

XIII*—MAKING SENSE OF NONSENSE: KIERKEGAARD AND WITTGENSTEIN

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to make sense of cases of apparent nonsense in the writings of Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. Against commentators such as Cora Diamond and James Conant, we argue that, in the case of Wittgenstein, recognising such a category of nonsense is necessary in order to understand the development of his thought. In the case of Kierkegaard, we argue against the view that the notion of the ‘absolute paradox’ of the Christian incarnation is intended to be nonsensical. However, we recognise that Kierkegaard’s discussion of Christianity uses a similar methodology to a Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation. We maintain that by making sense of their respective views on nonsense and paradox we are able more fully to appreciate their positions on, and approaches to, ethics and religion.

I

In a recent series of papers, James Conant expresses his dissatisfaction with commentators who try to draw a certain kind of connection between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein.¹ The main focus of his attack, and that with which we are concerned, is to challenge the idea that either of these thinkers seriously wished to advance the view that we must recognise something which is ‘nonsensical but significant’.² Thus, with respect to Wittgenstein, he argues against those who wish to maintain that ‘for the *Tractatus* the propositions of ethics and religion—as well as either all or only the most important propositions of the *Tractatus* itself—are both nonsensical and deeply significant’.³ In the case of Kierkegaard, the primary target is the allegedly nonsensical notion of the ‘absolute paradox’ of the Christian incarnation.

1. Conant, James. ‘Must We Show What We Cannot Say?’ in R. Fleming and M. Payne (eds), *The Senses of Stanley Cavell* (Lewisbury PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989); ‘Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense’ in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam (eds), *Pursuits of Reason* (Texas Tech University Press, 1993); and ‘Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for Their Work as Authors’ in Timothy Tessin and Mario von der Ruhr (eds), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995).

2. Conant (1989), p. 244.

3. Conant (1989), p. 247; Conant (1995), p. 252.

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The aim of this paper is to make sense of these cases of apparent nonsense in the writings of these thinkers in such a way that reveals a more illuminating link between them. In doing so, we recognise the corrective value of some aspects of Conant's interpretative position. Nonetheless, in our view his reading, in places, is inadequate and too extreme. We begin by challenging Conant's reading of the early Wittgenstein, which underpins his understanding of the character of nonsense.⁴

II

A familiar way to read the Wittgenstein corpus is to see it as split into two periods during which two radically different accounts of the nature of language are advanced. Such great emphasis is often placed on this shift that it is common to speak of two 'Wittgensteins', the early and the late. Let us call this the 'doctrinal interpretation', as it suggests that what is important for the study of his work are his doctrines concerning language. Conant objects to this way of approaching the writings on the grounds that it cannot be squared with Wittgenstein's methodological claim that philosophy 'is not a body of doctrine'.⁵ He agrees with Cora Diamond who maintains that the doctrinal interpretation fails 'to take seriously what Wittgenstein says about philosophy itself'.⁶ With respect to his early thought, it inevitably generates what she regards as the 'chickening out' response, by which the *Tractatus* is treated as containing 'numerous doctrines which Wittgenstein holds cannot be put into words'.⁷ In contrast, to be consistent with his avowed method, which is to clarify by means of charting the limits of sense from the inside, we must give up the idea that any doctrines were ever advocated.⁸ Her recommendation is that

4. Although this paper is a collaborative effort, sections II and III were composed by Daniel Hutto, and sections IV and V by John Lippitt. Hence the changes between first person plural and singular within the paper.

5. Conant (1989), pp. 248, 266. Cf. also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Pears, D. and McGuinness, B. (London: Routledge, 1922), 4.114.

6. Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*. (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 18.

7. Diamond, (1995), pp. 181–182, p. 194. For this reason, she is openly hostile to standard readings because 'the attempt to take the *Tractatus* as metaphysical in a straightforward sense (as in Norman Malcolm's *Nothing is Hidden*) yields plain nonsense or plain self-contradictions' (p. 19).

8. *Tractatus*, 4.112.

insofar as the *Tractatus* gestures towards something meta-physically external to language, we must read it in an ironic sense.⁹ In her view ‘the notion of something true to reality but not sayably true is to be used only with the awareness that it itself belongs to what has to be thrown away’.¹⁰ Her proposal, which Conant endorses, is that we adopt an austere (or resolute) reading which sees the *Tractatus* in terms of its therapeutic project.

Under the auspices of what I dub the ‘therapeutic interpretation’, Conant is thus wont to ‘insist upon a greater continuity in [Wittgenstein’s] work than most previous commentators have allowed’.¹¹ He qualifies and amplifies this remark by suggesting that we find in ‘his later practice a significant continuity in aim along with an equally significant discontinuity in the form of the investigation through which this aim is prosecuted’.¹² The point is that the continuity in aim, during all periods, is ‘to take the reader from a piece of disguised nonsense to a piece of undisguised nonsense’.¹³ Consequently, both Conant and Diamond adopt the line that Wittgenstein’s view of nonsense remained constant throughout his philosophical career. All nonsense was from beginning to end simply ‘garden-variety’ gibberish.¹⁴

There is much that is admirable in this reading—both as a corrective and, especially in Conant’s case, as a means of getting us to focus on largely neglected issues in Wittgenstein studies such as the character of his authorship.¹⁵ Excitingly, it makes the early writings as important as the later ones insofar as it is their shared end that matters. However, if taken to extremes, the therapeutic interpretation obscures some important aspects of the development

9. Cf. Diamond, (1995) p. 19, p. 201.

10. Diamond (1995), p. 182.

11. Conant (1989), p. 246.

12. Conant (1995), p. 249. *Prima facie* support is lent to Conant by Wittgenstein’s remark that ‘There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.’ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe, G.E.M., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), §133.

13. Conant (1995), p. 250, Cf. also *Investigations*, §§ 119, 464.

14. Conant remarks on the impossibility of there being different types of nonsense: Conant, (1989), pp. 252, 253, 261. And Diamond says: ‘for Wittgenstein there is no kind of nonsense which is nonsense on account of what the terms composing it mean—there is as it were no positive nonsense’ Diamond, (1995), pp. 106, 112. She goes on: ‘I should claim that [this] view of nonsense...was consistently held to by Wittgenstein throughout his writings, from the period before the *Tractatus* was written and onwards’ Diamond (1995), p. 107.

15. Cf. Conant (1995), pp. 269–271.

of Wittgenstein's thought. Moreover, in doing so it can obscure the very character of his thought, in a different but equally bad way as the more standard doctrinal interpretation. I will make a case for this by considering the different places and different ways in which nonsense is important in the *Tractatus*.

III

Notoriously, Wittgenstein says at the very close of the *Tractatus*:

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

Read uncritically these remarks suggest that, as a work of philosophy, the *Tractatus* attempts to say what cannot be said. In one sense, it uses words in an intelligible way; yet according to its own account of sense, it must be nonsense. If we understand (and accept) what its propositions seemingly say, and especially those concerning the way in which propositions 'picture' reality, then we will realise that the entire book is an attempt to say what cannot be said. Its propositions are improper. This is because any genuine proposition pictures some possible state of affairs—a state of affairs which may or may not hold in the world. That is the general condition in order for a proposition to have a sense. But the propositions of the *Tractatus* are not of this kind. We cannot imagine a possible (Tractarian) world in which they are not the case. They tell us things like: the substance of the world resides in simple, indestructible objects; these objects combine to create states of affairs; the states of affairs which actually hold are the facts of the world; and so on. For this reason they are, strictly speaking, nonsensical. Put another way, if we take such 'propositions' very seriously (i.e. believe their apparent content) then they reveal to us that we must not treat them seriously (i.e. not like genuine propositions).¹⁶

Given this, we are in a position to consider two possible readings of the book's internal revocation. The purely therapeutic reading provides a way of making sense of Wittgenstein's plea that we

16. Cf. *Investigations*, § 134.

‘must throw away the ladder’ without committing us to the idea that the work had culminated, as is standardly thought, in an unreconcilable paradox. Diamond sees the key to these remarks in the sentence: ‘anyone who understands me eventually recognises them as nonsensical’. She makes great play of the fact that Wittgenstein writes about understanding *him* as opposed to the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself.¹⁷ She claims that the remarks in the preface and in the last section act as part of the ‘frame’ of the book; instructions for reading it.¹⁸ The remarks at the beginning tell us that the project is to set a limit to what can be said wholly from the inside of sensible language. Similarly, on her view the closing remarks come over as a final reminder of his message—for those who might be tempted, despite his rare internal indications, to misunderstand his project and purpose. On the purely therapeutic reading, he self-consciously employs a ‘strictly incorrect’ method for therapeutic purposes.¹⁹ The aim is to get his readers to see the impossibility of ‘traditional’ philosophy by first letting them ‘imagine’ they can find sense in its pseudo-propositions and then by pulling away the rug. It is a question of giving them enough rope.²⁰

It is interesting in this regard that despite having an aim which is continuous throughout all his writings, Wittgenstein alters his later approach so substantially (as Conant admits). For we may ask: Why he has he abandoned the ‘strictly incorrect’ method for the less deceptive one of offering up reminders?²¹ Why does he tell us in the preface to the *Investigations* that ‘...since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago, I have

17. Diamond, ‘Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*’ in *Bilder der Philosophie*, Heinrich, R. and Vetter, H., eds. (Wien: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991) p. 57.

18. Diamond (1991), pp. 55, 57. Conant also discusses the ‘frame’ of the *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard’s *Postscript* in Conant (1995), pp. 285–293. Technically, however there are straightforward problems with this kind of proposal as a proposition numbered 6.54 would appear to be *near* the conclusion but not the conclusion itself. Similarly, if we revoke all but the ‘frame’ how then can we take seriously other internal remarks about the nature of philosophy itself which are definitely in the centre of the book?.

19. Diamond (1991), p. 65.

20. As Koethe, who takes the sentences of the *Tractatus* seriously, notes: ‘On her account, the *Tractatus* does *not* attempt to articulate a metaphysical and semantic theory of the nature of language....Wittgenstein’s aim is to subject the notions figuring in that ostensible articulation—states of affairs, objects, logical form, and so on—to “a destabilization from the inside” in a effort to demonstrate their literal incoherence’ Koethe, John. *The Continuity of Wittgenstein’s Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell. 1996), p. 37.

21. *Investigations*, §§ 127, 89, 90.

been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book'?²² Which mistakes are present in what he had *written* in the *Tractatus*?²³ Why has his style changed so drastically while his aim remained wholly intact? Why is he using ordinary sentences, questions, paragraphs and short passages instead of neatly numbered propositions? I believe it isn't possible for the purely therapeutic view to provide adequate, principled answers to these questions by appeal to what we know of Wittgenstein's life and work.

However, if we read Wittgenstein's remark at 6.54, not as a note of guidance but as revealing a problematic conclusion, we can then regard it as a spur for his future development and an impetus for the refinement of his philosophical approach.²⁴ On the developmental view the revocation is a realisation of a tension that is genuinely present in his philosophy. He had uncritically inherited views about the essence of language as being representative of the factual which resulted in his vision of the general form of the proposition.²⁵ But such a view is at odds with the transcendental way in which the *Tractatus* is written. On such a reading the book is a great first attempt to deal with these issues systematically—but it is an imperfect work; one which fights against itself. This is not a simple re-statement of the doctrinal reading. The developmental reading attempts, in an explanatory mode, to identify the continuities and discontinuities in Wittgenstein's thought which other readings either play down or ignore completely.²⁶

One might wonder: How does this square with Wittgenstein's claim that 'philosophy is not a body of doctrine'; a remark upon which both Conant and Diamond place great emphasis? I would argue that if Wittgenstein genuinely recognised the paradox of his

22. *Investigations*, p. viii.

23. Cf. *Investigations*, §§ 89, 92, 96, 98, 105, 107, 108, 114, 115.

24. Cf. Hutto, 'Was the Later Wittgenstein a Transcendental Idealist?' in *Current Issues in Idealism*, Coates, P. & Hutto, D. eds. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press. 1996), p. 147.

25. Cf. *Tractatus*, 3.318.

26. As Conant notes, '...according to a reasonably standard history of the development of Wittgenstein's thought, "grammar" is precisely what is supposed to replace "logic" as one moves from the early to the later. The usual way of picturing the history of these matters is to assume that the early Wittgenstein—given the philosophical centrality he attributes the Frege–Russell formalism—would be hostilely disposed to his later conception of "grammar"...I am inclined to think a great deal is lost if one underrates the continuities here.' Conant (1989), p. 258.

account then he must also have recognised that it was impossible for philosophy to advance any doctrines which were not strictly nonsense. Perhaps, then, the less than perfect solution would be just what Conant and Diamond deny, that he wished his readers to understand both what the *Tractatus* was trying to say while accepting its self-destructive nature. It could still act as cure to all forms of traditional philosophy in this way. This reading, which regards him as aware of the tension, is also consistent with the fact that he should express himself by asking his readers to understand *him* rather than the pseudo-propositions found in his book. It should also help to explain at least some of the changes in the direction and style of his later philosophy.²⁷

Apart from raising the issue in his closing remarks, Wittgenstein critically deploys his position on nonsense in his attack on the view that logical constants represent objects.²⁸ As Peterson notes, that there are 'no such objects' is indeed his fundamental thought (*Grundgedanke*).²⁹ His analysis of the so-called 'propositions' of logic reveals them to be, strictly speaking, without sense. In the prelude to his attack on 'logical objects', he introduced the idea of 'formal concepts' to contrast with our notion of proper concepts. He writes:

4.126 When something falls under a formal concept as one of its objects this cannot be expressed by means of a proposition.

The thought is that the nature of a formal concept can only be shown in the way it is *employed*. It not something which can be expressed by propositions (which picture states of affairs).

4.1272 Thus the variable name 'x' is the proper sign for the pseudo-concept object.

27. This is consistent with other attempts to chart the development of Wittgenstein's thought through his 'middle period'. For example it does not contradict the fact, as Finch notes, that 'Judging from the posthumously published *Philosophical Remarks* and *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein moved with almost agonizing slowness to the new position that language makes sense only as it is altogether intertwined with different kinds of activities.' Henry LeRoy Finch, *Wittgenstein: The Later Philosophy: An Exposition of the 'Philosophical Investigations'* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1977), p. 4.

28. Cf. Diamond (1995), p. 204.

29. Donald Peterson, *Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy: Three Sides of the Mirror*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 48. Cf. also, Brian McGuinness, 'The *Grundgedanke* of the *Tractatus*' in *Understanding Wittgenstein*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, vol. 7, 1972/73 (London: The MacMillan Press, 1976). pp. 49, 50. Cf. also Finch (1977), p. 5.

What Wittgenstein is telling us is that there is no ‘thing’ that the apparent name ‘object’ (or variable, x) goes proxy for. There is no super-object of a Platonic character which answers to the name. Our understanding of the general term ‘object’ is revealed or shown in the employment we make of the logical variable in relation to the kinds of genuine objects which can substitute for that variable. Likewise, the components of the so-called propositions of logic are to be regarded as purely formal in this sense as well. Logical ‘names’ have no corresponding objects and logical ‘propositions’ picture no states of affairs.

The point, again, is that this only makes sense against the backdrop of the ‘picture theory’ of sense which articulates the conditions for the possibility of representation inherent in the way factual language operates. Hence, we might also see his ‘fundamental thought’ as amounting to the claim that the ‘propositions’ of logic are non-representational (or to borrow Peterson’s phrase—syntactic).³⁰ He appeals to alternative notations so as to show us how symbolism can obscure what is most important in understanding the nature of logic; that is its purely ‘formal’ character. To achieve this he makes us focus on the use of logical symbols in order to prevent us from mistakenly thinking of them in terms of their capacity to represent.

Here, the therapeutic reading is apposite and the developmental view is in concordance. It is in these sections that we can best see at work Wittgenstein’s idea that philosophy is an activity of clarification with the aim of avoiding philosophical nonsense. Here, in a genuine way, the real continuity between the early and later works is visible.³¹ For example, read developmentally, it may be that it is an expansion of this ‘fundamental thought’ that drives the later Wittgenstein to reject the idea that language has a general form altogether and to adopt a conception that directs us to focus instead on the use of language in particular contexts.

This idea is particularly compelling when we consider the importance he places on devising alternative language games as a philosophical tool.³² We are asked to imagine situations in which

30. Peterson (1990), p. 47.

31. Cf. Koethe (1996), p. 2.

32. In 1948 Wittgenstein writes: ‘...Nothing is more important for teaching us to understand the concepts we have than constructing fictitious ones.’ *Culture and Value*, ed. Von Wright, G.H., trans. Winch, P. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1980), p. 74e.

'others' use concepts differently for the express purpose of getting a clear view of the grammar of our language.³³ Consider, for example, why he introduces us to the possibility of other language games which might surround the concept pain as in the extreme case described in *Zettel*. He imagines a tribe which employs two different concepts of pain—'one is applied where there is visible damage and is linked with tending, pity etc. The other is used for stomach-ache for example, and is tied up with mockery of anyone who complains'.³⁴ Accordingly, unless members of this tribe can locate some kind of outer bodily damage they will not regard the person as experiencing what-we-would-call-'pain'. Their notion of what counts as pain cuts much more finely than would ours. Or as Wittgenstein puts it they 'have concepts which cut across ours'.³⁵ I claim that one of his vital aims in encouraging us to engage in these exercises of imagination is to get us to realise that: 'We are not analysing a phenomenon (e.g. thought) but a concept (e.g. that of thinking), therefore the use of the word'.³⁶

Compare this to the deployment of alternative logical notations, in the central sections of the *Tractatus*, in order to cure us of the practice of mythologising logical objects. The truth-tabular analysis is meant to reveal the misleading nature of the symbolism of Russellian notation. The truth tables are devices for showing that the signs for logical connectives do not correspond to anything. For instance, the so-called logical relation 'if p then q' can be represented by using the truth table as an alternative sign. Representing 'if p then q' in the form of a truth table removes the temptation to think that there are logical objects in some

33. 'The language games are rather set up as objects of comparison which are meant to throw light on the facts of our language by way not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities.' *Investigations*, §130. Cf. also §122.

34. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 2nd ed., eds. Anscombe, G.E.M. and Von Wright, G.H., trans. Anscombe, G.E.M., (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), §380.

35. *Zettel*, §379. For a fuller discussion of this case and the use of these imaginary language games see Hutto (1996), pp. 128–129.

36. *Investigations*, § 383. Cf. also §§ 194, 196. This is not to say that this was the only use of imaginary language games in his later writings. For a full discussion of this see David Cerbone's 'Don't Look but Think: Imaginary Scenarios in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy' *Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1994) pp. 159–183. Furthermore, this way of understanding his later approach makes sense of his wholesale rejection of the view of psychological language as representational which sponsors a mistaken picture of the reified mind. For a fuller discussion of this see Hutto, 'Consciousness Demystified: A Wittgensteinian Critique of Dennett's Project' in *The Monist: The Mind in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*, vol. 78, no. 4. (1995), pp. 467–468, 474–477.

‘transcendental realm’.³⁷ The point is that if we see Wittgenstein as expanding the scope of this kind of approach to include all forms of symbolism (i.e. ordinary words and names, etc.) in his later period, then the ‘developmental reading’ is no less consistent with his occasional remarks about the nature of ‘proper’ philosophical method than the purely therapeutic reading. In both periods all genuine grammatical investigations have the aim of clarifying; getting a clear view.³⁸ The attention to logical symbolism, like the attention to our everyday use of language, is designed to prevent the bewitchment of our intelligence by language.³⁹ But in order to see this one does not have to treat the metaphysical and semantical aspects of the *Tractatus* as ironic attempts at therapy.

Finally, and most importantly for this paper, a developmental reading is vital if we are to understand the proper role of the Tractarian remarks concerning ethics, aesthetics and religion which have been regularly identified as the very heart of the work.⁴⁰ They are regarded as transcendental and nonsensical, in part for the reasons that logic was so regarded. That is, they are non-representational; which is to say, they cannot be captured in factual language.⁴¹ But as Peterson notes, they are non-representational in a way different than are logical ‘statements’. As he rightly insists, they involve ‘what lies outside of language’ whereas logic concerns what is internal to it (given the Tractarian view of language).⁴²

It is here that we find the key tension in Diamond’s version of the therapeutic account.⁴³ Since she does not take the picture theory

37. Cf. Peterson (1990), p. 36, p. 40 and also, David Pears, *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy: Volume 1* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) p. 29.

38. *Tractatus*, 4.0031, *Investigations*, §122. Cf. also Koethe (1996), p. 60.

39. *Investigations*, § 109.

40. As he writes in his undated letter to von Ficker ‘...the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I’ll write to you now because they might be a key to you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have not written. And precisely this second part is the important one.’ taken from Luckhardt, C.G., *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996) pp. 94–95.

41. If they could ethical statements could not be absolute. Cf. Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’ reprinted in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, Klagge, J. and Nordman, A. eds. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993) p. 39.

42. He claims that Wittgenstein’s preface to the *Tractatus* misleads on the issue of nonsense by suggesting a fourfold schema, when it should describe a sixfold one. Cf. Peterson (1990) p. 7, and especially p. 8. Another good account of the various senses of nonsense in the *Tractatus* can be found in Cyril Barrett’s discussion in his book *Wittgenstein on Ethics and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), esp. pp. 24–25.

to have been advanced in a serious mode she is put in an awkward position when it comes to accommodating the importance that Wittgenstein places on the ethical. She attempts to circumvent this problem by distinguishing the attractiveness of the ethical from other pieces of nonsense. She writes: 'if we read the *Tractatus* right, the upshot of the book will be different in regard to the two sorts of utterers of nonsense. The attractiveness of philosophical sentences will disappear through the kind of self-understanding that the book aims to lead to in philosophers; the attractiveness of ethical sentences will not. But if we understand ourselves, ourselves the utterers of ethical nonsense, we shall not come out with ethical sentences under the illusion that we are talking sense'.⁴⁴ But if all nonsense is on a par—it is all like saying 'piggly wiggle tiggly'⁴⁵—then how is it that one bit of nonsense can be more attractive than another? Her response is that we should treat ethical cases as 'cases of understanding a person as saying in his heart something that makes no sense, [as] something which we have the imaginative resources to grasp as attractive where that imaginative capacity is tied to our own capacities as moral agents'.⁴⁶ This gets the general focus on our responses right, but encourages us to ask: Why does nonsense in an ethical context affect us as it does?

My proposal is that we can begin to answer this question if we convert Diamond's claim about 'imaginative resources' to a more sophisticated one about the context in which such remarks occur in concert with the nature of our responses to them.⁴⁷ Such an approach fits with Wittgenstein's mature position concerning language games which relate to particular domains and the attention he demands that we give to context our activities and the roles they play in our lives. It also fits with the idea that he was aware from the first, even if only negatively, that ethical talk is not

43. The reason why Diamond as opposed to Conant is discussed here is because she explicitly deals with this issue. However, this problem will arise on any therapeutic reading.

44. Diamond (1991), p. 74.

45. Diamond (1991), p. 60.

46. Diamond (1991), p. 84, cf. also p. 80.

47. Diamond shows, persuasively, how the later Wittgenstein's attention is focused on the use and context of ethical remarks, in response to Lovibond's attempt to read him as a 'moral realist' in her paper 'Wittgenstein, Mathematics and Ethics: Resisting the Attractions of Realism' in Hans Sluga and David Stern (eds), *Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) §§VI, VII. esp. pp. 248–249.

a form of 'factual discourse'. For example, the fact that he regarded ethical remarks as strictly 'nonsensical'—given a Tractarian theory of sense—but nonetheless important, was a vital, if only partial, insight into the essence and function of ethical language.

I agree with Diamond that to think Wittgenstein was suggesting that there could be ethical 'doctrines' or 'propositions' would be *very* poor. However, what we should not lose sight of is that her reading also rules out a more sophisticated understanding of the ethical remarks; one which ties in with Wittgenstein's evolving conception of language. This is consistent with the idea that there is a genuine tension in his early writings. He was committed, given his views at the time, to the idea that there were 'profound forms of nonsense' because of the framework theory of sense with which he was working (as contrasted with the case of nonsense with respect to logic which was not profound—just confused). As his 'imposed conception' of the essence of language faded, certain arenas of discourse needed no longer be regarded as nonsensical merely because they lie outside the bounds of the factual. Nevertheless, their profundity remains. Ethics remains as important as ever and logic, which was the transcendent basis of factual language, is replaced by forms of life which are 'given'⁴⁸ as the ground for our linguistic practice. But seeing *this* kind of continuity in his thought is ruled out by a reading that doesn't first allow us to take the 'picture theory' seriously.⁴⁹ And it is only against this background that we can make sense of the idea that there is something about the ethical, which sets it apart from other kinds of 'nonsense': something which is worthy of further investigation and explication. That Wittgenstein was prepared to allow for the existence of profound forms of nonsense in his early work is vital to an understanding of the man and what he found important.

Does this indicate the therapeutic reading is wholly misguided? No. The continuity thesis which is part of such a reading is both exciting and important for a proper understanding of Wittgenstein's writings. The argument of this section has only been that in its

48. *Investigations*, p. 226.

49. Interestingly, Diamond too emphasises this connection to his later approach. She writes 'I mean this to sound *not terribly far* from the *Tractatus* view of ethics' (Diamond, 1996, p. 252). But despite elsewhere making the case that we must take seriously the idea that the book advances no doctrines, in this context, she tellingly begins to speak of the *Tractatus* 'view'; its 'ideas'; its 'conceptions' and what it 'argues' (pp. 252–253).

strongest form such a reading threatens a proper, developmental understanding of his thought. When we consider the links *and* breaks between different areas of the early and later writings, it becomes clear that it is a mistake to think that all that is regarded as nonsensical in the *Tractatus* can be treated alike.⁵⁰

By adopting the developmental reading we are able to both respect the importance of his remarks concerning philosophical method while, at the same time, making sense of his changing views on the scope of 'nonsense' in a way which emphasises the continuity of his view about the importance and unique function of ethical language. Furthermore, recasting our approach in this way reveals a much more interesting link between the way Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein understood the ethical and the religious. For example, in Wittgenstein's conversation with Waismann he explicitly drew the connection between their work in the following way: 'All we can say can *a priori* be only nonsensical. Nevertheless we dash ourselves against the boundaries of language. Kierkegaard also had seen this throwing oneself and even described it in a very similar way (as throwing oneself against a paradox).'⁵¹ We can see Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein as both deeply concerned to understand the particular forms of life which give ethical and religious language games their sense.

IV

To expand upon this in Kierkegaard's case, recall that what is supposed to be 'nonsensical but significant' here is the 'absolute paradox' of the Christian incarnation. This section of the paper aims to argue the following. Firstly, I shall show how Conant takes the strategy of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to be ironic, culminating in the allegedly nonsensical account of the absolute paradox. Secondly, I shall argue that we can take on board his illuminating suggestion that the *Postscript*, rather than

50. As Koethe writes 'we should expect this attitude towards [the domains regarded as nonsensical] to persist beyond the *Tractatus*. If on the other hand, their construal as nonsensical in the *Tractatus* is an artifact or consequence of the picture theory, then we should expect such concepts and discourse to survive the abandonment of that theory and to occur in his later writings in ordinary, unconceptualised forms.' Koethe (1996). p. 39). I think, as does Koethe, that it is the second scenario which is realised in all cases.

51. 'Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics, Part II: Notes on talks with Wittgenstein', Waisman, Frederick. Mon. 30th, December, 1929 (at Schlick's) *Philosophical Review*, (1965), p. 13.

advancing original theses, offers us ‘grammatical remarks’ which function as reminders of what we already knew (but had forgotten, or had become confused about). However, we can do this without committing ourselves to the view that any of these reminders are themselves nonsensical.⁵² Finally, and relatedly, I shall offer a more detailed discussion of Climacus’s⁵³ account of the absolute paradox, concluding that there is no good reason to view this, in particular, as being, or intended to be, simple nonsense. Conant’s view rests upon an inappropriate reading of Climacus through the lenses of an austere view of nonsense derived from the *Tractatus*. Moreover, he also overlooks the significance of the later Wittgenstein’s recognition that the limits of sense are determined with respect to the language games appropriate to different forms of life.

Conant argues that the *Postscript* forwards no doctrine; no ‘teaching that we can quote approvingly’.⁵⁴ Despite appearing to offer ‘an elaborate argument in support of a substantive conception of Christianity and a conception of the kind of truth that is appropriate to it’,⁵⁵ in the Appendix Climacus indeed denies having any ‘opinions’. Taking this to mean that he advances no doctrines, Conant notes that Climacus then immediately revokes the text: ‘what I write contains the notice that everything is to be understood in such a way that it is revoked [*tilbagekaldt*], that the book has not only an conclusion [*Slutning*] but has a revocation [*Tilbagekaldelse*] to boot.’ (CUP 619)⁵⁶ However, he continues, ‘to write a book and revoke it is not the same as refraining from writing it’ (CUP 621). Why? Conant’s answer trades on Climacus’s

52. I am grateful to Anthony Rudd for discussion on this point.

53. Johannes Climacus is the pseudonymous author of the *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

54. Conant (1993), p. 202.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Quotations from the *Postscript* are from the translation by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). In the above quote, I have amended the translation slightly. The Hong’s have ‘end’, rather than ‘conclusion’, for *Slutning*; but Climacus is clearly referring back to the section immediately preceding the Appendix, headed *Slutning* in the Danish, and translated there as ‘Conclusion’ by both the Hong’s and by Swenson and Lowrie in the older translation. For a more detailed account of Conant’s view of the significance of Climacus’s revocation in what he takes to be the ironic strategy of the book, and an argument in favour of an alternative reading, see John Lippitt, ‘A funny thing happened to me on the way to salvation: Climacus as humorist in Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*’, in *Religious Studies* 33 (1997), pp. 181–202.

description of himself as a ‘humorist’, in that, seizing upon the link the *Postscript* makes between humour and ‘contradiction’ [*Modsigelse*], he concludes that Climacus, *qua* humorist, aims to ‘bring out the ludicrousness of certain contradictions ...particularly ...[those that] arise when the neo-Hegelian speculative philosophers of his day attempt to comprehend and clarify the nature of Christianity’.⁵⁷ ‘The humour of Climacus’s doctrine’, Conant asserts, ‘is that it gradually subverts any possible hope for a ground upon which the integrity of a distinction between the absurdity of the paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn’.⁵⁸ This is because, according to Conant’s account, the *Postscript* moves from propositions which can be given a clear sense (provided that we understand that their meanings are dependent upon a specifically religious context), through those which ‘teeter on the brink of sense’⁵⁹ (where mere truisms are presented as philosophical theses) to sheer nonsense: the ‘affirmation of objective absurdity’⁶⁰ found in the ‘absolute paradox’.⁶¹ According to Conant, Climacus’s ‘argument’ culminates in a claim that ‘from the standpoint of objective thought, the object of faith must be maximally indigestible to reason’.⁶² But as he notes, Climacus also says that the believer ‘cannot believe nonsense against the understanding ...because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder him in believing it’. (CUP 568) Underlying such claims, Conant argues, must be the idea that the believer *retains* his understanding; for it is precisely this which enables him to distinguish between ‘the objective absurdity of Christian doctrine and less repulsive forms of nonsense ...Climacus’s analysis therefore commits him to a distinction between mere absurdity and ‘objective absurdity’—a category of deep nonsense which is supposed to be qualitatively more repellent to reason than ordinary nonsense’.⁶³ But this view is itself nonsense. We cannot ‘rank incomprehensible “thoughts” by the

57. Conant (1993), p. 203.

58. Conant (1989), p. 261.

59. Conant (1993), p. 223n85.

60. *Ibid.*

61. For the clearest account of which sections are supposed to be which, see Conant (1993).

62. Conant (1993), p. 215.

63. *Ibid.*

degree of their absurdity'.⁶⁴ There is no way that we can judge one nonsensical statement to be *more* nonsensical than the latter, since nonsense does not come in 'a spectrum of degrees'.⁶⁵ Hence Conant damns virtually all previous commentators for having totally overlooked the 'incessant activity of irony' in the *Postscript*, and the significance of the fact that the book is revoked.⁶⁶ Hence his final conclusion that what appears to be the doctrine of the book turns out to be a pseudo-doctrine. Like the *Tractatus*, the *Postscript* is, on this reading, a ladder which can be thrown away once we have climbed up it. Climbing up it involves eagerly following Climacus through each stage of his thoughts, eventually realising that this culminates in his speaking nonsense. Once we have seen this, and thus recognised that Climacus gets himself embroiled in precisely the kind of confusions to which we ourselves are susceptible, the book has served its purpose, having had a curative and therapeutic effect.⁶⁷

I do not wish to deny that Conant notes important, interesting features of the *Postscript*, such as that what appear to be theses are actually akin to 'grammatical remarks'.⁶⁸ But I do not hold that the 'absolute paradox' is intended to be nonsense.⁶⁹ Conant suggests that there is no sense in claiming a paradox to be 'absolute'. If—as Climacus indeed claims—Christianity requires us to believe 'dialectical contradictions', then this, he argues, is utter nonsense, since a contradiction is contentless: there is no 'it' to believe. Against this view, I shall argue that this objection misunderstands

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. The 'incessant activity of irony' is a phrase Climacus uses in reference to his *Philosophical Fragments*. In the *Postscript*, he criticises the earlier book's only reviewer, accusing him of having given the misleading impression that the book was 'didactic' (CUP 275n), whereas its content is really—as we shall shortly see—a series of *reminders* of Christianity's traditional teachings. Conant clearly thinks this description applies to the *Postscript* too.

67. This depends upon assuming that Climacus's revocation plays the same role as Wittgenstein's 'throwing away the ladder'. For what is, I argue, a more plausible reading of the revocation, see Lippitt (1997).

68. A similar point has been made by Stanley Cavell. See his 'Kierkegaard's *On Authority and Revelation*', in Josiah Thompson (ed.), *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 380.

69. Note that several writings written under Kierkegaard's own name suggest that he held the same view as his pseudonym Climacus. See, for instance, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Vol. 1 (entries 7, 9–12) and 6 (entries 6598–6601) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967 and 1978 respectively), and Lippitt (1997), p. 188–90.

the ways in which Climacus uses such terms as ‘contradiction’, ‘paradox’ and ‘the absurd’. It overlooks the Hegelian context in which the *Postscript* was written, and the fact that Climacus follows Hegel in using terms such as ‘contradiction’ extremely broadly.⁷⁰ Closer attention to Climacus’ uses of these terms, and particularly paying careful attention to how the term ‘absolute paradox’ is used in *Philosophical Fragments*, the text in which the idea is discussed in most detail, will show how describing something as ‘absolutely’ paradoxical can make sense.⁷¹

Much scholarly ink has been spilled over whether the absolute paradox is supposed to be a logical contradiction.⁷² I shall not cover this ground again in detail here, but simply make some observations about Climacus’s uses of the terms ‘contradiction’, ‘paradox’ and ‘the absurd’. It is clear from this use that Climacus does not intend ‘contradiction’ to be construed as narrowly as Conant assumes. For instance, Climacus considers ‘the comic’ to be based upon ‘contradiction’, but amongst the examples he gives to justify this claim is a man falling into a cellar because he is gazing upwards at a shop window display. Climacus claims that ‘the contradiction is in the movement, the upward direction of the head and gaze and the underground direction down into the basement’ (CUP 516n). Manifestly, there is no logical contradiction involved here, and such is the case in the vast majority of Climacus’s examples. As several commentators have suggested, a better English word would perhaps be ‘incongruity’⁷³ or ‘tension’. But such a usage of ‘contradiction’ should come as no surprise when we bear in mind the Hegelian context within which Climacus was writing, and the above-mentioned broadness of Hegel’s use of the term. (For

70. I do not wish to claim that Climacus follows all of Hegel’s uses; simply that his usage is far broader than that of a contemporary logician.

71. It is worth noting that although it is in *Fragments* that the most detailed account of the absolute paradox is to be found, Conant’s account focuses almost exclusively upon the *Postscript*.

72. For a more detailed argument than I have space for here towards the conclusion that it is *not* a formal contradiction, see Evans, 1992, chapter 7. A similar line is taken by several other commentators, for example Merold Westphal, *Becoming a self: a reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1996) and Steven M. Emmanuel *Kierkegaard and the concept of revelation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

73. Though this brings with it its own problems in relation to the comic, which Kierkegaard commentators tend to overlook. See John Lippitt, ‘Humour and incongruity’, in *Cogito* 8–2 (1994), pp. 147–53.

instance, Hegel refers to nature as a contradiction.⁷⁴) Merold Westphal draws out three aspects of Climacus's talk of 'contradiction'. As well as the incongruity point above, many of the contradictions referred to are 'existential rather than epistemological',⁷⁵ such as that between a tutor wanting her students to do well on her exam, but also feeling obliged to give genuine, honest marks. Given the importance that the *Postscript* ascribes to 'subjectivity' in orienting oneself to ethical and religious questions, this dimension should not be overlooked. Finally, where contradiction *is* intended epistemically, Westphal argues that 'it lies in the incongruity between the content of a particular belief and a larger frame of reference that excludes that belief but whose normative credentials are open to question'.⁷⁶ We shall shortly see the importance of this final point.

The term 'paradox' is also used in a way which stops short of nonsense. The absolute paradox is indeed identified with 'the absurd', and the absurd is said to be that 'God has come into existence in time... as an individual human being' (CUP 210). But this is said not to be absurd *per se*, but absurd from the standpoint of 'objective reflection' (cf. CUP 210). And a major point of the *Postscript* is to explain why we should not approach ethical and religious issues by means of 'objective reflection'.

Once we understand Climacus's usage of these terms, we can see that to ask someone in faith to affirm a 'contradiction' is not to ask them to embrace simple nonsense. It is to ask them to have faith despite an apparent tension or incongruity in the *object* of faith. But someone may still want to ask: can we coherently talk about the *absolute* paradox? Wherein lies its 'absoluteness'? In an attempt to answer this question, let us turn to the most extended discussion of the absolute paradox in the Climacus writings.

The term is introduced in Chapter 3 of *Philosophical Fragments*.⁷⁷ Climacus describes as 'the ultimate paradox of

74. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 17–22; cited in C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 191.

75. Westphal (1996), p. 181.

76. *Ibid.*

77. Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). All subsequent references will be to this translation.

thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think' (PF 37). Against this background, the (human) understanding is described as colliding with 'the unknown' (PF 39); an unknown which Climacus labels 'the god [*Guden*]' (PF 39) and 'the *absolutely* different' (PF 44, my emphasis). The understanding seems ambivalently related to this unknown: 'the understanding does not go beyond this; yet in its paradoxicality the understanding cannot stop reaching it and being engaged with it' (PF 44). The idea seems to be that the understanding has imperialistic⁷⁸ ambitions, and aims to go beyond its capabilities. We may delude ourselves into thinking that we have got a handle on 'the unknown', but this is indeed a delusion, since 'the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different' (PF 45). Not that that stops it from trying. The understanding's reaching beyond what it can legitimately make its own leads it into the realm of fantasy. We create gods which are, ultimately, in our own image. In inventing its gods, the understanding continually confuses what is *absolutely* different with what is only *relatively* different. (This is because anything we could know, or even 'think', cannot, by definition, be *absolutely* different from the human understanding.) Any god we can *imagine* is merely a fantastic creation of our own minds, and thus not the god of Climacus's thought-experiment, who is 'the unknown', the 'absolutely different'.⁷⁹

The central point to note is that at the heart of this argument is God's *alterity*: the idea that God is radically other than the human. It is precisely this that figures such as Feuerbach ('all theology is anthropology') and the Danish Hegelians had denied, and which Climacus wants to insist upon as being an indispensable part of Christian teaching. This is the first sense of 'absolute': the *absolute otherness of God*.

At the end of each chapter of *Fragments*, a rather humourless interlocutor appears. In chapter 3, the interlocutor angrily asks why he should be concerned with 'a caprice so curious or so ludicrous that it probably has never occurred to anyone and, above all, is so unreasonable that I would have to lock everything out of my

78. I owe this term to Evans. See Evans (1992), *passim*.

79. Such talk of 'the god' recalls negative theology, and perhaps D. Z. Phillips' 'hidden God'; cf. his claims that 'mystery is bound up with the very grammar of our notion of God' (D. Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1995), p. 279).

consciousness in order to think of it' (PF 46). Climacus replies: 'This is exactly what you have to do, but then is it justifiable to want to keep all the presuppositions you have in your consciousness and still presume to think about your consciousness without any presuppositions?' (PF 46). Climacus's account seems ludicrous to the interlocutor because he holds certain assumptions which he does not *recognise* as assumptions. Which?

These assumptions relate to *revelation*. *Fragments* is in large part an attempt to clarify the grammar of the Christian concept of revelation, and how a world-view which has revelation as its distinguishing feature differs from various views Climacus labels 'immanent' and 'Socratic'. A vital part of the difference lies in the view of the power of the human understanding to cope with its existential plight. For Socrates, the truth we need is 'within' us, and can be attained through recollection. For Christianity, by contrast, we are radically separated from God through our state of sin: a state characterised by hubris, disobedience to God and an inappropriate desire to be as God. For this reason, it is claimed, God needed to intervene in human history to bring about 'the condition' needed for our salvation. Climacus implies that the interlocutor has not taken on board the full ramifications of this outlook. How so?

One point overlooked by Conant is that Climacus talks about the 'absolute difference' between God and man not solely in terms of the metaphysics of incarnation, but in terms of the concept of sin. Here is the passage: 'Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin, and positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality' (PF 47). God is without sin; humanity is sinful, and requires God's intervention. What the interlocutor has failed to take on board is this dimension of the 'absolute' difference between God and man. It is one which imports both epistemic and practical standards which are—from the point of view of 'immanence'—new. Revelation radically challenges our view of ourselves and our capabilities, and as such is 'the strangest thing of all' (PF 101). This is because it violates what we had previously thought about ourselves, including both the capabilities of our understanding and the worthiness of our lives. In Emmanuel's words, 'revelation is not absurd or

paradoxical in the sense that it violates fundamental principles of logic, but in the sense that it disturbs our common sense view of ourselves and our values'.⁸⁰ It is vital to realise that this is no merely intellectual problem. Remember Conant's claim: that there is no ground on which the distinction between the absolute paradox and mere nonsense could be drawn. I have argued elsewhere that the distinction is the *existential allegiance* which the paradox demands.⁸¹ We see here how far-reaching this allegiance is. According to Christianity, we are—without God—in a far worse position than we realised. In Gordon Kaufmann's words, 'Revelation, if it is revelation, judges us and our standards; we are in no position to judge it'.⁸² In other words, beliefs such as that are the *criteria*, not the object, of assessment.⁸³ According to Climacus, this idea of revelation meets with either 'faith' or 'offence'. We can now see *why* the absolute paradox appears offensive: because it requires us to rethink both the limitations of human understanding, and also what kind of beings we are. (It demands of me that I should see myself as a sinner, unable to save myself, and thus in need of a divine saviour.) What Conant doesn't seem to take on board is that one of *Fragments'* central themes is that the Christian faith, in Robert C. Roberts' words, 'transforms any concept of rationality that we may start with' and that thus 'Christians carry on their lives by a set of *epistemic and practical* standards that presuppose the incarnation for the knowledge of self and situation and *telos*'.⁸⁴

V

This is the grammar of revelation of which Climacus is aiming to remind us. As Conant rightly sees, these are indeed 'grammatical remarks': in reminding us of what Christianity teaches, Climacus is not saying anything new, but rather uttering 'old-fashioned orthodoxy' (CUP 275n). Yet rather than the absolute paradox being

80. Emmanuel (1996), p. 49.

81. Lippitt (1997).

82. Gordon D. Kaufmann, 'Philosophy of religion and Christian theology', in *Journal of Religion* 37 (1957), p. 238; cited by Emmanuel (1996), p. 50.

83. Cf. D. Z. Phillips, 'Religious beliefs and language games', in his *Wittgenstein and religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 65.

84. Robert C. Roberts, in a review of Evans (1992), in *Faith and Philosophy* 11–3 (1994), p. 498, my emphasis.

intended to be seen as simple nonsense, I have argued that one can find in the Climacus writings a meaningful sense which can be given to the use of the term in a Christian life. It refers, firstly, to the 'absolute difference'; the radical otherness, of God. Secondly, it draws our attention to the centrality of revelation within the Christian world-view, and the radical alteration of our view of ourselves and our values that this demands.

Let us turn now to the question of what outlook would have to be in place in order to judge the 'absolute paradox' of the incarnation as simple nonsense. To do so would presuppose that the world-view available to us, and with which we aim to form such a judgment, is in order. But we have seen that this is precisely what Christianity denies. Thus we are faced with a moment of existential choice, to be embraced in faith or rejected in offence. Any justificatory reasons given would be circular. This is the sense in which Climacus' infamous 'leap' *is* a leap. But a further point is this: if the claim of the absolute paradox was simple nonsense; utter gibberish, how could we find it offensive at all? In order to do so, wouldn't we need to be able to make *some* kind of sense of it?

Some light can be shed on the above by a final comparison with Wittgenstein. In the later writings, Wittgenstein clearly recognises that what *counts* as nonsense will vary from one context to another.⁸⁵ Likewise, I am suggesting that we cannot occupy a position from which we can justifiably claim that the absolute paradox is nonsense *simpliciter*. Such a move represents what Phillips has described as 'a deep philosophical prejudice', one characteristic of which is 'the craving for generality, the insistence that what constitutes an intelligible move in one context, must constitute an intelligible move in all contexts'.⁸⁶

With direct reference to religious utterances, Wittgenstein, in 1937, claims:

In religion every level of devoutness must have its appropriate form of expression which has no sense at a lower level. This doctrine, which means something at a higher level, is null and void for someone who is still at the lower level; he *can* only understand it *wrongly* and so these words are *not* valid for such a person.

85. Compare Wittgenstein's remark that something could only be a blunder in a particular game. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 59.

86. Phillips (1993), p. 63.

For instance, at my level the Pauline doctrine of predestination is ugly nonsense, irreligiousness. Hence it is not suitable for me, since the only use I could make of the picture offered would be a wrong one. If it is a good and godly picture, then it is so for someone at a quite different level, who must use it in his life in a way completely different from anything that would be possible for me.⁸⁷

There are two points to note here. First, that Wittgenstein explicitly acknowledges the possibility of different 'levels' of religious devoutness. (Note that elsewhere Wittgenstein includes Kierkegaard amongst those whom he puts at a 'higher' religious level than himself.⁸⁸ He remarks that 'Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint.'⁸⁹ and that 'Kierkegaard is far too deep for me... [h]e bewilders me without working the good effects which he would in deeper souls').⁹⁰ The point is that Wittgenstein acknowledges the possibility that he is unable to see something that would be more apparent to someone with greater religious sensitivity.

Second, note the talk about sense and nonsense in the above passage. The view 'which has no sense at a lower level' of devoutness 'means something at a higher level', even if the person at a lower level (such as Wittgenstein) can make no sense of it. ('These words are not valid for such a person' seems to mean, in this context, that such a person has not *appropriated* them; has not found a use for them in his life.⁹¹) This sounds like someone who would say, with Stanley Cavell, that just as 'to understand a metaphor you must be able to interpret it', so 'to understand an utterance religiously you have to be able to share its perspective'.⁹²

Something similar might be said about the absolute paradox. It will *appear* to be nonsense (perhaps even 'ugly nonsense'; offensive nonsense) to many. But to some, it 'means something'. This can easily be misunderstood as the claim that the Christian

87. *Culture and Value*, p. 32e.

88. Conant remarks: 'The author who seems to have most influenced Wittgenstein's understanding of the category of the religious is Kierkegaard.' (Conant (1995), p. 271).

89. Quoted by M. O'C. Drury, 'Some notes on conversations with Wittgenstein', in Rush Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 87.

90. See Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: a memoir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 75.

91. Compare Climacus's account of 'becoming subjective': CUP Part II, Section II, especially Chapter 1.

92. Cavell (1972), p. 384.

has privileged access to a knowledge which others lack. This is *not* what I am claiming. Climacus claims that the absolute paradox will always remain a paradox; this is another dimension of its absoluteness. But the point is that *in and through* appropriating a theological concept; finding a meaning for a concept like the absolute paradox (and the kenotic conception of God which it includes), the believer makes a certain sense of this apparent nonsense. Again, this does not mean that she understands, purely intellectually, something the non-believer does not, but that she discovers a meaning for ideas like revelation and *kenosis in her life*. As Phillips likes to point out, it is to the lives and practices of religious believers that we must look if we are to understand religious concepts in their natural contexts. In doing so, we take up an important part of what Conant is arguing. But we do not take up Conant's assumption that because the paradox *appears* to be nonsense, that therefore it *is* nonsense. He is misled by reading back into Climacus an inappropriately austere view of nonsense.

VI

Ours has been an attempt to recognise some of the important aspects of the readings of Diamond and Conant while challenging their suggestion that we should read Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard as sponsoring a uniform view of nonsense. For, despite drawing our attention to something vitally important in Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard's respective views on the ethical and the religious, Conant and Diamond's strong line on the straightforward nonsensicality of such discourses threatens a full and proper understanding of how the ethical and the religious can affect us as they do. By making sense of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard's views on nonsense and paradox we are able more fully to appreciate the subtlety of their positions and the focus of their remarks on ethics and religion.

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