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METAPHYSICS AND NONSENSE: ON CORA DIAMOND’S THE REALISTIC SPIRIT

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ive of the papers collected in Cora Diamond’s The Realistic Spirit concern early analytic philosophy, Frege and the early Wittgenstein in particular. This writing is dominated by two themes. First, Diamond shows herself to have a fascination with, or even an obsession about nonsense. I don’t mean a fascination with or an obsession about one or another particular piece of nonsense, as any fan of Lewis Carroll or (for that matter) the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus has, but rather with the issue of what nonsense is, how to characterize it. Second is the question of realism, as an ontological view ascribed to the early analytic philosophers. It is Diamond’s great contribution to have shown how a discussion of nonsense can illuminate issues of realism that looked intractable when approached in other ways.

One of her concerns with realism arises from the question of getting accurately the obviously large differences between early and later Wittgenstein — and this in service of getting accurately the continuities, too. The standard characterizations — that early Wittgenstein was a realist while later Wittgenstein was an anti-realist, or, that early Wittgenstein had a truth-conditionalist theory of meaning whereas later Wittgenstein a warranted assertibility view (or a “criticial semantics”) — are familiar enough from Dummett, Kripke, Pears, and so on to need little footnoting. Diamond is convinced (as am I) that this is a completely mislocation of those differences, indeed, that it gets everything wrong, that it “misses the philosophy of Wittgenstein,” in Rush Rhees’s priceless phrase. 3 The point is: it’s wrong on both sides, on the characterization of the philosophy of the Tractatus as realist and the characterization of the philosophy of Philosophical Investigations as anti-realist. Diamond sees that the mischaracterizations rest not on “blanders” but on the characterizer’s having bought into various sorts of philosophical myths which (on her view) are among those Wittgenstein is concerned to unmask, in both early and late work. Diamond’s challenging of the ascription of realism to the Tractatus is a part of showing how
Wittgenstein's early thought is aimed at undercutting such myths. Only once we see this can we see what truly changes between early and late, and what is behind his insistence, in both periods, that there are no questions and no theses in philosophy.

I. Frege and Nonsense

Diamond's walking horse — and no straw horse, this — is the notion that there is a type of nonsense, more important (or more interesting) than mere gibberish or random words strung together without any syntactic rhyme or reason, that comes about through "clash of category". Such sentences contain expressions that refer to various items, but the items are of sorts that do not cohere, do not stick together, and the result is nonsense. Thus, to use a Fregean example, "There exists Julius Caesar" is nonsense because it tries to put together a second level concept, denoted by "There exists," with an object, denoted by "Julius Caesar." Similarly, "is a horse is a mammal" is nonsense because it tries to put together a first-level concept with another first-level concept. In both cases, the nonsense is explained as the result of different logical sorts of entities having different "logical valences" (the phrase is Dummett's); in sentences that have sense, the words refer to entities whose logical valences allow a joining-together, whereas in nonsensical sentences, they don't. Or, to use another analogy concerning objects and concepts, objects have one type of velcro on them, concepts another; so that an object and a concept stick together, while two objects or two concepts, do not.

Once the Fregean category distinctions are introduced, this can seem to be the inevitable way of describing what goes wrong in sentences like my examples; Diamond calls it the "natural view" (RS, p. 95). What, then, does Diamond oppose to it? The differences don't look large at first: what she says is that in such cases we haven't given a meaning (reference) of the right sort to the expression. The natural view is that "is a horse is a mammal" makes perfect sense. It is the first three words do not mean an object. It agrees, too, that to cure the nonsense it would be enough to give those first three words an object meaning. If we now take "is a horse" to mean "Man-o-'War" then the sentence "is a horse is a mammal" makes perfect sense. On both views, if we do that, "is a horse" becomes ambiguous, since the expression does different work in "Plica is a horse," and in our sentence "is a horse is a mammal" takes our sentence as ambiguous, because "is a horse" is ambiguous in it. For, according to that view, the expression can either refer to the concept ordinarily meant by "is a horse," in which case the sentence is nonsense, or (given our new undertaking) the expression can refer to Man-o-'War, in which case the sentence states a truth about a certain animal. This is where Diamond differs. On her view, even though the ordinary uses of "is a horse" are as a predicate, the expression as it occurs in our nonsensical sentence does not refer to what it does in its ordinary predicative usage. Indeed, it makes no sense to think it does.

Diamond's argument rests on taking very seriously Frege's maxim, "Only in the context of a proposition does a word have meaning." Much ink has been splattered on the import of that maxim, but Diamond proposes a straightforward understanding of it: that we can see expressions as referring only in sentences; that any talk of their referring by themselves is parasitic on their role in particular sentences. From this, she infers that we cannot take "is a horse" to be a concept expression, to mean a concept, in our nonsensical sentence. Put this way, the conclusion is surprising, but curiously obvious. For so to take it is to make sense of the sentence when "is a horse" has predicative meaning, and that, of course, is precisely what we cannot do. As she variously puts it, it is to see the expression as a "working part" or "Logical Element" of the sentence, as something that can contribute to the way in which the whole sentence can be taken as meaningful. But there is no natural working part or Logical Element there that is predicative; there is no taking the expression as referring to a concept, in the way I am eliding the detailed considerations Diamond brings to bear here, in particular, some excellent remarks on how one locates argument places, and what they are argument places for, in trying to understand sentences. ) The upshot is that we cannot see a sentence like our nonsense sentence as composed of logical elements of the sort that the natural view takes it to be:

What has sense and reference is only expressions recognizable through function-argument decomposition as having a certain role in the context. (RS, p. 91)

This construal of the context principle suggests that the natural view implicitly takes there to be something that would be the combination of the entities in question, although that combination is, of course, ruled out. That is, there is a sense in which the view takes it that there is something (impossible) asserted in the sentence, since otherwise we cannot identify, as parts of the sentence, the expressions which have their putatively undeniable referents; but then it takes it that the sentence is nonsense, and hence nothing is asserted after all (cf. RS, p. 105). It is this idea that Wittgenstein criticizes in Philosophical Investigations §500, where he says, "When a sentence is called senseless it is not as it were its sense that is senseless." (Closely related is his remark in §374, "The great difficulty here is not to regard the matter as if there were something one couldn't do, "is a horse.")

The upshot of Diamond's reading of the context principle is that there is no independent purchase on the things we refer to except through the sentences in which the referring is done. Concepts, for example, are recognized as what the predicative parts of sentences refer to. It isn't that we have some way of recognizing them independently of this, and then of seeing that they have a certain logical property, or logical valence, or type of velcro. Thus Frege can say, "I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form
a thought or judgment; I come by the part of a thought by analyzing the thought." On this view, then, Frege's conception of ontology is judgment-based, not "entity"-based. This is not to say that Frege is not a realist; for what could be clearer than that Frege believed that all sorts of objects — among them imperceptible, causally inert ones like numbers — exist, and exist independently of our cognition? Rather, it is to say in what that realism consists, and in particular it is to deny that the ontological level can coherently be thought of as forming a ground of our judging. Diamond formulates what is being denied thus:

Among the kinds of things there are, are concepts and objects. That something — say, the number 4 — is an object, is why it is appropriate for a term for it to have the logical character of the object. What is in question is the logical structure of judgments. Indeed, that something is a concept is why it is appropriate for a term for it to have the logical character of a predicate.... Our linguistic expressions thus properly have a character which matches the independently fixed logical character of the things they stand for. The logical character of those things is prior, and belongs to them on their own; and we can in the use we fix for our signs get it right or wrong. (RS, p. 128)

That kind of realism is just what Diamond has Frege undercutting. (All this, then, from an examination of what nonsense is.)

Before proceeding, I would like to flag one facet of the argument that troubles me. Diamond talks about the "working parts" of a sentence, the Logical Elements, as being locatable only given the sentence as a whole. To use her favorite example, in "Smith has Parkinson's hat," "Parkinson's" is a working part, while in "Smith has Parkinson's disease," it is not. My concern is how the notion of working part, logical element, is to be characterized. Elsewhere she says "To fix the meaning of these Logical Elements is to fix their contribution to the sentences of which they are parts" (RS, p. 100); "a logical part of a sentence would be one on whose content the content of the whole depends in accordance with the general rules of the symbolism" (RS, p. 78). My worry is that these locations suggest the necessity, in this connection, of adopting a semantic stance towards language. We are envisioned as having to hand a body of rules telling how a sentence is determined as true or false in accordance with its structure, presumably along with basic semantic properties of its constituents. In this vein she speaks of "these kinds of general rules, one kind enabling us to break down whole sentences into elements... and another sort fixing the meanings of proper names, concept expressions and relational expressions of various sorts" (RS, p. 109).

The notion that our understanding of sentences is given by semantic rules seems to me deeply un-Fregean, on just the reading of Frege that Diamond is urging. First, the framing of semantic rules would require the ineliminable use of a truth predicate, in so far as such rules generalize over particular sentences. Such a use of a truth predicate, however, is ruled out on Frege's view by the odd and indefinable nature of truth. More directly connected with what I have been discussing, the notion that our understanding of sentences presupposes our having rules fixing the meanings of proper names, concept expressions, and so on, goes directly against Diamond's insistence that for Frege our only purchase on the objects and concepts we talk about is through our judgments. For such "fixings" of the meanings of expressions cannot be themselves judgments, on pain of regress (since we would need prior fixings to undergird our understanding of them); but then we must have a take on objects, concepts, etc., prior to their figuring in our judgments. This cannot be right.

Fortunately, Diamond's line of thought can be preserved without invoking a semantical stance. What is in question is the logical structure of judgments. Instead of this being based on semantic rules of composition, it can be seen as a matter of the applicability of logical laws and inference patterns. "Parkinson's" is a logical unit of "Smith has Parkinson's hat" since we may infer from this judgment that 3x (Smith has x & x is a hat & x is Parkinson's), while, of course, the analogous inference cannot be made from "Smith has Parkinson's disease." This emphasis, it seems to me, strengthens Diamond's argument for her strict reading of the context principle. It makes it clear that, for Frege, ontological distinctions rest on logical distinctions.

The emendation does not affect the lessons Diamond wishes to draw. Categorial distinctions are not properties we discover about an entity; to categorize is not to sort entities. Note that this doesn't mean that there is no sensical way of saying, e.g., that something is an object. For Frege there is a self-respecting first-level predicate that does this. It is, however, a predicate that is true of everything. The concept it means yields the truth whenever its argument place is filled, that is, whenever its argument place is filled with an object, which is the only way for its argument place to be filled. To say that to categorize is not to classify is in part to say that there is no judgment that "a concept is not an object." What then of sentences like "No concept is an object," or sentences containing expressions like the distinction between first and second order functions?" These must be judged nonsense; but, again, not because they attempt to put together items that can't be put together. Rather, it's that no suitable meaning has been given to their parts. What Diamond's view opposes is that these sentences, while nonsensical, somehow gesture at something that is going on, some inexpressible state of affairs or true but inexpressible thought. There is, of course, psychological imagery that accompanies these sentences. But nothing can be made of them logically. The imagery might be helpful, and to that extent these sentences are not devoid of usefulness. In Frege's case it's quite clear what help they are. Namely, they are exhortations to adopt an adequate concept-script: a begriffsschrift in which, as Diamond puts it, "the
distinctions in question come out clearly in a language which makes them systematically, by having expressions which make plain the logical character of what they stand for" (RS, p. 141). We have gotten the point of Frege’s elaborations when we frame our sentences using different variables, and allow different substitutions for those variables in the subject place and those in the predicate place of sentences. It is thus through Frege’s construction of his begriffschrift that the point can be seen in sentences about categorical distinctions, despite their nonsensicality.

II. The Tractatus

Diamond finds the views she ascribes to Frege also in the early Wittgenstein. In fact, far more explicit statements of them appear in the Tractatus than in Frege, for example in 5.473: “The sentence [. . .] is nonsensical because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination, and not because the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate,” and 5.4732, “We cannot give a sign a wrong sense.” Diamond even goes so far as to say Wittgenstein “owes” the view to Frege (RS, p. 91).

A short digression may be in order, to reflect on the relative influences of Frege and Russell on Wittgenstein, a question Diamond asks along the way (RS, p. 186). To be sure, the most important root of Wittgenstein lies in what is common to Frege and Russell, a universalist conception of logic: there is one logic that applies to everything and that is the framework of all rational discourse. That conception has as a consequence a type of logocentric predication (the term is Sheffer’s) — there is no stepping outside of logic. Both Frege and Russell recognize this, at least occasionally, but it is for Wittgenstein that logocentrism becomes central. Frege and Russell are also agreed as to how to understand the universal reach of logic. They take logical principles to be maximally general truths, which generalize over every thing and every property. Here Wittgenstein disagrees with both. Beyond this, however, there is a major difference between the two. For Russell, ontology is primary and grounds logic, as the ontological discussions in Principles of Mathematics make clear. For Frege (as Diamond reads him), ontology is not presupposed; as I said above, ontological distinctions rest on logical ones. It is Russell’s view that is subject to attack by Wittgenstein almost from the very beginning of Wittgenstein’s writing.

Wittgenstein’s pre-Tractarian writings show an intense involvement in the details of Russell’s philosophical logic, and in particular with the multiple-relation theory of judgment that Russell was trying to develop in 1910–1913. It is from this involvement with and criticism of Russell’s views at that time that the picture theory developed. In contrast, there is little sign of a deep engagement with Frege’s thought. What references to Frege there are almost solely concern fairly gross features of Frege’s logical theory, for example, that he takes sentences to be names. In Notes on Logic Wittgenstein uses the Russellian (and un-Fregean) terminology “Frege’s
WITTGENSTEIN’S TALK OF OBJECTS DOES NOT BESPEAK UNCERTAIN REALISM, BUT ALSO HOW THIS DENIAL OF REALISM DOES NOT INVOLVE AN ASRIPTION OF SOME TYPE OF
LINGUISTIC IDEALISM. SECOND, THROUGH HER TREATMENT OF FREGE, SHE HAS GIVEN A CASE IN WHICH WE CAN SEE WHAT IT COMES TO HAVE A RESOLUTE VIEW OF
NONSENSE. THAT IS, WE SEE WHAT GOES WRONG IN TREATING NONSENSE IRRESOLUTELY AND WHY IT IS THAT THE CATEGORIAL DISTINCTIONS CANNOT BE TALKED ABOUT WITH SENSE. THE POINT IS THAT WHEN WE SEE THAT, WE WILL NO LONGER BE ABLE TO THINK OF SUCH DISTINCTIONS AS THOUGH THEY WERE FEATURES OF REALITY. IN SHORT, WHAT WE HAVE IN DIAMOND’S FREGE IS A CONCRETE AND HENCE RATHER MORE TRANSPARENT CASE. THIS CAN ORIENT US AS WE TRY TO SEE WHAT A RESOLUTE READING OF THE FAR MORE ABSTRACT TRACTATUS WOULD COME TO.

The gap that has to be bridged, between the (relative) intelligibility of nonsense resolutely conceived in Frege and an application of these ideas to the Tractatus arises from the much greater extent of what is called nonsense in the latter. Frege’s considerations were limited to a few words, which purport to sort items into logical categories — “object,” “concept,” “function” — and only with certain uses of those words, namely, those in which we purport to formulate categorial distinctions. As Diamond says, Wittgenstein extends Frege’s accusation that we are confused about what a concept is to “the whole philosophical vocabulary” (RS, p. 184). Of course, Wittgenstein includes here not just the vocabulary of philosophical logic, but also that of ethics, aesthetics, and “the higher” generally. How these last are to be fitted in into a resolute reading of nonsense is not something on which I shall speculate, though, as there is enough work to do on the vocabulary of philosophical logic.

It may be useful to look at several examples within that vocabulary, for it seems to me that there are differences in how we can come to see that something is nonsense. There may be different rungs of the ladder that are to be climbed away, and there may be different things involved in wanting to talk of irresolute. Let us consider possibility, logical form, and the notion of an object.

In the 2’s of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein helps himself to talk of possible situations; his point, apparently, is that any conception of fact, of what is the case, requires as a backdrop a conception of what is not the case but might be. Irresolute readings of the Tractatus often rely on a refutation of possibility (e.g., it is central to both Hacker and Pears). Yet, I would claim, Wittgenstein does not countenance possibility in his ontology. For him, possibility would make the obtaining of a state of affairs a property of the combination of objects, whereas Wittgenstein is explicit that the combining of objects is the obtaining of the state of affairs. Wittgenstein’s talk of possible states of affairs in the 2’s is simply inconsistent with the conception of fact he is adumbrating. I would also suggest that this is intentional; that Wittgenstein was acutely aware of the difficulties that arise in talking of possibility ontologically (difficulties that beset Russell’s early ontological views in Principles of Mathematics). Thus, his talk of possible states of affairs in the 2’s is
transitional mode, to use Diamond’s term. What gets us to overcome it, to discard it, lies within it; we see that, following out the implications of the existence of reified possibilia, we land quickly in incoherence. It dissolves from inside, so to speak. Then, in 5.525 Wittgenstein says, “The ... possibility of a situation is not expressed by a proposition, but by an expres- sion in a proposition with sense.” So we see what the transitional vocabulary was meant to lead us to: an appreciation that our understanding of possibility is not ontologically based in some realm of the possible, but arises simply from our understanding of and our operating with the sensical sentences of our language.

Here, then, we have a reasonably intelligible case of throwing away the ladder in a resolute way. There seems little temptation, at least for me, to take the discarded realm of possible states of affairs as a feature of reality. Only one that we can’t talk about. Two aspects of the passage to nonsense are important in this. First, there is a destabilization done from inside, incoherence which shows up as we try to unfold the notion of possible state of affairs and place it alongside our notion of actual state of affairs. Second, the place we arrive at is a proper appreciation of the work of our language, that is, of ordinary propositions with sense. There is analogy here to the Fregean idea that the grains of salt we grant are just to help us arrive at the proper appreciation and use of the begriffsschrift.

The second example I shall consider is logical form. Wittgenstein is explicit that “Propositions cannot represent logical form” (4.121). Can we arrive at position where we have discarded his propositions about logical form, yet not feel that there is a feature of states of affairs and propositions, a feature that they have in common, but one we cannot represent? Here the matter is more difficult; but the situation is close enough to that of Frege and categorical distinctions. This is not surprising, since logical form, in the sense of the “way” objects are combined or names are combined, is Wittgenstein’s more general and more abstract analog of Frege’s fitting an object into the “empty” place of an unsaturated entity. Once we see that logical form is what we discern in a proposition over and above the names it contains, it is the contribution (if I may put it thus) to the sense of the proposition made by the juxtaposition of those names, then it obviously makes no sense at all to think one can see a name going proxy for that, or a complex of names representing that. In this way Diamond’s insight on how to think about nonsense enables us to overcome the transitional language in the right way. There is no hint of “features of reality” that we notice, would like to talk about, but find we cannot. All we are doing is noting that names have to be put together in one way or another in order to make sentences.

The third example is one that Diamond discusses at length: the term “object” in locations of the form “x is an object.” This is a case of a different sort. In the earlier examples, we could come to see that the sentences using the philosophical vocabulary are nonsense in a resolute way, because we could get rid of the idea that there’s something the sentence is “trying to say” but failing. We could eliminate that idea, and with it the idea that there are features of reality about which we just cannot talk, because we came to see that there could be no such trying, no trying to say such a thing. In the first case, the notion we thought we could use is inconsistent. In the rules of syntax, the words we try to use do not match up with the rules of syntax that allow us to make sense of sentences generally. To “try to say” the philosophical proposition is to make inconsistent demands on the rules of syntax. It is only a philosophically misguided impulse, of our stepping outside of thought to see what logical form is really, in itself, not as it appears in thought, that makes us think we can try. No such reason applies to the present case, as is evidenced by the difference on the point between Frege and Wittgenstein. This is not a case that Frege would judge to be nonsense, despite his view that attempts to state categorical distinctions are.

As Diamond makes clear, the crucial factor in this case is Wittgenstein’s view of the nature of the proposition. It is not, or not just, that we are confused about what an object is; rather, as she puts it, “We are confused about what saying something is” (RS, p. 184). At issue here is Wittgenstein’s contrastive view of meaning: for a sentence to have content requires a contrast between what would make the proposition true and what would make it false, and hence requires that there be conditions under which the proposition is true and under which it is false. If there is no such contrast, then there is no claim being made by the sentence; it lacks meaning. The application of this view of meaning to “A is an object” is immediate. We are talking about an attempted use of “A is an object” to state a precondition for the sensicality of sentences containing the name “A”; hence it is a precondition for its own sensicality. But then there is no contrast being presented; there is no way for this sentence to be false. Were it false, it would cease to be a meaningful sentence, cease to have a truth-value at all.

At this point we are in most danger of being irresolute. For “A is an object” looks perfectly all right until the contrastive view of meaning is brought to bear. Nothing could be more calculated to make us think that there is something that being an object is, but we are prevented from saying it because of a particular constraint on saying. The constraint looks extrinsic to the matter of objecthood.

Indeed, irresoluteness is unavoidable if we take the contrastive view of meaning as resting on the identification of meaning with configurations of objects. A proposition means such a configuration or a truth-function of such configurations, and since such configurations can each hold or not hold (and do so independently of any others), it follows that any sensical proposi- tion can be either true or false. Such a view bases the essentiality of contrast in the nature of what is meant. (This seems to be the view in Hacker and in Pears. It is also at the core of how Schlick and the Vienna Circle took the Tractatus. They identified meaning with the configurations of experiences that verify the sentence, and inferred that since configurations of experiences are all contingent, so too are sentences.) But this view requires
a stance external to language in order to frame it. The view then implies that we cannot speak, with sense, from this external stance, but the clear message is that it is features of reality which frame what we can speak of with sense.

However, on the interpretation we are pursuing, it should be clear, Wittgenstein’s contrastive view of meaning could not rest on the identification of meaning with configurations of objects, since that would invoke a full-blooded notion of possible states of affairs. Diamond does not mention configurations of objects in this connection. She speaks instead of features of “the body of sentences,” emphasizing the independence of the truth-valuedness of a sentence from other sentences. She urges, moreover, that the contrastivity of meaning is to be taken literally. To think otherwise, to think that there are claims that are necessary, like “A is an object,” is to take necessity as “fixed some particular way rather than some other,” and so not as truly necessary (RS, pp. 195-96). However, it seems to me that what she offers is not sufficient, since the features of the “body of sentences” she discusses do not yet yield the contrastive view. The problem remains. We come to see “A is an object” as nonsense through an application of the constraint that sense requires a contrast between the case if true and the case if false; but this application looks adventitious, and so leaves us with the sense that there is something that, as it turns out, we cannot say.

The question is whether we can come to a resolute understanding of the contrastive view of meaning. There are two aspects to this. First, we have to see the source of the view in terms that do not presuppose an external stance, a stance whose shadow would bespeak irresoluteness. Second, we have to be able to apply the understanding of the view of meaning to sentences such as “A is an object” in an intrinsic way, a way that makes clear that there is nothing being said here, and nothing being not quite said, either.

What I have called the contrastive view of meaning is what Wittgenstein calls in his early writings “the bipolarity of the proposition,” although the expression does not survive into the Tractatus. It is the idea that a proposition has two poles, true and false. Wittgenstein comes to it in the summer of 1913, and in the Notes on Logic, which dates from that autumn, bipolarity is the central topic. (Around that time Wittgenstein starts worrying about his dying before his work could see the light of day. It seems clear that he feels he has come onto something big.) Wittgenstein states the point variously.

To understand a proposition p it is not enough to know that p implies p is true but we must also know that not-p implies p is false. This shows the bipolarity of the proposition. (NL, p. 94)

What we know when we understand a proposition is this: we know what is the case if the proposition is true and what is the case if it is false. (NL, p. 98)

Every proposition is essentially true-false. To understand it we must
when used in philosophical propositions, and to show that it falls apart. The view is not that the Wittgenstein’s notion of object becomes so rich that it ceases to be expressible. Rather, if we try to follow out some of the logical implications of calling something an object, given where the notion is supposed to be fitting in the theory, then we will get nothing coherent. In other words, we are not meant to apply a general notion of nonsense. In fact, it is an important feature of the strategy that no step looks like “As a consequence of Wittgenstein’s theory of the proposition, it turns out this is nonsense.”

An example due to Ricketts might give some idea of how such a strategy can work. Consider Wittgenstein’s characterization “Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unsettled” (TLP, 2.0271). Once the notion of “changing” is scrutinized, it becomes clear that configurations don’t change — configurations of objects are what we express by what Quine calls eternal sentences. So when we think it through, we see that we have no relevant conception of altering, and hence no contrast between objects and configurations, however suggestive the idea seemed at first. Its suggestiveness, its ordinary use, is what pushes us along in the dialectic when we are trying to follow out the logical implications. If such a strategy can be pursued more generally, it would avoid the jumping from outer to inner characteristic of irresolute views. It would also help show how the transitional remarks move us, even though they are nonsense.

Incidentally, if this is the strategy Wittgenstein would want us to use, then the Tractatus is in fact an exemplar of what it deems the correct method in philosophy. Wittgenstein urges in 6.53: “Whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, . . . demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” On the view under discussion, this paragraph is not presenting a contrast to the method of the Tractatus but a suggestion as to how to read the text. Wittgenstein presents a theory, but that just shows we have not asked ourselves certain questions about it, which would lead us to follow out logical implications of it, and that would make it impolite.

Now, of course, this task has not been done. As a program for understanding the Tractatus I think it promising. It is, I believe, the only way of arriving at a convincing demonstration that the work can be read in a fully resolute way.

Even if we think of the program as executable, there are two further questions that might be pressed. The first is that of whether there is already irresoluteness, charring out in Wittgenstein’s use of “nonsense” as a term of criticism. It might be objected that this term of criticism is in place only when one has accepted the thoughts seemingly expressed in transitional language. The transitional language cannot be fully jettisoned, or we will lose the term of criticism. (After all, “nonsense” is not being used in the Tractatus in its ordinary sense.) Only once we get this metaphysical insight can we then agree with Wittgenstein that this or that use of the philosophical

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vocabulary is nonsense, illegitimate, cannot be said. In that case Diamond will have to retain some irresoluteness, at least to keep the term of criticism. I think this objection a good one. The lesson is that “nonsense” cannot really be a general term of criticism. As a general term of criticism, it would have to be legitimized by a theory of language, and Wittgenstein is incoherent. In fact, there is no such thing (“Logic must take care of itself”). If it is something shown but not said, we are in real danger of its being a “what” that is shown, depending on the features of reality that we cannot talk about but only exhibit. The way out of this morass is already been canvassed. Wittgenstein’s talk of nonsense is just shorthand for a process of reasoning to see how the words fall apart when worked out from the inside, as Wittgenstein is urging is a case-by-case approach. The general rubric is nothing but synecdochic for what emerges in each case. Here the commonality with his later thought is unmistakable.

A second objection — not too distant from the first — is Ramsey’s question of how, if this is nonsense, can it be helpful. Irresolute views have an answer for this, namely, that the sentences of the text gesture at the “what” that is shown, at the unutterable features of reality. (It’s not a good answer, really, since no account of gesturing is given, or indeed can be given.) A resolute view has to say, if we truly throw the ladder away, how is it that the nonsense could have been helpful. Why isn’t it just as if we had uttered “fribble frabble squibble squabble.” The process of working from inside, not assuming an external stance, is one in which we treat transitional language as though it were real language, and interrogate it logically. The question, then, is why we use this transitional language, rather than any other. The answer must lie in this: in showing that there is no such thing as an ontological theory, one should give the best ontological theory one can find, and show its terms fall apart upon closer logical inspection. Similarly with a theory of propositions.

An appropriate elaboration of this line of thought should go some way towards answering the question. But only some way. The question might remain: why the rather articulated nonsense of the Tractatus? After all, the nonsense doesn’t stop at 2.063, or even at 3.3. The text goes far beyond sentences seeming to give a general theory of ontology and of propositions. There is much fine detail. If it all is nonsense, seen resolutely, then the question is what can it be doing. What could the point of such details possibly be?

An answer suggests itself, along Fregean lines. For Frege, as we have seen, talk of categorical differences makes no sense; but the illusion of sense, or psychological images the words cause in us, are helpful in getting us to take up the proper language. The sentences are an urging for us to adopt the begriffsschrift; once we do, these remarks can be left behind. Now Wittgenstein certainly approved of the use of a “sign-language that is governed by logical grammar” (3.325), which he thought, Frege’s begriffsschrift — despite its flaws — was. So then, for Wittgenstein, we might say that his
very detailed remarks serve as an urging to adopt his logical sign-system, a
Wittgensteinian begriffschrift. The details of the nonsense are in lieu of
actually giving us that sign-language.

Yet precisely that lack that is worrying. In the Fregean case, we can see
what it is to overcome the transitional language, for we see what it is to use
begriffschrift, and we see how our use of variables in begriffschrift differs
for objects and for functions. There is no such thing to see, in the Wittgen-
steinian case. We might say that what Frege offers about the distinction
between concepts and objects is literally nothing, apart from the begriffschrift.
Can we say that Wittgenstein offers nothing about the logical forms of objects
(or about the number of objects, etc.) apart from a begriffschrift that he doesn’t
have? Or apart from the possibility of a begriffschrift?

Here it could be remarked that it is precisely the point of the detailed
nonsense to get us to undertake the construction of such a begriffschrift. In
constructing the begriffschrift, we will see that the level of abstraction of
Wittgenstein’s remarks is a sham, that they truly are nonsensical. There is,
however, a real problem with this elaboration. For among the features of
the level of abstraction of the Tractatus is a silence on what guides analysis, on
what it is we are to take into consideration in getting so-called better ana-
lyzed forms of our sentences (and hence, in the current context, in moving
towards a begriffschrift). Not only does he give us no begriffschrift, he
gives us no instruction on how to look for one. This is not a problem if the

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text is understood irresolutely. For then analysis can be thought of as guided
ontologically; it is the process of determining what configurations of simple
objects the sentence asserts. On the resolute understanding that we seek, we
cannot so formulate the point of analysis. How, then, does the project of
analysis get off the ground? Since — as we have seen — even talk of sense
and nonsense is transitional, a resolute understanding of this language can-
not provide the canons for analysis. Indeed, what we gain from such talk is
supposed to be exhibited in actual analysis. It is tempting to conclude that the
sentences of “transitional language” cannot be elucidatory in the ab-

“RS.”

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Society, supplementary volume 70 (1990), pp. 121-140.
5See Thomas Ricketts, “Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense in Wittgenstein’s
6This was first noted by G.E. M. Anscombe in her Introduction to Wittgenstein’s
7See the Introduction in L. Wittgenstein. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlungen, Kri-
on Logic and Notes Dictated to G.E. Moore are published as Appendices I and II of
L. Wittgenstein, Notebooks 1914–1916 (Chicago: 1979). The former will be cited in
the text as “NL.”
8The cited letters are items R.9 and R.7 in L. Wittgenstein, Letters to Russell, Keynes,
9P.M.S. Hacker, Insight and Illusion (Oxford: 1986); D. Pears, The False Prison,
10The terminology was suggested by Thomas Ricketts in “The Theory of Types
12Hidé Ishiguro, “Use and Reference of Names”, in Studies in the Philosophy of
Realism of the Tractatus,” in Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein, I.
Block, ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1981) and “Language and Reality in the Tractatus,”
Teoria, volume 5 (1985); Warren Goldfarb, “Names, Objects, and Realism in the
13Juliet Floyd has pointed out that the verb Wittgenstein uses in the last sentence of
6.54 is “überwinden,” probably best translated as “overcome.” The Pears-
McGuinness translation “transcend” is seriously misleading.
14See his letters to Russell of September 5 and September 20, 1913.
15In the paper cited in footnote 10. See also the paper cited in footnote 5, section V.
16Diamond treats this question briefly, in “Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of
the Tractatus”, Bilder der Philosophie: Reflexionen über das Bildliche und die
similar, but not identical.
17I am greatly indebted to Thomas Ricketts for many helpful discussions and
comments. I am also most grateful to Philippe Z. Selendy for suggestive formu-
lations of the issue discussed in the closing paragraphs.