸³—and hence can be understood as an expression for any one of three different thoughts:

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| (a) Mr. Green is green | Gg |
| (b) Mr. Green is Mr. Green | g=g |
| (c) The color green is the color green | (∀x) (Gx≡Gx) |

One way of noticing how the same sign symbolizes differently in each of these three cases is to focus on the word "is." In each of the propositions expressing each of these three different thoughts, the sign "is" symbolizes a different logical relation. In (a), the sign "is" symbolizes the copula (a relation between a concept and an object); in (b) we have the "is" of identity (a relation between objects); in (c) we have the "is" of co-extensionality (a relation between concepts).⁸⁴ In the ordinary language version of (a)—"where the first word is a proper name and the last an adjective"—"green" can be seen to be not merely ambiguous with respect to its meaning (the way "bank" is in "The bank is on the left bank"), but ambiguous with respect to its logical type: "these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*" The point of the example is to show us that we cannot gather from the notation of ordinary language how a given sign (e.g. "green," or "is") symbolizes in a given instance. Wittgenstein suddenly follows this example with the observation: "Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)" (§3.324). In a proper *Begriffsschrift*, a different sign would express each of these "different methods of symbolizing," thus enabling us to identify the sources of certain confusions. In §3.325, Wittgenstein immediately goes

on to say that in order “to avoid such errors” we require a symbolism which obeys the rules of *logical* grammar. How can such a *Begriffsschrift* enable us to avoid “the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)”? In order to answer this question, we need first to explore: (i) what sorts of “confusions” are these? (ii) what role in their elucidation does a *Begriffsschrift* play?

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that once we appreciate how Frege’s three principles work in conjunction with one another we will see that there will always be room for a question as to whether a given sign, when it occurs in two different sentences of ordinary language, is symbolizing the same way in each of those occurrences. And this question cannot be settled simply by appealing to the fact that the same word (sign) ordinarily occurs (symbolizes) as a name⁸⁵ (for example, as a name of the capital of Austria); nor by appealing to the fact that if I were asked what I meant when I uttered one of those sentences I would reply that I meant the word in the same sense as I have on other occasions; nor by appealing to the fact that I, on this occasion of utterance, exert a special effort to mean the word in the same way as before. How can this question be settled? Wittgenstein says: “In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the context of significant use” (§3.326). We must ask ourselves on what occasion we would utter this sentence and what, in that context of use, we would then mean by it.⁸⁶ (This is what we saw Frege do in his handling of the example “Trieste is no Vienna.”) In asking ourselves this, we still rely upon our familiarity with the way words (signs) ordinarily occur (symbolize) in propositions to fashion a segmentation of the prepositional sign in question.⁸⁷

In §3.326, “the context of significant use” translates *sinnvollen Gebrauch* and “recognize” translates *erkennen*. The latter is the same word that occurs in §6.54: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually *recognizes* them as nonsensical.”⁸⁸ It is a condition of being able to recognize the symbol in the sign that the string in which the sign occurs be *sinnvoll*. To recognize a *Satz* as nonsensical [*Unsinn*] is to be unable to recognize the symbol in the sign. For the *Tractatus*, these two forms of recognition eclipse one another.⁸⁹ To recognize a *Satz* as nonsensical [*Unsinn*], for the *Tractatus*, is not a matter of recognizing that it is attempting to say something that cannot be said, but rather a matter of recognizing that it fails to say anything at all. Building on Frege’s own methodological practice, the *Tractatus* argues that in the case of a piece of nonsense—that is, in the absence of the provision of a context of *sinnvollen Gebrauch*: a possible logical segmentation of the *Satz*—we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a proposition; for, *ex hypothesi* there are no working parts of the proposition. One can identify the contribution the senses of the parts of a proposition make to the sense of the whole only if the whole has a sense⁹⁰—if it stands in some identifiable location with respect to the other occupants of logical space. According to the *Tractatus*, there are [no examples of putting a proper name where a concept word belongs], for if one can properly make out that what belongs in that place is a concept word, then that is a sufficient condition for treating whatever is in that place as a concept word. There isn’t anything, on the conception of *Unsinn* which the *Tractatus* advances, which corresponds to a proposition’s failing to make sense because of the meaning which the parts already have taken in isolation. On the

Tractarian conception, there is only one way a sentence can be *Unsinn*: by its failing to symbolize. This conception does not rule out the possibility of *Sätze* (such as tautologies and contradictions) which have logical structure and yet are devoid of *Sinn*. (To think that it did would be to lose sight of the distinction between that which is *Unsinn* and that which is *sinnlos*.⁹¹) It only rules out a sentence's having an "impossible sense"—a sense that it *cannot* have because of the senses that its parts already have.

6 The method of the *Tractatus*

There is nothing which requires such gentle handling as an illusion—that is, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the captive of the illusion to set his will in opposition, then all is lost.... So one must approach him from behind.... [T]his requires...a kind of deception in which one deceives a person for the truth's sake.... 'To deceive' in such a case means to begin by accepting the other man's illusion as good money.

(Søren Kierkegaard⁹²)

Recall how Fregean elucidation is supposed to work. The aim of Fregean elucidation is to help us to understand the principles of construction which underlie his *Begriffsschrift*. The mark of our having grasped his elucidations is that we have mastered his symbolism and are able properly to use it to express thoughts. Frege's elucidatory "propositions" cannot be expressed in *Begriffsschrift*, but the logical distinctions which they attempt to convey—such as the distinction between concept and object—show themselves through the difference in the signs of *Begriffsschrift* whose employment we have mastered. Frege, in offering his elucidations, self-consciously employs a kind of nonsense in order to bring out the confusions of people like Kerry.⁹³ But—according to the interpretation of Frege which Geach favors—for Frege, that is only part of the purpose of the activity of elucidation. Frege takes his elucidations also to convey insights into necessities founded "deep in the nature of things."⁹⁴ Though his expressions, through a kind of necessity of language, misfire, the insights they seek to impart can be latched onto by the reader who meets him halfway and does not begrudge him a pinch of salt. This additional positive role (of imparting a kind of inexpressible insight) which Geach ascribes to Fregean elucidation corresponds to the central purpose ascribed to Tractarian elucidation by proponents of the ineffability interpretation of the *Tractatus*.⁹⁵ The ascription of such a conception of elucidation (to either Frege or Wittgenstein) presupposes the prior ascription of the substantive conception of nonsense.

But, as we have seen, it is possible to find in certain of Frege's doctrines a ground for hostility towards the substantive conception and for hospitality towards the austere conception of nonsense. Moreover, as we have also seen, there is ample textual evidence that the *Tractatus* seeks to erect its teachings on just those doctrines of Frege's. But if one attempts to credit this textual evidence, and thus ascribe to the *Tractatus* the austere conception, what then should one take the aim of Tractarian elucidation to be? How, according to such a reading, are we to make sense of the fact that the *Tractatus* takes itself to be engaged in an activity which is

properly termed one of “elucidation”—an activity, that is, which is able to achieve or confer some form of clarity, enlightenment or insight? To understand how the *Tractatus*’s own *Unsinn* is supposed to elucidate (when that of other philosophers mostly only misleads), some distinction between misleading nonsense and illuminating nonsense is evidently required; but, on the austere reading, illuminating nonsense is no longer a vehicle for a special kind of thought. If the aim of elucidation, according to the ineffability interpretation, is to reveal (through the employment of substantial nonsense) that which cannot be said, then, according to the austere reading, the aim of Tractarian elucidation is to reveal (through the employment of mere nonsense) that what appears to be substantial nonsense is mere nonsense. While the aim of the former sort of elucidation was supposed to be the conferral of insight into inexpressible features of reality, the aim of the latter is not insight into meta-physical features of reality, but rather insight into the sources of metaphysics. The premise underlying the procedure of the *Tractatus* (and this is connected to why the point of the work is an ethical one) is that our most profound confusions of soul show themselves in—and can be revealed to us through an attention to—our confusions concerning what we mean (and, in particular, what we fail to mean) by our words.

The *Tractatus* aims to show that (as Wittgenstein later puts it) “I cannot use language to get outside language.”⁹⁶ It accomplishes this aim by first encouraging me to suppose that I can use language in such a way, and then enabling me to work through the (apparent) consequences of this (pseudo-)supposition, until I reach the point at which my impression of there being a determinate supposition (whose consequences I have throughout been exploring) dissolves on me. So on the reading of the *Tractatus* suggested here, what is to happen, if the book succeeds in its aim, is *not* that I (1) succeed in conceiving of an extraordinary possibility (illogical thought), (2) judge “it” to be impossible, (3) conclude that the truth of this judgment cannot be accommodated within (the logical structure of) language because it is about (the logical structure of) language and (4) go on to communicate (under the guise of only “showing” and not “saying” “it”) what it is that cannot be said. Rather, what is to happen is that I am lured up all four of these rungs of the ladder and then: (5) throw the *entire* ladder (all four of the previous rungs) away. On this reading, first I grasp that there is something which *must* be; then I see that it cannot be said; then I grasp that if it can’t be said it can’t be thought (that the limits of language are the limits of thought); and then, finally, when I reach the top of the ladder, I grasp that there has been no “it” in my grasp all along (that that which I cannot think I cannot “grasp” either). In order for a reader to pass through the first four stages of ascent up this Tractarian ladder he must take himself to be participating in the traditional philosophical activity of argument—to be inferring conclusions from premises (as, e.g., Frege appears to be doing when he reasons from a pair of premises concerning (a) the nature of *Begriffe* and (b) the logical structure of certain propositions—such as “The concept *horse* is not a concept”—to the conclusion that his words “miss his thought”). A reader of the *Tractatus* only ascends to the final rung of the ladder when he is able to look back upon his progress upwards and “recognize” that he has only been going through the motions of “inferring” (apparent) “conclusions” from (apparent) “premises.” Thus the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus* depends

on the reader's provisionally taking himself to be participating in the traditional philosophical activity of establishing theses through a procedure of reasoned argument; but it only succeeds if the reader fully comes to understand what the work means to say about itself when it says that philosophy, as this work seeks to practice it, results not in doctrine but in elucidations, not in *Philosophische Sätze* but in *das Klarwerden von Sätzen*. And the attainment of this recognition depends upon the reader's actually undergoing a certain *experience*—the attainment of which is identified in §6.54 as the sign that the reader has understood the author of the work: the reader's experience of having his illusion of sense (in the “premises” and “conclusions” of the “argument”) dissipate through its becoming clear to him that (what he took to be) the *philosophische Sätze* of the work are *Unsinn*.

Thus what happens to us as readers of the *Tractatus*—assuming the work succeeds in its aim—is that we are drawn into an illusion of occupying a certain sort of a perspective. From this perspective, we take ourselves to be able to survey the possibilities which undergird how we must represent things as being, fixing what is “logically” necessary and what is merely contingent. From this perspective, we contemplate the logical structure of thought as it is and imagine that we are also able to contemplate the possibility of its being otherwise. We take ourselves to be occupying a perspective from which we can view the logical structure of language “from sideways on.”⁹⁷ This illusion of perspective is engendered by the perception of a flawed sense in certain nonsensical propositions; we take these substantially nonsensical propositions to be attempting to express a state of affairs that *cannot* be—and thereby to be disclosing the limits of possibility. Tractarian elucidation aims to show us that these sentences that apparently express substantially nonsensical thoughts actually express no thoughts. The “problems of philosophy” that the *Tractatus* sets itself the task of “solving” are all of a single sort: they are all occasioned by reflection on possibilities (of running up against the limits of thought, language or reality) which appear to come into view when we imagine ourselves able to frame in thought violations of the logical structure of language. The “solution” to these problems (as §6.52 says) lies in their disappearance—in the dissolution of the appearance that we are so much as able to frame such thoughts. The “propositions” we come out with when we attempt to formulate these problems are to be recognized as *Unsinn*. The only “insight” that a Tractarian elucidation imparts, in the end, is one about the reader himself: that he is prone to such illusions of thought.

The assumption underlying Tractarian elucidation is that the only way to free oneself from such illusions is to fully enter into them and explore them from the inside. This assumption—one which underlies both Wittgenstein's early and later work⁹⁸—is nicely summarized in the following remark (from a 1931 manuscript of Wittgenstein's): “In philosophy we are deceived by an illusion. But this—an illusion—is also something, and I must at some time place it completely and clearly before my eyes, before I can say it is only an illusion.”⁹⁹ The illusion that the *Tractatus* seeks to explode, above all, is that we can run up against the limits of language. The book starts with a warning about a certain kind of enterprise—one of attempting to draw a limit to thought. In the body of the text, we are offered (what appears to be) a doctrine about “the limits of thought.” With the aid of this doctrine, we imagine ourselves to be able both to draw these limits and to see beyond them. We imagine ourselves able to do what the Preface warns we will fall into imagining

ourselves able to do (once we imagine ourselves able to draw a limit to thought): we imagine ourselves able “to think both sides of the limit” (and hence “able to think what cannot be thought”).¹⁰⁰ The aim of the work is to show us that beyond “the limits of language” lies—not ineffable truth, but rather—(as the preface of the *Tractatus* warns) *einfach Unsinn*, simply nonsense.¹⁰¹ At the conclusion of the book, we are told that the author’s elucidations have succeeded only if we recognize what we find in the body of the text to be nonsense. In §6.54, Wittgenstein does not ask his reader here to “grasp” the “thoughts” which his nonsensical propositions seek to convey. He does not call upon the reader to understand his sentences, but rather to understand *him*, namely the author and the kind of activity in which he is engaged—one of elucidation. He tells us in §6.54 how these sentences serve as elucidations: by enabling us to recognize them *as* nonsense.¹⁰² One does not reach the end by arriving at the last page, but by arriving at a certain point in an activity—the point when the elucidation has served its purpose: when the illusion of sense is exploded from within. The sign that we have understood the author of the work is that we can throw the ladder we have climbed up away. That is to say, we have finished the work, and the work is finished with us, when we are able to *throw* the sentences in the body of the work—sentences about “the limits of language” and the unsayable things which lie beyond them—away.¹⁰³

Notes

- 1 This paper is drawn from a longer manuscript of mine, “The Method of the *Tractatus*” which is forthcoming in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, Erich Reck (ed.) Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- 2 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.54; my emphases. All subsequent unspecified references to a section number are to the *Tractatus*. Quotations from the *Tractatus* will be drawn from either the Pears and McGuinness translation or the Ogden translation, or some emendation or (as in this case) combination thereof.
- 3 “I cannot imagine that Carnap should have so completely and utterly misunderstood the last sentences of the book—and therefore the fundamental conception of the whole book” (Wittgenstein, Letter to Moritz Schlick, August 8, 1932; quoted in *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, M.Nedo and M.Ranchetti (eds) Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1983, p. 255. For further discussion of this remark, see my “On Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors” in *The Grammar of Religious Belief*, D.Z. Phillips (ed.) New York, St. Martins Press, 1995.
- 4 Each of these translations has something to recommend it.
- 5 On most interpretations, the aim of the *Tractatus* is taken to be precisely one of advancing a doctrine.
- 6 That the notion of *Erläuterung* figures centrally in both Frege and the *Tractatus* is also the topic of Joan Weiner’s paper “Theory and Elucidation: The End of the Age of Innocence” in *Future Pasts: Reflections on the History of Analytic Philosophy*, J.Floyd and S.Shieh (eds) Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999.
- 7 For Frege’s own formulation, see *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, Montgomery Furth (trans.) Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, §32.
- 8 It is, Wittgenstein acknowledges in his Preface to the *Tractatus*, “to the great works of Frege and the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell that I owe in large measure the stimulation of my thoughts.”
- 9 *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Philadelphia, Pa., University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971, p. 12.

- 10 See my "The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege and the *Tractatus*," *Philosophical Topics*, 1991, vol. 20, pp. 115–180.
- 11 I am using the word "show" here *not* in the sense which the *Tractatus* itself reserves for this term (which, as we shall see, is not applicable to nonsense), but rather (as it is often used by proponents of the ineffability interpretation) to refer to the activity of "hinting" or "gesturing" at ineffable truths by means of nonsense. Whenever I employ the word in this latter sense I will place it in scare-quotes. I am here adopting the idiom of many of the commentators with whose work I wish to take issue. But I hereby invite confusion in two ways; so let me just say for now: (1) that, in adopting this idiom, I do not take myself to be making any contact with the (actual) Tractarian notion of *zeigen*, and (2) that any commentator who holds that the sentences of the *Tractatus* aspire to hint or gesture at ineffable truths counts, by my lights, as a proponent of the ineffability interpretation, even if they (unlike most proponents of the ineffability interpretation) are textually scrupulous enough carefully to refrain from ever employing the term "showing" to designate the activity of so hinting or gesturing.
- 12 In claiming that the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving a tension in Frege's thought (between these two different conceptions of nonsense), I raise interpretative questions about how Frege is to be read—questions which I do not hope to resolve in this paper. I mean to take sides on this question only in so far as it bears on the claim that Wittgenstein can be fruitfully read as having read Frege in certain ways. I do not wish to deny that Frege can be fruitfully read as adhering to either one of these two conceptions of nonsense, and as having faced up to the implications of such a commitment. (Peter Geach reads Frege as an adherent of the position that there are certain truths which can be "shown" but cannot be said. Cora Diamond, in chapters 2 and 4 of *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991), reads Frege as having already anticipated the conception of nonsense which I attribute in this paper to the *Tractatus*.) I am inclined to think that each of these readings of Frege has its exegetical advantages, each has moments where it stumbles over the text, and both are able to account for most of the texts (which, depending on the angle from which they are viewed, can assume the gestalt of either a substantial rabbit or an austere duck). My concern here will not be to referee such a dispute about Frege, but rather only to advance a claim about Wittgenstein and how he read Frege: namely, in a way which assigns to each of these readings half of the truth about Frege.
- 13 The positivist interpretation is all for showing that some sentences are nonsensical, but it wants no truck with the idea of philosophically illuminating nonsense. It wants to hold onto the substantial conception of nonsense (the idea that metaphysical nonsense arises through violations of logical syntax), while eschewing the idea that there are things which can be "shown" but not said.
- 14 I distinguish between these two variants because proponents of the substantial conception tend to present themselves as *prima facie* distinct in this respect. As we shall see, however, these variants cannot in the end be clearly distinguished from one another in the manner that I am here pretending that they can be.
- 15 In fact, the range of interpretative options available in connection with this dimension of Frege's thought perfectly parallel those available in connection with the *Tractatus*. Some commentators have ascribed to Frege the positivist variant of the substantial conception (e.g., Dummett), others (as mentioned in the previous note but two) the ineffability variant (e.g., Geach) or the austere conception (e.g., Diamond). I repeat: this paper is agnostic as to which of these readings represents the true Frege.
- 16 "Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein" in *Essays in Honor of G.H. von Wright*, J. Hintikka (ed.) *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 1976, vol. 28, p. 55.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 18 *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Letters to C.K. Ogden*, p. 51.
- 19 Contrary to the assumption implicit in most of the secondary literature on it, the *Tractatus* itself scrupulously marks this distinction (between what I misleadingly refer to here as two senses of "show") by reserving *zeigen* to refer only to the first notion and using *erläutern* to refer to the second. Both of these notions are, in turn, to be

distinguished from the notion of “showing” which figures in the ineffability interpretation (see note 11).

- 20 The widespread assumption in the scholarly literature that this distinction (between saying [*sagen*] and showing [*zeigen*]) is crucial for understanding §6.54 arises from the conflation of the two distinctions I am trying to disentangle here. The distinction between *sagen* and *zeigen* has no application to *Unsinn*. A proposition which is *sinnvoll* says what is the case and shows its sense (§§4.021–4.022). A proposition which is *sinnlos* shows that it says nothing (§4.461). A “proposition” which is *unsinnig* (contrary to the ineffability interpretation) neither says nor shows anything (which is not to say that it cannot elucidate). §6.54 is concerned with those sentences of the work which are (to be recognized as) *unsinnig*.
- 21 I speak here of different “*kinds* of use of language”—instead merely of different “uses of language”—in order to note a distinction which must be respected if we are to avoid confusion later when we turn to the topic of what §3.326 of the *Tractatus* calls “significant use.” To distinguish (what I here call) “kinds of use” is to distinguish the different sorts of things one can *do* with language over and above putting it to the use of *saying* something. Later on in this paper, when I turn to the point of §3.326, I will employ the expression “uses of language” to discriminate *within* the (primary) field of the assertoric employment of language different ways to use language to say things. Whenever the *Tractatus* itself speaks of the “use” [*Gebrauch*] of a sign it is always in this latter sense.
- 22 I borrow this useful term from J.L.Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1962.
- 23 The early Wittgenstein did not think these two kinds of use of language (the constative and the elucidatory) comprised an exhaustive classification—he thought there was also a distinct *ethical* employment of language. (What comprises an ethical use of language needs to be understood before one can approach the question of what Wittgenstein means when he says that “the point of the *Tractatus* is ethical”; see Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, op. cit., chapter 8 and “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” reprinted in this volume.) There is therefore good reason to be wary of an oft-repeated textbook platitude concerning the fundamental difference between the thought of the early and the later Wittgenstein: that early Wittgenstein thought that language can only be put to *one* kind of use, whereas later Wittgenstein demolished his earlier doctrine by pointing out that language has a multiplicity of kinds of use. A way to put what is sound in the textbook platitude would be to say: for early Wittgenstein, non-constative kinds of use of language (1) come in only two flavors (elucidatory and ethical), and (2) are not, properly speaking, employments of *language per se* (see §§4–4.001) but rather employments of *language-like* structures; whereas for later Wittgenstein, the category of non-constative kinds of use (1) subsumes many more kinds of use than ever dreamed of in the philosophy of early Wittgenstein (expressive uses of language, performative uses of language, etc.) and (2) represents not a mutually exclusive alternative to the constative employment of language but rather a pervasive dimension of all language use.
 Since, as a matter of terminology, elucidation does not count as a kind of *Gebrauch* for early Wittgenstein (see the previous note but one) the gulf between early and later Wittgenstein can appear greater than it is. When I allow myself to describe (what for the *Tractatus* count as) elucidations as uses of *language*, I am describing a feature of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy in the idiom of his later philosophy (with its correspondingly broader conception of language). Later on in this paper, we will be in a position to express this distinction in (what I have been calling) kinds of use of language in the idiom of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy by distinguishing kinds of employment of linguistic *signs* (as opposed to symbols).
- 24 That what is at issue when Wittgenstein speaks of his sentences serving as elucidations is an implicit distinction in kinds of uses of linguistic signs is critical for answering a number of questions which typically arise in connection with §6.54—e.g., isn’t the passage self-refuting? (The last note but one of this paper addresses some of these questions.)
- 25 Zettel, §712.

- 26 “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein,” op. cit., p. 55. The kind of *showing* which is at issue in the first half of this passage (one according to which logical category-distinctions show themselves in a well-constructed formalized language) is a kind of showing that the Tractarian notion of *zeigen* aims to accommodate (though in this sense of “show,” according to the *Tractatus*, logical category-distinctions only show themselves in *sinnvolle* sentences). Geach speaks of the nonsensical “sentences” which form the subject of the latter half of this passage (sentences in the vernacular which “are logically improper and admit of no translation into well-formed formulas of symbolic logic”) as seeking to “convey” these same distinctions of logical category. Such sentences, according to Geach, seek to convey something which cannot be said. The idea that the latter sort of “sentences” intend to *convey* what the former sort *show* might invite the idea that it ought to be possible to formulate a more inclusive notion of “showing”—one which construes as a single sort of activity something which logically proper sentences (of either a natural language or a well-constructed formalized language) and certain logically improper sentences (of a natural language which admit of no translation into a well-constructed formalized language) are both able to engage in. Some commentators on the *Tractatus* employ the term “showing” in this (by my lights, hybrid) way to encompass both these sorts of cases. Most commentators on the *Tractatus*, however, seem to have only the latter sort of case in view when they employ the term. Geach himself, however, is careful to employ the term to refer only to the former sort of case. In order to avoid confusion, I remind the reader (see note 11) that when I employ the term “show” in scare-quotes I am using it in a way that Geach does not. I shall continue to do so even when expounding Geach’s views (concerning how nonsense can convey something which cannot be said).
- 27 See, for example, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, §42.
- 28 *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, op. cit., p. 18. For further discussion of why logic, for Frege, does not stand in need of psychology, see Thomas Ricketts’s article “Objectivity and Objecthood: Frege’s Metaphysics of Judgment” in *Frege Synthesized*, L.Haaparanta and J.Hintikka (eds) Dordrecht, Reidel, 1986, and chapter 2 of Joan Weiner’s *Frege in Perspective*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1990. For further discussion of why logic, for Frege, does not stand in need of metaphysics, see Ricketts’s “Truth, Thoughts and Objectivity in Frege” (forthcoming), and Weiner’s “Realism *bei* Frege,” *Synthese*, 1995, vol. 102 and her “Burge’s Literal Interpretation of Frege,” *Mind*, 1995, vol. 104.
- 29 What Frege has done for Kerry (not to mention Schubart, Thomae and others) brings to mind Heinrich Heine’s remark (from Part Two of *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*) a propos Lessing’s polemics against Götze, Reimar and others: “He has snatched many a name from a well-deserved oblivion...and preserved it for posterity like an insect trapped in amber.”
- 30 *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, Brian McGuinness (ed.) London, Blackwell, 1984, p. 182.
- 31 This charge is expressed more emphatically in the unpublished version of “On Concept and Object.” See *Posthumous Writings*, H.Hermes, F.Kambartel, and F.Kaulbach (eds) Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 104–5. Frege and early Wittgenstein both use the expression “concept” in the same (“strictly logical,” non-surface-grammatical) way. What Frege calls a concept (“in the strictly logical sense”) is what Wittgenstein in *The Blue Book* calls a non-grammatical kind (p. 19). Frege and Wittgenstein differ, however, about which kinds are non-grammatical kinds—e.g. “number” is for Frege a non-grammatical kind, for (both early and later) Wittgenstein it is merely a grammatical kind.
- 32 *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, J.L.Austin (trans.) Evanston, 111., Northwestern University Press, 1980, p. x.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. x.
- 34 *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., p. 253.
- 35 In conformity with this doctrine of the primacy of judgment, Frege’s concept-script forbids the isolated occurrence of designations for the various possible components of a judgment. See *ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

- 36 Frege worries that the all but unavoidable (and in itself potentially innocent) locution of a thought's having "parts" or "components" will mislead one into attributing a false independence to the parts of a thought—so that we imagine that the parts could retain their identity apart from their participation in a whole thought:

But the words 'made up of', 'consist of', 'component', 'part' may lead to our looking at it the wrong way. If we choose to speak of parts in this connection, all the same these parts are not mutually independent in the way that we are elsewhere used to find when we have parts of a whole.

(*Collected Papers*, op. cit., p. 386)

Frege's context principle—and the correlative doctrine of the primacy of judgment (which refuses to allow that the parts of the whole are "mutually independent in the way that we are elsewhere used to find when we have parts of a whole")—in no way denies the compositionality of either thought or language. It insists only upon the mutual interdependence of compositionality and contextuality. (Diego Marconi nicely summarizes the position in the slogan: "Understanding without contextuality is blind; understanding without compositionality is empty.") Frege's view of natural language—upon which the *Tractatus* builds its "understanding of the logic of language"—affirms both (1) that it is in virtue of their contributions to the senses of the whole that we identify the logical "parts" of propositions, and (2) that it is in virtue of an identification of each "part" as that which occurs in other prepositional wholes that we segment the whole into its constituent parts (see note 39).

- 37 Gilbert Ryle attempted to summarize this "difficult but crucial point" of Frege's by saying that the meanings of words "are not proposition components but prepositional differences":

Frege's difficult but crucial point... [is] that the unitary something that is *said* in a sentence or the unitary sense that it expresses is not an assemblage of detachable sense atoms, of, that is, parts enjoying separate existence and separate thinkability, and yet that one truth or falsehood may have discernible, countable, and classifiable similarities to and dissimilarities from other truths and falsehoods. Word meanings or concepts are not proposition components but prepositional differences. They are distinguishables, not detachables; abstractables, not extractables.

(*Collected Papers*, vol. 1, London, Hutchinson, 1971, p. 58)

As this paper goes on, it will prove to be a matter of some interest that Gilbert Ryle—the man who made the notion of a category-mistake famous as a term of philosophical criticism—should have (at least occasionally) had such a firm grip on "Frege's difficult but crucial point."

- 38 *Foundations of Arithmetic*, op. cit., p. 71.

- 39 How do we find this out? What determines the logical segmentation of a sentence, for Frege, are the inferential relations which obtain between the judgment the sentence expresses and other judgments. Identifying an expression as a logical unit and determining its logical role consequently turn on appreciating the inferential relations which obtain between the judgment in which the expression occurs and other judgments.

- 40 It has been thought by some commentators that Frege's claim that objects—unlike concepts—are "self-subsistent" should be interpreted to mean that the context principle does not apply to object-expressions: that object-expressions mean—or name—objects prior to and apart from any contribution they make to the sense of (whole) propositions. Frege explicitly repudiates such an interpretation:

The self-subsistence which I am claiming for number is not to be taken to mean that a number word signifies something when removed from the context of a proposition, but only to preclude the use of such words as predicates or attributes.

(*Foundations of Arithmetic*, op. cit., p. 72)

- 41 The only way to refer to a concept, for Frege, is to *use* a concept expression: i.e., to employ it predicatively within the context of a judgment. Thus his argument against Kerry can be rephrased as a substitutional argument. Two expressions mean the same thing (have the same *Bedeutung*) only if the new expression can be substituted for the original expression without changing the truth-value of any judgment in which the original expression occurred. Whenever we attempt, however, to substitute an object expression (such as “the concept horse”) for a concept expression (such as “——— is a horse”) not only do we not get a new sentence with the same truth-value, we get nonsense. See Weiner, *Frege in Perspective*, op. cit., pp. 251ff for an excellent discussion of this point.
- 42 The sign that such a Fregean elucidation has been successful—that the desired “meeting of minds” between the elucidator and his audience has been achieved—is that the other person is able to go on as a user of *Begriffsschrift* on his or her own in the right way. Frege therefore has an answer to an obvious objection (voiced by some commentators on the *Tractatus*) to the doctrine that there are fundamental logical distinctions which underlie but cannot be expressed in language. The objection goes as follows: there is no way to adjudicate the success of an attempt to communicate such distinctions—for there is no way for someone who has grasped such a distinction to exhibit his mastery of the distinction. But Frege furnishes a touchstone of success: the sign that we have grasped his elucidations is that we emerge masters of his symbolism. A reader can be said to have grasped one of Frege’s elucidations (for example, his elucidation of the distinction between concept and object) if he is able to employ the appropriate elements of the symbolism (the symbol for an object only if an object is denoted, etc.) when segmenting judgments and translating them from ordinary language into *Begriffsschrift*. His segmentation of the judgment can, in turn, be checked by making sure that the translation of the judgment into *Begriffsschrift* preserves the appropriate inference and substitution licenses between the judgment in question and other judgments.
- 43 This and related aspects of Frege’s conception of elucidation are discussed in illuminating detail in the final chapter of Weiner’s *Frege in Perspective*, op. cit.
- 44 Geach is one of the few commentators who sees a connection between this moment in Frege’s work and the concerns of both the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein’s later work. (See “Philosophical Autobiography” in *Peter Geach: Philosophical Encounters*, Harry A. Lewis (ed.) Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1991, pp. 13–14, 16.) It is remarkable, with a few notable exceptions (Anscombe, Diamond, Geach, Ricketts and Weiner) how little of the secondary literature on the *Tractatus* has interested itself in this moment in Frege’s thought. For a contrast between Frege (who has no use for the idea that nonsense can be illuminating) and Wittgenstein (who does have a use for the idea) which is typical of the sort of contrast between them one finds throughout the secondary literature on the *Tractatus*, see Max Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, pp. 378–9.
- 45 *The Gospel According to Tolstoy*, David Patterson (trans.) Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1992, p. 11.
- 46 *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., p. 207 (I have emended the translation).
- 47 Henceforth, whenever it is employed in connection with Frege, the term “elucidation” will be used only to refer to the species of elucidation at issue in “On Concept and Object.” (In their original context, some of the passages from Frege’s work I cite below are concerned in the first instance with the broader genus, but pertain *a fortiori* to the species, and are adduced below solely to illuminate the nature of the species.)
- 48 Contrary to what some commentators have claimed, this is an oft-repeated refrain in Frege’s work. A list of representative passages would include: *Collected Papers*, op. cit., pp. 147, 281–2, 292 and 381, *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., p. 235 and *Mathematical Correspondence*, G. Gabriel, H. Hermes, F. Kambontel, C. Thiel and A. Veraart (eds), H. Kaal (trans.), Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980, pp. 37 and 141–2.
- 49 The word “categories” won’t really do here. But, as we shall see, there is, according to Frege, no word that will do. I shall continue, throughout the rest of this paper, to finesse

this problem by pretending that talk of “logical categories” is able to possess greater referential powers than Frege thinks it can.

50 Here, again, is a list of some representative passages: *Collected Papers*, op. cit., pp. 147 and 292, *Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 37 and *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., p. 235.

51 *Collected Papers*, op. cit., pp. 182–3.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 183.

53 “I am well aware that expressions like ‘saturated’ and ‘unsaturated’ are metaphorical and only serve to indicate what is meant—whereby one must always count on the co-operative understanding of the reader” (*ibid.*, pp. 281–2).

54 It is only this species of elucidation that Frege thinks compels us to traffic in nonsense. Within the broader genus of elucidation, elucidations will generally take the form of perfectly meaningful propositions (such as, for example, elucidations of *geometrically* primitive terms). It is worth noting, however, that a parallel distinction between a generic and a specific notion of elucidation must also be drawn if one seeks to understand the different occurrences of the term *Erläuterung* in the *Tractatus*. In §3.263 what is at issue is a generic notion (which I will not explore further here, other than to remark that perfectly meaningful propositions can serve as elucidations of this sort), whereas an understanding of §6.54 is unattainable apart from an understanding of what is peculiar to that species of the genus which aims to elucidate “philosophic matters” (and which proceeds through the employment of *Sätze* that the reader is to recognize as *Unsinn*). For further discussion of this issue, see “The Method of the *Tractatus*” op. cit., note 67.

55 *Collected Papers*, op. cit., pp. 300–1 (I have emended the translation).

56 *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., p. 207 (I have emended the translation).

57 For two representative passages, see: *Collected Papers*, op. cit., pp. 300–1 and *Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 37.

58

[W]e cannot come to an understanding with one another apart from language, and so in the end we must always rely on other people’s understanding words, inflexions, and sentence-construction in essentially the same way as ourselves. As I said before, I was not trying to give a definition, but only hints; and to this end I appealed to the general feeling for the German language.

(*Collected Papers*, op. cit., pp. 184–5)

59 *Culture and Value*, op. cit., p. 56.

60 *Collected Papers*, op. cit., p. 189. The final hedge here—first he says “impossible” and then “senseless”—occurs frequently in Frege’s discussion of this topic and can be taken to be indicative of a profound ambivalence on his part. The ambivalence is tied to the tension the *Tractatus* discerns in Frege’s thought: a tension between (a) wanting to say that there are inexpressible *thoughts* which certain forms of words attempt to express, and (b) wanting to say that the distinction between what can and what cannot be rendered in *Begriffsschrift* provides a precise logical demarcation of what is and what is not a thought (and hence that there is *no* thought expressed by forms of words which cannot be so rendered).

61 In order to avoid a possible confusion, I should remark that although I have followed the practice of translating Frege’s term *sinnlos* as “senseless,” I think it could equally well be rendered as “nonsense.” In similar contexts, Frege sometimes employs the term *unsinnig* instead in order to make the same sort of point. Unlike Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, in his alternating between these terms, Frege does not have any systematic distinction in view.

62 Throughout Frege’s corpus we find numerous remarks that appear to be defective in just the way he takes Kerry’s remark to be—remarks in which Frege employs expressions of the form “the concept *X*” and in which he wants to put forward this or that claim either about the nature of concepts *überhaupt* or about some particular concept (most famously, for example, the concept of number). Frege seems to be committed to the claim that these

remarks (in which expressions of the form “the concept *X*” figure) have the status of elucidations. I only mean here to be pointing out a consequence of Frege’s doctrines. (I am not committed to defending the claim that Frege himself faced up to this implication of his views.) See Weiner, *Frege in Perspective*, op. cit., chapter 6 for a spirited defense of the claim that Frege’s doctrines do indeed have this consequence (though Weiner herself is careful to insist that the views that she thus attributes to Frege—on the grounds that they are the only views that she thinks can make sense of the relevant portions of Frege’s writings—may well be views that “Frege-the-historical-person” would have disavowed).

- 63 *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., pp. 177–8 (I have emended the translation). There’s that hedge again: “it requires something contradictory...or perhaps better still...something nonsensical.”
- 64 Frege actually goes so far as to argue that the terms “function” and “concept” *even when they occur predicatively* are defective (because they function in ordinary language as names of first-level functions rather than themselves ranging over first-level functions) and thus “should properly speaking be rejected”:

[T]he words “function” and “concept” should properly speaking be rejected. Logically, they should be names of second-level functions; but they present themselves linguistically as names of first-level functions. It is therefore not surprising that we run into difficulties in using them.

(*Correspondence*, op. cit., pp. 141–2)

- 65 *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., pp. 119–20. The claim that “concepts cannot stand in the same relations as objects” might strike one as false. What about the relation of identity, can’t both concepts and objects stand in that relation? Frege thinks not:

[T]he relation of equality between objects cannot be conceived as holding between concepts too, but...there is a corresponding relation for concepts. It follows that the word “the same” that is used to designate the former relation between objects cannot properly be used to designate the latter relation as well. If we try to use it to do this, the only recourse we really have is to say “the concept ? is the same as the concept *X*” and in saying this we have of course named a relation between objects, where what is intended is a relation between concepts.

(pp. 121–2)

If by “the relation of identity” we mean a relation in which objects can stand to one another, then it is not a relation in which concepts can stand to one another. We can of course say that this object is “the same” as that one; and we can also say that this concept is “the same” as that one. But Frege thinks there is no univocal notion of “sameness” here. We are misled by the fact that in ordinary language we use the same sign to express two logically distinct kinds of relation into thinking that there is some overarching mode of relation into which both concepts and objects can enter. The difference between these two cases is rendered manifest in a proper *Begriffsschrift*: a different arrangement of signs expresses each of these distinct kinds of logical relation—in modern logical notation: $x=y$ and $(\forall x) (Fx \equiv Gx)$. There is no way in a proper *Begriffsschrift* to express the (by Frege’s lights, philosophically confused) thought that these two logically distinct kinds of relation are both species of a single genus (say, the genus *ways of being the same*). An attempt to express such a (pseudo-)thought in a proper *Begriffsschrift* can help to make manifest the confusion that (its apparent expressibility in) ordinary language disguises. This is a nice example of the feature of a proper *Begriffsschrift* that interests early Wittgenstein most: its potential as a tool for making latent nonsense patent.

- 66 The *Tractatus* will seek to press the question: to what extent is Frege, by his own lights, entitled to look upon that which his words here intend (but fail) to express as a *thought*?
- 67 My emphasis; *Correspondence*, op. cit., p. 136.

68 “Something” is, again, a weasel word here. *Tractatus*, §§4.126–4.1272 rework the same sort of example which figures in Frege’s correspondence with Russell:

[W]e can speak of formal concepts.... I introduce the expression in order to make clear the confusion of formal concepts with proper concepts.... That anything falls under a formal concept as an object belonging to it, cannot be expressed by a proposition. But it is shown in the symbol for the object itself. (The name shows that it signifies an object, the numerical sign that it signifies a number, etc.)

(§4.126)

So the variable name “x” is the proper sign of the pseudo-concept *object*.

Wherever the word “object” (“thing”, “entity”, etc.) is rightly used, it is expressed in logical symbolism by the variable name.

For example in the proposition “there are two objects which...”, by “(x,y)....”

Wherever it is used otherwise, i.e. as a proper concept word, there arise nonsensical pseudo-propositions.

So one cannot, e.g. say “There are objects” as one says “There are books”....

The same holds of the words “Complex”, “Fact”, “Function”, “Number”, etc.

They all signify formal concepts and are presented in logical symbolism by variables....

(§4.1272)

Wittgenstein’s way of putting the point in this passage (about “X is an object”) appears at first blush to parallel Frege’s discussion of “X is a function”: what an object is can only be “shown in the symbol for the object itself,” and if we try to say what an object is by employing the word “object” as a proper concept word, then “there arise nonsensical pseudo-propositions.” Thus Peter Hacker, for example, summarizes the point of the passage in a way that parallels Geach’s reading of Frege: “An attempt to describe the essence of things will unavoidably violate the bounds of sense...and produce nonsense.... Thus, for example, that A is or is not an *object* cannot be said because ‘object’ is a formal concept” (*Insight and Illusion*, revised edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 21). On Hacker’s view, “A is an object” is nonsense, but we know *what* it is trying to say and we know that “it” cannot be said.

There is this much of a disanalogy between Geach’s reading of Frege and Hacker’s reading of Wittgenstein: Hacker talks as if the invocation of “formal concepts” allowed for the introduction of a device for *saying* why the sentences in question are nonsense (as opposed to one which simply enables the production of more nonsense). On Geach’s reading, to grasp the teaching of the *Tractatus* as a whole is to grasp why a passage such as §4.126 is nonsense. (Geach’s view is nicely summarized by Anscombe’s remark in her book on the *Tractatus*: “Sentences...cannot represent, and nothing in them can stand for, ‘the logic of the facts’: they can only reproduce it. An attempt to say what they so reproduce leads to stammering”; *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Bristol, Thoemmes Press, 1971, p. 164.) On Hacker’s reading, on the other hand, §4.126 seems to succeed in *saying* why certain subsequent passages in the book are nonsense by specifying the “it” which cannot be spoken about. But this (by Geach’s lights) is to miss the point of §4.1272. If it were possible thus to refer to that which allegedly cannot be spoken about then there would be no problem about putting “it” into words. Hacker’s reading threatens to leave Wittgenstein in the position of a fool—one who first says that there are these things that can’t be spoken about and who then proceeds to *tell* what they are.

Hacker is untroubled by the lack of difficulty he encounters in telling us *what* it is that cannot be said, and he apparently takes Wittgenstein’s introduction of the notion of formal concept to be a device designed to facilitate the telling of such things. Hacker tries to make clear what a formal concept is by saying things like “in a logically perspicuous notation it will be evident that formal concepts are expressed by variables” (op. cit, pp. 21–2). This appears to present us with a way of saying what a formal

concept is: “A formal concept is what is expressed by a variable...”—and we can then apparently go on and add: “...and *that* is something which can only be shown but not said.” But the question is whether the preceding sentence can, by the lights of the *Tractatus*, be informative? (But one might object: “How can what Hacker says be mistaken if he is just paraphrasing what the *Tractatus* itself says about formal concepts?” For my response to this objection, see note 99.) In order for what Hacker says to be informative, it must say something; and in order for it to say something, the expression “formal concept” must refer. Hacker evidently takes himself to refer to something when he so employs it. Similarly, when Hacker tells us that “A is or is not an *object*,” we are apparently not to understand the term “object” in his employment of it to be failing to signify altogether. In so far as Hacker takes himself to be able thus to employ the terms “object” and “concept” in his explanations of the point of §§4.126 and 4.1272, he misses the point of these sections altogether.

Hacker wants to say that “object,” when he employs the expression, does not signify a kind of thing; but he wants to be able to use the expression so that it can occur in propositions of a recognizable logical form—the form “X is an object.” But the whole (Fregean) point of §4.1272 is that for an expression to occur in a proposition of this form is for it to refer to a kind of thing. According to the *Tractatus*, the only way for an expression to so much as try to mirror the logical feature of reality that Hacker wants the expression “object” to try (but fail) to mirror is for it to occur in the context of a proposition as (what the *Tractatus* calls) a *name*. (If Hacker were to name his cat “object” and to announce that his cat is hungry by saying “Object is hungry now” then “object” would occur, in his employment of it, as a name; but in such an employment, it would no longer even appear to furnish a device for rounding on the logical structure of language and viewing it from sideways on.) Similarly, if the term “formal concept” occurred significantly when one said “The concept *object* is a formal concept” it would be playing the logical role of a concept. Hacker may well, of course, deny he *intends* to designate a concept by “formal concept.” That is, after all, not what Hacker *says* “formal concept” refers to. Hacker might try the following formulation of his point: “X is a formal concept if X refers to that which in a logically perspicuous notation is expressed by variables.” But this is still to employ the term “formal concept” predicatively. Hacker may still protest: “Just forget about the logical role that the term appears to have in my use of it, damn it all! What I mean to refer to is just *that* which is represented by a variable and don’t begrudge me the requisite pinch of salt!” But what is the reference of “that” here? Can a sufficiently emphatic use of the word “that” reach all the way to the “_____ which is expressed by a variable”? To think one can thus circumvent the point of §4.1272—by accompanying one’s employment of the word “that” (or “formal concept”) with the requisite intention or with a sufficiently emphatic emphasis—is to play Benno Kerry to §4.1272’s Frege. Hacker does, at one point, say that “formal concepts must be employed as if they were genuine concepts” (op. cit., p. 21). But this falls short of locating the true depth of the problem for the *Tractatus*: it makes it sound as if there could be something to an expression’s signifying a genuine concept over and above its being “employed as if it were a genuine concept.” How, in Hacker’s employment of the term “formal concept,” does the term play the logical role of a concept and yet manage to signify a (formal) “_____” of different logical type? Hacker’s answer seems to be that it manages this by his (engaging in a psychological act of) meaning it in a certain way. (We, too, are then apparently supposed to fix its referent for ourselves by each of us going on to “mean” it in the same way for ourselves.) But to think that meaning can thus be conferred on an expression through a psychological act is precisely to refuse to credit the Fregean problematic about what it is to refer to a *Begriff* (which the *Tractatus* takes even more seriously than Frege himself did) and which forms the point of the very passages Hacker purports (on pp. 21–2 of his book) to expound. (See note 80 below for a discussion of the putative textual support for the attribution to the *Tractatus* of the view that meaning is conferred on signs via a psychological act.)

The point of the opening sentences of §4.1272 is that when the word “object” is “rightly used” (i.e., according to its *üblicher sinnvolle Gebrauch*) in ordinary language—in sentences such as, e.g., “Smith saw an object on the windowsill, about three inches high”—its use is

properly “expressed in logical symbolism by the variable name” (and not, say, by a first-level concept with an enormous extension). The philosophical “use” of the word, nicely exemplified by Hacker’s discussion, hovers between (1) wanting it to have the kind of logical significance it has when it is thus (“rightly”) used (and symbolizes a variable), and, at the same time, (2) wanting it to have the logical significance of a concept-expression (which symbolizes a *Begriff*). Such wavering gives rise to (what Wittgenstein calls) a *Scheinbegriff*—an expression employed predicatively to mean something other than a *Begriff* (thereby failing to mean anything at all.) Wittgenstein says he introduces his pseudo-notion of a formal concept in order “to make clear the confusion” involved in thinking that one can employ a term such as “object” as if it were a “genuine concept” [*eigentlicher Begriff*] (§4.126). The point of Wittgenstein’s introduction of the notion of a formal concept would then be “to make clear the confusion” involved in thinking that a so-called “formal concept” is a special kind of “genuine concept” [*eigentlicher Begriff*]. The term “formal concept” in Wittgenstein’s employment of it—like the term “object” in Hacker’s employment of it—is an example of a term that only apparently refers to an *eigentlicher Begriff*. This is not to say that it refers to an *uneigentlicher Begriff*. It is to say that it does not refer. What the *Tractatus* calls an *uneigentlicher Begriff* or a *Scheinbegriff* is not a special (unsayable) kind of concept—“a non-genuine one.” It is a sign masquerading as a symbol for a concept. It is not a kind of concept at all, any more (to borrow an analogy of Frege’s from *Posthumous Writings*, op. cit., p. 130) than stage-thunder is a kind of thunder. The same holds equally for what the *Tractatus* calls *Scheinsätze*: they are not a species of the genus *proposition* (e.g., ones that “violate the bounds of sense”)—but rather strings of signs which we are prone to mistake for propositions. The goal of the *Tractatus* is to enable us to recognize such signs for what they are.

Returning to the parallel between Geach’s and Hacker’s readings—the focal question for the remainder of this paper will be the following: is it the *Tractatus*’s view that “*unsinnige* pseudo-propositions” arise (when, e.g., we attempt to employ the word “object” as a concept word) because we “violate the bounds of sense” and try to say what “cannot be said”? It depends on what the *Tractatus*’s conception of *Unsinn* is; and whether it squares with the one which readers such as Geach find in Frege. If the *Tractatus* holds to an austere conception of nonsense, then the ultimate aim of elucidation (of, e.g., sentences in which so-called “formal concepts” figure) will be to lead us one step past the point where an elucidation of the sort which Geach finds in Frege leaves us (at which we imagine we glimpse the unsayable thing our words attempt to mean) to the point where our conviction that we understand what a sentence such as “A is an object” is even attempting to say completely dissolves on us (and all we are left with is a string of words in which we are no longer able to discern even an abortive attempt to mean something).

69 *Collected Papers*, op. cit., p. 193.

70 I hear a reader grumbling: “What about *Russell*? Isn’t the *Tractatus* as much a response to Russell as to Frege?” Of course. But the relation to Frege is more instructive for seeing how the *Tractatus* is (and especially for seeing how it is *not*) to be read—for seeing, that is, what the *method* of the *Tractatus* is. I have thus confined myself in this paper to showing how the problematic of the *Tractatus* develops out of Frege’s work. See, however, note 83 of “The Method of the *Tractatus*” op. cit., for a discussion of a line of filiation between Russell’s work and the *Tractatus* parallel to the one sketched in this paper which runs from Frege to the *Tractatus*.

71 *Philosophical Investigations*, §374.

72 As, for example, in §51 of *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, op. cit.:

With a concept the question is always whether anything, and if so what, falls under it. With a proper name such questions make no sense. We should not be deceived by the fact that language makes use of proper names, for instance Moon, as concept words, and vice versa; this does not affect the distinction between the two.

(p. 64)

- 73 *Collected Papers*, op. cit., p. 189.
- 74 It is worth noting that on this point Frege's views, contrary to standard accounts, do not conflict with those of later Wittgenstein on ordinary language. Indeed, they importantly anticipate a recurring theme in later Wittgenstein: namely, that in ordinary language we are constantly extending the uses of our words and thereby creating new possibilities of meaning for them. Frege and Wittgenstein are in agreement that the expressions of ordinary language can be—and indeed constantly are—used in logically (later Wittgenstein prefers to say: grammatically) unprecedented yet perfectly intelligible ways; and that for all sorts of bizarre forms of words for which there is at present no language-game, we can dream up a context (in Wittgenstein's later idiom: find a language-game) in which we would be drawn without loss of intelligibility to call upon that particular form of words.
- 75 This is not to say that, in general, any proposal which yields a possible segmentation of a string is equally tenable. In real life cases of interpretation, we are obliged, on the one hand, to make sense of the way a sentence occurs within a larger stretch of discourse. ("Understanding without contextuality is blind.") To commit oneself to a segmentation of the string, on the other hand, is to commit oneself to patterns of inference which are a function of how these words (of which the string is composed) occur in other propositions. ("Understanding without compositionality is empty.") The attribution of the endorsement of inferences of certain patterns to a speaker is governed by those considerations of charity and relevance which govern all aspects of interpretation. These considerations generally uniquely determine a segmentation (and, if not, at least severely constrain the range of reasonable proposals).
- 76 For purposes of simplifying the exposition, I have restricted my definition to (what the *Tractatus* calls) "written signs"—the *Tractatus* explicitly allows for "sound signs" (see §3.321) and implicitly for other sorts.
- 77 My self-defeating exposition of the alleged distinction between the two variants of the substantial conception mirrors, albeit in a highly summary fashion, the first half of the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus*. Half of the central point of the *Tractatus*, on my reading, is to show that once one has bought into the substantial conception one has implicitly committed oneself to a conception on which there are ineffable thoughts—thoughts which we can gesture at (with the aid of nonsensical language) but cannot express in language. (A central part of the interest of Frege's work for Wittgenstein, as he reads him, is that Frege recognized and drew this consequence.) The second half of the point of the work is to show that the way to escape this consequence is to abandon the substantial conception of nonsense altogether (not, according to Wittgenstein, an easy thing to do). As will become clear, my exposition of the alleged distinction between the substantial and austere conceptions of nonsense aims to mirror, in equally summary fashion, this second (and largely unnoticed) half of the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus*.
- 78 To anticipate: the *Tractatus* is not concerned to argue that there are *no* ways to distinguish between kinds of nonsense—or even that there is no distinction to be drawn in the neighborhood of the distinction sought by the proponent of the substantial conception (i.e., one which marks off cases of "philosophical" nonsense from (other) cases of mere nonsense)—but only that there are no *logically* distinct kinds of nonsense (or more precisely: that talk of "logically distinct kinds of nonsense" is itself to be recognized as (mere) nonsense). The coherence of the entire procedure of the work, indeed, rests upon the assumption that there *is* a distinction to be drawn in the neighborhood of the distinction sought by the proponent of the substantial conception; but, as we shall see, the *Tractatus* takes it to turn on *psychologically* distinct kinds of nonsense.
- 79 I say "reformulation of Frege's second principle" (rather than restatement of it) because the *Tractatus* is concerned to refashion Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. §3.3 is worded as it is precisely in order to mark a departure from Frege in this regard. Just what sort of departure from Frege is here being marked, however, is far less clear (at least to me). In Friedrich Waismann's *Thesen* (which is his attempt to furnish the members of the Vienna Circle with an overview of the main ideas of the *Tractatus*, based

on detailed conversations with Wittgenstein), we find the following: “A proposition has *Sinn*, a word has *Bedeutung*” (*Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*). Enigmatic as that may seem, it is straightforward compared to anything to be found anywhere in the *Tractatus* itself on the subject. §3.3 (along with §3.144) does appear to seek to exclude the applicability of *Sinn* to any kind of symbol other than a *Satz*. When read in the light of §3.3, a number of earlier passages (§§3.142, 3.144, 3.203, 3.22) also appear to be worded in a manner suggesting that the overall doctrine of the work indeed is that (at least) *names*—i.e., the constituent parts of a fully analyzed sentence—do not have *Sinn*. The corresponding principle in regard to *Bedeutung* does not obviously hold, however: the application of *Bedeutung* in the *Tractatus* does not appear to be restricted (as the passage from Waismann’s *Thesen* might seem to imply) to the sub-judgmental components of propositions. Throughout the *Tractatus*, the term “*Bedeutung*” is employed in a (relatively non-technical) manner so as to suggest that any sign (including a *Satz*, i.e., a prepositional sign) with a determinate linguistic function can be said to have a *Bedeutung* (see, e.g., §5.451 for the claim that the negation sign has a *Bedeutung*), and, as such, are to be contrasted only with signs which have no *Bedeutung* or (as the *Tractatus* prefers to say) with signs to which no *Bedeutung* has been given (see, e.g., §§5.4733, 6.53). What *Tractatus*, §3.3 is concerned to withhold endorsement from is—not the bare idea that *Sätze* can be said to have *Bedeutungen*, but rather—“Frege’s theory of the *Bedeutung* of *Sätze* and *Funktionen*” (§5.02), i.e., Frege’s assimilation of sentences and functions to the category of proper names (and especially his doctrine that the *truth value* of a sentence is its *Bedeutung*). For useful discussion touching on this extraordinarily obscure region of the *Tractatus*, see Cora Diamond’s “Inheriting from Frege” (forthcoming in *The Cambridge Companion to Frege*, T. Ricketts (ed.) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) and Peter Hylton’s “Functions, Operations and Sense in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” in *Early Analytic Philosophy*, W. W. Tait (ed.) Chicago, Open Court, 1997).

- 80 A number of commentators have attributed to the *Tractatus* the view that a special mental act (of intending to mean a particular object by a particular word) is what endows a name with meaning (see, e.g., Hacker, *Insight and Illusion*, op. cit., pp. 73–80; Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, op. cit., pp. 114–22; Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 63–82). If textual support for this attribution is adduced at all, it is usually through appeal to texts outside of the *Tractatus*—usually passages from *Notebooks: 1914–16*; e.g., pp. 33–4, 99, 129–30, or corresponding passages from Wittgenstein’s correspondence with Russell. (When a passage from the *Tractatus* is adduced it has to be supplemented by a song and dance which purports to explain how it is supposed to support the attribution.) According to these commentators, the *Tractatus* holds that the connection between a name and its meaning can only be fixed by such a mental act: it is this act which confers upon the word the power to signify the object one has in mind. To think that one can fix the meanings of names by means of such an act just is to think that one can fix their meanings prior to and independently of their use in propositions; and it is just this psychologistic conception of meaning that Frege’s and early Wittgenstein’s respective versions of a context principle are concerned to repudiate.

There is no reference anywhere in the *Tractatus* to a distinct *act* of meaning (through which a *Bedeutung* is conferred on a sign). The passage from the *Tractatus* most commonly adduced to provide a semblance of textual support for this psychologistic attribution is §3.11 which Pears and McGuinness translate as follows: “The method of projection is to think of the sense of the proposition.” So translated, this remark can be taken to refer to an act of thinking and to ascribe an explanatory role to such an act. The Ogden translation is more faithful: “The method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition.” Rush Rhees glosses this (quite properly, I think) as: “The method of projection is what we *mean* by ‘thinking’ or ‘understanding’ the sense of the proposition.” Rhees comments: “Pears and McGuinness read it [i.e., §3.11] ... as though the remark were to explain the expression ‘method of projection’.... [On the contrary], ‘projection’, which is a logical operation, is...to explain ‘*das Denken des Satz-Sinnes*’. The ‘*ist*’ after

‘*Projektionsmethode*’ might have been italicized” (*Discussions of Wittgenstein*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 39). Rhees’s point here is that the last sentence of §3.11 has the same structure as, e.g., the last sentence of §3.316: the *explanans* is on the left and the *explanandum* on the right—not the other way around as the psychologistic interpretation supposes. I believe—but I cannot go into detail at this point—that the subsequent passages of the *Tractatus* (as well as *Notebooks*, pp. 20, 41) clearly bear this reading out. (Acknowledging the justice of Rhees’s criticism, and finding it more natural in English to place the *explanandum* on the left, McGuinness later recanted his and Pears’s original translation of §3.11 and proposed the following translation instead: “Thinking the sense of the proposition is the method of projection.” McGuinness goes on to offer the following lucid summary of the actual point of the passage: “Thinking the sense into the proposition is nothing other than so using the words of the sentence that their logical behaviour *is* that of the desired proposition” (“On the So-called Realism of the *Tractatus*” in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, I. Block (ed.) Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1981, pp. 69–70).) The point being made at this point in the work about “thinking” is an illustration of a general feature of Wittgenstein’s method. What the *Tractatus* does throughout is explicate putatively psychological *explananda* in terms of logical *explanantes*. The Malcolm/Black/Hacker reading of §3.11 takes Wittgenstein to be explaining one of the central logical notions of the book in terms of a psychological notion, thus utterly missing the way Wittgenstein here takes himself to be elaborating and building upon Frege’s first two principles.

For further discussion of this point, see note 115 of “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” *op. cit.*

- 81 Although the notion of *Satz* which figures in the context principle (only the *Satz* has sense; only in the context of a *Satz* has a name meaning) is of a certain kind of a symbol, the term “*Satz*” in the *Tractatus* floats between meaning (1) a prepositional symbol (as, e.g., in §§3.3ff and §§4ff) and (2) a prepositional sign (as, e.g., in §§5.473 and §6.54). It is important to the method of the *Tractatus* that the recognition that certain apparent cases of (1) are merely cases of (2) be a recognition that the reader achieve on his own. Consequently, at certain junctures, the method of the *Tractatus* requires that the reference of *Satz* remain provisionally neutral as between (1) and (2). At the corresponding junctures in my own discussion, I leave *Satz* untranslated.
- 82 A version of this distinction (between sign [*Zeichen*] and symbol [*Symbol*]) is implicit in Frege’s work; for example, in his “Introduction to Logic,” Frege writes:

The same thought cannot be true at one time, false at another.... [T]he reason ...[people] believe the thought to be the same is that in such cases what is the same is the form of words; the form of words [which is said to be both true and false] will then be a counterfeit (non-genuine) proposition [*wird dann ein uneigentlicher Satz sein*]. We do not always adequately distinguish the sign [*Zeichen*] from what it expresses.

(*Posthumous Writings*, *op. cit.*, p. 186–1 have emended the translation)

Wittgenstein’s notion of an expression or symbol (that which is common to a set of propositions)—as opposed to a sign (that which is common to, what Frege here calls, forms of words)—builds on Frege’s idea that what determine the logical segmentation of a sentence are the inferential relations which obtain between the judgment that sentence expresses and other judgments. *Language* [*Sprache*] is Wittgenstein’s term for the totality of such prepositional symbols; and *logical space* is his term for the resulting overall network of inferential relations within which each proposition has its life. §§4–4.001 build on the notion of *Satz* developed in §§3.31ff (“The thought is the *sinnvolle* proposition. The totality of propositions is the language”). *Language* [*Sprache*] in the *Tractatus* refers to the totality of *possible* prepositional symbols. One might think of this as Wittgenstein’s attempting to follow Frege’s example (in his exchange with Kerry about concepts) by “keeping to the strictly logical use” of the word “language.” It is

trivially true, if one applies this idiom, that *there is only one language*—though there are, of course, countless alternative systems of signs which may differ widely in their respective expressive powers.

- 83 The ensuing exposition of this example only really works if we assume all the letters of the sentence to be capitalized so that we have no orthographic clues as to when the expression “GREEN” is being used as the proper name of a person and when as a concept-expression.
- 84 The sequence of (a), (b) and (c) nicely brings out a further asymmetry between sign and symbol. In the rendition of (b) into logical notation, we might think of the sign “=” as corresponding to the sign “is” in the ordinary language version of (b); that is, we might think of these two signs (“=,” “is”) as symbolizing the same relation (the relation of identity). But in the rendition of (a) into logical notation, there is no candidate for a sign that corresponds to “is”—there is here nothing which is *the* sign which symbolizes the copula. The *Tractatus* draws five morals from this: (M1) a method of symbolizing is not simply a matter of a sign *naming* an item of a particular logical category, (M2) a symbol is expressed not simply through a sign but through *a mode of arrangement* of signs, (M3) not every logically significant aspect of a mode of arrangement of signs corresponds to an argument place (into which a different sign can be substituted), (M4) it is not the case that each method of symbolizing requires the employment of a distinct sign to express the method of symbolizing (a method of symbolizing can be expressed through a mode of arrangement of signs, such as the method of symbolizing the copula in modern logical notation), (M5) for certain methods of symbolizing the employment of a distinct sign is required.
- (M4) is of great importance. The *Tractatus* distinguishes between kinds of symbol by distinguishing degrees of “dispensibility” of signs for different kinds of symbol. The degree of the “dispensibility” of a sign depends on how easy it is to express the symbolic function of the sign while making the sign itself (as the *Tractatus* puts it) “disappear.” (My appreciation of the importance of this point for the *Tractatus* is indebted to discussion with Michael Kremer.) (M4) sets up two further doctrines which play a central role in the *Tractatus*: (i) that any sign which symbolizes a *relation* can in principle be dispensed with and expressed instead through a mode of arrangement of signs (§§3.1431–3.1432), (ii) that this shows us something about such symbols: they are not (in the Tractarian sense) *names* (§§3.1432–3.22). For further discussion of these issues, see “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” op. cit, note 119.
- 85 This is not to claim that it is possible to understand a sentence, if *none* of its constituent signs symbolize in the same manner in which they symbolize in other sentences. (Hence *Tractatus*, §4.03: “A proposition must use old expressions to communicate new senses.”) It is only to claim that not *all* of the constituent signs must symbolize in a precedented fashion. But an unprecedented usage of a sign will only be intelligible if the constituent signs which symbolize in the “old” manner determine a possible segmentation of the prepositional sign—where such a segmentation specifies both (i) the logical role of the sign which symbolizes in an unprecedented manner and (ii) the position of the resulting prepositional symbol in logical space.
- 86 One standard way of contrasting early and later Wittgenstein is to say that later Wittgenstein rejected his earlier (allegedly truth-conditional) account of meaning—on which considerations of use have no role to play in fixing the meaning of an expression—in favor of (what gets called) “a use-theory of meaning.” Our brief examination of §3.326 should already make one wary of such a story. The popularity of this story rests largely on an additional piece of potted history, according to which the *Tractatus* advances the doctrine that it is possible (and indeed, according to most readings, semantically necessary) to fix the meanings of names prior to and independently of their use in propositions (either through ostensive definition or through some special mental act which endows a name with meaning; see note 80). This putative teaching of the *Tractatus* is standardly taken to be the primary target of the opening sections of *Philosophical Investigations*. But the whole point of §§3.3–3.344 of the *Tractatus* is that the identity of the object referred to by a name is only fixed by the use

- of the name in a set of significant [*sinnvolle*] propositions. An appeal to use thus already plays a critical role in Wittgenstein's early account of what determines both the meaning of a proposition as a whole and the meanings of each of its "parts." With respect to this topic, the opening sections of *Philosophical Investigations* is properly seen as recasting and extending a critique of Russellian doctrines already begun in the *Tractatus*.
- 87 In the absence of any familiarity with the way words (signs) ordinarily occur (symbolize) in propositions, we would have no basis upon which to fashion possible segmentations of propositional signs, and hence no way to *recognize* (rather than simply fantasize) the symbol in the sign. (This is the situation we find ourselves in when faced with a sentence of a language which we do not know and which does not in the least resemble any which we do know.)
- 88 *Erkennen* can also be translated "perceive." I will occasionally favor this translation.
- 89 Both the positivist and ineffability readings of the *Tractatus* require that these two forms of recognition be mutually compatible: that we be able to recognize the symbol in the sign *and* that we recognize his propositions as nonsensical (because the symbols clash with one another).
- 90 We can now begin to see how misleading the standard attribution to early Wittgenstein of (what gets called) a "logical atomist theory of meaning" is. It is just such a theory that is under indictment in passages such as §§3.3, 3.314, 3.341, 3.344. Gilbert Ryle noticed that already early Wittgenstein (building on Frege) had been concerned to attack Russell's atomism; and he offered a rather eloquent summary of Wittgenstein's criticisms of an atomistic theory of meaning:

It was... Wittgenstein who, developing arguments of Frege, showed that the sense of a sentence is not, what had hitherto been tacitly assumed, a whole of which the meanings of the words in it are independently thinkable parts but, on the contrary, that the meanings of the parts of a sentence are abstractible differences and similarities between the unitary sense of that sentence and the unitary senses of other sentences which have something but not everything in common with that given sentence. To put it in epistemological terms, we do not begin with the possession of concepts and then go on to coagulate them into thoughts. We begin and end with thoughts, and by comparative analysis we can discriminate ways in which something is constant *vis-à-vis* what else is varied between different unitary things we think.... [A]n assertion is not a molecule of which the meanings of the words in which it is worded are the atoms. ... Concepts are not things that are there crystallized in splendid isolation; they are discriminable features, but not detachable atoms, of what is integrally said or integrally thought. They are not detachable parts of, but distinguishable contributions to, the unitary senses of completed sentences. To examine them is to examine the live force of things we actually say. It is to examine them not in retirement, but doing their co-operative work.

(*Collected Papers*, vol. 1, op. cit, pp. 184–5)

- Aside from a few notable exceptions (such as Cora Diamond, Hidé Ishiguro and Anthony Palmer), no one writing on the *Tractatus* over the subsequent several decades seems to have either noticed early Wittgenstein's repudiation of an atomist theory of meaning or noticed that Ryle noticed it. Some commentators have, however, noticed something which is intimately related to what Ryle noticed: namely, that the notion of an "object" is developed in the *Tractatus* with the aim of undercutting the *onto-logical* doctrines of logical atomism. See Brian McGuinness's "On the So-called Realism of the *Tractatus*," op. cit.; Tom Ricketts's "Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense in the *Tractates*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Hans Sluga and David Stern (eds) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996 and Warren Goldfarb's "Objects, Names and Realism in the *Tractatus*" (unpublished).
- 91 In order to count as *sinnvoll* a *Satz* has to be able to serve as a vehicle of *communication*: it has to make a *statement* about how things are—it has to *assert* what is

the case [*der sinnvolle Satz sagt etwas aus*] (§6.1264). Such a *Satz* is characterized by both a form [*Form*] and a content [*Inhalt*] (§3.31). A *Satz* which is *sinnlos* possesses a (logical) form but no content. *Unsinn*, on the other hand, possesses neither a form nor a content.

For a *Satz* to be contentful [*gehaltvoll*]⁹²—to bear on how things are—there has to be room for a distinction between what would make it true and what would make it false. Its truth is determined by (consulting) whether things are in accordance with what it asserts. A *Satz* which is *sinnlos* does not make a claim on reality; it has no bearing on how things are. There is no need to consult how things stand in order to determine its truth value—mere “inspection of the sign” is sufficient to determine its truth value. The *Tractatus* therefore distinguishes between the broader genus of *Sätze* (*sinnlos* or *sinnvoll*) characterized by a logical form (i.e., in which we can recognize the symbol in the sign) and the narrower genus of (genuine [*eigentliche*]) *Sätze*. The latter sort of *Satz* asserts “This is how things stand” [*“Es verhält sich so und so”*] and thus is characterized by “the general form of a proposition” (cf. §4.5)—where this latter phrase should be understood to mean: “the general form of a *genuine* proposition.” In saying that a “proposition” of logic is *sinnlos*, the *Tractatus* is identifying it as belonging to a degenerate species (or “limiting case,” cf. §4.466) of the genus proposition—it has the logical form of a proposition without its being *gehaltvoll* (§6.111): “the representational relations it subtends cancel one another out, so that it does not stand in any representational relation to reality” (§4.462).

To say of a *Satz* (a prepositional sign) that it is *Unsinn* is to say that it is a mere sign: no determinate method of symbolizing has yet been conferred on it. Whereas to say of it that it is *sinnlos* is to affirm that a method of symbolizing has been conferred on it, but that the method of symbolizing in question fails to yield a proper proposition. A *Satz* which is *sinnlos* is unlike a genuine proposition (and like *Unsinn*), in that it fails to express a thought (it does not restrict reality to a yes or no and hence does not represent a state of affairs): it says *nothing*. Yet it is like a genuine proposition (and unlike *Unsinn*), in that we are able to recognize the symbol in the sign and hence are able to express it in a *Begriffsschrift*—it forms, as the *Tractatus* puts it, “part of the symbolism” (§4.4611). Thus what logic is, for the *Tractatus*, is *internal to* what it is to say something; and hence which *Sätze* are logical *Sätze* (and thus form part of the symbolism) only shows itself [*zeigt sich*] in language—that is, in the meaningful employment we already make of (what the *Tractatus* calls) “our everyday language” [*unsere Umgangssprache*].

According to a widely accepted reading of the *Tractatus*, the so-called “propositions” of logic represent a set of *a priori* “conditions on the possibility of thought”—a set of *requirements* laid down in advance on what can and cannot be said. Yet it is, in fact, just such a Fregean/Russellian conception of the “substantiality” of logic which is under indictment in the *Tractatus* on the grounds that (i) the so-called “truths of logic” are not only not *prior* to, but rather parasitic on ordinary garden-variety truths, (ii) logic therefore cannot be abstracted from language so as to form a body of *independently* thinkable or assertable truths, (iii) the “propositions” of logic (because they are void of content [*inhaltsleer*]) cannot be construed as forming a body of *truths* at all (let alone, as Frege and early Russell would have it, a body of maximally general truths), and (iv) (because they say nothing) they cannot *require* anything and hence cannot be construed as “laws of thought,” so (v) there is no (Fregean/Russellian) *science* of logic. For more on (iii)-(v), see my “The Search for Logically Alien Thought,” op. cit.

92 *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (my translation), Part Two, chapter 1.

93 Note: everything I have said so far in this paragraph—understood in the appropriate way—is perfectly consistent with an “austere” reading of Frege (such as that offered by Cora Diamond).

94 *Collected Papers*, op. cit., p. 156.

95 Except that proponents of the ineffability interpretation of the *Tractatus* pretend, unlike Geach, to be able to see how to go on and adapt the guiding idea of this interpretation—i.e., that attempts to formulate propositions which violate the logical

structure of language are able to convey insights into *logical* features of reality—so that it extends to the possibility of conveying additional insights into other apparently quite different, yet equally ineffable (usually ethical, aesthetic and/or religious) features of reality.

- 96 *Philosophical Remarks*, §6. Or to put the same point differently: it aims to show us that we cannot use language as proponents of the ineffability interpretation assume Wittgenstein supposes we can. For example, Peter Hacker, as we saw in note 68, takes §§4.126 and 4.1272 of the *Tractatus* to be concerned with showing how a certain sort of attempt to “violate the bounds of sense”—in the case in question, the violation (allegedly) incurred by a certain employment of the expression “object”—enables us to hint at something which cannot be said. Hacker and I agree that these sections of the *Tractatus* do not succeed in *saying* anything. But Hacker takes these passages of the book to be *trying* to say what can not be said but only “shown.” He implicitly attributes to the *Tractatus* the doctrines (a) that there is something which is a piece of nonsense’s trying but failing to say something, and (b) that there is something which can count as one’s knowing what the nonsense in question would be saying if it were something which could be said. Thus, on Hacker’s interpretation, the whole point of the book is to show us how to employ language (or at least language-like structures) to get outside language (to what cannot be said but only “shown”). On my interpretation, the whole point of the *Tractatus* is—not to get us to see the truth of (a) and (b), but rather—to get us to see that (a) and (b) rest upon the (only apparently intelligible) notion that nonsense can so much as try to say something.
- 97 I am here borrowing a phrase of John McDowell’s; see his *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1994 and “Non-cognitivism and Rule-following,” reprinted in this volume.
- 98 See, for example, *Philosophical Investigations*, §464.
- 99 *Manuscript 110* of Wittgenstein’s *Handschriftlicher Nachlass*, p. 239 (quoted by David Stern in *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 194). When the aim of a work is “to place an illusion before one’s eyes,” the task of offering an exegesis of the work becomes a delicate one. Much of what proponents of the ineffability interpretation write often amounts to little more than a paraphrase of things Wittgenstein himself (apparently) says in the *Tractatus*. How can a commentator who furnishes us with a seemingly faithful paraphrase of Wittgenstein’s own words be leading himself or his readers astray as to the point of the passage in question? Well, it depends on the sort of use to which one wants to put such a paraphrase. It depends on whether the paraphrase is adduced as a transitional remark (whose sense is subsequently to be queried) or as an *explanation* of the meaning of the passage. What is it to exemplify an understanding of the point of those passages from the *Tractatus* which the reader is to recognize as *Unsinn*? Here are two possible answers: (i) one exemplifies one’s understanding of the passages in question through a faithful paraphrase of them, where what one says makes explicit what these passages (are at least trying to) say; (ii) one exemplifies one’s understanding of the passages in question by bringing out how they are to serve as expressions of philosophical temptations which are eventually to be recognized as *Unsinn* and to be thrown away, (i) is quite properly presupposed in most expositions of most philosophical works; but to presuppose (i) in an exposition of the point of the relevant passages from the *Tractatus* is inevitably to fall into the very confusions which the passages in question seek to expose. An undue confidence on the part of a commentator in the reliability of para-phrase as a method of explicating the point of a passage will lead to a complete missing of its point if the point is to carry the reader along a movement of thought which culminates in an undermining of its credentials as thought (if it is latent nonsense which is to be recognized as patent nonsense). To think that one can faithfully exhibit an understanding of those passages of the *Tractatus* which are to be recognized by the reader as *Unsinn* by offering (what one takes to be) a faithful paraphrase of them is to fail (to do what §6.54 calls upon the reader to do: namely) to understand the author of the book and the character of the project of elucidation in which he is engaged.

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

(*Tractatus*, Preface)

101 “The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be *simply nonsense*” (my emphasis) (ibid.).

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

Question: *which* sentences are (to be recognized as) nonsensical? Answer: those that elucidate. §4.112 does not say: “A philosophical work consists *entirely* of elucidations.” It says: “A philosophical work consists *essentially* of elucidations.” Not every sentence of the work is (to be recognized as) nonsense. For not every sentence serves as an elucidation. Some sentences subserve the elucidatory aim of the work by providing the framework within which the activity of elucidation takes place. Some of them do this by saying things about the work as a whole (and offering instructions for how the work is to be read); others by saying things with the aim of helping us to see what is going on in some part of the work (i.e., within a particular stretch of elucidation). Many of the sections of the *Tractatus* to which this paper has devoted most attention—e.g., the Preface, §§3.32–3.326, 4–4.003, 4.111–4.112, 6.53–6.54—belong to the frame of the work and are only able to impart their instructions concerning the nature of the elucidatory aim and method of the work if recognized as *sinnvoll*. (Indeed, what I have just done in this endnote is offer a partial explanation of what §4.112 and §6.54 say.)

Question: what determines whether a remark belongs to the *frame* of the work (preparing the way for those remarks which do serve as elucidations) or to the (elucidatory) *body* of the work? Answer: its role within the work. The distinction between what is part of the frame and what is part of the body of the work is not, as some commentators have thought, simply a function of *where* in the work a remark occurs (say, near the beginning or the end of the book). Rather, it is a function of *how* it occurs.

Question: how are we to tell *this*? What criteria govern whether a given remark is *Unsinn* or not? This question presupposes that certain strings of signs are intrinsically either cases of *Unsinn* or cases of *Sinn*. But the *Tractatus* teaches that this depends on us: on our managing (or failing) to perceive [*erkennen*] a symbol in the sign. There can be no fixed answer to the question what kind of work a given remark within the text accomplishes. It will depend on the kind of sense a reader of the text will (be tempted to) make of it. Many of the remarks are carefully designed to tempt a reader to find a (substantially) “nonsensical sense” in them. In order to ascend the ladder a reader must yield to (at least some of) these temptations.

Certain remarks in the *Tractatus* can be seen to have a triple-aspect structure: liable to flip-flop between (1) (apparently) substantial nonsense, (2) mere *Sinn*, and (3) (what

the *Tractatus* calls) *Unsinn*—i.e., between (1) a remark in which the reader (imagines she) is able to perceive a symbol in each sign but is unable to attach *Sinn* to the resulting combination, (2) a remark in which the reader is able to perceive a logically unproblematic proposition in the prepositional sign, and (3) a remark in which the reader perceives [*erkennt*] a mere string of signs upon which no determinate method of symbolizing has been conferred. Some remarks—including the final remark (read, e.g., as the tautology: “We must be silent [i.e., say nothing] where there is nothing to say”—can present yet a fourth aspect: that of *Sinnlosigkeit*. What sort of foothold(s) a given remark provide(s) a given reader in her progress up the ladder thus depend(s) upon the sort(s) of aspect it presents to her, and that will depend on *her*—on the use(s) to which she is drawn to put it in the course of her ascent.

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