Why does resoluteness matter to philosophy?

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1. The collection of papers discussed in this issue of *Iride* is called *Rileggere Wittgenstein* – not *Rileggere the Tractatus*, or *Rileggere the early Wittgenstein*. In fact, a central theme of the collection is precisely the rejection of the idea that all that is at stake in the debate over so-called ‘resolute’ readings is, in Conant’s words, ‘the relatively parochial question concerning the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work during a single, relatively early phase of his philosophical development’ (Why Worry, p. 167). Both Conant and Diamond emphasize that, properly thought through, a resolute reading of the *Tractatus* will undermine many established views of what Wittgenstein is doing in his later works as well, and lead to a deeper and more adequate understanding of what the continuities and discontinuities between his early and late philosophies are.

   However, from the perspective of someone whose area of specialization is not Wittgenstein’s philosophy, the significance of the resolute program may continue to appear quite limited, even granted that it provides the best framework for an adequate understanding of Wittgenstein’s whole corpus. After all, it may seem, what is at stake is only the relatively parochial question concerning the proper interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work, early *and* late.
Indeed, such an outsider may feel that since resolute readings ascribe to Wittgenstein such seemingly idiosyncratic views of the aims and methods of philosophy, the exegetical adequacy of such readings would show just how parochial and insignificant Wittgenstein exegesis is to the wider philosophical community. Conant and Diamond may be right that Wittgenstein held these views, but – the argument goes – so much the worse for his relevance to contemporary philosophical research.

In the debate among Wittgenstein interpreters, critics of the resolute program tend to express a similar concern, suggesting that it is a corollary of resolute readings that Wittgenstein’s thought is philosophically insignificant and impotent. As Peter Hacker puts it: in contrast to “[a]ll the great debates about Wittgenstein’s philosophy over the last fifty years” – debates that “one need not have been a follower of Wittgenstein to have been justified in attending to […] and to have hoped to learn from” – the “New American Wittgenstein […] will not alter the way non-Wittgensteinian philosophers pursue their work – nor need it do so” (Hacker 2003: 2).

My aim in what follows is to respond to this allegation. Indeed, I shall defend the opposite view: If one wants a Wittgenstein that is not parochial but can engage with and be of importance to the philosophical struggle of present-day ‘non-Wittgensteinian’ outsiders, resolute readings is a much better option than ‘traditionalist’ readings such as Hacker’s.

2. “[Stanley Cavell’s] writings,” says Conant, “have remained, to this day, the single most lasting influence on me as a reader of Wittgenstein” (Conant 2001: 102). And Diamond recalls that reading Cavell’s ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’ was what persuaded her to begin really studying and thinking about Wittgenstein’s work (Diamond 2001, 108). These statements are by themselves clear indications that Conant’s and
Diamond’s interest in Wittgenstein was never restricted to the interpretation of his early philosophy. After all, Cavell has written virtually nothing of substance on the *Tractatus*, let alone provided anything like a resolute reading of that work. However, I think Cavell’s influence on Conant and Diamond suggests not only that a resolute reading of the *Tractatus* is meant to be relevant to the interpretation of the later works, but that the significance of the resolute program is meant to go beyond any merely exegetical interest in Wittgenstein’s work, early and late. In Cavell’s work we can find a key to an understanding of how resoluteness is meant to help us see the wider philosophical importance of Wittgenstein’s thought as a whole.

I shall focus here on one central strand in Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein, which I take to be of crucial importance to both Conant and Diamond. To get that strand and its significance into proper view, let us first consider an observation often made by Conant and Diamond – namely, that any sign can have various intelligible uses, and that a sign can be given a new meaningful employment even without prior stipulation. This observation plays a central role in their defense of resoluteness, and in their repudiation of the idea that Wittgenstein ever believed that there could be pre-established rules or principles or criteria by means of which the nonsensicality of particular sentences or utterances can be demonstrated (see Criss-Cross, p. 202ff.).

Cavell’s significance emerges if we consider a natural objection that a non-resolute reader may want to raise in response to this aspect of Conant’s and Diamond’s defense of resoluteness. The objection is that Conant and Diamond can assign such importance to the possibility of linguistic variation and innovation only because they tacitly rely on an untenable, Humpty-Dumpty-like and clearly non-Wittgensteinian conception of what it is to give a new meaning to a sign. In particular, such a non-resolute reader argues, Conant and Diamond fail to keep clearly in mind two Wittgensteinian insights, namely, (i) that to give a
sign a new meaning is always already a linguistic affair, and (ii) that the possibility of linguistic innovation is therefore by necessity parasitic on the linguistic resources that are available before the innovation is made. Once these insights are kept in mind (the objection continues), it should be clear that our established linguistic practices do delimit the space of intelligible linguistic innovation, and that we can therefore from this standard employment elicit the rules or principles that are needed to show that certain philosophical utterances transgress the bounds of sense and constitute empty misuses of language.

The non-resolute reader who raises this objection may well admit that the possibility of linguistic innovation is always present in established usage, and even that such innovations may sometimes be intelligible without prior stipulation (in cases where contextual clues provide the information necessary to understand what the speaker is trying to convey). What he is claiming is that any linguistic innovation owes whatever intelligibility it has to old patterns of use, and that the space of linguistic creativity is therefore determined by the non-innovative, routine soil from which the innovation must grow. And from this he goes on to conclude that there is such a thing as demonstrably nonsensical misuses of language – uses of words that we can see fall outside the limits of intelligible innovation thus drawn by the grammar of ordinary language.

Now, a central theme in Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein is that the sort of reasoning just rehearsed is invalid, since it relies on a false dichotomy. More precisely, this reasoning presupposes the idea that linguistic innovation must be conceived either (1) as dependent on established usage in such a way that this established usage allows us to draw the limits of intelligible innovation before particular innovations have actually been made and put to use in concrete circumstances, or (2) as completely independent of established usage, in such a way that the intelligibility of an innovation might have nothing at all to do with how language has
been used before, being the product instead of some mysterious, non-linguistic meaning-giving act of the speaker. Given this dichotomy, once the problems with of the second conception are perceived, the first conception seems like the only remaining alternative. It is one of Cavell’s greatest contributions to philosophy to have made it clear that this conclusion is premature, since the dichotomy itself is spurious. In fact, the space of linguistic innovation can both be dependent on, and yet not circumscribed beforehand by, established patterns of use.

More precisely, Cavell (and Cavell’s Wittgenstein) holds that any living language is inherently dynamic in a way that undermines the very idea that the nonsensicality of deviant utterances can be ‘demonstrated’. We constantly develop the use of words in imaginative and unpredictable ways, without prior stipulation. To use Cavell’s most famous example, we learn to employ the word ‘feed’ in contexts such as ‘feed the dog’ and ‘feed the baby’, and then one day we start saying things like ‘feed the meter’, ‘feed in the film’ and ‘feed his pride’. It is of no explanatory value to say that such ‘projections’ of the word ‘feed’ are meaningful because they are ‘within’ previously established ‘bounds of sense’. If anything, they appear to transgress previously established patterns of use, in ways that could not be predicted beforehand. Rather than a matter of obedience to established conditions of application, their meaningfulness is a matter of our shared imaginative capacities and reactions: As we go along, we spontaneously see and agree on how these expressions can be given a use in our life with language, as the same time as they serve to expand and enrich that life.

Still, it is clear that such projections depend on previous, established usage. The intelligibility of ‘feed the meter’ is not a matter of some free-wheeling, non-linguistic meaning-giving act – ‘feed the meter’ would not mean what it means unless ‘feed’ were also used in constructions such as ‘feed the baby’ and ‘feed the dog’. So, the creativity exemplified
here is not a non-linguistic, Humpty-Dumpty sort of creativity, but a development within an inherited and shared practice.¹

This point directly undermines the force of what Cavell calls *direct* criticisms, or *flat* repudiations, of philosophical positions and confusions – that is, charges to the effect that philosophical confusion arises when words are employed in ways than transgress the bounds of sense, as those bounds are allegedly laid down by established usage. What Cavell’s point shows is that the allegedly confused philosopher at whom such a charge is directed can rightly reply that even if his use of, say, ‘know’, or ‘good’, or ‘real’, is not fully in line with standard usage, this deviance is by itself no threat against the meaningfulness of his claims – just as the deviance of ‘feed his pride’ in no way shows that *that* expression is nonsense. After all, any truly tempting philosophical use of a contentious word – say, Descartes’ use of ‘know’ in his *Meditations* – is spontaneously perceived by most people, from philosophically interested kids to university professors, as perfectly intelligible. And a flat repudiation does *nothing* to show that this spontaneous perception is false and that the philosopher’s use is in fact a nonsensical misuse, rather than a creative projection that leads to new and interesting insights.

Cavell’s Wittgenstein is one who clearly sees that flat repudiations of philosophical confusion are useless, and conceives this uselessness as a direct consequence of the possibility of genuinely creative and unforeseeable yet not free-wheeling, Humpty-Dumpty forms of linguistic innovation. The same is true of Conant’s and Diamond’s Wittgenstein. An important difference is that Conant and Diamond finds (a variety of) this conception already in the *Tractatus*, where Cavell at least used to think of it as one of Wittgenstein’s later insights. But we should not let that difference hide from view the basic similarity between Cavell’s and Conant’s and Diamond’s Wittgenstein. For that similarity is the key to

¹ For an extensive discussion of Cavell’s conception of projection, see Gustafsson (forthcoming).
understanding why their readings provide us with a Wittgenstein that can still matter to philosophy. After all, no important philosopher today believes in flat repudiations – and this skepticism is well founded. Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be of genuine significance only to the extent that it consistently distances itself from such a hopeless methodology. And such distancing is precisely what a resolute reading aims to achieve.²

3. Consider now the following passage:

How can we investigate the bounds of sense? Only by examining the use of words. Nonsense is often generated when an expression is used contrary to the rules for its use. The expression in question may be an ordinary, non-technical expression, in which case the rules for its use can be elicited from its standard employment and received explanations of its meaning. Or it may be a technical term of art, in which case the rules for its use must be elicited from the theorist’s introduction of the term and the explanations he offers of its stipulated use. Both kinds of terms can be misused, and when they are, nonsense ensues […]. For either nothing has been stipulated as to what the term means in the aberrant context in question, or this form of words is actually excluded by a rule specifying […] that this is a form of words that has no use. (Bennett and Hacker 2003: 6)

This is taken from the introductory chapter of Maxwell Bennett’s and Peter Hacker’s 2003 book, Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience. The book is an attempt to eradicate

² Putnam has also been of considerable importance for Conant and Diamond with regard to this sort of point, but I cannot here go into details about Putnam’s significance.
conceptual confusions from contemporary neurophysiological science, taking as its point of
departure an allegedly Wittgensteinian conception of language and philosophical
methodology. The quoted passage is just one in a series of unusually frank statements of
precisely the sort of ideas from which Conant and Diamond aim to dissociate Wittgenstein.
Later in the book, when Bennett and Hacker start engaging in concrete philosophical work,
the repudiations they produce are consistently and openly ‘flat’.

It is instructive to reflect on the ease with which philosophers such as Paul Churchland
and Daniel Dennett are able to disarm Bennett’s and Hacker’s criticisms (Churchland 2005,
Dennett 2007). An important part of Churchland’s and Dennett’s responses consists precisely
in showing what a delimited and simpleminded conception of linguistic creativity Bennett and
Hacker are working with. Dennett reminds his readers of the extensive work on linguistic
deviance and linguistic development done by linguists over the last forty years – work that
clearly shows the hopelessness of the idea that standard usage is governed by rules that, once
‘elicited’, can be seen to ‘draw the bounds of sense’. Similar problems arise with respect to
the sort of conceptual hygiene that Bennett and Hacker propose, according to which the only
form of conceptual development and change that scientists should be allowed to engage in is
the introduction of technical terms by means of explicit stipulation. As Churchland and
Dennett both point out, if there is anything that philosophers of science have come to
understand clearly during the last sixty years, it is that such hygiene would stifle rather than
promote fruitful scientific creativity.

So, far from showing how Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be relevantly and forcefully
applied to contemporary problems, Bennett’s and Hacker’s book is likely to cause the
following reaction: If this is how Wittgenstein’s thought is supposed to matter to us today,
then its marginalization within mainstream contemporary philosophy is entirely deserved, and
we can leave the study of Wittgenstein’s corpus to antiquarian exegetes. And this reaction is well motivated, as far as it goes. But then, one should of course go on by asking: Is this really how Wittgenstein’s thought matters (or, rather, fails to matter) to philosophy?

4. It can be hard to see that there different and more forceful conception of Wittgenstein’s philosophy available. If we abandon the notion that the philosopher can distinguish sense from nonsense by patrolling the borders of intelligibility set by the rules of standard usage, then haven’t we made ourselves entirely defenseless against those who think they can safely just ignore ordinary language? Haven’t we then opened the floodgates to that mindless oversimplification and schematic artificiality that seem to arise as soon as philosophers lose their awareness of how thought is anchored in the complex realities of our common, inherited, real-life linguistic practice? Isn’t the consequence of resoluteness that philosophers and others are free to use words in whatever way they like, and that the attendance to everyday language that did characterize much of Wittgenstein’s philosophizing has no real force against such conceptual carelessness?

This sort of worry should be seen in the light of the spurious dichotomy regarding linguistic innovation mentioned earlier – to repeat, a dichotomy to the effect that such innovation must be conceived either (1) as dependent on established usage in such a way that this established usage allows us to draw the limits of intelligible innovation before particular innovations have actually been made and put to use in concrete circumstances, or (2) as completely independent of established usage, in such a way that the intelligibility of an innovation might have nothing at all to do with how language has been used before, being the product instead of some mysterious, non-linguistic meaning-giving act of the speaker. More precisely, the worry involves a closely related dichotomy regarding philosophical
methodology – namely, the idea that either (i) established usage are methodologically relevant because it allows us to elicit rules that draw the bounds of sense and by means of which we can therefore classify given utterances as meaningful or nonsensical, or (ii) reflection on established usage is completely inert, methodologically speaking, since philosophers and others are free to use linguistic expressions as they like and ordinary usage can in no way shed light on the question whether a given utterance makes sense.

I explained why a resolute reader rejects the first of these two dichotomies. I now want to end this paper by explaining briefly why such a reader also rejects the second. What is important here is to see how the two dichotomies are connected – why the second is a natural companion to the first. Being under the spell of the first dichotomy means being blind to the possibility of a sort of linguistic creativity exemplified by Cavellian projections – a sort of creativity which is not predetermined by and yet dependent on established linguistic practice. Becoming aware of the possibility of such creativity means becoming aware of how established linguistic practice may matter methodologically otherwise than by containing rules by means of which the nonsensicality of particular utterances can be demonstrated. Thus, suppose a philosopher uses, say, the word ‘know’ in a way that makes us suspect that he has failed to give it any determinate sense. As resolute readers, we are aware that in this situation it would be futile to argue that his use of ‘know’ is nonsense because it is not in accordance with how ‘know’ is normally employed – for he can rightly respond by pointing out that one can speak meaningfully without speaking in accordance with ordinary usage. However, this does not mean that it is futile to compare his employment of ‘know’ with how that word gets employed in various everyday contexts. For it may well be that such comparisons make him realize and acknowledge that he is unwittingly hovering between
various uses of ‘know’, and, thus, “that there is no particular use of [the word that he has] clearly in focus; that there is no way in which the sign is being meant” (Criss-Cross, p. 203).

Not that he has to realize and acknowledge this; and if he doesn’t, it remains an open question whether our failing to make sense of his words is due to our lack of conceptual imagination or to his lack of conceptual self-reflection. We can continue the dialogue by coming up with further comparisons in order to settle the issue, but there is no guarantee that a clear and agreed-upon result will ever be reached. What is important to recognize is that this lack of a guarantee does not mean that the approach is methodologically impotent. It just means that success is not certain beforehand – which is not by itself very worrisome, since success is virtually never guaranteed in any interesting branch of research.

I said at the beginning of this paper that if one wants a Wittgenstein that can engage with the philosophical struggle of present-day ‘non-Wittgensteinian’ outsiders, resolute readings is a much better option than ‘traditionalist’ readings such as Hacker’s. ‘Engage with’ are the key words here: on a resolute reading, what Wittgenstein requires of us is that we enter a dialogue with thinkers who we suspect are confused. Disentangling their confusions is possible only by being responsive to what they say in reaction to our grammatical reminders. By contrast, an approach based on the idea that there are rules by means of which nonsensicality can demonstrated will lead away from such engagement, and thereby make itself irrelevant to anyone who is genuinely puzzled by philosophical problems.

References


