

Mysticism and Nonsense in the *Tractatus*

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1. The Paradox of the *Tractatus*

Upon reading Wittgenstein's Preface to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, one could easily be forgiven for thinking that the book is in a similar line of business to any other work of analytical philosophy. True enough, Wittgenstein's professed aim of drawing a limit to the expression of thoughts is exceptionally ambitious; and one could not fail to be struck by the immodesty of the claim that the problems of philosophy—that is, *all* of them—'have in essentials been finally solved' (*TLP*: p. 29).¹ But be this as it may, the Preface seems to welcome the reader onto familiar methodological territory, for it would seem to be the case that:

(A) The purpose of the *Tractatus* is to communicate truths.

Wittgenstein states both that one aspect of the work's value consists in the fact that 'thoughts are expressed' in it (*TLP*: p. 29), and that 'the *truth* of the thoughts communicated . . . here seems to me unassailable and definitive' (*TLP*: p. 29).²

Infamously, however, it seems that if (A) were correct, then the book could never succeed in what we are assuming its purpose to be. And the reason for this would seem to lie in the fact that the *Tractatus* is incoherent, and in the *Tractatus*'s particular brand of incoherence. For in laying out its theory of meaning, the book draws a limit to the expression of thoughts that entails the meaninglessness of any attempt to elaborate this very theory of meaning. More specifically, if the theory of meaning it elaborates—the so-called 'picture theory'—is correct, then to try to say how the world, and language, must be for meaning to be possible is to try to say something about the logical form that sentences share with reality (*TLP*: 2.16–2.18); but, according to that very theory, the attempt to do such a thing can only issue in nonsense, since logical form cannot be represented (*TLP*: 4.12). Consequently, if one holds true all that has gone before in the text, then, at the text's end, one is compelled to say, with Wittgenstein, that what went before is nonsense (*TLP*: 6.54). Here, then, is the paradox of the *Tractatus*: if its constituent sentences are true, then they are nonsense.

One response to all this is to follow P. M. S. Hacker (2000: 356) in regarding the incoherence of the *Tractatus* as demonstrating the falsity of its central doctrines. And we, as philosophers of language, view things in just this way. To our minds, the incoherence of the picture theory is just one more reason for denying that sentences can only be meaningful if they share reality's logical form. But it is one thing for a contemporary reader—quite rightly, in our view—to treat the

Tractatus's incoherence as a reason for rejecting its theory of meaning; it is quite another to explain just what *Wittgenstein* thought he was doing in producing a text whose incoherence seems both so obvious and so easy to diagnose. After all, Wittgenstein suggests that reading the *Tractatus* may, nonetheless, bring us some enlightenment of a kind; that is, do us some *good*. As he himself, puts it:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.
(*TLP*: 6.54)

One way of putting the problem with which this paper is concerned is this: given that the text looks for all the world to be incoherent, what could Wittgenstein have been up to in writing it? Finding a solution to this problem—which, of course, requires us to come up with a plausible treatment of Wittgenstein's way with the paradox—has some claim to be the basic problem facing an interpreter of the *Tractatus*. It is certainly not the only problem; perhaps not even the deepest problem; but it is a problem that shapes every other aspect of an interpretation as no other problem does. And, as it happens, we think that we may well have solved it once and for all.

2. Two Interpretations Based on a Shared Assumption

How can we make sense of what is going on in the *Tractatus*, given its apparently incoherent nature? Much depends on the attitude we take towards (A). Our favoured solution has it that (A) should, in fact, be rejected: a move that enables us to interpret Wittgenstein as self-consciously producing an incoherent text with a view to doing *something other* than communicating truths. But as long as (A) remains in place—as long as we think that the *good* Wittgenstein thought the text could do us could only lie in its being a source of propositional knowledge—our only hope lies in portraying Wittgenstein as regarding the *Tractatus* as incoherent in appearance only; and there would seem to be two ways of doing this.

According to the first such reading, Wittgenstein avoids incoherence because he does not, in fact, assert (i.e. present as true) *any* of the sentences of the *Tractatus*. On the contrary, the truths to be communicated are treated as inexpressible but somehow capable of being transmitted to the book's readership *via* the production of a text consisting entirely of nonsense. Wittgenstein, on this view, occupies a stable position *behind* the text, where a coherent set of ineffable truths can be acknowledged. Certain items from this realm—namely, those constituting Wittgenstein's general conception of the nature of language—explain why the text itself is meaningless.

On the alternative reading, incoherence is avoided by interpreting Wittgenstein as regarding certain of the sentences in the *Tractatus* as straightforwardly

meaningful, and by taking these, and these alone, to communicate truths and convey arguments. On such a reading, those portions of the text that are nonsensical are not taken by Wittgenstein to be so on the strength of the philosophical theory they supposedly help to elaborate; and those parts of the text that are true do not bring their own meaningfulness into question. Here Wittgenstein's claimed stable resting-place lies, not behind the text, but within a part of it.

Let us call the first option 'The Ineffable Truths View'.³ This way of reading the text seeks to explain how the *Tractatus* can communicate truths by virtue of appealing to Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing. In order to see how this might work, consider the remarks on solipsism, and especially the claim that 'what solipsism means, is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but it shows itself' (*TLP*: 5.62). Taken at face value, the claim is that solipsism is true, but cannot be put into words: it is an ineffable truth that is manifest in the fact that the limits of what I can say are the very same as the limits of the possible combinations of objects in facts.⁴ But, nonetheless, the idea is that Wittgenstein's failed attempt to put into words such ineffable truths is intended to bring enlightenment to the reader. His nonsense sentences can lead readers to see what he tried—and failed—to say: such sentences are, supposedly, illuminating in the sense that the reader's appreciation that they are nonsense may help her come to see the ineffable truths that Wittgenstein tried, and failed, to put into words.⁵ The leading idea behind The Ineffable Truths View is that this form of explanation characterises the text as a whole. If this way of reading the *Tractatus* is correct, the sentences of the *Tractatus*, though nonsensical, are used by Wittgenstein to bring us to see the ineffable truths which explain why this is so. Such nonsense sentences communicate truths by getting the reader to grasp the truths lying behind his words.

So much for the appeal to ineffable truths. Someone sceptical, as we are, about attributing to Wittgenstein both the belief that there exist ineffable truths and the thesis that nonsense can be used to communicate truths, and yet convinced of correctness of (A), will want to consider the second option. This involves radically restricting the scope of the phrase 'my propositions' in *Tractatus* 6.54. According to this alternative way of reading the *Tractatus*—which we shall call 'The Not-All-Nonsense View'—not every sentence of the text is nonsense. Whilst the text's main body is, indeed, nonsensical, other parts of it—which we might call 'the frame'⁶—will be regarded as Wittgenstein's instructions to his readers on how to approach the book, and will be taken to have sense unproblematically. The end result will be a reading of Wittgenstein according to which the doctrines traditionally associated with the *Tractatus* are not his. We may then take the book's point to be therapeutic:⁷ its purpose will be to help readers to see that the main body of the text is nonsensical and, hence, that the philosophical pretensions it represents are nonsensical too.⁸

Clearly, if such a reading is correct, then the *Tractatus* has truth-telling aspirations that are not at once thwarted by incoherence. The sentences presented as true are precisely not those that elaborate a theory of meaning, the latter such sentences being regarded by Wittgenstein as nothing more than exemplars of the

kind of nonsense that philosophers cannot help but come out with. Consequently, there is no substantial theory of language propounded by Wittgenstein in the text, and so no concern that his endorsement of such a theory might commit him to its very statement being nonsensical. In fact, on this view, there is no general argument for the thesis that the book's main body is nonsense: that thesis can only be the result of 'a judgement about the actual history, to date, of some particular' signs, a judgement which 'is always empirical, provisional' (Moore 2003: 186).

The distinction between The Ineffable Truths View and The Not-All-Nonsense View is thus quite clear: with assumption (A) in place, they are exclusive alternatives, exhausting the options available to us. However, it will be helpful to compare and, crucially, contrast this distinction with one that has become familiar in the recent literature on the *Tractatus*: the distinction between interpretations that have come to be known as 'traditional' and 'resolute' respectively.⁹ This latter distinction is framed both by, and in the interest of, those who style themselves 'resolute'; and it is the ideal of resoluteness that defines it.

In our view, 'resolute' criticisms of interpretations classed as 'traditional' have not been uniformly helpful; and one reason for this is that it is not clear what the 'resolutists' are really trying to be resolute about.¹⁰ Insofar as it is crucial to the 'resolutists' to distinguish between a 'frame' of the *Tractatus* and the text's main body, it seems that their aim is to be resolute about the seriousness of the paradox of the *Tractatus*: they will be wanting to insist that if 6.54 is taken to claim that *all* the propositions of the *Tractatus* (including that one) are nonsensical, then Wittgenstein's position is rendered ineluctably incoherent. In effect, then, they will be accepting (A), and rejecting the idea of ineffable truths as an incoherent evasion: a failure to recognize the depth of the paradox created by letting 6.54 have general application. If their aim is to be resolute about the seriousness of the paradox of the *Tractatus*, they are, in effect, adopting The Not-All-Nonsense View.

But there is another kind of resolution that 'resolutists' seem keen to display: a resolution concerning the nature of nonsense. Philosophers who label themselves 'resolute' in this context pride themselves on attributing to Wittgenstein what they call an 'austere', rather than a 'substantial', conception of nonsense (Conant 2000: 176). And one thing that they intend by such a conception is a denial that a nonsensical sentence may make *the wrong kind* of sense: that is, express 'a logically incoherent thought' (Conant 2000: 176).¹¹ Such an incoherent thought would, presumably, be a depiction of objects as arranged in a way in which, due to the logical kinds of objects they are, the objects concerned could not be arranged.¹² And, drawing on such an understanding of 'austerity', 'resolute' readers who take the characterisation of nonsense to be the crux of their dispute with more traditional interpreters, rebut the idea that such a conception can be attributed to Wittgenstein. The right thing to say, according to them, is that Wittgenstein took nonsense to be a mere *failure* to make sense: a failure to express any thought at all (Conant 2000: 176; Diamond 1991: 181). Nonsense sentences do not represent things as being arranged in logically impossible ways; they fail to represent.

We shall return to the topic of austerity about nonsense in §4, ultimately revealing it to be a concept that requires a good deal more analysis than 'resolute'

readers are apt to give it. But for the time being, it suffices to say this: due to the aforementioned confusion over the crux of the dispute between 'resolute' and 'traditional' interpreters, taxonomising the available responses to the paradox of the *Tractatus* according to whether or not they are resolute is apt to obfuscate rather than enlighten. Indeed, if one were to try to effect such a classification, whilst supposing that the distinctive feature of 'resolute' readings lay in their commitment to an 'austere' conception of nonsense, one would go off on the wrong track entirely. As we have explained, if (A) is held constant, then the incoherence of the *Tractatus* must be flattened out, and this can only be done by means of adopting one of The Ineffable Truths View and The Not-All-Nonsense View. But it would be a mistake to suppose that a defender of The Ineffable Truths View *must* deny austerity. There *may*, of course, be holders of The Ineffable Truths View who accept the kind of 'substantial' conception of nonsense repudiated by 'resolutists', but as we shall demonstrate in the next section, it is not essential to the view itself. Once 'traditional' readings are understood to be readings that deny austerity, conflating The Ineffable Truths View with such readings misrepresents the options before us in the wake of the paradox.

Whatever the historical interest of the contrast between 'resolute' and 'traditional' interpretations, if it is the problem of the paradox of the *Tractatus* that concerns us, we had better stick with the distinction between The Ineffable Truths View and The Not-All-Nonsense View.¹³ These remain the only clear options for making sense of Wittgenstein's project, as long as we continue to accept assumption (A).¹⁴ But neither option is very satisfactory, as we shall argue below. And this means that we need to question (A), which reveals there to be a third option available: the position that we shall call 'The No-Truths-At-All View'. Our aim here is to argue for a version of this third option. Specifically, we suggest that, since the book's incoherence cannot be eliminated in either of the respective ways suggested by The Ineffable Truths View and The-Not-All-Nonsense View, we must accept that the *Tractatus* could not have been intended to communicate any truths, even the (supposed) truth that large portions of it are nonsensical. The text is simply too unstable for this: it can have no *final conclusion*. Instead, it is our view that, rather than aiming to impart propositional knowledge, its purpose is that of bringing us into acquaintance with the limits of the world: having us *feel* those limits (*TLP*: 6.45).

In the next section, we shall outline our dissatisfaction with The Ineffable Truths View, before going on to explain, in §4, why The Not-All-Nonsense View is, if anything, worse. In §§5 and 6 we shall outline our proposed alternative, and then respond to a few objections in §7.

3. Against the Ineffable Truths View

In order to do justice to The Ineffable Truths View, we should consider it in its strongest form. It is important, in particular, to be clear that The Ineffable Truths View does not in itself require any fudging over the nature of nonsense. It does

not need to ascribe to Wittgenstein a conception of nonsense that he obviously rejected; and it does not need to adopt a conception of nonsense that is radically at variance with the conception adopted by most adherents of The Not-All-Nonsense View.

We need, therefore, to distinguish The Ineffable Truths View, as such, from the cartoon version of it constructed by some opponents: a pastiche which attributes to Wittgenstein a substantial conception of nonsense and which, as result, has him taking the *Tractatus's* nonsensical sentences *themselves* to express somehow the ineffable truths that he is supposed to want to communicate. On such a reading, Wittgenstein would be adopting precisely the position that a 'resolute' reader sets her face against. He would be taking a piece of nonsense to have another, exotic, kind of sense: the kind of sense had by a sentence that represents an incoherent state of affairs.

One *could*, of course think all of this; but if one did, one's interpretation would clearly be in deep trouble. For one thing, what Wittgenstein explicitly says is *inexpressible* would turn out, after all, to be expressible (TLP: 6.522). For another, as is now a familiar fact, Wittgenstein explicitly rejects the idea that nonsense is a matter of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way. For Wittgenstein, nonsense is always a matter of a whole sentence *failing* to have sense; and such a failure is always a matter of one or more of the sentence's constituent signs not having been assigned a meaning (TLP: 5.4733).

Wittgenstein, then, signs up to precisely the conception of nonsense the 'resolute' readers champion. But the plain fact is that The Ineffable Truths View need not reject or fudge this conception, since it is not committed to *any* particular view of the mechanism by which the reading of nonsense sentences might bring one to appreciate certain ineffable truths. It can allow, for example, that the sentences of the *Tractatus* can *seem* to have sense, and *seem*, therefore, to express certain truths, although they do not—cannot—in fact have sense. We might then suppose that their seeming to have sense enables us to appreciate the truths they seem to express. This would require us to suppose that there are truths that they seem to express. And that supposition could be held to be unthreatened by the realization that the sentences that seemed to express them do not—cannot—in fact express anything. But all of this is entirely compatible with 'austerity' about nonsense.

By the same token, it can be no objection to The Ineffable Truths View that it involves distinguishing between 'illuminating nonsense' (Hacker 1986: 18) and unilluminating nonsense. Any view that takes the bulk of the text to be more than just *mush*—that is, as being there to serve *some* purpose—seems bound to make such a distinction (Hacker 2000: 365). To say that nonsense sentences may be 'illuminating' is to say that they may play a role in prompting enlightenment; and their doing this does not commit us to thinking of nonsense as making a kind of sense. All in all, The Ineffable Truths View is distinctive neither in taking nonsensical sentences to express incoherent thoughts—it need hold no such thing—nor in distinguishing between 'illuminating' and 'unilluminating' nonsense—every view must make some such distinction if it is to take any note

at all of the bulk of the text—but, simply, in attributing to Wittgenstein the view that there are ineffable truths that the *Tractatus* somehow communicates.

What could be wrong with this idea? And why could it not have formed the basis of Wittgenstein's intended response to the paradox of the *Tractatus*? In short, the basic difficulty with it is that the notion of an ineffable truth is incoherent on Wittgenstein's own terms.¹⁵ A truth is a *thing* that is true. So what kind of thing could be true, and yet ineffable? The best that we can suggest, on Wittgenstein's behalf, is a *thought*: something that might be produced or grasped by a possible act of thinking. In Wittgenstein's system, there is only one kind of thing that an ineffable truth could be: a (true) thought that could not be expressed in language. But now we have a problem. For according to Wittgenstein, a thought is not a Fregean *Gedanke*; a thought is not a non-linguistic item that may (or may not) come to be clothed in words. On the contrary, a thought 'just is a kind of proposition' (1979a: 82): that is, a sentence with sense (*TLP*: 4). (This is what is meant by the claim that 'thinking is a kind of language' (1979a: 82).) But, given Wittgenstein's commitment to this conception of thoughts, it is plain that he leaves no room for there being ineffable truths. Since a truth is a thought that is true, and since thoughts are significant sentences, there cannot be truths that are incapable of being put into words. From the perspective of the *Tractatus*, the very idea of such a thing is incoherent. Consequently, there can only be instability in an interpretation that attempts to render the *Tractatus* coherent—as does The Ineffable Truths View—by attributing such an incoherence to its author.

In the light of this, someone might try to preserve at least a ghostly shadow of The Ineffable Truths View by drawing on a suggestion made by Elizabeth Anscombe. According to Anscombe, the properly Wittgensteinian position is not that there exist truths that cannot be said, but that there are things that *would* be true, if they *could* be said (Anscombe 1971: 162). On this reading, then, there are (really) no ineffable truths; just things that *would* be expressed by true sentences, *were* they to be expressible at all. But it is difficult to see how such a manoeuvre can really help matters. What are these 'things that would be true, if they could be said'? They cannot be thoughts, or anything that can be pictured. Perhaps they are such things as the form of reality, or features of the form of reality. But the difficulty now becomes that of making sense of the claim that something *so* unsuited for expression *would* be true, *if* it were sayable. For if something is not, as it were, remotely like the kind of thing that can be said, how could there be a possible world in which *that very thing* existed and yet possessed the property of truth?

One response to this might be to shake one's head sadly, in recognition of what would be taken to be the unfortunate fact that Wittgenstein failed to see the inconsistency of his own position: it is true, we might say, that there is no room either for ineffable truths or for this Anscombian shadow of them within Wittgenstein's position, but unfortunately Wittgenstein himself did not see this. This seems to have been the response of Ramsey (1931), who is followed by Hacker (2000). It seems to us, however, that this must be a last resort: we should

first try to find an interpretation that does not attribute this kind of blindness to Wittgenstein.

4. Against the Not-All Nonsense View

As long as we remain in the grip of (A)—namely, the claim that the *Tractatus* has a truth-conferring function—a rejection of The Ineffable Truths View will only push us towards the Not-All-Nonsense View. We have already remarked on the tendency of some of those who hold something like The Not-All-Nonsense View to hold that it is characterized fundamentally by a certain conception of nonsense in the *Tractatus*. But just as it is a mistake to suppose that the defining mark of The Ineffable Truths View is that it gets Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense *wrong*, so it is a mistake to suppose that the defining mark of the Not-All-Nonsense View is that it gets Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense *right*. For as it turns out, The Not-All-Nonsense View can only find Wittgenstein's remarks on nonsense surprising. As we shall see, what is described as Wittgenstein's 'austere' conception of nonsense is, in fact, a conjunction of two claims, one of which The Not-All-Nonsense View can make no sense of at all.

So what, exactly, *is* Wittgenstein's austere conception of nonsense? Its first constituent thesis is one with which we are, by now, perfectly familiar: nonsense is *plain* nonsense; it is the *failure* to make sense, not the expression of a sense that is logically incoherent. And it is quite clear that the ascription of such a view to the author of the *Tractatus* is well motivated: the point of ascribing such a view to Wittgenstein is that it should neither 'chicken out' over the genuine nonsensicality of what is said to be nonsense, nor acknowledge the coherence of the idea of ineffable truths. This being so, any defensible interpretation of the text must, we think, agree with The Not-All-Nonsense View's insistence on this matter.

But if we look at the details of what Wittgenstein has to say about nonsense, we can discern a second constituent thesis: namely an explanation of *why* any sentence of plain nonsense is 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)

There is thus a single *reason* why sentences are nonsense, and this is that one or more of such sentences' sub-sentential signs have not been given a meaning. Clearly, this second element of Wittgenstein's view of nonsense is central to his own reflections on the nature of his project, since it determines the nature of his prescription for the only correct method of doing philosophy, namely that we should:

... say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and

always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. (TLP: 6.53)

Now, that the two elements of Wittgenstein's austerity about nonsense—his insistence that all nonsense is plain nonsense, and his explanation of how nonsense arises—are distinct should be obvious.¹⁶ But just to underline this fact, it will be useful to contrast Wittgenstein's position with that of Frege. For Frege, it seems to us, accepts the first of these elements but holds back from the second, as Wittgenstein himself says in *Tractatus* 5.4733. Motivated by a form of contextualism about meaning, Frege puts forward his famous 'context principle' (1967: §32), a principle which it is natural to gloss as follows:

(Con) There is no more to the meaning of a word than its contribution to the meanings of legitimately constructed propositions of which it can be a part.

(Con) gives a certain primacy to whole propositions, but, significantly, leaves room for the possibility of there being *illegitimately* constructed propositions: propositions that combine words, with the respective meanings they have elsewhere, in ways that disobey the rules of logical syntax. Significantly, however, Frege's admitting this possibility does not commit him to regarding such illegitimately constructed propositions as having any kind of meaning. Indeed, there exist thoroughly Fregean reasons for thinking that such propositions could have no meaning at all. For the Fregean will typically accept a kind of converse of the context principle, a principle of compositionality, that can be formulated like this:

(Com) There is no more to the meaning of a proposition than is determined by the meaning of its parts, together with their mode of combination.

Once both (Con) and (Com) are granted, it follows that those propositions that are illegitimate combinations of words have no meaning at all—that is, that they are plain nonsense. From which it follows, given the *prima facie* coherence of Frege's position, that we must distinguish the thesis that all nonsense is plain nonsense from the thesis that nonsense always results from having failed to give a meaning to one or more of one's signs. The properly Fregean position has it that nonsense can result from illegitimately combining words, with the meanings they have elsewhere, but that what results from such illegitimate combinations is not an incoherent representation, but a sentence that fails to represent at all: that is, a piece of plain nonsense.

Having distinguished the two distinct components of Wittgenstein's austere conception of nonsense, we can now press home our objection to The Not-All-Nonsense View. What is distinctive of The Not-All-Nonsense View is, of course, that it holds that some sentences of the work, which might be said to constitute the work's 'frame', are not nonsense. Now, if any part of the text could belong to

such a properly sense-possessing frame, then 6.53, and—by implication—5.4733 must do so. Consequently, The Not-All-Nonsense View must take such remarks, which outline the second element of Wittgenstein's austerity about nonsense, at face value. That is, The Not-All-Nonsense View must account for the fact that what Wittgenstein insists upon is not just that nonsense is plain nonsense—he and Frege seem to be agreed on that—but that plain nonsense can only arise from a constituent part having had no meaning assigned to it. But, as we shall now see, it is precisely this last claim that cannot be accounted for by The Not-All-Nonsense View. It simply does not have the resources to explain why it should matter to Wittgenstein that nonsense (i.e. plain nonsense) comes to be nonsense for the particular reason he provides.

One thing that *is* clear is that Wittgenstein takes Frege to take a somewhat weak-kneed attitude to his own context principle: a principle that Wittgenstein adopts, almost word for word, at *Tractatus* 3.3:

[O]nly in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.¹⁷

Whilst glossing this principle as (Con) is enough for most (at least) of Frege's purposes, and perhaps for all of ours,¹⁸ *Tractatus* 5.4733 sees Wittgenstein, in effect, criticizing Frege for being content with (Con), rather than with the strict and literal construal suggested by *Tractatus* 3.3: a construal that suggests, not just that a word's meaning is exhausted by its contribution to sentences in which it occurs, but that it can have no meaning unless it is combined with other names in a (meaningful) proposition (*TLP*: 3.14).

Why should Wittgenstein need this strict version of the principle, rather than the more natural, but looser, alternative? Wittgenstein's bold and iconoclastic choice here certainly stands in need of motivation: it is one thing to say that the meaning of a word is determined by its contribution to the meanings of sentences in which it may occur; it is quite another to deny that words have meanings when they do not occur in propositions. In our view, two such possible motivations exist, both of which stem from a general requirement of Wittgenstein's overarching theory of language: namely, that the form of a proposition must be the same as the form of the reality it depicts. First, since, according to Wittgenstein (*TLP*: 2011), it is unintelligible that an object should exist without being combined with other objects in an atomic fact, it ought to be similarly unintelligible that the linguistic representative of an object, a name, should be capable of existing without being combined with other names in a proposition (*TLP*: 2.0122). Second, the requirement of identity of form between a proposition and the reality it depicts brings with it a requirement that the possibilities of combination of a name with other names must correspond exactly with the possibilities of combination of the corresponding object with other objects. And this means that it is not possible for names to be illegitimately combined in propositions: that is, combined in ways that do not match possible combinations of objects.¹⁹ Either way, what is hard—perhaps, impossible—to understand is how there could be a reason for preferring the strict and literal context principle

to (Con), which did not derive from the *Tractatus's* general conception of language, with its attendant metaphysics.

But now things really do look bleak for The Not-All-Nonsense View. For the explanation just given of why Wittgenstein endorses his strict and literal context principle—and, hence, why he thinks that plain nonsense can only arise as the result of a failure to assign a meaning to a constituent sign—is simply unavailable to any interpretation that regards Wittgenstein as in no sense committing himself to the general account of language seemingly set out in the 2's and 3's. If the book is supposed to have a stable, final conclusion according to which these remarks are nonsensical, then, ironically enough, a style of reading that prides itself on treating austerity as its keystone is thereby prevented from explaining one of its constituent commitments. This commitment can only be explained if Wittgenstein is portrayed as adopting, albeit self-underminingly, the picture theory and its attendant metaphysics.

The point, then, is that The Not-All-Nonsense View, whilst providing a framework that promises to render the *Tractatus* consistent, fails to do justice to the book's *detail*. As such, the position staked out falls short of being a *reading-proper*: that is 'a persuasively developed account of what Wittgenstein was up to in the *Tractatus*' (Sullivan 2002: 71). And, further evidence of this deficiency emerges, if we turn our attention to 6.53: a section that is regarded by adherents to The Not-All-Nonsense View as indisputably a part of the frame and, as such, both *sinnvoll* and to be taken at face value. For what is immediately arresting about this passage is its claim that *all* attempts to say something philosophical end in the production of nonsense. Now this is a bold, general declaration that stands in need of motivation; it is certainly not the kind of claim that one could feel justified in making purely on the basis of having observed a good many philosophical disputes. Rather, what we have here is the kind of claim that needs to be supported by *argument*. But what could such an argument be?

If we adopted The Ineffable Truths View, we could suggest that the *Tractatus* aims to communicate something like the following kind of answer. Doing philosophy, as traditionally conceived, involves attempting to represent something that cannot be represented. This, The Ineffable Truths View might suggest, is because traditional philosophy always involves attempting to say how the world *must* be—attempting to state what Kant (1928) would count as synthetic a priori truths. But according to the *Tractatus*, the modal limits of the world—how the world *must*, *can*, or *cannot* be—are embodied in the logical *form* of the world, which is also the general form of the proposition. So doing traditional philosophy would involve attempting to produce propositions that described the general form of the proposition—what is common to the form of all propositions. But according to the *Tractatus*, no proposition could describe its own form, just as, in general, no picture can depict its own pictorial form.

But, once more, no such explanation is available to The Not-All-Nonsense View, which, to reiterate, denies that Wittgenstein commits himself to the general theory of language on which it depends. True enough, a commitment to this theory catapults the text into incoherence, but denying that the text expresses

such a commitment *at all* serves merely to render the generality of the claim of 6.53—that is, that *all* attempts to say something philosophical will end up producing nonsense—extravagant and unmotivated. Explaining the motivation for 6.53 requires us to see the text, not as plucking the thesis that philosophical utterances are nonsensical *out of the ether*, but as presenting it as following from its substantive semantic doctrines. And this can only mean that the text's essential incoherence must be acknowledged. Rather than viewing 6.53 as a part of the book's final conclusion, we must see it as a part of a text that is inescapably unstable and incoherent: that is to say, nonsensical, if true (and, if nonsensical, only nonsensical *because true*).

This might seem bad for The Not-All-Nonsense View, but in fact the situation is worse even than that. The claim of 6.53 is not just general: it is *modal* ('The right method of philosophy', Wittgenstein says, '*would* be this: To say nothing except what *can* be said . . . *would* be the only strictly correct method'²⁰). That is, it is to do with how the world *must*, *can*, or *cannot* be. As such, it is hard to see how it can avoid being a piece of philosophy itself: it will certainly be counted as philosophy by the traditional conception of philosophy it hopes to undermine. In that case, it will have to count itself as nonsense, in virtue of having failed to give meaning to some of the signs that are used here. And if this is right, then it, too, provides no insight and must be confined to the dustbin of philosophy.

In fact, it looks as if a form of the problem arises even if we ignore the modality involved in 6.53. After all, 6.53 identifies something as philosophy, and as metaphysics. But can we even *identify* something as philosophy or metaphysics without engaging in philosophy? For example, if we say that philosophy is concerned to say how the world *must*, or *can*, or *cannot* be, do we not have to entertain—even if only to reject—the intelligibility of the modality which is involved here? Merely entertaining or rejecting the intelligibility of this modality seems inevitably to be a form of philosophy.

All this looks disastrous for The Not-All-Nonsense View. It is not merely that parts of the supposedly sense-possessing 'frame' are hard to understand on this reading, or become rash and unmotivated generalizations. The problem is that there seems to be no isolable 'frame' at all: it is hard to see how there can be any part of the *Tractatus* that is not infected with the philosophy that it seems to undermine.²¹ This is evident enough in the modal commitments of 6.54 and 7:

(He *must* . . . throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
Whereof one *cannot* speak, thereof one *must* be silent.²²

And it arises from the only natural reading of the phrase 'my propositions' in 6.54. It is strained in the extreme to interpret the 'them' in the claim that 'he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless' as standing for just *some* of his propositions; but this is just how The Not-All-Nonsense View must interpret it. *Tractatus* 6.54 is presented as an *exceptionless* claim about Wittgenstein's propositions: in denying this, in claiming that Wittgenstein restricted the scope of 'my propositions' in *any* way, The Not-All-Nonsense View presents him as failing

to follow through the moral of 6.53. Furthermore, the disintegration of the text's supposed 'frame' even infects the Preface, where, again, we find claims that are unashamedly modal, together with an apparently unabashed commitment to the existence of a limit of thought and the outline of an account of how it *must* be delineated. In our view, these problems are so serious, and so fundamental to the point of The Not-All-Nonsense View, that this approach is simply a non-starter as a serious reading of the text.

The rejection of The Not-All-Nonsense View must make a significant difference to our conception of the problem with the *Tractatus*, which it is worth taking a moment to elaborate. The Not-All-Nonsense View encourages us to think that there might be a reason taken from outside the text—indeed, outside philosophy—for thinking that all attempts to say something philosophical will end up in the production of nonsense. It encourages us to think that the judgement that a philosophical proposition is nonsensical will be an empirical judgement about the history of one or more particular signs (Moore 2003: 186). But we have seen that the claim of 6.53 cannot be a judgement of this kind: it is utterly general (inasmuch it applies to *every* attempt to say something philosophical); it is modal (since it is concerned with what *can* be said); and it offers a particular reason why any attempt to say something philosophical must end up in nonsense (namely, that such attempts see us fail to give meaning to some of our signs). What this means is that we have to suppose that the reason for the claims made in 6.54 and 7 must lie within the text of the *Tractatus* itself.

This being so, we can diagnose exactly what the problem with the *Tractatus* really is. The problem is *not* that, according to the *Tractatus*, the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense; for the only reason for thinking that they are all nonsense is that some of them are *true*. Indeed, as the *Tractatus* presents them, these sentences are just as much true as they are nonsense: the text places them before the reader, incoherently, as both true *and* nonsense. The problem is not, then, that the *Tractatus* reaches a final, stable conclusion that its own sentences are nonsense; rather, the problem is that the work is just incoherent, and can reach no stable conclusion at all.

5. Introducing the No-Truths-At-All View

Let us return to the paradox of the *Tractatus*: if the *Tractatus* is true, then it is nonsense. The text is incoherent. Since assuming the text's purpose to consist in communicating truths serves merely to present us with a choice of two unsatisfactory ways of trying to undo the paradox, it is this assumption—assumption (A)—that should go. We should develop a No-Truths-At-All-View. Wittgenstein, so we think, self-consciously develops an argument that renders his text incoherent; but this is not an objection to what he is doing, since his aim consists in doing something *other* than communicating truths. Wittgenstein is not using the text to try to communicate a final conclusion to his readership, something that would require him to *iron out* the text's apparent incoherence.

Rather, if we are right, he knowingly produces an incoherent text—a text with no such final conclusion—for a decidedly non-alethic purpose. Two questions arise at this point. What is the nature of this purpose? And how is the *Tractatus* supposed to bring it off? The remainder of the present section is devoted to the first question. The second question will be tackled in §6.

With a view to answering our first question we must note, from the off, that the *Tractatus's* incoherence arises from the fact that it applies to itself. But the work is not mere *porridge*. If we put to one side its self-application, the text seems to present an intelligible—to some, perhaps, compelling—philosophy of language, with a corresponding metaphysics. We can thus divide the text into an otherwise coherent substantial philosophy, on the one hand, and the application of this philosophy to itself, on the other. Naturally, if we continue to accept (A), this division cannot help us decide what the purpose of the work is: now that we have rejected both The Ineffable Truths View and The Not-All-Nonsense View, the fact that the text is incoherent all too clearly undermines the idea that there can be any truths that Wittgenstein was trying to communicate.

But if we give up assumption (A), we can make some headway. Since we are not supposing that the point of the work is to communicate truths, we can set aside for the moment the fact that it applies to itself. We can then use the *otherwise* coherent substantial philosophy to be found in the text as a guide in looking for *something else* that the work might be aiming to achieve. That is, we can use the detail of the text to find something other than the communication of truths that the work might be hoping to bring about. Furthermore, whilst doing this, we can let our interpretation be guided by what Wittgenstein himself says elsewhere about the significance of the *Tractatus*. With this project in mind, there are two famous remarks of which we need to take particular account. One is something Wittgenstein wrote to Russell in 1919, in which he explains that the book's:

... main point is the theory of what can be expressed by prop[ositions]—i.e. by language—and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought* and what cannot be expressed by prop[ositions], but only shown: which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy. (1995: 124)

This hardly looks like an off-the-cuff comment; and a week's discussion of the *Tractatus* with Wittgenstein in 1919 seems to have confirmed in Russell the sense that (in Wittgenstein's view, at least) the saying/showing distinction was at the core of the work (Monk 1990: 182–3). We need somehow to give that distinction due prominence.

The other famous remark about the significance of the book is in a well known letter to Ludwig von Ficker, in which Wittgenstein says that:

... the book's point is ethical. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now, but which I will write out for you here, because it will be a key for you. What I meant to write then was this: my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one.

For the ethical gets its limit drawn from the inside, as it were, by my book; and I am convinced that this is the ONLY *rigorous* way of drawing that limit. In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it. (1979b: 94–5)

It is hard to resist linking this point with the previous one: when Wittgenstein talks of a *part* of the book which is not written, he is surely talking about *something* ‘which cannot be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown’.

Taking these remarks as a guide, we can return to the text of the *Tractatus*. There is a piece of clear evidence that Wittgenstein himself regarded the sentences of the *Tractatus* as merely a means to some other end—some end other than recognizing the truth of those sentences. It is to be found in the famous passage to which we referred at the outset:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) (*TLP*: 6.54)

And the obvious place to look for an end to which the sentences might serve merely as means is in the immediate sequel to that famous passage, where Wittgenstein voices a large positive ambition:

He [who understands me] must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. (6.54)

We suggest that the point of the *Tractatus* is not that its readers should have come to apprehend some set of truths, but that they should have come to ‘see the world rightly’. As we shall see in §6, the idea is that the *Tractatus*’s incoherence—the fact that it is nonsense, if true—reveals, not that we should take up some other philosophical position on the nature of representation, but that the doctrines of the *Tractatus* and, with these, philosophy itself, are self-undermining. The text is designed to bring us to adopt another perspective on life altogether; and this other perspective, we suggest, is the perspective of mysticism. It is this mystical perspective—not some set of truths—that the text is designed to get us to adopt.

Taking our cue from the remarks Wittgenstein made to Russell and von Ficker, we are looking for something which cannot be said, which is concerned with ethics, and which can be thought to be what matters most about the book. It is not absurd to suppose that there is something ethical in the value expressed in ‘rightly’ here: seeing the world rightly would be adopting the right ethical perspective on the world.

If we are thinking of a way of seeing the world that is involved with ethics, it is natural to recall this remark in the *Notebooks*:

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics. (Wittgenstein 1979a: 83);

a sentiment echoed in a passage in the *Tractatus*:

6.45 The contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni* is its contemplation as a limited whole.
The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling.

Furthermore, in the following remark, Wittgenstein makes it clear that it is mysticism that provides the link with 'what cannot be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown':

6.522 There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.

To make sense of this, we need to understand feeling the world *as* a limited whole as something different from feeling *that* it is a limited whole. As we ordinarily understand the phrase, this is entirely natural: ordinarily speaking, we may allow that feeling something *as F* involves a (possibly indefinite) number of feelings *that*, but we are likely to insist that feeling something *as F* is at least *prior* to all those (possibly indefinite) propositional elaborations. And in Wittgenstein's case—as long as we ignore its self-application, and treat the *Tractatus* as stating truths and presenting arguments—there is a more powerful reason for resisting any propositional paraphrase, when it comes to the particular case of feeling the world as *limited*.

This reason is that the *limits* here are what is necessary, what is possible, and what is impossible in the world. And the limits of the world in this sense—according to the conception of language presented in the *Tractatus*, with its accompanying metaphysics—are nothing but the form of the world, which is the same as the general form of the proposition, and so inevitably is something which no proposition can describe (*TLP*: 4.121). What someone sees when she sees the world as a limited whole is nothing but the *form* of the world in the world. She sees the world with, simultaneously, a sense of everything that is necessary, possible, and impossible about it. In the words of the *Notebooks*:

The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space. (Wittgenstein 1979a: 83)

The form of the world (or logical space) is precisely what cannot be expressed in language, but only shown, at least according to the general account of language presented in the *Tractatus*.

Our suggestion, then, is that the point of the *Tractatus* is to get us to adopt a mystical point of view.²³ The aim is to bring us to see the world rightly—which is to say, as a mystic sees it, as a limited whole, with its limits visible. This suggestion allows us to see the purpose of the *Tractatus* as at least overlapping

with the aims of philosophy, on a natural and traditional conception of philosophy, while still being clearly distinct from it. On that traditional conception of philosophy, it is the business of philosophy to state what Kant called synthetic a priori truths—which he took to be truths about how the world must, can, and cannot be. According to the metaphysics of the *Tractatus*, these, of course, would be truths about the form of the world; and, since the form of the world is nothing other than the general form of the proposition, there can, according to the *Tractatus*, be no such truths. So the business of the *Tractatus* is that of getting us to see something that escapes philosophy, because philosophy is always concerned to say something. This enables us to understand how the *Tractatus* might get us to see something ‘by being silent’, where philosophers have been ‘just gassing’.

The crucial difference is that while philosophy aims to produce thoughts and propositions—things that can be assessed for truth—mysticism involves having a certain kind of experience: a ‘feeling’. In ordinary talk, we might express this in terms of a difference between different kinds of grammatical construction involving the concept of knowledge: we might say that, whereas philosophy is concerned to provide knowledge *that*, mysticism provides us with knowledge *of an object*, acquaintance-knowledge. Of course, the point cannot be put so simply within the context of the *Tractatus*; that which mysticism brings us into closer ‘acquaintance’ with is nothing less than the world, and there are important reasons for hesitating to call this an ‘object’, if we are to remain sensitive to Tractarian concerns. First, an *object* is what stands at the world end (so to speak) of a relation of reference (with a name at the language end); and the relation between language and the world as a whole cannot be reference, within the *Tractatus*’s conception. Secondly (and correlatively), the world is, according to the *Tractatus* ‘the totality of facts’ (TLP: 1.1), rather than any kind of thing. But the difficulty of describing the difference between philosophy and mysticism coherently within the terms of the *Tractatus* should not surprise us: it is of a piece with the general difficulty of doing any philosophy within the terms of the *Tractatus* (and it seems to have the same source: namely the insistence that the form of language must be the same as the form of the reality it describes).

If we accept, at least as an intuitive characterization, the description of the difference between philosophy and mysticism as analogous to the difference between propositional and acquaintance knowledge, we can make a useful contrast between our interpretation and a different kind of No-Truths-At-All View. Some have suggested that the business of the *Tractatus* is to engender knowledge *how* rather than knowledge *that*.²⁴ This form of No-Truths-At-All View, like ours, would explain why it is that what the *Tractatus* provides is not something that can be *said*. But, unlike ours, it cannot explain how the *Tractatus* gets us to see what can be *shown*. The notion of showing seems inextricably linked with *experience*, rather than with the acquisition of an ability, and what the *Tractatus* claims that an understanding reader will do is not *act* rightly, but *see* the world rightly (TLP: 6.54).²⁵

6. The *Tractatus*: Incoherence in the Service of Mysticism

According to our No-Truths-At-All View, and in clear contrast to its competitor interpretations, the *Tractatus* has a purpose that survives the recognition that the text itself is incoherent. Indeed, the plausibility of our portrayal the book's aim stems directly from this recognition. Since the text is incoherent, and thus incapable of being a source of propositional knowledge, it makes better sense to take Wittgenstein's mystical remarks at face value, and treat his aim as that of bringing us into acquaintance with the limits of the world. This, we suggest, is the space that an understanding reader is supposed to *climb into* by way of the sentences of the *Tractatus*: a position in which no philosophy at all is done. It is distinct from the resting-place offered by The Ineffable Truths View—which is supposed to be a place, as it were, above the text where we can somehow engage in philosophy without actually expressing anything philosophical. And it is no less distinct from the resting-place offered by The Not-All-Nonsense View—which is found in a part of the text that is supposed to be both non-philosophical and capable of rejecting philosophy. The resting-place The No-Truths-At-All View finds for Wittgenstein is a *post*-philosophical one reached only after the text has been recognised as incoherent and then abandoned.

Crucially, however, our case for reading the *Tractatus* in this way is predicated upon our having *distanced ourselves* from the book's central, semantic doctrines. In our view, explaining the work's purpose requires us to do three things: point out that the central paradox of the text is unanswerable; present the *Tractatus* as describing a non-philosophical, mystical perspective, from which the world can be seen aright (i.e. as a limited whole); and portray the text as providing a reason for wanting to adopt such a perspective. Clearly, such a reading requires us to exploit the division between the substantial philosophy of the *Tractatus* and its application to itself, so that we may treat the text's sentences as both saying truth-apt things and expressing arguments. But it is just this that the *Tractatus*'s semantic theory rules out; for if this theory is correct, all philosophical discourse (including the attempt to state the motivating semantic theory itself) is senseless. The moral is evident: making sense of the book is contingent upon rejecting its analytical spine.

To our minds, however, achieving such a critical distance from the picture of language and the world presented by the *Tractatus* is no bad thing. We do not—we confess it—feel inclined to endorse such a picture. Specifically, we do not believe that the form of language is identical with the form of the world, or that the possibilities of combination of the only genuine names in a fully worked-out notation are identical with the possibilities of combination of the necessarily existent, simple objects that form the substance of the world. But having made this point, it should be equally clear that our distanced, interpretative perspective on the *Tractatus* can only explain Wittgenstein's motivation in writing the book by considering the text's own conception of the philosophical enterprise: a conception that presents the text's key doctrines as compulsory. One thing is for sure: the mystical perspective on the world that Wittgenstein would have us

adopt cannot itself provide a motivation either for its own adoption or for writing the *Tractatus*. The mystical existence so attractive to Wittgenstein involves no philosophical thinking whatsoever, and hence is deaf both to the incoherence of the *Tractatus* and to the subsequent need, felt within the text, to bring philosophy peace by replacing it with mysticism. What the *Tractatus* presents as the self-undermining nature of philosophy, and what it recommends as a cure for this intellectual vertigo, can only be conceived *within* philosophy and, as such, cannot be captured from the perspective *after* philosophy.

Consequently, if we are to shed light on the Tractarian motivation for wanting to adopt the mystical perspective on the world, and also explain how the text might plausibly be thought to fulfil its purpose by getting us to adopt that perspective, we must reconstruct the text's conception of the nature and limits of philosophy. The details of this reconstruction are not, of course, what *we* think is involved in doing philosophy; only what the *Tractatus* presents as involved. So let us now consider how this conception of philosophy might be described. Inevitably, what follows will be a sketch, perhaps even a caricature, of the *Tractatus* itself; but even sketches and caricatures can be revealing.

In reconstructing the Tractarian take on the nature of the philosophical enterprise, we start by asking ourselves how language is meaningful; that is, we ask how it is possible to describe the world at all. We reply (according to the *Tractatus*) by claiming language to be meaningful by virtue of some of our words being correlated with items in the world. But, we observe, for such correlations to be possible, the ways these words can combine with one another must match the ways in which the items in the world can combine with one another; in Wittgenstein's terms, the form of language must be the same as the form of reality. Unfortunately, this means that it is impossible to talk about the ways in which items of the world can combine with one another. Even more unfortunately, this also means that these last sentences cannot really have said anything. And nor can that one. Nor that. (And so on.) Once the philosophical theses laid out in the first half of the *Tractatus* are accepted, any attempt to engage in philosophy—even to the extent of saying that philosophical claims are nonsensical—has to be regarded as lacking sense.

What this shows is, by now, familiar: philosophy, as characterized in the *Tractatus*, is incoherent on its own terms. When fully worked out, the philosophical perspective embodied by the text cannot but regard its own claims as being both true and nonsense (including this last claim). To reiterate, however, it is incoherence, not nonsense, that is the problem facing the *Tractatus*. Given that the book has it that philosophical claims are only nonsense if certain particular claims of philosophy are *true*, it cannot come as a philosophical moral that its own claims are nonsense: such a 'conclusion' will have to be a *reductio* of the philosophical premises from which it is derived; and once these premises are abandoned, the conclusion will fall away as well. If it is not to provide a simple *reductio*, the conclusion that purported philosophical claims are nonsense can be no more final than the premises from which it is derived. If the text is taken on its own terms, the sentences of the *Tractatus* can be no more (and no less) nonsense than they are true.

What this shows is that one *can* escape from the self-undermining conclusion that purported philosophical claims are nonsense by taking this conclusion to be a simple *reductio* of the *Tractatus's* central tenets. And, to reiterate, we—*qua* interpreters who do not accept the said tenets—take just this line. But it is important to be clear about what adopting this position commits us to: namely, there being a way of continuing to do philosophy while rejecting one of the premises in the argument for the nonsensical status of philosophy. And a crucial point that we want to emphasise is that, in our view, Wittgenstein thought that was simply impossible.²⁶ We suggest that he thought that one could not do philosophy at all without accepting the legitimacy of such a question as ‘how is language meaningful?’; that one could not ask that question without finding the answer ‘in virtue of some of our words being correlated with items in the world’ irresistible; that this answer involves a commitment to the crucial thesis of identity of form between language and the world—and so on. That is to say, although *we* think that there is a way of doing philosophy without following this route down into nonsensicality, Wittgenstein himself did not. According to him, no attempt at philosophy can avoid self-immolation.

Consequently, it is our contention that Wittgenstein, whilst occupying the philosophical perspective outlined in *Tractatus*, is simultaneously aware of its incoherence and, as such, believes (albeit self-underminingly) that it should be abandoned. He cannot but hope that there is available a space within which these problems do not arise. Indeed, it is tempting to see in the *Tractatus* a conception of philosophy which Wittgenstein looks back on later, as something from which he has mercifully been released:

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping philosophy when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* into question. (Wittgenstein 1953: §133)

The crucial point is that, *in producing the Tractatus*, Wittgenstein set out to bring just such peace to philosophy, both for himself and for his readership. Given that the *Tractatus's* philosophical perspective can be aware of its own incoherence, then there is no reason to doubt that the text can describe—even if only self-underminingly—a better, post-philosophical, perspective. And we suggest that this is done precisely in the description of mysticism and the idea of ‘seeing the world rightly’.

We can see that philosophy as characterized by the *Tractatus* can provide a reason for wanting to abandon philosophy—that is, for wanting to abandon itself. It is also plausible that it will regard itself as the only perspective from which that reason could be seen. We have also seen, in the failure of The Not-All-Nonsense View, that it is hard to believe that any non-philosophical perspective could find a reason for thinking philosophy should be abandoned. And it seems that Wittgenstein himself thought that the only philosophical perspective was one that bound him into the self-undermining incoherence of the *Tractatus*.

Philosophy, according to him, cannot be coherently adopted, but it seems that it has to be adopted if we are to see why it would be better abandoned. And with this realization, it immediately becomes clear that once we abandon assumption (A), and thereby take the *Tractatus* to have a goal beyond philosophy, it is actually an *advantage* that philosophy is presented as self-undermining. If we hold onto assumption (A), the incoherence of philosophy is disastrous: Wittgenstein is represented as being concerned to present as true what he knows to be incoherent. If we abandon assumption (A), however, the incoherence of philosophy can *itself* be seen as a reason for wanting to move beyond philosophy to the non-philosophical goal which it is the real business of the *Tractatus* to promote.

But, equally, once (A) is given up, we cannot think that Wittgenstein's aim in writing the *Tractatus* is to *give us* a reason for abandoning philosophy, for giving us that reason would involve communicating the truth of the reason. His aim must be to get us actually to *abandon* philosophy. And one thing is clear: on Wittgenstein's view, we cannot abandon philosophy *for* the reason that it is incoherent. (Indeed, it seems to follow from this that there cannot be a reason for abandoning it: there can only be a reason for thinking it should be abandoned—that is, for thinking it would be better abandoned.) Even to be aware of the incoherence of philosophy—which is necessary for that to be a reason for thinking it should be abandoned—is to be engaged in philosophy; that is, to be occupying a space that is incoherent. What this means is that the *Tractatus* can only be conceived by Wittgenstein as working on its readership in a decidedly non-philosophical manner. Wittgenstein cannot hope to get us to adopt the much-desired *post*-philosophical perspective by *persuading* us to adopt it: as long as we are sensitive to an *argument* that philosophy is incoherent and should be abandoned, we are still trapped within philosophy, and unable to abandon it. If we are to be brought to abandon philosophy, some means other than argument will have to be used.

It is a peculiarity of our No-Truths-At-All View that it holds—indeed, *must* hold—that the *Tractatus* itself provides such a means. According to the other two approaches, the business of the *Tractatus* is finished when certain truths are communicated: certain ineffable philosophical truths, according to The Ineffable Truths View; the supposedly non-philosophical truth that attempts to say something philosophical end up in nonsense, according to The Not-All-Nonsense View. But according to our interpretation, the business of the *Tractatus* is to get us to see the world rightly: to see it as a limited whole, with the limits visible. We cannot be made to do that simply by argument, as we have just seen. But, if Wittgenstein is right, there *is*, nevertheless, a way in which the *Tractatus* could bring about such a mystical feeling in its readership.

We suggest that Wittgenstein seeks to directly confront us with the limits of the world by employing the strategy of describing these limits and then erasing the description. And it is striking how well this view of things coheres with the phenomenology of the kind of self-undermining move Wittgenstein engages in repeatedly throughout the *Tractatus*. Such a move can be found also when we

consider Frege's difficulty with the concept *horse*, from which much of Wittgenstein's conception of the nonsensicality of philosophy can be derived (Frege 1984: 182–94). Frege, like Wittgenstein after him, thought that the different grammar of different categories of expression was to be explained by differences in the things to which they refer. Singular terms refer to objects, which are complete or saturated. Predicates refer to (what Frege called) concepts, which are unsaturated, having within them space to be filled by objects, just as predicates have gaps to be filled by singular terms. This creates a puzzle when we try to say what predicates refer to. Intuitively, the predicate '*x* is a horse' refers to the concept *horse*, concerning which Frege will want to insist on the following:

(H) The concept *horse* is not an object.

Unfortunately, the grammar of the phrase 'the concept *horse*' is the grammar of a singular term; so if it refers to anything, it refers to an object. But that would make (H) false. We seem forced, then, to say that the phrase 'the concept *horse*' does not refer to anything, since no object has been assigned as its referent.²⁷ And consequently (H) has to be empty, plain nonsense. For all that, we are, supposedly, left with a feeling, now inexpressible, of a difference between concepts (in Frege's sense) and objects, and this feeling can inform our sense of the difference between singular terms and predicates: we seem to feel the incompleteness of the referents of predicates when we see how predicates differ from singular terms.

That, we suggest, is the true phenomenology of the recognition of the nonsensicality (on the Wittgensteinian view) of claims like (H), although it can be mistaken for a sense that there are some ineffable truths (including, perhaps, the truth *that* the concept *horse* is not an object). The crucial idea is just this: we are offered what seems to be a description of the character of the reality which underlies the grammar of our words, and this apparent description is then shown to be nonsensical, which leaves us just with a sense—now not supported by any description—of the character of reality. Indeed, this seems to be exactly what Wittgenstein is describing in his talk of the understanding reader as *climbing out*, or *on*, or *over* his propositions (*TLP*: 6.54). Once one has climbed through the sentences of the book, one finds oneself in a state—a place, if you like—that is beyond language.

We can now understand how, for Wittgenstein, the incoherent text that is the *Tractatus* is supposed to be elucidatory; that is, part of a means to an end beyond the recognition of any truth the sentences might have been thought to possess. The sentences of the *Tractatus* are supposed to lead one to a sense of the limits of the world, but not by giving us a reason to believe that the limits are thus and so. Their aim is not to *persuade* us that the limits of the world are a certain way—although they *may* do that, by providing arguments for a particular philosophical view. Rather, their purpose is actually to get us to feel the limits for ourselves. The basic mechanism is the one we have described. An apparent description of the form of the world is laid out, which is then followed by an argument that this

apparent description must, in fact, be nonsensical. Whilst the claims themselves supposedly wither away due to their own incoherence, we are then left, supposedly, with a feeling of the world's limits that amounts to an acquaintance with the bounds of sense.

This mechanism is complemented by the way in which Wittgenstein writes. Two features, in particular, are worth mentioning. First, there is what we might call a device of *delaying self-refutation*. What this involves is a certain studious care in the use of words which seems, for a moment, to avoid trying to do what cannot be done (for example, saying what cannot be said), but which nevertheless—as we can see quite quickly, on reflection—really does try to do what it seems not to. One example is the famous remark we have quoted already in §2:

For what the solipsist *means*, is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself. (5.62)

We suppose for a moment that we have caught what the solipsist means without thinking of something that cannot be said as if it could be said; but a little reflection shows us that the very idea of *what* is meant is also the idea of *what* can be said. Another example occurs in the Preface:

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking. Or rather—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).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense. (*TLP*: p. 27)

What we have here is the careful replacement of a form of words that seems to try to do something that cannot be done. But there is a double paradox in this replacement. First, the inappropriate form of words is left on the page: the words were not just omitted after the first draft; they sit there, self-underminingly, seeming to explain their own impossibility. And, secondly, the supposed improvement seems to be subject to the very fault that has been so carefully explained in connection with the first formulation. We think for a moment that we have avoided paradox, but on reflection we realize that we are no better off. The point of this *delay* of self-refutation, we suggest, is to give us time to achieve acquaintance with the world as a limited whole; and the sustaining of this acquaintance is the mystical outlook.

The other feature of Wittgenstein's style which tries to get us, just in itself, to feel the world as a limited whole is the most obvious and pervasive thing about the way the *Tractatus* is written. The book is written in short remarks—'aphorisms' is the wrong word—that seem to hang like droplets, with space around them. Wittgenstein seems to do as little as he possibly can to construct a continuous argumentative narrative, while still allowing the argument of the whole to be followed. There is nothing chatty here, no conversational engagement, no jokes (quite unlike the *Philosophical Investigations*). We are surely

meant to pause at the end of each remark, to dwell on it, to contemplate things. Our suggestion is that here again we are being made to engage in the mystical feeling of the world as a limited whole.

7. Replies to Objections

We think that The No-Truths-At-All View we have developed provides a compelling interpretation of the *Tractatus*, manifestly more satisfying than the two alternatives that are left to us if we accept assumption (A). But despite its evident exegetical attractiveness, The No-Truths-At-All View may nevertheless face certain scholarly objections. These will fall into two kinds: objections which arise from consideration of the text; and objections which arise from consideration of the larger historical context. We will consider three areas of difficulty for our interpretation, before returning finally to consider the status of the Preface to the *Tractatus*.

First, there is a question posed by the discussion of mathematics.²⁸ The No-Truths-At-All View might seem to be able to find a (self-undermining) place for the particular philosophy of *language* of the *Tractatus*: it is the (supposed) unavoidability of that philosophy of language, if one is doing philosophy at all, that makes philosophy in general incoherent. But why should Wittgenstein have bothered to develop a particular philosophy of *mathematics*? Why should *this* philosophical detail have mattered to him?

We can suggest two reasons. The first is that Wittgenstein is, on our account, concerned to claim—whilst doing philosophy, and even though the philosophy involved in such claims is self-undermining—that there can be no philosophical truths, i.e. no truths about how the world must, can, or cannot be. Given this, he has reason—insofar as philosophical reasons can be counted as reasons at all—to show that his general claim applies to every type of supposed philosophical truth. And then he has a double reason for showing that it applies to mathematics. First, mathematical truths were held by Kant to be the obvious cases—metaphysical truths would be the unobvious ones—of synthetic a priori truths; if we can see Wittgenstein as self-consciously concerned with the same issues as Kant, we can understand why he should be concerned to show that mathematical propositions, in particular, fail to state how the world must be. And, secondly, Wittgenstein's most immediate philosophical inspirations—Frege and Russell—were themselves centrally concerned with mathematics.

But there is also a second reason for Wittgenstein to attend to mathematics, according to The No-Truths-At-All View. His overall concern is to provide us with an experience of the limits of the world—or at least, to enable us to experience the limits of the world when we engage in ordinary non-philosophical activity and discussion. If mathematical propositions show us the form of reality—rather than saying how the world must be—then it is a legitimate concern of the *Tractatus* to enable us to experience the form of reality when we read them.

The second place where our interpretation might seem open to objection is over its treatment of mysticism. We have suggested that the mystical contemplation of the world is precisely what Wittgenstein has in mind when he talks of 'seeing the world rightly', and that his concern in the *Tractatus* is to encourage us to adopt a mystical attitude. However, at one point the text of the *Tractatus* might seem to tell against this. It might seem that the mystical attitude is not described in the way it ought to be, if it is what the No-Truths-At-All View takes him to be encouraging. Our view requires mysticism to involve an experience of (what we may call) an *object* (the world), and not a recognition *that* something is the case. But, in apparent contravention of this picture, Wittgenstein says this:

6.44 Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.

And this, at first glance, seems to present the mystical as a collection of supposedly ineffable truths and, hence, would seem to involve lumping mysticism, along with philosophy, among the things which cannot be engaged in without producing nonsense.²⁹

Ultimately, however, this objection is not compelling. We accept that mysticism is here presented as involving a recognition *that* something is the case, but deny that this undermines our interpretation. The problem arises, according to our presentation of Wittgenstein's view, not from the character of *mysticism itself*, but from the difficulty of *describing it philosophically* (which is the only way of describing it). The *that* which is said to be the mystical is *that there is a world at all*: that is, that there are objects, the necessary existents which constitute the substance of the world, its form and its content (*TLP*: 2.025). The reason why Wittgenstein wants at least to entertain the idea that there is a *that* to be recognized here can be seen from this parallel passage in the *Notebooks*:

Aesthetically, the miracle [Wunder] is that the world exists. (Wittgenstein 1979a: 86)

We need to treat the existence of the world as a *that*—in effect, to treat the world as something which might not have existed at all—in order to make philosophically intelligible the delight with which the artist (that happy man) views the world. To make the artist's delight philosophically intelligible, we have to present it as rational; and to present it as rational, we have to present it as a rational response to a certain fact, a *that*. Our suggestion is that this is the reason for the formulation of 6.44: it is not (according to Wittgenstein) that mysticism itself involves treating the existence of the world as a fact, but that trying to make it philosophically intelligible requires that. Given that there is no such fact as that the world exists, the conclusion (according to Wittgenstein, on our interpretation) is not that mysticism involves producing nonsensical propositions, but that it cannot be made rationally intelligible.

Our description of the *Tractatus* as being fundamentally concerned to lead us into mysticism is open also to a historical objection. Wittgenstein's project seems

to have arisen initially from certain worries about Frege's and Russell's treatment of logic, and his central aim seems originally to have been to make sense of logic without supposing that logical connectives function like names.³⁰ His interest in ethics, aesthetics, and mysticism seems only to have arisen later, in the light of his experiences in the war. It might be thought that by taking mysticism to be central to the *Tractatus* we are misrepresenting the work's true inspiration.³¹

But if we are misrepresenting what is central to the work, then so did Wittgenstein himself. There is no more difficulty in seeing the work as advocating a form of mysticism than there is in seeing it as having an ethical point: ethics is just as (we think: exactly as) distant from the work's original logical inspiration as mysticism is. The truth is that there was a transformation in Wittgenstein's thought, which led him to see that his early thoughts on logic had a larger and more general significance. Thus he says, in a passage in the *Notebooks* where ethics is his central concern:

[Yes, m]y work has extended from the foundations of logic to the nature of the world. (Wittgenstein 1979a: 79)³²

There is room for doubt about the extent to which this later and larger conception of the central point of the book was worked into the detail of material on logic and language, but if this creates a difficulty, it is a difficulty for Wittgenstein, and not for The No-Truths-At-All View.

The third kind of problem for our interpretation is simply historical. How can we account for the fact that, in his later discussions of the *Tractatus*—that is, in the period *after* he apparently decided that philosophy was self-undermining, but *before* he changed his whole approach to philosophy—he still seems to have taken philosophical problems seriously, and to have argued over philosophical points with as much earnestness and concern for rigour as any analytic philosopher?³³ Surely, he should just have abstained from philosophy altogether?

This worry depends upon a misunderstanding of our view. Our view is that Wittgenstein held—self-defeatingly, of course—that it is impossible to do philosophy without ending up in incoherence. This, we suggest, is taken to be a reason for wanting to abandon philosophy and adopt a mystical view of the world, even if philosophy cannot be abandoned, and the mystical view adopted, *for* that reason. For this purpose, Wittgenstein needs it really—albeit incoherently—to be impossible to do philosophy without ending up in incoherence; and for that purpose, he needs to address, with all possible rigour and seriousness, any considerations (apart from this central incoherence) which seem to undermine his arguments for the incoherence of philosophy.

The No-Truths-At-All View has one final and obvious objection to meet. We claim that the aim of the *Tractatus* is not to communicate truths, but to lead us into a mystical contemplation of the world. But, as we noted at the outset, Wittgenstein himself claims in the Preface that 'the truth of the thoughts communicated' is unassailable and definitive: how can our interpretation be reconciled with that claim?

The first thing to be said is that we should not take too innocent an attitude to the Preface. The Preface is itself part of the text: we have already noted that it itself uses a tactic to be found elsewhere in the *Tractatus*—apparently avoiding talking nonsense by adopting a careful circumlocution which itself must be counted nonsensical, after further reflection. And the Preface claims that ‘thoughts are expressed’ in the book, which seems exactly what is denied by 6.54.

For all that, it is a preface. What it says may be undermined by the rest of the book, but it will be read before the main body of the book, and it can therefore hardly be expected to declare that it itself, like the book to which it is a preface, is nonsense. And there is still a kind of sense in which we can say that the truth of the propositions of the *Tractatus* is, in Wittgenstein’s eyes, unassailable and definitive: he holds that the philosophy of the *Tractatus* cannot be undermined *except* by means of the incoherence which brings all philosophy tumbling down. And this is something which is accepted by The No-Truths-At-All View: whilst the propositions of the *Tractatus* may be unassailable and definitive in this way, they are still incoherent. And this can only mean, according to Wittgenstein, that his text cannot be in the business of communicating truths.

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NOTES

¹ Wittgenstein 1922: p. 29. Peter Sullivan (2002: 52) reveals a lively sense of the grandness of the claims made here. ‘TLP’ is used in references to the *Tractatus*, with the following numerals referring to the numbered remarks of the text, unless they are preceded by ‘p’ (when we refer to the Preface, for example).

² Unless we specify otherwise, we use the Ogden translation. As Ian Proops (2001: 399) has pointed out, it counts as a primary text because Wittgenstein himself gave it his approval.

³ Hacker 1986 is a prominent exponent of this kind of approach.

⁴ ‘That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (the language which I understand) mean the limits of *my* world’ (TLP: 5.62).

⁵ Geach (1977) is sometimes taken as a precursor of views which are hostile to the idea of ineffable truths, but some of his remarks suggest precisely the view described in the text. For example, he supposes, nonsensical sentences ‘may nevertheless succeed in conveying insights’ (Geach 1977: 69).

⁶ The term derives from Cora Diamond (1991), whose approach has some affinities with The Not-All-Nonsense View; it is also adopted by several other people, e.g., James Conant 2000: 216, Michael Kremer 2001, and A. W. Moore 2003.

⁷ The idea of philosophy as therapy is most famously found, of course, in Wittgenstein 1953 §133; and it is likely to be characteristic of The Not-All-Nonsense View to see a strong continuity between the early and the late Wittgenstein (and to see this therapeutic ambition as central to the later work). Note, however, that the conception of philosophy as therapy arises here simply as part of a particular response to the apparent paradox of the *Tractatus*. It is not the defining feature of The Not-All-Nonsense View (so The Not-All-Nonsense View is not simply to be identified with what Marie McGinn (1999) calls a 'therapeutic reading').

⁸ Conant 2000 offers an account of the point of the *Tractatus* in this spirit.

⁹ 'Traditional' interpretations are supposed to include those of Anscombe 1971 and Hacker 1986 and 2000; 'resolute' interpretations are supposed to include those of Diamond 1991, Conant 1989 and 2000, Goldfarb 1997, and Kremer 2001. The term 'resolute' was coined by Goldfarb 1997; it is used in contrast with the 'chickening out' of which Diamond accuses those she opposes (Diamond 1991: 181).

¹⁰ Problems over the distinction between 'resolute' and 'traditional' interpretations, as it is found in the literature, are raised by, for example, Proops 2001 and Sullivan 2002. Moore 2003 suggests that there may not be as much between them as is generally assumed; the appearance of less difference between the 'resolute' and the 'traditional' readings than there is between The Ineffable Truths View and Not-All-Nonsense View is due, we suggest, to the fact that the 'resolute' and 'traditional' readings are not simply defined by their attitude to the paradox of the *Tractatus*.

¹¹ Crucially, and as we shall see in §4, this is not the only thing that is meant by 'austere' in this context; and resolute readers are apt to conflate the things meant by the term in a way that makes their reading of the text seem more plausible than it really is.

¹² This way of putting it is due to Sullivan 2003: 45, though he distances himself from the resolutist camp, remaining sceptical that anything deserving the title of 'resolute reading' yet exists (2003: 44).

¹³ Our characterization also has the advantage of being evaluatively neutral. The choice of the value-laden term 'resolute' to characterize one side of an of an opposing pair of interpretations has encouraged an unscholarly forming of gangs: it is as if we had decided to call our interpretation 'The Correct View', or 'The Noble Reading'.

¹⁴ Thus there is no evident space for McGinn's 1999 third 'elucidatory' reading *as a response to the apparent paradox of the Tractatus*. McGinn only seems to find space for such a reading because the other two readings she identifies are not understood as ways of dealing with that apparent paradox: instead, she conceives of them as 'metaphysical' and 'therapeutic'.

¹⁵ Our argument here is an amplification of the argument to be found at Sullivan 2003: 198.

¹⁶ Though it seems not to be obvious to both Conant and Diamond. Conant conflates the two elements when he takes 'mere' (i.e. plain) nonsense to be 'a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which has no discernible logical syntax' (2000: 191); whilst Diamond makes essentially the same mistake when she claims that plain nonsense 'merely contains a word to which ... no meaning has been given' (1991: 197).

¹⁷ See also 3.314. The formulation at *TLP* 3.3 echoes Frege 1980: 73. Conant 2000: 181 also traces Wittgenstein's point back to Frege's context principle.

¹⁸ And also, we think, for those of the later Wittgenstein. As Hacker (2000: 367) notes, Wittgenstein 2005: 425 contains an explicit endorsement of the idea of transgressing grammatical rules.

¹⁹ This would be allowing it to be possible to present in language something which 'contradicts logic': see *TLP*: 3.32.

²⁰ The emphasis here is ours.

²¹ Kremer 2001: 57–8 shows an uneasy awareness of this point, without seeming quite to realize that it undermines a large part of his interpretative approach.

²² We have added emphasis.

²³ This is in line with what Russell wrote to Ottoline Morrell in December 1919: 'I had felt in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk' (Monk 1997: 568).

²⁴ Thus Kremer 2001: 62; Kremer thinks the know-how in question is knowing how to live. Moore 2003 holds that knowledge how is sometimes ineffable, but takes the *Tractatus* to be concerned to engender a kind of *understanding* which is not precisely a form of knowledge how, but brings with it the ability to detect 'transcendental twaddle'. It is not easy to see how Moore's version gives the book an 'ethical point'.

²⁵ In this context, it is worth noting that Pears's and McGuinness's translation in Wittgenstein 1961 of 6.45 'To view the world sub specie aeterni . . .' is superior to Ogden's 'The contemplation of the world sub specie aeterni' in suggesting experience, rather than theory.

²⁶ At the time of the *Tractatus*, at least: it is arguable that the *Philosophical Investigations* offers us a way of doing philosophy which does not require us to follow this path.

²⁷ Frege himself did not actually take this route; we claim merely that he should have (though it would not have helped).

²⁸ Michael Potter made this point to us.

²⁹ Richard Gaskin made this point to us. Kremer 2001: 56 also supposes that mysticism involves trying to say what cannot be said. And Hacker 2000: 374 breezily asserts that '[i]t is characteristic of mystics to claim that there are ineffable truths'.

³⁰ See *TLP* 4.0312: 'My fundamental idea is that the "Logical constants" are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts'.

³¹ Michael Beaney raised this worry.

³² Note that Anscombe does not translate the 'Yes' ('Ja') here.

³³ We have in mind in particular Wittgenstein 1929 and the earlier parts of Wittgenstein 1980. Similar points apply to some parts of Waismann 1979. The worry here was raised by Roger White.

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