

## Chapter 8

# Why Worry about the *Tractatus*?

James Conant

In order to understand Mr. Wittgenstein's book, it is necessary to realize what is the problem with which he is concerned.<sup>1</sup>

Why worry about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*? Did not Wittgenstein himself come to think it was largely a mistaken work? Is not Wittgenstein's important work his later work? And does not his later work consist in a *rejection* of his earlier views? So does not the interest of the *Tractatus* mostly lie in its capacity to furnish a particularly vivid exemplar of the sort of philosophy that the mature Wittgenstein was most concerned to reject? So is it not true that the only real reason to worry about the *Tractatus* is to become clear about what sort of thing it was that the later Wittgenstein was most *against* in philosophy? Is the interest of the book therefore not largely exhausted by its capacity to show us what the later Wittgenstein did *not* think?

Much of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, either implicitly or explicitly, answers these questions largely in the affirmative. The aim of this paper is to suggest that the manner in which it has done so has done much to obstruct the possibility of an understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy – both early and late. The aim is not to suggest that these questions should be answered instead in the negative, but rather to furnish a prolegomenon to the possibility of a proper understanding of what – and how much – ought to be affirmed in answering them in the affirmative.

As the present volume makes evident, there is currently a debate underway about how to read (and how not to read) Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. This paper will not attempt a direct contribution to that debate,<sup>2</sup> it will attempt instead to bring out some of what might be at stake in that debate. It is natural to think that all that ought to be at stake is a fairly parochial question concerning the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein's work during a single, relatively early phase of his philosophical development. Thus it is natural to conclude that, whatever differences may divide the parties to this debate concerning how to read the *Tractatus*, nonetheless, *au fond* these interpreters of Wittgenstein may be in broad agreement about how to read most of the rest of Wittgenstein's work – or, at least, whatever their disagreements may be about the early work, they are ones that can be independently adjudicated, without substantial cost to anyone's prior

commitments concerning how one ought to read the later work. One burden of this paper is to suggest that this is mistaken – that issues parallel to those which arise in the interpretation of the *Tractatus* arise in connection with the interpretation of Wittgenstein's later work as well.

Even though, as stated above, much of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* either implicitly or explicitly answers the questions with which this paper begins largely in the affirmative, nonetheless it is customary for it also to acknowledge that there are important *continuities* in Wittgenstein's philosophy. So a different way of putting the question of this paper is as follows: how are these continuities to be conceived? How are we to hold together, in a single unitary account of the development of Wittgenstein's thought, that which he was most concerned to root out and reject in his early philosophy with that in it which he was most concerned to retain and refine?

This is therefore a paper about how to begin to think about the possible continuities and discontinuities in Wittgenstein's philosophy – and hence about where many commentators on Wittgenstein's work think the continuities are to be sought and about where else one might look for them. In what follows, I will attempt to lay bare some of the central exegetical assumptions common to certain standard readings of Wittgenstein's writings at three different stages of his career: the *Tractatus*, the private language sections of *Philosophical Investigations*, and *On Certainty*. This exercise requires that I settle for descriptions of the relevant readings of these works that operate at a fairly severe level of abstraction. I shall abstract, as far as possible, from matters about which the relevant community of readers disagree in order to bring out their fundamental points of agreement. I shall also abstract, as far as possible, from the differences in the doctrines attributed to Wittgenstein at each of these three stages of his development in order to bring out the fundamental continuity in his philosophy, as that continuity emerges on standard readings of his work. In the latter part of the paper, I will indicate why there is reason to think that the philosophical assumptions thus standardly attributed to Wittgenstein are already under indictment in the *Tractatus*, and why there is also reason to think that this indictment is still in force in *Philosophical Investigations* and in *On Certainty*. I hope thereby to offer a brief overview of an alternative picture of where the continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy might be thought to lie – one which locates it in the opposite place from where we have been taught to look for it by much of the commentary on Wittgenstein's work

A passage from Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker will suffice to give a brief indication of the sort of account of the continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy that I wish to oppose.<sup>3</sup> The following passage offers a fairly standard story of how an appeal to rules of logical syntax in the *Tractatus* gives way in the later Wittgenstein to an appeal to the rules of grammar:

Wittgenstein had, in the *Tractatus*, seen that philosophical or conceptual investigation moves in the domain of rules. An important point of continuity was the insight that philosophy is not concerned with what is true and what is false, but rather with what makes sense and what traverses the bounds of sense.... [W]hat he called 'rules of

grammar' ... are the direct descendants of the 'rules of logical syntax' of the *Tractatus*. Like rules of logical syntax, rules of grammar determine the bounds of sense. They distinguish sense from nonsense.... Grammar, as Wittgenstein understood the term, is the account book of language. Its rules determine the limits of sense, and by carefully scrutinizing them the philosopher may determine at what point he has drawn an overdraft on Reason, *violated the rules for the use of an expression*, and so, in subtle and not readily identifiable ways, traversed the bounds of sense.<sup>4</sup>

I agree with Baker and Hacker that the later conception of grammar is the heir of the earlier conception of logical syntax. I also agree with their proposal concerning the general region of Wittgenstein's thought in which one ought to look for significant continuity: namely, in his conceptions of grammar (or logic) and failures thereof (that is, nonsense) and in his concomitant conception of philosophical method. But I will want to disagree with their particular characterizations of these conceptions – for example, as turning on an aspiration to formulate rules that will 'determine the limits of sense' and thus 'determine at what point' the philosopher has 'traversed the bounds of sense', a point reached when the philosopher 'violate[s] the rules for the use of an expression'. Such characterizations are to be found in much of the secondary literature on Wittgenstein's work – early and late. The question is: how faithful are they to Wittgenstein's own conception of what it is that he was trying to accomplish in philosophy?

### **Pseudo-Tractarianism**

I begin with a brief sketch of the standard reading of the *Tractatus*. It turns on a certain way of understanding the distinction between that which can be *said* in language and that which can only be *shown*. The 'logical form' which a proposition shares with the bit of reality that it depicts cannot itself be made the subject of depiction; rather, it is *shown* in the proposition which possesses it. On the standard way of understanding this, the 'logical form' is conceived of as a *something* – a something which stands in a certain sort of relation to a proposition. So it comes to look as if there are *facts* about what propositions depict: it is a *fact* that this proposition has that logical form.

Having said this much, already at this incipient stage in their exposition, most proponents of the standard reading of the *Tractatus* will begin to backpedal furiously. They will say: 'Well, actually, it is not a fact, but rather a "fact" that this proposition has that logical form.' Some of them think it helps to call what is at issue here a 'fact', placing the word 'fact' in quotes to mark the difference between such 'facts' and ordinary garden-variety facts. Facts are what can be spoken of, what can be depicted by meaningful propositions. What is at issue here is not that sort of fact, but rather something much deeper. Something? Well, not some *thing*. It is something much deeper than a fact or thing. It is like a fact, in that we can, in our thought about it, get it right or wrong; but it lies at too deep a level – deeper

than any ordinary fact – to be a mere fact. Let's call those matters which our thought aims to get right, when it seeks to grasp the structure of this deeper domain, *quasi-facts*. Our language cannot depict quasi-facts, we are told, because quasi-facts have to do with what language itself can or cannot depict. That our language cannot depict such quasi-facts comes into view as a limitation on our language. It might be taken to be a merely contingent limitation – one which might be overcome by rising, say, to the level of a meta-language, as Russell suggested in the Introduction to the *Tractatus*. According to the standard reading, the Tractarian response to such a Russellian suggestion is to insist that the limitation in question is a necessary one – to insist that in attempting to frame propositions about 'logical form' we are attempting to state the essential presuppositions of any meaningful language whatsoever. To treat this as a *fact* that could be represented in some other language is to suppose that there could be a language which could accommodate the possibility of that alleged fact's *not* obtaining; and such a language would be an 'illogical language'. And the whole point of the *Tractatus* is, according to the standard reading, to try to show that such a language is something that cannot be. And it is not just something that for some contingent reason cannot be. The non-contingent character of the sort of impossibility here at issue is made manifest to us through our realizing that when we try to speak of what it is that we imagine we might be able to say in a such language (one in which it would be possible to speak of quasi-facts), we end up speaking nonsense. We come to see that any attempt to put into words what it is that we would want to say, when attempting to speak of the essential presuppositions of any meaningful language, must necessarily violate the conditions that render meaningful discourse possible.

If the *Tractatus* is read in this manner, as it standardly is, then it seems to be open to a devastating charge: the procedure of the book as a whole, insofar as it allows itself to talk of how logical form is 'shown', presupposes the possibility of just the sort of language that it seeks to show is impossible. And, indeed, such a charge is difficult to forestall as soon as the difficulty posed by the following question comes into focus: is the 'thought' that 'an illogical language is impossible' itself a thought or not? Is it something thinkable? On the standard reading of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein not only bites the bullet here, but seeks to deal with the threat by chewing the bullet up and swallowing it. On the most influential line of interpretation, Wittgenstein's 'solution' to this problem is to relocate it to the realm of the unsayable. So the book is read as attempting to hint at what it cannot say: that there is a realm of ineffable fact-like quasi-truths, such as the fact-like quasi-truth that language and world share a common logical form. On this view, the propositions of the *Tractatus*, while 'strictly speaking' nonsense, serve a useful purpose by directing our attention to the ineffable features of reality and language that undergird all meaningful discourse. In this way, they enable us to 'see the world aright'.

The difficulty is thus transformed from one concerning what we can think and say into one concerning whether certain sorts of ineffable content can be 'shown' and 'grasped'. Usually, the appearance that the difficulty has been surmounted is generated by introducing some device of equivocation. We have already seen one

such device: the device of putting expressions in quotation marks ('fact', 'truth', 'grasp' and so on), so that one can deploy a concept and at the same time deny that one is deploying the concept in question, without ever having to make it clear what concept it is that one is thereby deploying, if not the one which figures in quotes. Another favourite device is the handy locution 'strictly speaking'. If the elucidatory propositions of the *Tractatus* are *nonsense*, then how can we understand them? Well, they are, strictly speaking, nonsense (for, after all, the *Tractatus* does say that they are nonsense), but they are not mere nonsense; they are a form of deep nonsense by means of which a special sort of insight can be conveyed. Is what such a proposition conveys a *thought*? Well, actually, it is not, strictly speaking, a thought, (the *Tractatus*, after all, says 'The thought is the significant proposition' (TLP, 4)). But it is like a thought in that one person can communicate it to another and we can grasp what is thus meant. In what sense do we 'grasp' what is 'meant'? Are we able to *understand* that which such a proposition is trying (if failing) to say? Well, strictly speaking, we do not understand it. (The *Tractatus*, after all, says to understand a proposition is to 'know what is the case, if it is true' (TLP, 4.024).). But it is like understanding a proposition, except that in this case there is nothing that is the case for us to understand. Does the *Tractatus* itself distinguish between mere nonsense (that has no meaning) and deep nonsense (whose intended meaning we can grasp)? Well, perhaps not in so many words. But the distinction is required, we are told by commentators, in order to make sense of what the *Tractatus* does want to say, if only it could. Does the *Tractatus* itself distinguish between mere thoughts (that are the contents of significant propositions) and deep 'thoughts' (that outrun the limits of language)? Well, not in so many words. But the distinction is required, we are told, in order to make sense of what the *Tractatus* does want to say, if only it could. And thus it comes to pass that Wittgenstein's work seems to stand in desperate need of the assistance of his commentators in order for it even to appear to be able to stand on its own feet.

I will henceforth refer to readings of the *Tractatus* that dither in such a fashion – both in their treatment of the philosophical problems themselves and in their willingness to credit the *Tractatus* with having thought its own treatment of these problems all the way through – as *irresolute readings* of the *Tractatus*.<sup>5</sup> As I said before, it is not my aim in this paper to argue directly for or against such readings. My aim here is simply to bring out how these readings align with certain alternatives for reading Wittgenstein's later work. But since I do not think such irresolute readings do justice to Wittgenstein's early work, I will allow myself to say that parallel readings of his later work ascribe *pseudo-Tractarian* doctrines to the later Wittgenstein.

### **Pseudo-Tractarian Readings of the So-called 'Private Language Argument'**

On the standard reading of the so-called 'private language argument', Wittgenstein's aim is to show: (1) that the possibility of language-use rests on

certain conditions; (2) that a private language does not satisfy these conditions; and therefore (3) that such a language is impossible. If there is an argument of this form to be found in the text, it is buried underneath quite a few distractions and digressions. But the sheer quantity of secondary literature that has been devoted to uncovering it testifies to the extent to which it has become a near-universal article of faith among Wittgenstein scholars that an argument of this form is somewhere there in the text waiting to be excavated. There are a great many differences of interpretation about the details of the supposed argument: disagreements about what the relevant conditions are, about why a private language falls short of these conditions, and hence about why such a language is impossible. But most of these differences of interpretation will not matter for my purposes. What I want to bring out is what almost all such interpretations have in common with one another. They all take Wittgenstein to be trying to show us that there is something that cannot be – a private language. And the reason that it cannot be rests upon a conception of the necessary conditions of the possibility of any language and what it would be to transgress against these.

The ‘essential preconditions of our language’ now at issue (that is, now that we have turned to the work of the *later* Wittgenstein), tend to be called grammatical truths. Grammatical propositions are taken to be propositions that say something true, and some of the standard ways of evading and confronting the issue of what sort of truth attaches to them ought to remind one of the standard ways of understanding and evading the issue of what sort of pseudo-Tractarian quasi-fact it is that a particular proposition has this, rather than that, sort of logical form. So, now in the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, again, a discomfort arises in connection with how we should conceive of the nature of the *something* which a certain sort of proposition, which is not an ordinary factual proposition, asserts to be the case. And here, as before, there is a great deal of wavering in the commentary when it comes to facing this central issue. But, because we now at least know that we are no longer dealing with the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, new scruples come into play about what we are allowed to say about the matter. (Deference to these scruples is often mistaken for philosophical progress.) Again, at this early point in the game, many proponents of the standard reading of a later Wittgenstein backpedal; only now most of them think they have to backpedal in (what at least sounds like) a different direction. They no longer want to retreat from the asserting of philosophical truths to a pseudo-Tractarian showing of them. Yet, in grasping that there cannot be a private language, they still want there to be something that we grasp. We are told that what is at issue here is a ‘grammatical truth’, rather than an ‘empirical truth’; but we are also reassured that such ‘truths’ are much less metaphysical than pseudo-Tractarian truths about the logical structure of language and reality. On most readings, the quasi-fact that our ordinary factual discourse cannot lay hold of this sort of ‘truth’ again comes into view as a kind of limitation on our language; only now it is sometimes taken to be a merely contingent limitation – one which might be overcome by switching to a different language. According to such readers of the later Wittgenstein (who have no counterpart among scholars of the *Tractatus*), a fundamental change in the

grammatical structure of our language or in our form of life could indeed furnish us with linguistic/conceptual resources able to accommodate the sorts of fact that the present grammar of our language forbids our being able to countenance. (These readers of the later Wittgenstein, like Russell in his Introduction to the *Tractatus*, take the necessities of logic and grammar that Wittgenstein encounters in his philosophizing to be ones that we are able to transcend simply by enriching or exchanging our linguistic resources, and they therefore – though they may be reluctant to acknowledge the point – take the later Wittgenstein to have made progress over his early self through having given way to Russell on this basic point, albeit while differing with Russell over the details concerning the sort of linguistic enrichment required.)

According to other readers of the later Wittgenstein, the proper response to this anthropologistic variant on Russell's suggestion (that the solution to the problems that trouble Wittgenstein is to be found simply through recourse to the vantage point afforded on our own language by another language) is to insist that the 'truths' disclosed by grammatical investigation are indeed necessary ones – to insist that in, for example, attempting to frame 'truths' about the public nature of language-use, we are attempting to state presuppositions of any meaningful language whatsoever. If the 'truths' disclosed by grammatical investigations were mere truths about us (and how we cannot help but think) or about our language (and the way it forces us to carve up the world) or about our culture (and the forms of thinking that it traps us into), then Wittgenstein's view would collapse into some form of psychologism, sociological relativism, or linguistic idealism; and this, these other readers of the later Wittgenstein insist, is just what Wittgenstein most sought to avoid. To treat that which grammatical remarks bring to light – for example, the public nature of language use – as a mere *fact* about *our* language, as these first readers of Wittgenstein do, is to suppose that there could be a language which could accommodate the possibility of this fact's *not* obtaining. But the very notion of such a language makes no sense. To think that there could be such a language is to run foul of that which is disclosed by grammatical investigations regarding such questions as how ostensive definition works, the role of training in language acquisition, and so on and so forth. Thus the whole point of the private language argument, according to this variant of the standard reading, is to try to show that such a language – a private language – is something that cannot be, precisely because it runs foul of what the *Philosophical Investigations* teaches us must be the case in order for any language so much as to be possible. So the target now is no longer the idea of an illogical language, but that of a private language. However, the general shape of the conclusion is the same: a private language is something that cannot be, and not just for some contingent reason. The non-contingent character of this impossibility (and others like it) becomes manifest to us through our realizing that when we try to speak of that which we imagine might possibly be, when we imagine that there could be a private language, we end up speaking nonsense; and we end up speaking nonsense here because we end up violating the conditions of the possibility of meaningful discourse.

If the private language argument is read as proceeding in such a fashion, it, too,

would seem to be open to some version of the devastating charge to which the *Tractatus* was formerly alleged to be vulnerable. The argument seeks to show that the very idea of a private language is inherently nonsensical and thus not a possible topic of discourse; but, insofar as talk of 'a private language' is employed with the aim of advancing an argument against the possibility of such a language, the argument would appear to presuppose the possibility of a language in which it is possible to speak of and frame thoughts about a private language – thoughts such as the thought 'a private language is impossible'. Is the 'thought' that 'a private language is impossible' a thought or not? Is it something thinkable? The very structure of such an argument – one that aims to show that the very idea of a private language is one that cannot make sense – seems to presuppose the intelligibility of that which it seeks to show is unintelligible.

One way around this problem is, at this point, to back off from the claim that what grammatical remarks seek to articulate has anything specially to do with the possibilities for making sense (as opposed to speaking truly rather than falsely), and thus to back off from the claim that the aim is to show the philosopher that he lapses into nonsense when he entertains the idea of a private language. One could back all the way off from this claim and claim instead that it is simply an empirical truth that there can never be a private language (so that 'nonsense' is taken to be just a colourful way of saying 'surely false'). A less drastic and more common strategy is to back only halfway off from what seems to be Wittgenstein's own thought about the matter and to try to domesticate Wittgenstein's argument by turning it into one that aims to show that the idea of a private language involves some sort of contradiction in terms (so that 'nonsense' is taken to be just a colourful way of saying 'logically or conceptually contradictory'). Either of these ways of domesticating Wittgenstein's philosophical concerns begins to come free of Wittgenstein's text.

There are commentators who are alert to this, and will simply declare, at this point, that much of what Wittgenstein says – about grammar, about the nature of his method in philosophy, about his wanting to avoid theses, and about his aim being one of taking his interlocutor from latent to patent nonsense and so forth – is quite unfortunate and best disregarded, if one wants to extract those bits which are philosophically useful from his writings. I will have nothing to say to such commentators in this paper, other than to suggest that there is something to be gained by keeping an open mind about whether it is possible that Wittgenstein may have known what he was doing, even if it is not what they themselves want to do in philosophy. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with reading a philosopher simply in order to see what useful ideas you can find him in and not worrying about whether he would approve of the use that you proceed to make of his ideas yourself. (Any philosopher worth his salt often approaches the work of other philosophers in this spirit. Wittgenstein himself certainly often did.) But maintaining the value of such an approach is perfectly consistent with thinking that there is value to approaching, on a different occasion, the work of that same philosopher in a very different spirit – especially if his philosophical approach and sensibility are utterly alien to your own – namely, in a fashion that seeks to

understand how he could have ever thought that the bulk of what he wrote hung together as a coherent whole. For it is only by reading such a philosopher in such a manner that one is likely ever to discover the possibility of conceptions of philosophy radically different from one's own. The possibility of such an encounter depends on having an open mind about whether there might be understandings of the nature of philosophical difficulty and the possibility of philosophical progress utterly alien to one's own and yet worth spending one's time to discover. To push to one side, in one's reading of Wittgenstein, everything to do with his understanding of the peculiar nature of the difficulty of philosophy and the character of that difficulty being tied to the question of what is to make sense (and what it is to fail to make sense) is to deprive oneself of the opportunity for such an encounter.

Most commentators on Wittgenstein do continue to want to try to take seriously the idea that, for example, in the private language sections of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein's aim is to show the interlocutor that he somehow lapses into nonsense. In so far as they seek to read these sections as advancing an argument to the conclusion that what the interlocutor wants to say is nonsense, these commentators are faced with the problem mentioned before: the very structure of such an argument – one that aims to show that the very idea of a private language is one that cannot make sense – seems to presuppose the intelligibility of that which it seeks to show is unintelligible. Some of the commentary, more or less explicitly, tries to get around this problem by exploring the following suggestion: perhaps the appearance of an argument here is a ladder which we are supposed to climb up and then throw away. There are more and less resolute ways to construe such a suggestion. To be a proponent of some version of what I am here calling the standard reading of the later Wittgenstein is to opt for an irresolute construal of the suggestion. In practice this often means throwing away what was supposed to be, according to many proponents of the standard reading of his later work, a fundamental milestone in the progress of Wittgenstein's thought. The relatively uncontentious way to put the point is as follows: it turns out that the later Wittgenstein did not abandon the distinction between saying and showing after all! The more contentious way to put it is as follows: it turns out that the later Wittgenstein was still trying to whistle it! However you put it, on this variant of the standard reading of the private language argument, Wittgenstein's strategy is not to give us an argument to the conclusion that a private language is impossible – for talk of a private language is nonsense, and a claim to the effect that what a bit of nonsense asserts is impossible is itself just a further bit of nonsense. So, according to the reading I am now considering, Wittgenstein's strategy in the private language argument is rather to be seen as seeking to show us something which cannot be asserted in a factual proposition or in any other kind of proposition, not even a grammatical proposition. The thing he wants to show us, if we try to put it into words, will, admittedly, end up sounding something like the following remark: 'A private language is impossible.' But, according to this unabashedly pseudo-Tractarian reading, what this remark seeks to convey is a kind of insight that cannot really be conveyed by an ordinary assertoric proposition. Nevertheless, it is

something that can be shown – and that we can come to grasp – by working through Wittgenstein’s investigations. A grammatical proposition therefore does not succeed in saying a sort of thing that mere factual propositions cannot say, for what it appears to say simply is not assertable. Rather what it does is merely to summarize in a helpful shorthand that which is shown – and can only be grasped by someone who has successfully worked through the exercise of following all the way through what is shown – in a grammatical investigation. If one construes what is thus summarized as a sort of truth that cannot be stated and yet which can be conveyed, then one remains within the ambit of a pseudo-Tractarian interpretation of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.

Proponents of the standard reading of the so-called private language are therefore faced with a dilemma. Either they leave themselves defenceless against a version of the devastating charge or they avoid it by employing what is essentially a pseudo-Tractarian gambit. (Or, more typically they hover between these two options, without ever even noticing that they so hover.) The typical proponent of the last of the aforementioned variants of the standard reading of the later Wittgenstein – the one that has a use for a pseudo-Tractarian construal of the idea that Wittgenstein holds on to the distinction between saying and showing in his later work – will, in my experience, immediately bristle if one suggests that his ‘solution’ to the problem of the devastating charge is to relocate the problem to the realm of the unsayable. Although such a reader will view the private language sections as attempting to reveal something that cannot simply be asserted, unlike the corresponding reader of the *Tractatus*, he will not want to saddle the later Wittgenstein with the doctrine that there is a realm of ineffable fact-like quasi-truths called grammatical truths. Yet this same reader of Wittgenstein, his distaste for ineffability theses notwithstanding, does want to say that the body of quasi-truths displayed in Wittgenstein’s grammatical remarks possess the following features: they cannot be expressed in factual language and can only be shown through a grammatical investigation. Moreover, generally such a reader will not want to call that which these grammatical remarks allow us to grasp facts, or even ‘facts’. Therefore, on this reading of the later Wittgenstein, the grammatical propositions of the *Philosophical Investigations* are at least tacitly held to possess all of the following pseudo-Tractarian characteristics: they seek to give voice to truths which are not garden-variety truths; what thus comes into view are not facts; these ‘truths’ are ‘strictly speaking’ unassertable; the propositions that attempt to state them nonetheless serve a useful purpose; this purpose is achieved by directing our attention to features of language and/or reality that undergird the possibility of meaningful discourse and, in this way, they enable us to see matters aright.

Such readers of the later Wittgenstein will do their best to describe their own reading of Wittgenstein in ways that disguise the extent of its pseudo-Tractarian character. They do not want their reading of the later Wittgenstein to sound too much like their reading of the *Tractatus*. Some of these readers of Wittgenstein will admit to the existence of a certain degree of parallelism. They might agree that, for the later Wittgenstein as for the early Wittgenstein, philosophy does not consist in a body of doctrine but an activity, and that the purpose of philosophy is

not to arrive at a set of philosophical propositions but to arrive at a certain way of viewing language and/or world. But they will do their best to emphasize those features of the later Wittgenstein's philosophical practice which highlight the differences between the later Wittgenstein (on their reading of him) and the early Wittgenstein (on their reading of him). They will emphasize the role of examples and the attention to the use of language in the work of the later Wittgenstein. They will emphasize the insistence on the existence of a multiplicity of grammars and the importance of the role played by an attention to the motley of kinds of language-game in the later work. They will emphasize that language-games are instances of language-use interwoven with human activity and that everything now turns on an appreciation of just how deeply context-dependent each such instance is. And so on. And they will attempt to draw upon all of these differences in the descriptions they offer of what it is that is shown by the later Wittgenstein and how it is shown, so that it sounds nothing like their descriptions of the activity by means of which the *Tractatus* allows us to grasp that which is shown but cannot be said. But the true measure of how pseudo-Tractarian a reading of the later Wittgenstein is is not to be gauged by the vocabulary in which it is couched. You can replace talk of 'logical syntax' with 'grammar', 'language' with 'language-games', 'application' with 'use', 'elucidation' with 'investigation' and so on and still end up attributing a doctrine to the later Wittgenstein that is mired in an essentially pseudo-Tractarian problematic.

### **Pseudo-Tractarian Readings of *On Certainty***

Standard readings of the argument of Wittgenstein's very last work, *On Certainty*, tend to be equally pseudo-Tractarian. The argument here, again, turns on a distinction between two sorts of proposition – in this case, propositions that are situated within the framework of our practices of making and accepting knowledge-claims and propositions that seek to articulate constitutive features of that framework. Thus what sceptical reflections and Moore-style responses to scepticism reveal, according to the standard reading of Wittgenstein's last work, is that there are these two types of proposition or judgement: there are those that are part of the framework and those that are not. Let us call the former 'framework propositions'. (They are also sometimes called 'Moore-type propositions' or 'hinge propositions'.) Leaving aside differences in terminology and nuances of doctrine, the same fundamental difficulties tend to accumulate around this privileged category of propositions (on the standard reading of what they are supposed to be) that we earlier saw attend Tractarian propositions about logical form, on the one hand, and *Investigations*-style grammatical propositions, on the other (on the standard readings of what each of these is supposed to be). In each of these three cases, we need a distinction that allows us to articulate a difference between two sorts of proposition: those propositions which say that which can simply be said without further ado and those propositions which articulate a limit which marks off sense from nonsense, but which are unable to pull off this trick of articulation

without considerable further ado.<sup>6</sup> According to the standard reading of this matter, framework propositions, in ordinary contexts, are not subject to confirmation or disconfirmation. Rather, they form the fixed points around which all inquiry revolves – they constitute the framework which makes all inquiry possible – and, as such (as long as they are caught up in playing this framework-constituting role), they themselves cannot come into question. Any of the following, we are told by proponents of this reading, if uttered on an appropriately inappropriate occasion, would constitute an example of a framework proposition: ‘The world existed a long time before my birth’; ‘Things do not go in and out of existence’; ‘Everyone has parents’; ‘My name is James Conant’; ‘This is my hand’; ‘I am a human being’; ‘I am presently reading a paper to an audience’; ‘I am here’. There are differences among proponents of the standard reading about what feature, or features, mark propositions such as these out, on certain occasions of use, as framework propositions. Sometimes the crucial feature seems simply to be that, on a certain occasion of use, what is said is ‘flamingly obvious’; sometimes it seems to have more to do with the authority which the proposition or the speaker of the proposition possesses; sometimes it seems to have more to do with the manner in which such a proposition must be taken for granted in order for inquiry to proceed. According to most accounts, which of these features is relevant itself depends on the particular case of the framework proposition in question. Such differences in interpretation, again, will not matter for my purposes here.

What does matter is that, on most readings of *On Certainty*, framework propositions are taken to be propositions that attempt to say something true; and, once again, the standard ways of evading and confronting the issue of what sort of truth attaches to them ought to remind one of standard ways of dealing with, and evading, the issue of what sort of pseudo-Tractarian ‘fact’ it is that language has this, rather than that, sort of logical form.<sup>7</sup> Here, again, a discomfort arises in connection with how we should conceive of the nature of the *something* which this sort of proposition, which is not an ordinary factual proposition, asserts to be the case. Again, to the ears of most commentators on the latest Wittgenstein, it will sound altogether too Tractarian to say anything like that there is a state of affairs which stands in a truth-making relation to a framework proposition, or that what is asserted by a framework proposition is a ‘fact’ in any ordinary sense of the term. So, at this early point in the game, almost all proponents of the standard reading of the latest Wittgenstein also backpedal, only now most of them think they have to backpedal in (what at least sounds like) yet another direction. They will think that it still helps to insist that the sort of ‘truths’ articulated by framework propositions are not ‘empirical truths’ (how could they be if they are neither confirmable nor disconfirmable?), only now they often think that it helps to mark the difference between such ‘truths’ and ordinary garden-variety truths by striking the note of *activity* – of doing rather than saying, of knowing-how rather than knowing-that.

Under ordinary circumstances, if we say ‘I am here’, we will not be understood by others; and we will not be understood because it will not be clear what we are *doing* with our words. Now that certainly seems right. But most readers of the latest Wittgenstein want to go on to suggest something further: that the very nature

of our practice renders it impossible to say this sort of thing – it renders it nonsense. Now what is nonsense here? Is it the sentence – that is, the form of words – that is nonsense? How can that be? I can, after all, come up with circumstances in which it makes perfect sense to utter this sentence. (I push the button next to your name and speak the following words into the intercom: ‘I am here.’) If the sentence can make perfect sense then it is not just the sentence *per se* that is nonsense. It must have something to do with the circumstances of use. But still the question remains, when uttered under such circumstances, what is nonsense? Is it what we say that is nonsense? Well, if the account of why it is nonsense is supposed to have to do with how our practice of entering and assessing claims forbids us from saying things that are flamingly obvious, then there must be something which gets said such that it can be claimed that *it* is flamingly obvious. So perhaps what is said makes sense, but the saying of it does not. Perhaps it is the *act* of saying it under certain circumstances that is generative of nonsense.

Does this mean that the epithet ‘nonsense’ applies only to the speech-act and not at all to the content of what is thereby asserted? In the face of questions such as these, the dithering begins. But despite all the dithering, this much tends to remain fairly clear: there is supposed to be something that we cannot say here that we are nonetheless supposed to come to grasp; and it is in grasping this that we come to appreciate something about the structure of our linguistic practice – about the shape of our framework. So that there is a sort of ‘truth’ that our ordinary factual discourse cannot lay hold of again comes into view as a kind of limitation on the expressive resources of our linguistic practice. It might be taken to be a merely contingent limitation – one which might be overcome by switching to a different linguistic practice.

Interestingly, now, when we turn to *On Certainty*, the constituency of readers of the later Wittgenstein who favour such a reading swells in number. A change in our everyday practices of claim-making, these readers tell us, could indeed furnish us with linguistic/conceptual resources able to accommodate the sorts of claim that the present structure of our linguistic practice forbids us from ever being able to countenance as candidates for truth or falsity. According to other readers of *On Certainty*, however, the proper response to this reprise of the anthropologicist variant on Russell’s suggestion is to insist that the ‘truths’ disclosed by framework propositions are never susceptible to doubt, since to allow otherwise would be to concede the truth of scepticism. (The sceptic isn’t denying after all that, while caught up in our everyday practices, we find certain claims all but impossible to doubt. He is claiming that however unnatural we may find it to do so, these seeming indubitable claims can, when subjected to the appropriate pressures, be shown to be susceptible to sceptical doubt.) According to these other readers, to treat the indubitability of framework propositions as a mere artefact of our practice, as the first sort of readers of Wittgenstein wish to do, is to suppose that there could be a linguistic practice which could accommodate the possibility of these propositions’ not obtaining while remaining the sorts of propositions that they are. This would require a practice which would allow us, at one and the same time, to mean what we mean by them and yet to look upon them as possibly false. But such

a practice would be an incoherent practice. To think that there could be such a practice is to run foul of Wittgenstein's fundamental insights regarding the manner in which inquiry must be conducted. Such a practice would require that we be able to accept, and at the same time refuse, the fundamental techniques of description and claim-making presupposed by the practice as a whole. And the whole point of Wittgenstein's last work, according to this variant of the standard reading, is to try to show that such a practice – one that could accommodate sceptical doubts regarding the epistemic credentials of its own framework – is something that cannot be. It is not just something that cannot be for some contingent reason. The non-contingent character of this impossibility becomes manifest to us through our realizing that when we try to convert features of our framework of inquiry into topics of inquiry, we end up speaking nonsense; and we end up speaking nonsense because we end up violating the conditions of the possibility of meaningful discourse. Such nonsense arises whenever we try either to question or to claim to know the truth of a framework proposition.

If the argument of Wittgenstein's last book is read as proceeding in such a fashion, it, too, would seem to be open to some version of the devastating charge to which the *Tractatus* was previously held to be vulnerable. If the sceptic's questions and Moore's counterassertions are nonsense, then so, too, should be the framework propositions which seek to articulate and display those 'truths' – or quasi-truths. But how can the conclusion that they are nonsensical be made to cohere with the claim that they are fundamental to our linguistic practice and that that is why they cannot be doubted in the manner of the sceptic nor affirmed in the manner of Moore? Some proponents of this interpretation try to buy room by saying that framework propositions are not nonsensical; they are just not assertable. Yet it is hard to see how something which can never be asserted can be meaningful. And, if what a framework proposition says is meaningless, it is hard to see how it can also be part of a framework. How can that which is asserted by a piece of nonsense be fundamental to anything? Is the thought expressed by a framework proposition a thought or not? Is it something thinkable? Once again, the very structure of the argument attributed here to Wittgenstein seems to presuppose the intelligibility of something which, at a later stage, it is committed to declaring unintelligible. And, here again, it is tempting to think that the following stratagem might buy one philosophical breathing space: the appearance of an argument here is ultimately to be recognized as a ladder which we are supposed to climb up and then throw away. On this variant on the standard reading of Wittgenstein's last work, the strategy is not to show us that what we assert when uttering a framework proposition is true – for any attempt to assert such a proposition is nonsense, and nonsense has no truth-conditions. Wittgenstein's strategy is to show us something about the nature of our linguistic practice that cannot be asserted in a factual proposition or in any other kind of proposition – not even in a framework proposition. Although what these propositions seek to assert can not be asserted, nevertheless, it is something that can be shown – and that we can come to grasp – through an examination of the nature of our lives with language. A framework proposition therefore does not say something that cannot be said in factual language, for what it appears to say simply

is not assertable. It merely points to something which can be shown – and can only be grasped by someone who has successfully worked through the exercise of following all the way through what is shown – in the appropriate sort of examination of what it is that we actually *do* with language. Here again, if one construes what is thus pointed to as a sort of truth that cannot be stated and yet which can be conveyed, then one remains within the ambit of a pseudo-Tractarian interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

A proponent of this latter sort of reading of the latest Wittgenstein will, again, bristle if one suggests to him that his 'solution' to the problem posed by the devastating charge is simply to relocate the problem to the realm of the unsayable. He does seem to think that framework propositions hint at something they cannot say, but he does not want to saddle the latest Wittgenstein with a last-minute conversion back to the pseudo-Tractarian doctrine that there is a realm of ineffable fact-like framework truths. His distaste for such a doctrine notwithstanding, he will insist that what framework propositions misfiringly attempt to assert are not facts, or even 'facts'. Indeed, what they point to are not even supposed to be candidates for assertion, yet the attempt to assert them still serves a useful purpose by directing our attention to features of linguistic practice and/or reality that undergird our linguistic practice. In this way, they enable us to see matters aright.

And, again, these readers of the latest Wittgenstein will do their best to describe their reading of Wittgenstein in ways that disguise its pseudo-Tractarian character. They will emphasize that we are now no longer talking about the logical structure of language, but rather about the presuppositions of a practice; we are not talking about what we can say in language, but about what we do with language and so on. But, again, do not be fooled: the proper measure of how pseudo-Tractarian a reading of the latest Wittgenstein is is not to be gauged by the vocabulary in which it is couched. It is to be gauged by the structure of the problems it encounters, the nature of the responses these engender, and the attendant forms of evasion and wavering that characterize such responses.

### **The Pseudo-Continuity of Wittgenstein's Philosophy**

I have sought thus far in this paper only to bring out how deep the parallels run between standard readings of the early, the later, and the latest Wittgenstein. I do not mean hereby to deny that one can discover all sorts of difference within these parallel conceptions attributed to Wittgenstein at these supposedly very different stages of his development. Nonetheless, it is important to come to see how very little philosophical progress Wittgenstein actually succeeds in making with his fundamental problems, if the standard narrative of his intellectual trajectory has any merit. The parallel begins, at each stage, with the idea that Wittgenstein is concerned to show that there is something that cannot be: there cannot be an illogical language; there cannot be a private language; there cannot be a practice of knowing and doubting whose framework judgements are themselves candidates for knowledge or doubt. Or, if one thinks that it helps matters, one can reformulate the

putative parallel here in linguistic terms. Thus reformulated, the parallel begins with the idea that, at every stage of his career, Wittgenstein is concerned to show that we run up against a limit of language: we cannot say what can only be shown; I cannot speak about anything so private that others are necessarily incapable of speaking about it; we cannot say we know or doubt the judgements expressed by framework propositions. Or, if it seems insufficiently Wittgensteinian to couch matters in general terms rather than in terms of specific examples of philosophical nonsense, one can reformulate the parallel by displaying particular instances of the particular sort of thing that our logic, or grammar or linguistic practice allegedly debar us from saying: I cannot say this proposition has that logical form; I cannot say 'Only I can know my pain'; I cannot claim under present circumstances to know that I am here. However one formulates the parallel here, in each case the parallel lies in the idea that *there is something we cannot do*. To think that this is the locus of significant continuity is to miss what I take the real continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy to be – one which is nicely summarized in section 374 of *Philosophical Investigations*: 'The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one *could not do*.'

The idea that Wittgenstein's aim is to show us that there is something we cannot do goes hand-in-hand with the tendency to read Wittgenstein, at each stage of his career, as seeking to adumbrate the conditions of meaningful speech – whether one takes these conditions to reside in the logical structure of language, the rules of grammar or the shape of our linguistic practice. In each case, Wittgenstein's aim is taken to be one of showing the philosopher that he is speaking nonsense because he has violated certain conditions. The integrity of Wittgenstein's method of philosophical criticism thereby comes to apparently require that he first be able to specify what the conditions in question are. This requirement, in turn, gives rise to the appearance that he must be committed to the existence of a set of quasi-truths – whether they be called the principles of logical syntax, the rules of grammar, or the judgments that constitute the framework of our practice – that mark the bounds of sense and reveal the exact point at which the philosopher has strayed beyond them. These quasi-truths must lie outside the realm of merely empirical truths, while lying just inside the limit beyond which the realm of impermissible philosophical nonsense begins.

Once the question arises what sort of truth it is that these quasi-truths can be said to possess, the waffling and dithering begins. For the account of nonsense that emerges from the specification of such a set of conditions on the possibility of meaningful discourse always requires a distinction between two sorts of proposition: ordinary empirical propositions and logical, grammatical, or framework propositions – it being through the latter that the conditions on the former are to be articulated, and the problem being that the latter always end up looking as if they involve what is, by their own lights, a failure to live up to the conditions of meaningfulness that they themselves seek to articulate. But the full extent of the parallel between readings of the early, the later and the latest Wittgenstein only comes fully into view when one learns to recognize the homology in the steps of the dance that ensues when readers of each these

Wittgenstein's attempt to evade the consequences of some version of what I have called the devastating charge. The first sequence of steps begins with an attempt to domesticate the conditions on meaningful speech by construing them as contingent limitations on our capacities for thought and language, and it ends up collapsing into some form of psychologism, sociologism or linguistic idealism. The second sequence of steps begins with an attempt to affirm the non-empirical character of the statements that formulate the conditions of the possibility of meaningful speech, and it ends up leaving it a complete mystery why the putatively less than nonsensical logical, grammatical or framework propositions should be thought to be in any better (logical or grammatical) shape than the propositions they seek to expose as nonsensical. The third sequence of steps begins by biting the bullet and accepting the charge that the propositions that articulate the conditions on meaningful speech are themselves meaningless – like the statements they seek to condemn – but it then tries, by whistling what cannot be said, to find a way for these bits of nonsense to succeed in communicating (that which they cannot say) by some other means. It is when this third sequence of steps reaches its climax that readings of the later Wittgenstein become unmistakably pseudo-Tractarian. But it is a mistake to think that a reader who shrinks from following through on all the steps of the dance, and takes pride in having remained stuck somewhere in the middle of the first or second sequence of steps, has thereby avoided the dialectic of pseudo-Tractarianism. The whole point of the *Tractatus* is that all of its rungs belong to a single ladder. To execute the final sequence of steps in this dance is at least to have climbed all the way up to the penultimate rung of the ladder, and, comparatively speaking, that is a form of progress. But it is not yet to do what the *Tractatus* seeks to enable its reader to do: namely, to throw the whole ladder away.

### **An Alternative Reading of the *Tractatus***

I have termed the reading of the *Tractatus* briefly sketched at the beginning of this paper pseudo-Tractarian in order to be able to distinguish it from the reading of that work which I myself favour and which I have defended in other writings of mine. I cannot go into the details of that reading here,<sup>8</sup> but will only say enough to indicate why, if one endorses that reading, one will want to conclude that the early Wittgenstein had already set forth, within the pages of the *Tractatus*, a critique of the doctrines attributed to the early, the later and the latest Wittgenstein on the standard readings of each of these three stages of his philosophical development outlined above – a critique that does not attempt to pretend that the devastating charge is anything less than devastating.

The fundamental differences in different readings of the *Tractatus* are usually to be traced to differences in how readers approach the famous penultimate paragraph of the book, where we are told that the author's propositions serve as elucidations by *our* – that is, the reader's – coming to *recognize* them as nonsensical. The question any reading must come to terms with is this: how can the recognition that a proposition is *nonsense* ever elucidate – ever shed light on – anything? 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. (TLP 5.4733)

I would like to draw attention to the word ‘only’ in this passage. The critical difference between the formulation attributed to Frege 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.’ The ‘only’ indicates that there is only one way for a proposition to fail to have a meaning where one might have thought that there were two. What does it mean to reject the idea that there could be logically illegitimately constructed propositions? Or, to put the same question differently, what does the early Wittgenstein mean, when he says (in TLP 5.4732) ‘We cannot give a sign the wrong sense’?

I have argued elsewhere – in a paper titled ‘The Method of the *Tractatus*’<sup>9</sup> – that Wittgenstein saw a tension in Frege’s thought between two different conceptions of nonsense, which I call the *substantial conception* and the *austere conception* respectively. The substantial conception distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible – it expresses no thought. Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way – it expresses a logically incoherent thought. According to the substantial conception, these two kinds of nonsense are logically distinct: the former is mere gibberish, whereas the latter involves what commentators on the *Tractatus* are fond of calling a ‘violation of logical syntax’.<sup>10</sup> 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. The *Tractatus* is standardly read as championing the substantial conception. This is, I argue, to mistake the bait for the hook – to mistake the target of the work for its doctrine. On the reading of the *Tractatus* I sketch in the above-mentioned paper, the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving the tension in Frege’s thought between these two conceptions of nonsense in favour of the austere view.<sup>11</sup> The presence of the word ‘only’ in the above passage is therefore to be seen as signalling Wittgenstein’s rejection of the substantial conception.

On a resolute reading, the *Tractatus* itself does not subscribe to any variant of the substantial conception, and thus the aim of the work is not to show us that certain sequences of words (or particular employments of them) possess an intrinsically flawed sense by persuading us of the truth of some theoretical (though perhaps unsayable) doctrine about where to locate ‘the limits of sense’. Rather, the early Wittgenstein seeks to show that any theory which seeks to draw such ‘a limit to thinking’ commits itself, as he says at the outset of the book, to being ‘able to

think both sides of the limit' and hence to being 'able to think what cannot be thought'. The Tractarian attack on substantial nonsense – on the idea that we can discern the determinately unthinkable thoughts which certain pieces of nonsense are trying to say – is an attack on the coherence of any project which thus seeks to mark the bounds of sense. The *Tractatus* seeks to bring its reader to the point where he can recognize sentences within the body of the work as nonsensical not by means of an account of the conditions of meaningful speech which legislates certain sentences out of the realm of sense, but rather by bringing more clearly into view for the reader the life with language he already leads – by harnessing the capacities for distinguishing sense from nonsense implicit in the everyday practical mastery of language which the reader already possesses. As the Preface says, 'The limit ... can only be drawn *in language* and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense'. The word 'simply' here goes with the 'only' (in TLP 5.4733) to which I drew attention previously. That is, once we go 'outside' of language what we end up with are forms of words which are nonsense in what this work aims to show is the only way anything can be nonsense. The work seeks to do this not by instructing us in how to identify determinate cases of nonsense, but by enabling us to see more clearly what it is we do all the time with language when we succeed in achieving determinate forms of sense and what it is we fall short of doing when we fail to achieve such forms of sense, yet are prey to the illusion that we are making a kind of sense.

The assumption underlying Tractarian elucidation, on this reading of the book, is that the only way to free oneself from such illusions is to enter into them and explore them from the inside. 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').<sup>12</sup> The aim of the work is to show us that beyond 'the limits of language' lies not ineffable truth, but rather (as the Preface cautions) *einfach Unsinn*.<sup>13</sup> 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. He tells us in TLP 6.54 how these sentences serve as elucidations: by enabling us to recognize them *as* nonsense.<sup>14</sup> The sign that we have understood the author of the work is that we can throw away the ladder that we have climbed. That is, 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*.

### An Alternative View of the Continuity in Wittgenstein's Philosophy

We are now ready to take up the question where the continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy will appear to lie to someone who undertakes to read all of his major writings – early and late – in a similarly resolute fashion. Consider the following remark from 1935:

*Different kinds of nonsense.* Though it is nonsense to say 'I feel his pain', this is different from inserting into an English sentence a meaningless word, say 'abracadabra' (compare Moore last year on 'Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford') and from saying a string of nonsense words. Every word in this sentence is English, and we shall be inclined to say that the sentence has a meaning. The sentence with the nonsense word or the string of nonsense words can be discarded from our language, but if we discard from our language 'I feel Smith's toothache' that is quite different. The second seems nonsense, we are tempted to say, because of some truth about the nature of things or the nature of the world. We have discovered in some way that pains and personality do not fit together in such a way that I can feel his pain. – The task will be to show that there is in fact no difference between these two cases of nonsense, though there is a psychological distinction, in that we are inclined to say the one and be puzzled by it and not the other. We constantly hover between regarding it as sense and regarding it as nonsense, and hence the trouble arises.<sup>15</sup>

For a resolute reader of Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein's description here of his task – to show that there is in fact no logical difference between these two cases of nonsense – will seem equally accurate as a description of the task of his early and his later work. Certain passages in the later work, however, in which Wittgenstein speaks, for example, of 'excluding certain combinations of words from our language', might seem to contradict this, thus inviting a reading of Wittgenstein along the following lines: certain combinations of words are to be identified as impermissible on the grounds that these combinations violate the principles governing which combinations of words are grammatically well-formed. It is precisely such a reading of his work that a resolute reader of Wittgenstein will hear him seeking to fend off in § 500 of *Philosophical Investigations*: 'When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless.' A resolute reader of Wittgenstein will take such a passage to mark an important continuity in Wittgenstein's thought: when Wittgenstein remarks in his later writings that a nonsensical word does not have a 'senseless sense' (as for example, in *Philosophical Investigations*, § 500), he is refashioning the Tractarian point that we cannot give a sign 'the wrong sense'.

To see what is at stake here, recall that according to the standard reading of the so-called private language argument, Wittgenstein's aim was to show: (1) that the possibility of language use rests on certain conditions; (2) that a private language does not satisfy those conditions; and therefore (3) that such a language is impossible. Such a reading of the 'private language argument' takes the aim to be to show that the very idea of a private language is the idea of something which we can rule out because of the kind of sense that the locution 'private language' has

antecedently been given. It takes it that there is something determinate which the philosopher wants to mean by the locution 'private language' and that *that* is nonsense. There are, of course, all kinds of perfectly determinate things one might mean in speaking of a 'private language'. I might tell you that I just invented a private language and that I am its only speaker, but, if you are nice to me, I might consider teaching it to you. But that is not the kind of thing the philosopher wants to mean by a private language. Why not? Because, we will be told, it is not private enough. Wittgenstein says his topic is 'the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand'; and we will be told that the right way to understand what is at issue here is to understand that a 'private language' is a sort of language which it is impossible for anyone but me to understand. Thus there is a right way of understanding what Wittgenstein means by 'private language' and this is the sort of thing that he is concerned to show cannot be. There is therefore supposed to be a determinate something that is the thing that the philosopher does want to mean that Wittgenstein is taken to be interested in singling out in order to show that *that* is something that the philosopher cannot mean because it is nonsense. On any such analysis of what is at issue here, what the philosopher means must be shown to be not mere nonsense but substantial nonsense.

What would a reading of the relevant sections of *Philosophical Investigations* that did not attribute to Wittgenstein a commitment to the substantial conception of nonsense look like? A resolute reader of this stretch of Wittgenstein's later work will want to begin by pointing out that Wittgenstein does not say that there cannot be a private language. The discussion of private language (like so many passages in Wittgenstein's later work) begins with an invitation for us to try to imagine something.<sup>16</sup> The point of the exercise is not to get us to see that there is something determinate to imagine which we are then supposed to see as a sort of thing that cannot be. Rather, the point of the exercise is to get us to see that there is nothing for us to mean by the locution 'private language' that corresponds to what we, under the pressure of certain philosophical perplexities, want to mean by it. There are, of course, various things we can mean by it, but they do not answer to our philosophical desires. And as long as there hovers before us the seeming possibility of something further to mean that does promise to answer to our philosophical desires, the philosopher's treatment of the question of a 'private language' remains unfinished. The point of the exercise of trying to imagine 'a private language' is to work through 'the seeming possibility' here – to try to think it all the way through – until we find it dissolves on us. The transition from latent to patent nonsense is the point of the exercise: the task is to help us see how the seeming possibility (of a 'private language') dissolves under the pressure of an attempt to work out what 'it' (seemingly) requires. What makes a reading of this bit of Wittgenstein's text 'resolute' (in my parlance) is that it follows all the way through on such an exercise to the point where the apparent something dissolves into a nothing. And what makes a reading 'irresolute' (in my parlance) is that it continues to cling to the idea that there is something determinate which the words 'private language', on a philosophical employment of them, are trying, but failing, to mean, and that

Wittgenstein's aim is to show his interlocutor that *that* is a sort of thing that cannot be. To fail to see how different these two different ways of reading Wittgenstein are is, I think, to fail to see what is at stake in his work – what sort of treatment of philosophical problems he seeks to offer – both early and late.

On some readings of the so-called 'private language argument', the nonsensicality of the idea of a private language can be traced to the incompatibility of the concepts 'private' and 'language'. These two concepts, we are told, cannot be made to fit together. On most readings of *On Certainty*, on the other hand, the nonsensicality of uttering a proposition such as 'I am here' under ordinary circumstances is to be traced to a different sort of incompatibility – the incompatibility of the sentence with its context of use. This sentence and this context, we are told, cannot be made to fit together. It is important to see that the progress from one of these accounts of nonsense (in terms of the incompatibility of the components of a proposition) to the other (in terms of the incompatibility of the components of a speech-situation) does not make the sort of difference that some commentators on Wittgenstein's work would like to imagine it does.<sup>17</sup> Each of these accounts holds that there is something determinate that the philosopher wants to mean, if only he could. As long as one traces each of the stages of progress in Wittgenstein's philosophy in terms of such exchanges of one version of the substantial conception of nonsense for another – as almost all of the commentary on Wittgenstein's work does – one has made Wittgenstein's philosophy, in all of its stages, vulnerable to the sort of criticism that he sought already in the *Tractatus* to advance against the views of Frege and Russell.

Consider what Wittgenstein says in *On Certainty*, § 348:

[T]he words 'I am here' have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly – and not because they are superfluous, but because their meaning is not *determined* by the situation, yet stands in need of such determination.

What Wittgenstein says here is not that it is clear what determinate thing it is that the sentence 'I am here' means, but, because of the unsuitable character of its context of use, it cannot be said. Rather what he says is that the meaning of these words is not determined by the situation – their meaning still stands in need of further determination. Over and over again, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein tries to get us to see that it is only through its being caught up in circumstances of use that a sentence has sense. This is why he says in *On Certainty*, § 348 that 'the words 'I am here' have a meaning *only* in certain 'contexts' – that is, it is a mistake to think that the words themselves possess a meaning apart from their capacity to mean what they do in the various contexts of use in which they can be put to work to say something. All of the differences in philosophical approach between the two works notwithstanding, the 'only' here in *On Certainty* is making a point that parallels the point of the 'only' in 5.4733 of the *Tractatus*. The point of the 'only' is that there is not some other way for the words 'I am here' to achieve a determinate sense apart from having one conferred upon them through their employment in a context of

use; and hence there is not some other way for these words to fail to make sense apart from such a failure to confer determinate sense upon them. And this means that there is not some way for these words to fail to make sense when imported into a particular context of use because of the fully determinate sense they already have, prior to and independent of their occurrence in contexts of significant use. Here, again, the 'only' signals Wittgenstein's commitment to the austere conception of nonsense: the only way for a form of words to be nonsensical is for us to fail to mean something determinate by them.

Wittgenstein sought in his early work to show us how we are able to fail to confer a determinate method of symbolizing upon a sign while imagining that we have already done so. His early method of philosophy tried to get us to see this by having us see that some putative thought (that we imagined ourselves able to lay hold of by calling upon a particular form of words) could not be translated into (what the *Tractatus* calls) a proper logical syntax – an ideography specifically designed to perspicuously display the logical structure of any proposition expressed in it. The point of employing such a notation was not to demonstrate to the philosopher that he had violated a principle of logical syntax. Rather, faced with a perspicuous representation in a proper logical symbolism of the possibilities available to him for meaning his words, the philosopher was to discover for himself that he had unwittingly hovered between alternative possibilities of meaning them, without determinately settling on any one. In Wittgenstein's later method of philosophy, there is no longer any privileged role to be played by a logical symbolism. Rather what we find in its stead are a multitude of examples: examples of the sorts of things that we, when doing philosophy, are tempted to exclaim ('A word stands for a thing', 'Only I can know whether I am in pain' and so on), examples of some of the apparently related sorts of things that we, when not doing philosophy, actually do say or possibly might say ('What does this word stand for?', 'Bring me a slab!', 'I wish I knew what was going on inside his head right now'), and (seeming) examples of situations whose possibility we are invited to imagine (imagine a complete language consisting of only four words, imagine a language which describes your inner experiences and which only you yourself can understand). The point of such interlocking sets of examples and invitations is not to mark out some bright line of grammar which the philosopher is forbidden to cross. Rather, it is to exhibit the grammar of possible ways of speaking to the philosopher, in order to present him with a perspicuous overview of the various possibilities of meaning his words that are genuinely available to him. He is to discover that he can make perfect sense in calling upon the very words he wants to call upon in expressing his philosophical perplexity, although such ways of making sense will not seem to him to answer to what it is he imagined he had originally wanted to say – and to discover that there is nothing further available to mean by his words of a sort which fully answers to what it was he imagined he had originally succeeded in meaning by his words. The aim, both early and late, is to help the reader or interlocutor to see that, until he settles upon one of the determinate things he can mean by his words, he has not yet succeeded in meaning anything by them. Thus, in both Wittgenstein's early and later work, it is left for

the reader to discover *for himself* that the problem with his words lies neither in the words themselves, nor in some inherent incompatibility between his words and their context of use, but in his confused relation with respect to his own words.

But then where does the change in his philosophy come? Why do the instruments of logical symbolism become irrelevant to his concern? Why, indeed, does he later look upon such instruments with suspicion? In what way does he take his earlier self to be have been seduced by a vision of the crystalline purity of logic? Why does the manner in which his philosophical work is written undergo such a radical transformation? Why does he come to reject the strategy of offering the reader a single continuous ladder which he is to climb up and then throw away? I believe it is only once one has attained a sufficiently resolute view of where the fundamental continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophy lies that it begins to become possible to make real progress with questions such as these and thus to see where the most profound discontinuities in Wittgenstein's philosophy lie.<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

1 Bertrand Russell, 'Introduction' to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), p. 7.

2 I have attempted such contributions elsewhere. See, for example, my 'The Method of the *Tractatus*', in Erich H. Reck (ed.), *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

3 It should be noted that Gordon Baker is no longer in agreement with the views expressed in the passage I go on to cite here from G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). Indeed, he tells me that his present reading of Wittgenstein, though differing in detail from the one advanced here, is in broad agreement with the criticisms I here make of 'Baker and Hacker'.

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40, 55.

5 I believe it was Thomas Ricketts who first coined this term and its complement – *resolute readings* – in connection with current debates concerning how to read the *Tractatus*.

6 We might reformulate the distinction here sought, in this case by readers of Wittgenstein's last work, to bring the parallels to standard readings of the early Wittgenstein to the fore, by formulating it as a distinction between that which can be *said within the framework of our linguistic practice* and that which can only be *shown through the employment of framework propositions*.

7 I should perhaps make it clear that, in what follows, I do not mean to impugn the bare claim that Wittgenstein thinks, in *On Certainty*, that there are certain propositions – which he calls 'hinge propositions' – that can be said to be true because they are inferentially related to empirical propositions, although it makes no sense to think of them as either confirmable or disconfirmable (any more than I would want to impugn the claim that he thinks, in the *Tractatus*, that there are certain propositions – a subset of those which he calls 'logical propositions' – that can be said to be true, because they are inferentially related to propositions which make a claim on reality, although it makes no sense to think of them as either confirmable or disconfirmable). What I object to are attempts to extend the category of hinge (or framework) propositions in *On Certainty* to include those forms of words which Wittgenstein seeks to expose as nonsense and to exploit this conflation to give a unitary

account of what sort of thing it is that employments of such forms of words, in common with hinge propositions, are able to ‘show’. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

8 Aside from ‘The Method of the *Tractatus*’, *op. cit.*, n. 2, see also the following papers of mine: ‘The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege and the *Tractatus*’, *Philosophical Topics*, **20** (1), 1991; ‘Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense’, in T. Cohen, P. Guyer and H. Putnam (eds), *Pursuits of Reason*, (Lubbock: Texas Technical University Press, 1992); ‘Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder’, *Yale Review*, **79**, (3), 1991; ‘Must We Show What We Cannot Say?’, in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds), *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, Bucknell Review (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989); ‘Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors’, in T. Tessin and M. von der Ruhr (eds), *The Grammar of Religious Belief* (London: St Martin’s Press, 1995); ‘Carnap and Early Wittgenstein on Logical Syntax’, in T. McCarthy (ed.), *Wittgenstein in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); ‘A Prolegomenon to the Reading of Later Wittgenstein’ in C. Mouffe and L. Nagl (eds), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Press, 2001); ‘On Going the Bloody Hard Way in Philosophy’, in J. Whittaker (ed.), *The Possibilities of Sense* (New York: Macmillan, 2003); ‘What “Ethics” in the *Tractatus* is *Not*’ in D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religion* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2005).

9 ‘The Method of the *Tractatus*’, *op. cit.*, n. 2.

10 In the entry entitled ‘Nonsense’ in Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 259–60), Glock is helpfully explicit in attributing the substantial conception of nonsense to the *Tractatus*.

11 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 touch on an interpretative question about how Frege is to be read. 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.

12 ‘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).’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922), Preface, p. 27.)

13 ‘The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be *simply* nonsense’ (Preface, my emphasis). As noted above, the ‘simply’ here goes with the ‘only’ over which we paused earlier: ‘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’ (TLP 5.4733, my emphasis).

14 Commentators fail to notice that what Wittgenstein says in TLP 6.54 is not: ‘*all* of my sentences are nonsensical’ (thus giving rise to the self-defeating problematic that Geach has nicely dubbed *Ludwig’s Self-mate*). Rather, TLP 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.’ The aim of the passage is *not* to propose a single all-encompassing category into which the diverse sorts of proposition 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.

15 Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘Lectures on Personal Experience’, ed. C. Diamond, unpublished, 1935.

16 See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 344ff.

17 See my 'Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use', *Philosophical Investigations*, **21** (3), 1998, pp. 222–50.

18 For further discussion of this topic, see J. Conant and C. Diamond, 'On Reading the *Tractatus* Resolutely' (in M. Koelbel and B. Weiss, *The Lasting Significance of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*, Routledge: London, 2004).