BEYOND THE
TRACTATUS WARS

The New Wittgenstein Debate

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# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments vii  
Notes on Contributors ix  
Note on Translations xi  

Introduction  
*Matthew A. Lavery and Rupert Read*  

1 *Das Überwinden*: Anti-Metaphysical Readings of the *Tractatus*  
*Warren Goldfarb*  

2 Throwing the Baby Out with the Ladder: On “Therapeutic” Readings of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*  
*Roger M. White*  

3 Throwing the Baby Out: A Reply to Roger White  
*James Conant and Ed Dain*  

4 Context, Compositionality, and Nonsense in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*  
*Silver Bronzo*  

5 Toward a *Useful* Jacobinism: A Response to Bronzo  
*Matthew A. Lavery*
6 The Dialectic of Interpretations: Reading Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*
   Oskari Kuusela 121

7 The Possibility of a Resolutely Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*
   Rupert Read and Rob Deans 149

8 Synthesizing without Concepts
   Peter Sullivan 171

9 A Response to Sullivan
   A.W. Moore 190

*Bibliography* 196
*Index* 199
2

THROWING THE BABY OUT WITH THE LADDER

On “Therapeutic” Readings of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus

Roger M. White

The inexpressible (that which I find mysterious and am unable to express) is perhaps the background from which all that I am able to express receives its meaning.¹

The most natural reading of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus runs along the following lines: philosophy is concerned with fundamental issues concerning the nature of logic, language, the relation of language to reality, and “the essence of the world.” Reflection, however, on those very issues provides strong logical grounds for claiming that the answers to the questions which philosophy raises cannot be stated in language itself. Rather, philosophy is concerned with something that shows itself in the significant use of language, but that cannot be said or put into words. The body of the book is then concerned to specify precisely those features of reality that cannot be put into words and at the same time to bring out why they cannot be put into words. This automatically leads to the further reflection that this is, at least apparently, a self-defeating enterprise, since both specifying these features and arguing for them will at every turn involve one in attempting to say what, ex hypothesi, cannot be said. Hence the Tractatus will move ineluctably to its final catastrophe, which is probably the most famous, and certainly the most notorious, claim that is made by Wittgenstein in the Tractatus: the claim that he makes in the final paragraphs of the book that the sentences he has been advancing throughout the book are nonsensical (unsinnig):

6.54 My sentences are elucidatory in that someone who understands me finally realizes that they are nonsensical, if he has climbed through them—on them—beyond them. (He must, as it were, throw away the ladder after having climbed up it.)

He must surmount these sentences; he then sees the world aright.²
This claim has been regarded as outrageous by a majority of commentators, even by those, such as Russell and Ramsey, who in other respects have expressed sympathy with much else in the book. The hostility is immediately intelligible. The very first reaction that most people have when they read the *Tractatus* is the thought: “What more blatant an example could you find of a *reductio ad absurdum* than an argument which led one to conclude that not only the premises of the argument but every step in the argument was nonsense?” But even if there was widespread resistance to this whole strand in the *Tractatus*, which Wittgenstein himself clearly saw as the “main point” of the whole book, there are significant differences in the reactions, which are worth indicating at least briefly. For Russell, in his Introduction to the *Tractatus*, the key point was that since Wittgenstein had indeed succeeded in communicating a great deal in the book, the account of “what could be said” must, despite the strong arguments that Wittgenstein had advanced, be in some way unduly restrictive, and there must be some way to say the things that Wittgenstein was claiming could not be said—“possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit.” Ramsey’s reaction seems to have been more in line with Dr Johnson’s no-nonsense comment on the mystical theology of Jakob Böhme: “Were it even so [that he had seen *unutterable things*], Jacob would have resembled St. Paul still more, by not attempting to utter them.” Members of the Vienna Circle followed the *Tractatus* in holding that considerations in the theory of meaning did indeed rule out the possibility of significant metaphysical utterances. However, they regarded this as showing that as a result there was nothing “shown,” that Wittgenstein had indeed produced a *reductio* argument that showed there was nothing beyond the limits of my language. Hence the natural conclusion to draw was that the whole idea of there being something inexpressible was just an illusion.

By comparison, those who have been prepared to champion Wittgenstein’s position have been few in number. They include most notably Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach. Although I myself side with them against those who oppose Wittgenstein at this point, the purpose of the present article is only indirectly to further the defense of this apparently awkward position. It is rather to discuss an interpretation of the *Tractatus* that has recently gained currency, which seems to have been prompted initially as a reaction to Geach’s article. This is the interpretation that has been advocated most forcibly by Cora Diamond and James Conant, and that has subsequently, with significant variations, found favor with various writers. This rests on a rejection of the kind of account of the *Tractatus* that I outlined in the opening paragraph, claiming instead that the book should be read “ironically” (Conant) and with a purely “therapeutic” intent (Diamond). But before turning to that, it is necessary to give at least a thumbnail sketch of some of the considerations that Wittgenstein advances for there being “that which can be shown but not said.”
I. Why We Cannot Say What We Cannot Say

Recent discussions have tended to concentrate on the case highlighted by Geach’s article, that of the difficulties that arise when we assign entities to different logical categories (types, as belonging to different formal concepts), of saying that they are of different categories. Although this case is undoubtedly important, and has central significance for the Tractatus, it is far from being the only consideration at work in Wittgenstein’s thought, and it is worthwhile indicating the variety of the ideas that for Wittgenstein all point towards the one central theme of the book. It frequently happens in interpreting the Tractatus that one finds it is a mistake to look for a single argument that establishes its central contentions: it is, rather, that Wittgenstein is presenting as reinforcing each other a series of considerations all leading in the same direction. In the present case, I suspect the ideas I summarize do not amount to a single theme. Although there are complex interrelations between these different ideas, they are difficult to reduce to any one formula, and for my purposes I shall simply list what I take to be crucial ideas at work at different stages in the Tractatus. This variety is worth stressing, since the stress upon the one case, the case of its being claimed that sentences such as “A is an object” are nonsensical, itself suggests neither the breadth of the “anti-metaphysical” thrust of the Tractatus nor the continuity between the concerns of Wittgenstein’s early work and his later concern with “metaphysical claims,” such as his preoccupation in the 1930s with “Everything is in Flux” and “You cannot step into the same river twice,” which at least apparently are far removed from the questions raised by formal concepts.

(1) We may in the first instance think of the Tractatus as being a transcendental enquiry into the question “How is language possible?,” interpreted, at least in part, as the question “What must the world be like for it to be describable in language?” leading to such considerations as, say:

2.0211 If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on the question of whether another was true.

2.0212 It would then be impossible to sketch out a picture of the world (true or false).

If we construe the project of the Tractatus in these terms we immediately run into a fairly obvious difficulty. Let us suppose that the result of our inquiry leads to the conclusion that for the world to be describable at all it must be thus and so (a describable world must be one in which p, q and r must all be true). Saying this would lead straight to a contradiction, since we can now form the following description: “a world in which at least one of p, q, and r is false,” which ex hypothesi would be a description of an indescribable world. So if we lay stress in our account of meaning on the idea of names standing for objects, and conclude that every
proposition is a truth function of propositions that present us with possible arrangements of such objects, we may then go on to say:

1.2 The world divides into facts.

1.21 Any one can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remain the same.

2 What is the case, a fact, is the obtaining of states of affairs.

2.01 A state of affairs is a combination of objects, etc.

If we try to present these four propositions as giving us a condition for the possibility of language, it immediately becomes impossible to state it as a condition for the descirability of the world, since, once stated, it provides us with the possibility of forming the *ex hypothesi* impossible description “a world in which some of the states of affairs that obtain are not combinations of objects.”

Put generally, if, as Wittgenstein says,

3.031 . . . The truth is, we could not *say* of an “illogical” world how it would look,

for that very reason, we cannot say what conditions the world would have to satisfy in order to be “logical.”

(2)

The limit of language shows itself in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to a proposition (is its translation), without simply repeating the proposition.

(Here we have to do with the Kantian solution to the problem of philosophy).13

Looking at the *Tractatus* from a slightly different angle, it is concerned with the way that language relates to reality, the way in which language “reaches right up to reality” (2.1511), in such a way that, for instance, the particular situation now before me is such that it makes a particular proposition *p* true. What we would like to do is to describe the situation now before me in such a way that it is clear that this situation “fits” the proposition *p*. The *language* of facts is clearly internally related to the language of propositions. (That is to say, it is a fact that *p* if and only if “*p*” is true.) If one then takes the language of facts and states of affairs seriously—as specifying existing features of reality—one must say that a proposition is internally related to the states of affairs that make it true, and to understand the
propagation is precisely to know which states of affairs make it true and which make it false (4.024). If we wish to specify the states of affairs that make a proposition true, there is no way in which we can do it other than by using precisely the same set of words as those we use in formulating \( p \) itself (or some logically equivalent set of words). If we were to use a form of words to describe the state of affairs that was not logically equivalent to our original proposition, we should no longer be explaining what it is for the state of affairs to be a truth-condition of \( p \), but specifying an external relation between the proposition and the state of affairs.

If, then, we wish to give an account of what is meant by “comparing a proposition with reality,” the nature of the correspondence between the two, we constantly find that we come up with such claims as “‘The cat is on the mat’ is true if and only if the cat is on the mat,” and “The convention governing the word ‘red’ is that it is truly applicable to all, and only, red things.” What we would like is a genuinely informative account of the relation of a proposition and those states of affairs which make it true, but it can’t be given.\(^{14}\)

Instead when we talk of “comparing language with reality,” we are talking about something that we learn to do when we learn the language, and which is shown by the way that we do in practice compare propositions with the world. But any attempt within language to give an informative description of the relation we are looking for when we seek to verify a particular proposition is doomed.

(3)

“It is necessary also to be given the proposition that all elementary propositions are given.” This is not necessary because it is even impossible. There is no such proposition! That all elementary propositions are given is SHOWN by there being none having an elementary sense which is not given.\(^{15}\)

Wittgenstein is throughout writing about language as a whole, the world as a whole, making exhaustive remarks about the relation of language to the world. It is precisely because they are exhaustive that they are supposed to show “the limit of language” by drawing it from within, so that everything that lies outside the limit will be simply nonsense.\(^{16}\) The background against which Wittgenstein is working is his concern with the status of Russellian logic. The central point of Russell’s work was the avoidance of the range of logical paradoxes that arose if one tried to talk globally—the vicious circles generated by talk of “the set of all sets” or “the universal set.” But Wittgenstein’s whole project depends essentially upon making observations that are to be given global import—“The world is everything that is the case,” where the “everything” is to be construed without any kind of restriction whatever. Hence the danger arises at every point of precisely the kind of vicious circles that Russell was dedicating his energies to avoiding:

1.11 The world is determined by the facts, and by these being all the facts.
Such a proposition immediately threatens to generate precisely the kind of vicious circle that was to be avoided. Is it a fact that these are all the facts? And if so, is it an additional fact to the ones we had already? If we attempt to say what is said in 1.11 we immediately run into the whole gamut of logical paradoxes that Russell was engaged with. Of course, even the opening flourish “The world is everything that is the case” already runs into difficulties not just with the everything but with the “is the case,” when we ask whether “The world is everything that is the case” is one of the things which is the case, generating precisely the sort of loop that Russell’s paradox preyed on. Wittgenstein is banishing such paradoxes by declaring the illegitimacy of such global talk as we find in the opening paragraphs, but engaging in such global talk to effect the banishment. Hence the opening paragraphs are to be regarded as nonsensical sentences attempting to bring us to see something that, on pain of contradiction could not be said, but that was actually shown (but not said) by the way that sentences that are significant relate to reality.

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—the logical form.

In order to represent the logical form, we would have to place ourselves and the propositions outside logic, which means, outside the world.

One major theme of the *Tractatus* is that every symbol is of precisely the same logical type as that which it symbolizes. This idea is to my mind undoubtedly a theme which Wittgenstein learnt from his study of Frege’s writings, where, whereas a proper name, which stands for an object, is itself an object, a functional expression is not an object—a quotable expression—but itself a function mapping names onto propositions. It is this idea, once modified by a rejection of Frege’s unfortunate construal of sentences as complex proper names, and replaced with the conception of a propositional sign as a fact that represents a state of affairs (3.14), that is the core idea of the “picture theory.” According to this conception, in order to assert that there is a three-termed relation holding between three objects, one has to produce a propositional sign by establishing a three-termed relation between the names that refer to those objects. In this way, every symbol will possess a logical form in common with that which it symbolizes. But this common form cannot itself be presented in isolation from the fact that it manifests itself in both the symbol and that which it symbolizes, since it follows automatically from what has just been said that any specification of the symbol itself could only be by means of another symbol possessing the same logical form as both the symbol itself and what it symbolizes. It is here that the inadequacy of the resolution of Wittgenstein’s difficulty adumbrated by Russell becomes apparent. Going up a level in a hierarchy of languages simply replicates the difficulty at the higher level.
(5) This leads on to the question with which Geach concerned himself in “Saying and Showing.” Geach with some plausibility traces the idea here back to the difficulties Frege had already indicated of putting into words his distinction between function and object. Whether that is so, or, as I suspect, as a result of reflecting on Russell’s Theory of Types, Wittgenstein was led independently to substantially the same position as Frege found himself in is impossible to say, and is a matter of indifference.

Let us suppose that one tries to develop, on logical grounds, an ontology of logically different sorts of entity—in Frege’s case functions and objects, in Wittgenstein’s case, e.g. objects and states of affairs—where the mark of the fact that they were logically different sorts of entity would be that one could not coherently have a quantifier that ranged over the entities of different logical sorts, and where it would be impossible to substitute a phrase symbolizing an entity of one logical sort for an entity of a different logical sort.

N.B. for Wittgenstein, the impossibility is strict: he is not saying, e.g., “it would be impossible salva congruitate . . .” Since, in accordance with the last section, a symbol is of the same logical type as what it symbolizes, it quite simply makes no sense to talk of substituting a symbol for an entity of one type for an entity of another type. This is the point of saying (3.023) “We cannot think anything illogical, since otherwise we should have to think illogically,” and, in the notes dictated to G.E. Moore, “An illogical language would be one in which, e.g., you could put an event into a hole.”

We now run into difficulties if we attempt to say to what logical sort an entity belongs, or that these entities are of different logical sorts, or how many entities there are of a given logical sort. For instance, Frege wished to insist that his distinction between functions and objects was exclusive and exhaustive. If, however, we try with Frege to say that by saying:

Here I can only say briefly: an object is anything that is not a function, so that an expression for it does not contain any empty place,

we can, in the very nature of the case, give no coherent account of the quantification involved in the use of the word “anything” in that sentence. A quantifier, such as that used here, which would have to range over both objects and functions is precisely what is ruled out by the insistence on objects and functions being of different logical categories.

Hence we are led to Wittgenstein’s insistence on a fundamental difference between “formal” concepts and genuine concepts, and that:

4.126 That something falls under a formal concept as one of its objects, cannot be expressed by a proposition. Instead it is shown in the sign for the object itself. (A name shows that it designates an object, a numeral, that it designates a number, etc.)
The sign for the mark of a formal concept is therefore a characteristic feature of all symbols, whose meanings fall under the concept. The expression for the formal concept is therefore a propositional variable, in which only this characteristic feature is constant.

At first sight, if we take the introduction of a word like “object” seriously, it appears that we ought to be able to say such things as “There are objects.” Wittgenstein is, however, insisting that this is to misunderstand the way the word “object” functions, and that we are here misled by the surface grammar of such sentences as “There are objects that are F.” Whereas “There are objects that are F” is perfectly coherent, “There are objects” is simply nonsense. It looks as though we can say: “If, from ‘There are books on the table’ we can infer ‘There are books,’ so, by parity of reasoning, from ‘There are objects that are F’ we can infer ‘There are objects.’” Wittgenstein, however, is insisting that “There are books on the table” is of a different logical form from “There are objects that are F,” and that in a correct logical notation they will receive visibly different renderings. The first will be rendered as “(∃x) (Bx & Tx),” but the second, not “(∃x) (Ox & Fx),” but simply “(∃x) (Fx).” The rendering “(∃x) (Ox & Fx)” would be appropriate only if the word “object” signified a genuine concept and not a formal concept. As a word for a formal concept, its function is to specify a domain of quantification—and we should read “(∃x) (Fx)” as “Something is F” and not as “Some thing is F.” To render “There are objects that are F” as “(∃x) (Ox & Fx)” would make sense only if we were quantifying over a domain that is wider than the domain of objects, but, if “object” signifies a formal concept, there could not be such a wider domain. We may say that a formal concept, such as that signified by the word “object,” is simply the objective correlative of the words “everything” and “something.” This is the point of Wittgenstein’s saying that “The expression for the formal concept is therefore a propositional variable.” But if the correct rendering of “There are objects that are F” is simply “(∃x) (Fx),” then “There are objects” on its own cannot be rendered, and the apparent analogy between the inference from “There are books on this table” to “There are books” and that from “There are objects that are F” to “There are objects” is exposed as an illusion. Hence, Wittgenstein will conclude “There are objects” is simply nonsense, and that what we want to express by saying “There are objects” is something that cannot be said, but that is shown by the way proper names for objects and variables that range over objects function within the language; what we want to express by saying “There are at least two objects” is shown by there being at least two names in the language, etc. . . .

(6) The last element in Wittgenstein’s idea of what can be shown but not said that should be mentioned is to my mind not very strongly connected with those already mentioned, but it is one which undoubtedly played a major part in the project of the Tractatus. It is also given central significance in Diamond’s reading of Wittgenstein.
There is only logical necessity.

This is sometimes regarded as simply a Humean prejudice, and in the context in which it occurs it is highly plausible to connect what is said with Hume’s discussion of causality. The remark does, however, arise more directly out of Wittgenstein’s own theory of meaning. The *Tractatus* seeks to “draw the limits of what can be said” by constructing an account of “the general form of proposition,” a variable which ranges over every possible meaningful proposition. In this he is guided by the idea that “to understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true” (4.024) where this is interpreted austerely as meaning which combinations of states of affairs will make it true and which false. Since each state of affairs can either obtain or not obtain, and they are all logically independent of each other, the only room that the general form of proposition leaves for necessary propositions is for the degenerate cases of propositions—the completely vacuous tautologies and contradictions. Hence there can be no significant synthetic necessary propositions. But since the sentences of the *Tractatus* itself are put forward neither as vacuous tautologies nor as merely contingent propositions, they automatically fall outside the scope of the general form of proposition, and hence are simply nonsense. They are, for instance, concerned with what must be the case for language to be possible, and with objects whose existence cannot be brought into question within language. Even the claim “There is only logical necessity” is now to be seen as self-refuting. It is clearly neither an empty tautology nor the contingent claim that there don’t happen to be any necessary propositions that are not logically necessary. Rather, for Wittgenstein, even here we would have to be concerned with something that cannot be said, but which instead is shown by the fact that the general form of proposition leaves no room for any necessary propositions other than tautologies and contradictions.

Whatever may be said for or against Wittgenstein’s remarks about ethics, aesthetics, and religion at the end of the *Tractatus*, they do not seem to be nearly as closely connected with the earlier, logical, motivations for the showing/saying distinction as Wittgenstein appears to have thought. If there is anything which connects the earlier reflections with these final remarks, it would seem to be this rejection of propositions asserting substantial necessities: for, whatever the status of claims in ethics and religion, they do not appear simply to be asserting contingent facts about the world.

There is a long mystical tradition in both philosophy and theology which would insist that there are deep truths that cannot be put into words, and that any attempt to communicate those truths would necessarily result in the utterance of sentences that were nonsense. Whether such a tradition is defensible or not, it should be sharply contrasted with Wittgenstein’s conception, despite his preparedness at 6.522 to use the phrase “das Mystische” to characterize what can only be shown.
The earlier mystical traditions were typically concerned with a form of esoteric knowledge of that which transcended normal experience and understanding. Wittgenstein, however, when he talks of “what is shown” is talking about something that is shown by our ordinary everyday use of language, and that is therefore at least tacitly known and understood by all of us—by everyone who has mastered their mother tongue. Consequently many of the difficulties surrounding the supposition that mystical theologians were genuinely engaged in an act of communication when they wrote about the ineffable do not beset the project of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein is concerned to draw our attention to something with which, if he is right, we are all at least tacitly familiar. Even if the communication is necessarily indirect, and that indirectness justifies Wittgenstein in beginning:

This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts.

What he is aiming to do is draw our attention to something that we are all fully equipped to see for ourselves.

Equally, the typical response among the positivists, “If we can’t say it, there’s nothing there,” seems little more than an unargued prejudice. There is no good reason to take this seriously unless it were to be accompanied by a detailed examination of the considerations Wittgenstein has advanced for there being that which can only be shown. *Prima facie* at least there is a great deal that we can know and understand but not say: for instance, if by dint of careful listening I come to appreciate Gregorian Chant, so that I can listen to it with understanding, there seems to be no good reason to insist that I must be able to say to someone else wherein my understanding consisted. Nevertheless, there clearly are people who do and people who don’t understand such music, and those who do understand manifest their understanding in their concrete reactions to particular pieces of music.

There is, however, one obvious difficulty that Wittgenstein has to confront, and that is the difficulty with which we began: if Wittgenstein is to write a book to communicate that which cannot be said, then either the sentences of the book will have no sense—be simply nonsense—or, if they have a sense, that sense will necessarily fail to capture what it is that he wants to convey to us. How can a book, whose sentences are, on their author’s own admission, nonsense, communicate anything at all?

II. “Therapeutic” Readings of the *Tractatus*

It is the supposed impossibility of giving a coherent answer to that question which has prompted a different kind of interpretation of the *Tractatus* from the one that I have just been sketching. Nonsense sentences do not say anything, nor, *pace* a few commentators on the *Tractatus*, are nonsense sentences presented by
Wittgenstein as the sort of thing that “shows” something. Hence, it is claimed, those who interpret Wittgenstein along the lines that I have outlined are subscribing, or at least presenting Wittgenstein as subscribing, to the absurd idea that there are two kinds of nonsense—mere nonsense on the one hand, and “substantial” or “informative” nonsense on the other. This is to represent Wittgenstein as “chickening out” (Diamond) or “irresolute” (Warren Goldfarb). If Wittgenstein followed the logic of his own argument, then he would recognize that, having been compelled to conclude that the bulk of his book was nonsense, he had said nothing, shown nothing, and communicated no philosophical insight.

It is proposed therefore that we resolve this apparent absurdity by rejecting completely what I have so far been calling the “natural” reading of the *Tractatus* and look at it in an entirely different way. In writing the book, Wittgenstein was trying neither to say anything, nor to show anything, nor to communicate an ineffable logico-philosophical vision. Instead it is to be read ironically, or to cure us of the urge to make philosophical pronouncements of the sort made in the *Tractatus* itself.

On this account, we are initially seduced into thinking that we are being invited to engage in a profound philosophical inquiry into the nature of logic, language, and reality. The inquiry comes apart in our hands, and we realize that the whole inquiry was nonsense. This has the therapeutic value of freeing us from the urge to engage in the inquiry in the first place, and we “then see the world aright.”

There is considerable local variation among the advocates of this “new” reading of the *Tractatus*. The following passage by Thomas Ricketts gives a sober and clear presentation:

The *Tractatus* imagines an attempt to think through at the most general level what a conception of sentences as logically interconnected representations of reality requires. At its opening, it presents what appears to be an alternative theory to Russell’s flawed one. We see through this appearance, when we realize that on the theory’s own apparent telling, there can be no such theory. When we throw away the ladder, we give up attempts to state what this conception of representation and truth demands of the world, give up trying to operate at an illusory level of generality, without however rejecting the conception of truth as agreement with reality. Rather, we understand what this conception comes to, when we appreciate how what can be said can be said clearly, when we appreciate the standard of clarity set up by the general form of sentences.

I find this whole “therapeutic” reading bizarre for a number of reasons, some of which I will mention later, but my principal concern in this article is to show that the interpretation rests on a series of misrepresentations of what it is that the proponents of the more orthodox readings of the *Tractatus* are saying. As a result,
most of the energies of writers such as Diamond and Conant are devoted to insisting on points which hardly anyone would deny, points that can readily be granted by their opponents. Above all, it would be only a careless thinker who would wish to say that there was such a thing as “substantial nonsense”—nonsense such that “its sense was senseless,” or whatever—or who would expound the orthodox reading of the *Tractatus* in such a way as to ascribe such an idea to Wittgenstein himself. If the orthodox reading does not require one to ascribe to Wittgenstein a conception of there being two kinds of nonsense, then there is very little argument being offered in favor of the new “therapeutic” reading.

Wittgenstein saw a tension in Frege’s thought between two different conceptions of nonsense, which I shall call the *substantial conception* and the *austere conception* respectively. The substantial conception distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought. Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way—it expresses a logically incoherent thought. According to the substantial conception, these two kinds of thought are logically distinct: the former is mere gibberish, whereas the latter involves (what commentators on the *Tractatus* are fond of calling) a “violation of logical syntax.”

The austere conception, on the other hand, holds that mere nonsense is, from a logical point of view, the only kind of nonsense there is.\footnote{The claim that Wittgenstein was accusing Frege of a belief in substantial nonsense is based on a reading of 5.4733:}

Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition has 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.

(Even if we believe we have done so.)
This is not the most pellucid remark in the *Tractatus*. A major part of my difficulty here is that, unless I am mistaken, Wittgenstein is actually misremembering Frege, who doesn’t, to the best of my knowledge, say what Wittgenstein quotes him as saying. I read Wittgenstein along the following lines—and in this I do not believe there is any disagreement between myself and Conant or Diamond: if we ask whether the *same* word, “object,” occurs in the two sentences “There is an object that is F” and “I object to what you are saying,” we can clearly answer in two different ways. According to the criteria employed by the typesetter, we have the same word. However, the two instances of “object” signify in completely different ways, are different parts of speech, and will be handled completely differently by the dictionary maker. In Wittgenstein’s terminology the two words symbolize in completely different ways, and are different symbols. This provides us with a different criterion of identity for words, which, following 3.327, says, “The sign determines a logical form only together with its logico-syntactic employment,” and since by those standards the two occurrences of “object” have quite different logico-syntactic employments, we have different words here, or in Wittgenstein’s terminology different symbols.

In the light of this let us consider an instance of supposed nonsense, such as “There are objects.” On one way of looking at this, this will be explained to be nonsense by saying that it involves a misuse of the word “object,” and is a violation of the rules of logical syntax governing the word “object,” which assign a significant use to the word only in such sentences as “There are objects that are F.” In this we are talking about the word “object” in accordance with the typesetter’s criteria of identity for words. If, however, we adopt the second criteria of identity for words, the word “object,” as it occurs in the sentence “There are objects that are F,” does not occur in the nonsense string “There are objects” at all, since a word is only the word it is when it has a specific logico-syntactic role, and the word “object” has, ex hypothesi, no logico-syntactic rôle in “There are objects.” It is simply a different word from the word “object” that occurred in “There are objects that are F.” Hence, according to this way of talking, we do not say that the sentence “There are objects” is nonsense because it is ill-formed, but it is nonsense because we have given no meaning to the string of letters: “objects.” Hence the word “objects” is simply a meaningless string of letters, and the word “objects” that is used in “There are objects that are F” no more occurs in “There are objects” than the word “heist” occurs in “Hume was an atheist.”

One may agree with all this as an interpretation of what Wittgenstein is saying in passages like 5.4733. One may also agree that Wittgenstein’s perspective is philosophically more insightful, but still maintain that that is a far cry from seeing Wittgenstein as accusing Frege of holding a theory of substantial nonsense, and an even further cry from his having made out a successful case that this is so. The most that can be said is that when someone talks of a “violation of logical syntax” or “logically ill-formed sentences” or “sentences embodying category mistakes” or the like, from all that has been said here, they are putting in a philosophically
less felicitous way what Wittgenstein would have put by saying that “Julius Caesar is a prime number” does not contain a use of the phrase “prime number” as that phrase occurs when gainfully employed, and hence contains a phrase to which no meaning has been assigned. The most natural interpretation of phrases such as “violations of logical syntax” is to take them to apply to a sentence that is void of any sense whatever because it incorporates a word or phrase that has been assigned a significant use only when combined in other sentences but not in this one. Provided we adhere to the typesetter’s criteria of identity for words and phrases, such a way of describing nonsense is merely a stylistic variant on Wittgenstein’s way of putting matters and not at all a commitment to a “sentence whose sense is senseless.”

I contend that, whatever may be said for or against Wittgenstein’s way of contrasting his position with that of Frege in 5.4733, it would be a very bad reason for ascribing to Frege a conception of there being such a thing as substantial nonsense.

So, all this strenuous polemic is curiously beside the point. If we wish to convict someone of holding that there are two kinds of nonsense, we need to look elsewhere. The issue is actually simple: what Diamond and Conant should be challenging is not the idea that there is substantial nonsense but the idea that they fail to distinguish from that—the idea that someone can maintain that a sentence is simply nonsense but can simultaneously believe that one can, under appropriate circumstances, use that sentence to communicate. We need therefore to look directly at those places where someone maintains that they can communicate by uttering nonsense sentences. It is here that the discussion most obviously has purchase, and, if there is a case that needs answering, it is the following far simpler challenge to those who, like myself, believe that Wittgenstein was using nonsense sentences to convey philosophical insights, and to Frege who saw himself as forced into lapsing into nonsense in order to convey his distinction between concept and object.

III. The Uses of Nonsense

Let us look first at what Frege actually said in his discussion with Benno Kerry, and at Geach’s gloss on Frege. (Frege is here talking of the difficulties he finds himself in, being obliged to say such things as “The concept horse is not a concept”):

I do not dispute at all Kerry’s right to use the words “concept” and “object” in his own way, if only he would respect my equal right, and admit that with my use of terms I have got hold of a distinction of the highest importance. I admit that there is a quite peculiar obstacle in the way of an understanding with a reader. By a kind of necessity of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought; I mention an object, when what I intend is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a
reader who would be ready to meet me halfway—who does not begrudge a pinch of salt.

. . . It may be easier to come to an understanding if the reader compares my work *Function and Concept*. For over the question what it is that is called a function in Analysis, we come up against the same obstacle; and on thorough investigation it will be found that the obstacle is essential, and founded on the nature of our language; that we cannot avoid a certain inappropriateness of linguistic expression; and that there is nothing for it but to realize this and always take it into account.36

On which Geach comments:

Frege already held, and his philosophy of logic would oblige him to hold, that there are logical category distinctions which will clearly show themselves in a well-constructed formalized language, but which cannot properly be asserted in language: the sentences in which we seek to convey them are logically improper and admit of no translation into well-formed formulas of symbolic logic. All the same, there is a test for these sentences’ having conveyed the intended distinctions—namely, that by their aid mastery of the formalized language is attainable.37

Certainly in both these passages there is a contemplation of the use of “logically improper,” or nonsensical sentences to convey an insight, and what is more the need to resort to such nonsense sentences in order to convey that insight, because no meaningful use of language could successfully capture it. From this, it might appear, and has appeared to some of the writers in the current debate, that Frege is thereby automatically committed to holding that there is substantial, or philosophically illuminating nonsense. But that would be an illusion. Frege wishes to convey an “ineffable” insight; to do so he is forced to resort to sentences that are on his own admission inappropriate to those insights and that will include sentences that are nonsense. But this is very different from him, absurdly, ascribing a sort of sense to these nonsense sentences.38

Instead he can quite well say what Wittgenstein says at 6.54:

My sentences are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense.

As Diamond stresses, Wittgenstein does not say here “he who understands my sentences”, but “he who understands me.” So too Frege wishes his readers to grasp his distinction between function and object—a distinction which, “by a kind of necessity of language,” cannot be put into words. To that end he utters nonsensical sentences, not so that the reader can grasp the meanings of those sentences but so that the reader can come to an understanding with Frege himself.39
What Frege and Geach are here committed to is not the view that there are philosophically significant nonsense sentences, but the view that it is possible to communicate philosophical insights by the use of sentences that are nonsense—and here “nonsense” may be interpreted with the full austerity that Conant and Diamond insist upon.

“But if nonsense sentences have no sense, how can they be used to communicate? How can we do anything with a string of words that has no sense?” Well, we do it all the time. There is no reason why we should not communicate an insight by whatever means there are to hand, and not merely by asserting a significant sentence. As Donald Davidson remarked in another connection: “Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact—but not by standing for, or expressing that fact.”

We frequently communicate by using sentences that are void of any literal sense whatever—consider commonplace examples that afford paradigm cases of Carnapian “violation of syntax,” “category mistakes,” and the like, such as Wemmick’s delightful summary of Jaggers:

“Deep” said Wemmick, “as Australia.” Pointing with his pen at the office floor, to express that Australia was understood, for the purpose of the figure, to be symmetrically on the opposite of the globe.

“If there was anything deeper,” added Wemmick, bringing his pen to paper, “he’d be it.”

Even considering a simple example like this shows a number of things which suggest that the arguments of advocates of the therapeutic reading of the *Tractatus* are approaching the issue of nonsense too simplistically:

1. This is an entirely straightforward and unproblematic example of communication: neither Pip nor any of Dickens’s readers has any difficulty whatever in understanding Wemmick, or gathering how he is regarding Jaggers.
2. The sentence used by Wemmick is mere nonsense, and expresses no thought. If, for instance, we follow Wittgenstein and say that to understand a proposition is to know what is the case if it is true, and interpret that to mean: specifying the situations that would make it true, there are simply no situations or states of affairs that would make it true that if there were anything deeper than Australia it would be Jaggers.
3. What tends to make one confused here is that Wemmick is certainly expressing what he thinks about Jaggers. But it does not follow that the sentences he uses express the thoughts which Wemmick is wishing to convey. If we were to report what it is that Wemmick thinks about Jaggers, we could not do it in the form: “Wemmick thinks that if there were anything deeper than Australia, it would be Jaggers.”
4. Equally, although this is an instance of successful communication, and, what is more, communication achieved by the use of the sentence “If there was
anything deeper, he'd be it,” we cannot use that sentence to specify what it is that Pip learns. We can no more say that Pip learns that if there were anything deeper than Australia, it would be Jaggers, than we could say that that was what Wemmick thinks. If we want to say what it is that Pip has learnt we have to use other words.

5. We cannot alleviate our understanding of this situation by positing special, contextually defined meanings for the words used by Wemmick. If he means anything by the word “Australia,” it is the name of the country on the other side of the world from himself—as he indicates with his pen. This is so, even though it is precisely that meaning which reduces his sentence to mere nonsense.

6. Of course, this situation is different from the situation of the *Tractatus* and its reader. We have little difficulty here in saying, that is to say, giving a prose version which gives the gist of what it is that Wemmick is conveying by his utterance. Even so, we travesty what goes on if we think that, in order for there to be successful communication, Pip must somehow translate Wemmick’s words into such a prose version. Pip understands Wemmick purely by means of the words that Wemmick uses, and no other words will typically occur to him when he grasps what Wemmick is after.

7. Reflection on all this suggests that Conant’s characterization of “mere nonsense” is potentially misleading. He writes: “mere nonsense is simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought.” Wemmick’s sentence here expresses no thought, but he can nevertheless use the utterance of that sentence to communicate. It would however be somewhat unnatural to describe Wemmick’s sentence as unintelligible—even though considered in isolation we might say that the sentence “If there were anything deeper than Australia, it would be Jaggers” is unintelligible and expresses no thought. We have to be careful here to distinguish in that case between “Wemmick utters an unintelligible sentence,” and “Wemmick is speaking unintelligibly.” Conant’s subsequent argument suggests he is simply conflating these two.

So too, Diamond slides from the claim that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense to the claim that Wittgenstein is talking nonsense. What the Wemmick example suggests is that when she makes that slide, “the decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one we thought quite innocent.”

We frequently can, and do, communicate using sentences that are simply nonsense—including even sentences which can be grossly grammatically deviant (“Grace me no grace, nor uncle me no uncle”). Under appropriate circumstances, we do so freely and easily. That much is, or ought to be, uncontroversial. As illustrated by the example from *Great Expectations*, what differentiates such communication from normal communication is that we cannot report what it is that is communicated by using the very same sentence that was used in the
communication (once the communication has succeeded, we throw away the ladder). In a way, none of this is surprising: I can, after all, under appropriate circumstances, communicate something to you by pulling your nose—and there too, if I succeed, what has been communicated will not be specified by saying that your nose has been pulled.

What, however, needs clarifying is precisely what differentiates the case of pulling your nose from using a nonsense sentence to communicate: the latter, unlike the former, is still a *linguistic* communication—a use of language, and of precisely the same language as is used in normal communication. It is this fact which has disconcerted so many of Davidson’s readers of his remark above about “bumps on the head.” His remark, which in itself is quite unexceptionable, seemed to minimize the difference between metaphor *as a use of language* and non-verbal communication. We may, if we like, talk here of a “figurative use of language,” but, although it is acceptable so to talk, it does little to clarify the situation, since in their generality the concepts of *figuration* or “Bildlichkeit” mean little more than a way of speaking which diverges from normal, literal, prose. Even if the variety in the examples here is such that no detailed general account of what happens when we use nonsense to communicate is possible, what we need to clarify is the relation of such a use of language to the use of normal, significant propositions. For one of the most obvious things to say is that we have here a use of language that is *parasitic* on the normal use of language: unless we were familiar with the normal use of the words which occur in the nonsense sentence, we should be completely unable to follow what was going on when the nonsense sentence was uttered.

It should be stressed that this question raises just as pressing an issue to be addressed by the proponents of a “therapeutic” reading of the *Tractatus*. Although they are fond of stressing that nonsense is nonsense, and therefore comparing the sentences of the *Tractatus* to “piggly wiggle” or the like, they need an account of the therapeutic or ironic use of nonsense. Their account “supposes a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it.” The therapeutic purpose of the *Tractatus* is achieved if someone is disabused of the illusion that certain “metaphysical” sentences in the book make sense. But there is simply no imaginative activity of taking “piggly wiggle” for sense, no therapeutic activity of disabusing someone of the illusion that “piggly wiggle” makes sense. As a result they are forced to talk in ways that sit oddly with their stress on an “austere conception of nonsense,” and that require clarification every bit as much as the ways that those of us who believe Wittgenstein was using nonsense to try to bring us to see something about the essence of logic, language, and the world are obliged to talk. Thus Conant will talk of “the perception of a flawed sense in certain nonsensical propositions,” and Ricketts, in the passage I quoted above, said “we realize that on the theory’s own apparent telling, there can be no such theory.” What is “a flawed sense”? What is
it for something to be true on a nonsense “theory’s own apparent telling”? Diamond talks of a conception which “dissolves into incoherence when pushed slightly.”49 “Piggly wiggle” does not dissolve into incoherence, no matter how hard you push it. There seems here something that is deeply in need of explanation. It looks just as mysterious as Diamond and Conant claim they find the idea of things which can be shown but not said.

One reply that is wholly inadequate here is to say that, whereas it is the business of logic and philosophy to explain significant propositions, the illusion of a significant proposition is a psychological matter, and that there is a purely psychological difference between different kinds of nonsense. “Psychological” here is a weasel word. If a man were to say to me that for him “piggly wiggle” made sense, I would regard that as a psychological matter, and a fit subject for the alienist rather than the philosopher to look into. In the Tractatus, however, we have a universal illusion. Everyone thinks that Wittgenstein is putting forward significant propositions until they are persuaded otherwise. There is a great deal that we can apparently do with the sentences of the Tractatus: we can paraphrase them; we can translate the book, we can follow trains of thought; we can discuss the cogency of arguments that are put forward, we can expound to students “the main outlines of the picture theory” etc., etc. None of this has any parallel whatever in the case of the man under the illusion that “piggly wiggle” makes sense. Also we can generalize from the examples given of nonsense sentences to a whole range of other sentences being nonsense: thus there is prolonged debate in the secondary literature of “Why the sentence ‘A is an object’ is nonsense?”50 which is meant to throw light on the claim that the sentences of the Tractatus are nonsense—even though the sentence “A is an object” does not itself occur in the Tractatus. Pointing out that “piggly wiggle” is nonsense has no implications whatever for which other sentences are, or are not, nonsense. What we need to understand is what it is about these words which creates this wide-ranging illusion, and that is a question about language and the words, and not the psychology of the individual reader of the book.

If we are to clarify these questions, it is useful to move away from the hothouse atmosphere of Tractatus interpretation and look at an unequivocal case of the use of nonsense to afford an insight.

In algebraic chess notation, the ranks and files of the chessboard are designated by the numbers 1 to 8, and the files a to h (with, e.g., White’s Queen Rook on the square a1). A chess move is then designated by the name of the piece to be moved, followed by the name of the square that is its destination. This, with slight elaborations for castling, resolving ambiguities and the like, gives a complete account of the way to specify a move in chess.

In one of his games, David Bronstein, playing Black, had a Bishop in an apparently dominant position, being well centralized on e5. In this position, he played the paradoxical move of retreating this Bishop to the corner of the board, to the square h8 where it looked completely out of play. This unlikely looking move turned out, as the game developed, to be the key to his winning strategy,
which depended on the Bishop retaining control of the a1–h8 diagonal. From h8, it did this ideally, since it was now placed on a square that was inaccessible to the opponent, so that the bishop could neither be exchanged nor attacked. He annotated this move as follows:

Bh8  I like this move a lot: Bj10 would have been even stronger.

1. The first point to make about this annotation is that it contains a sentence which is demonstrably nonsense—“austerely” nonsensical, if you like. The explanation of the chess notation sketched above was complete, and that explanation assigned no meaning to the letter “j” or numeral “10.”

2. Although it is a nonsense sentence, no one has any difficulty in understanding what Bronstein is up to. In fact, most people’s initial reaction to this example is to say that he is using hyperbole. But he is not: hyperbole would be a significant proposition which gave an exaggerated account of the actual situation. Here, however, we simply have nonsense. What this suggests is the readiness with which we regard such a nonsense sentence as if it had sense.

3. But even if we in this way regard it as if it were a proposition with a sense, we can give no coherent account of what that sense would be. It is clear that Bronstein is imagining a move in the actual chess game, played on an 8 by 8 board. He is not, e.g., saying, “If this chess position occurred on a 10 by 10 chessboard, Bj10 would be the best move”: no one considers that possibility at all, and it is completely irrelevant—who knows, on the enlarged board Bj10 might be an outright blunder. The only “sense” we could ascribe to this sentence would be one in which per impossibile the Bishop would be envisaged as moving two squares off the board while remaining on the 8 by 8 board.

4. No one is under the illusion that this sentence is anything other than nonsense. Despite the tendency to describe it as hyperbole, everyone will see this annotation as a joke, precisely because it is nonsense.

5. But, even if this is a joke, it is a serious chess annotation, designed to bring to our attention features of the move that Bronstein actually made. The function of the nonsense here is to draw our attention to something in the actual situation. We are led to see the move actually played—Bh8—in a certain light, to see the move as placing the Bishop on a square where, though apparently out of play, it exercises control over the a1–h8 diagonal from a square where it is invulnerable to attack or exchange, by means of the fantasy of a move where the Bishop would be apparently absolutely out of play, but absolutely invulnerable to exchange or attack.

6. Anyone who understands Bronstein will recognize his sentence as nonsense—and as deliberate nonsense: replace his annotation with a genuinely significant sentence and the whole joke is lost.
7. One point is completely obvious with this example, but worth stating explicitly in the present discussion. Bronstein’s annotation is instructive, and one can learn from it, but what one learns is something about the chessboard, and not the trivially obvious fact that the sentence he used was nonsense.

8. Once again, as with the example from *Great Expectations*, although this is a genuine act of communication, neither what Bronstein wishes to communicate nor what we learn can be stated by using the sentence Bronstein actually used. It would be ridiculous to say, “Bronstein told us that Bj10 would have been even stronger.” In this case it is not difficult to give the upshot of what we learn in boring prose—say, in the form “The further this Bishop retreats along the diagonal, the better”, but such a sentence will typically not occur to one. One doesn’t usually interpret an annotation like this by *translating* it into a significant proposition, but by seeing the move actually made in a certain light—seeing the Bishop as controlling the long diagonal from a square from which it cannot be attacked, etc.

Now of course this example contrasts with the use of sentences in the *Tractatus* in that Bronstein is not attempting to draw to our attention that which could not in principle be said. But before turning to that point, we need to examine how it is that Bronstein is able to achieve successful communication by using a sentence that is palpable nonsense. Saying that he is speaking figuratively merely labels the problem, particularly when as here he is clearly not using any of the recognized figures such as metaphor or hyperbole—he is opportunistically creating his own type of figure.

Clearly, what Bronstein is doing is exploiting an analogy between two different ways of talking: we use the numerals both to designate the ranks of the chessboard and in designating, e.g., the addresses of houses. But the analogy between these two uses of the numerals is imperfect. Whereas in the case of addresses the number series is essentially open-ended (If “8 Downing Street” makes sense, it follows that “10 Downing Street” also makes sense), whereas, equally, the number series for the chessboard is essentially closed—no meaning has been given to the use of numerals beyond “8.” Bronstein’s annotation pushes the analogy beyond breaking point. Because of the analogy that does exist, we instantly perceive “Bj10” as having a sense, even when no sense has been given to it, and even when we could not say wherein that sense consisted, because we in imagination follow the analogy beyond breaking point. What we have is a crossing of two different, incompatible, ways of talking, in much the same way as in an Escher print we have the crossing of two incompatible techniques of visual representation. And just as the effect of the Escher print is that we see a staircase both ascending and descending, so we hear Bronstein’s annotation as both describing a move that might have been played on the actual chessboard, and as describing a move on a possible unbounded
chessboard.\textsuperscript{51} The resulting surreal train of thought lapses of course into incoherence, but the effect of going through the train of thought is to highlight those features of the move actually played which it would share with the fantasy move that has been conjured up.

What we find in the sentences of the \textit{Tractatus} is, it seems to me, precisely the same exploitation of the analogies between two, incompatible, ways of speaking—ways of speaking for which different grammatical rules hold, but where it is essential to the way language works that there should be considerable overlap between the grammatical rules. Let us return to “There are objects,” and Wittgenstein’s contrast between genuine concepts and formal concepts. We say both “There are books on that table,” and “There are objects that are F.” The analogy between these two ways of talking instantly suggests that just as “There are books” makes sense, so “There are objects” must make sense, and the same kind of sense. Wittgenstein is, however, insisting that the first two sentences are of quite different logical forms, and hence the suggestion is misplaced. Here the analogy runs far deeper than that between the designation of chess moves and of house addresses. We could readily alter the chess notation and leave the rest of the language intact, but it is hard to imagine a language in which a formal concept word like “object” or “thing” did not produce precisely this surface analogy between sentences of different logical forms: \textit{every} language will create sentences in which there is a word corresponding to “thing” in which it is apparently functioning as a genuine predicate which is true of everything. Similarly \textit{every} language will have an identity sign that apparently functions as a relational expression, in which designations of facts have the apparent form of definite description, seemingly picking out a complex object in which the objects which figure in that fact are constituents of the fact. As a result, whereas no one will be under any illusion that the sentence used by Bronstein was anything other than nonsense, in the case of the sentences of the \textit{Tractatus} almost everyone has the strong illusion that such sentences as “Everything is identical with itself” or “There are infinitely many things” make sense. If Wittgenstein’s arguments are right, this is only an illusion, and a major part of the philosophical task will be to expose it as an illusion. Here I am in complete agreement with the therapeutic reading of the \textit{Tractatus}.

However, therapeutic readers take the further step of claiming that Wittgenstein’s \textit{whole} purpose in putting forward such sentences as

\begin{quote}
2.026 Only if there are objects, can there be a fixed form of the world
\end{quote}

was to expose them as nonsense, for readers to discard once they “have seen the world aright.” Their argument for this is simply that nonsense is nonsense, and once you have recognized that a sentence is nonsense, you can do nothing with it. To say otherwise would be to involve yourself in the absurd idea of “substantial nonsense.” However, we can now see that this is a bad argument, and the conclusion does not follow.
Bronstein’s annotation exploited an analogy between two different ways of speaking, by pushing that analogy beyond breaking point to produce a sentence that was demonstrably nonsense. He thereby produced a nonsense sentence that created the fantasy of the “move” Bj10. But his purpose in doing so was to highlight features which were shown by the actual move Bh8. The detour into nonsense was to direct our attention to the actual. If we take seriously Wittgenstein’s often repeated claims that there was that which could not be said but that was shown by our actual use of significant propositions, there is every reason to regard him as engaging in an activity that is strictly parallel to Bronstein’s. In order to direct our attention to those features that were shown by our meaningful use of language, but could not be significantly said, he was forced to take a detour into nonsense, but with the purpose of directing our attention to what actually went on when we use language to talk about the world and what was shown by our use.

At the very least, nothing said by Diamond and Conant shows that what I have just sketched is incoherent, or that Wittgenstein was “chickening out” if this was indeed what he was doing. But what are we to say about the difference between what Bronstein was doing and what Wittgenstein was doing? Bronstein was not trying to draw our attention to what could not be said: he was simply not saying what could also be said. Wittgenstein however is using nonsense sentences to draw our attention to that which, on his own admission, he could not also say. It is hard to see why that should make a difference. If “that which could not be said” were the ineffable truths of mystical theology, pointing to something that transcended human experience, it might. In the latter case the whole question of successful communication by any means whatever is put in jeopardy. Here, however, we are concerned with things that, if Wittgenstein knows them, are also at least implicitly known to every competent user of language. What Wittgenstein is engaged in is an activity of Socratic midwifery, to bring to the surface something that he believes we all already are fully competent to see for ourselves. He is simply drawing attention to something he believes is already implicit in our mastery of language, and our ability to know how the world must be if what we say is to be true or false.

It is only if one neglects the diversity in what can properly be regarded as communication and holds that all communication is necessarily communication of a proposition—that is to say, if one holds a crude view of the possibilities of communication, where communication always consisted in taking a proposition out of my head and putting it in yours—that one will be inclined to insist that the fact that Wittgenstein was seeking to communicate something that could not be said implies that what he was trying to do is essentially different from what Bronstein clearly succeeded in doing.

There is nothing wrong with saying that the sentences of the Tractatus are to be taken figuratively except that the breadth of the notion of figuration makes the claim almost vacuous. It looks as if Wittgenstein himself might have resisted the suggestion. In conversation with Waismann, he said:
Religious language is not a sort of metaphor [Gleichnis]; otherwise you have to be able to say it in prose. Running against the limits of language? Language isn’t a cage!⁵⁴

But that certainly doesn’t look decisive. This remark rests on an over simple account of metaphor, let alone the figurative in general. The idea that we should resist the suggestion that the sentences of the Tractatus are to be taken figuratively would seem to depend on three assumptions, each of which betrays a limited conception of the possibilities of figuration. There is no good reason to suppose any of the following:⁵⁵

1. A sentence used figuratively must have a literal meaning.
2. If a sentence used figuratively lacks a literal meaning then it somehow acquires a special “figurative meaning.”
3. If the function of figurative discourse is to prompt an insight, then that insight will be propositional in nature, and could in principle be recast as a proposition.

IV. Critique of the “Therapeutic Reading”

My main purpose in this article is to establish one simple point—that 6.54 does not necessitate a “therapeutic” or “ironic” reading of the rest of the book. Equally, accepting the orthodox reading of the Tractatus does not, as many commentators have thought, convict Wittgenstein of incoherence. Wittgenstein could, on the account I have sketched, quite consistently maintain that, since he was concerned with what could only be shown, his attempt to bring to our attention what could be shown necessarily involved him in continually using nonsensical sentences to do so. There are, however, a number of reasons for believing that the “therapeutic” interpretation is deeply wrongheaded.

What is puzzling is the way that the alleged therapy is supposed to be achieved. After all, if what was required to disabuse people of the wish to produce metaphysical theories was that one should present a supposedly incoherent theory of the relation between language and reality, the result would have been achieved centuries ago. But, even apart from that, the Achilles’ heel of the therapeutic reading is that it seems impossible on this reading to give a coherent account of the way in which we are meant to come to see why the sentences of the Tractatus are to be regarded as nonsense. What is supposed to happen runs along the following lines. One is first seduced into thinking that Wittgenstein is developing an account of the relation between language and reality, although what he is putting forward is nonsense. One then comes to realize that on the theory’s own terms it is nonsense, and this has the effect of one’s coming to see that any attempt to develop a philosophical theory of the relation between language and reality is doomed, and therefore abandoning the attempt to construct any such theory.
What is perplexing here is that, for this to work, the nonsense “theory” must be seen as having “terms,” so that the theory can be seen as nonsense on the theory’s terms. If there is only the illusion of having understood the theory, there is only the illusion that the theory has revealed itself to be nonsense. When Ricketts writes “on the theory’s own apparent telling, there can be no such theory,” a “theory’s apparent telling” can only apparently imply that there can be no such theory. If what is meant is that the theory is in some way self-refuting, or that we are actually presented with a theory which implies any such theory to be impossible, that simply shows the theory to be false, not nonsense. We have in fact been given no good reason to suppose that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsense. It is difficult to avoid the impression that this is the point at which the therapeutic reading makes Wittgenstein “chicken out”: the sentences of the *Tractatus* are to be given sufficient sense to inform us of their own nonsensicality.

The situation is quite different from that which arises for the orthodox reading of the *Tractatus*. It is the orthodox reading that is fully “resolute” at this point. Once we allow the idea that Wittgenstein may use nonsense sentences to draw attention to features of language and reality, then the account runs along the following lines: Wittgenstein wishes to bring us to see something that is manifest in our significant use of language, but that cannot be properly described by the sentences of that language. He therefore presents an account that apparently describes those features in order to bring us to appreciate “what can be shown but not said.” Once he succeeds, once we “understand Wittgenstein,” we both recognize those features and why they cannot be put into words. We therefore realize that the sentences that had led us to that point could not describe what we had been brought to see, and it is because they had been given no other sense that would be relevant in the context of the *Tractatus* that we realize that they are nonsense. It is precisely as baffled attempts to say something that can only be shown that they are exposed as nonsense.

But there are a number of other reasons for regarding the approach adopted by Diamond and Conant to be wrongheaded. I shall here briefly indicate some of the main ones.

(1) What is for me the most important reason is also the one that is most difficult to argue. For me, this is an immensely trivializing account of Wittgenstein’s work. For most people engaged in working on the *Tractatus* it is because we believe it to contain a large number of profound discussions of the nature of logic, language, and the relation of language to reality, which is the outcome of the sustained and difficult exploration that we find reflected in *The Notebooks*. It contains a huge number of deep insights which are the starting point for further philosophical reflection. Even if, in addition to the insights, there is a great deal that is wrong with what he says, it is almost invariably the outcome of profound and powerful argument, presenting us with a deep challenge to say why it is wrong. On the present account all this is just an illusion: nothing is shown, no insights are vouchsafed, other than that we have been led on a wild goose chase. If the work
is intended as “therapy,” it looks a highly perverse way to set about it, and, not surprisingly, the book has to be regarded as an unmitigated failure, since the great majority of its readers, far from being cured by the book, have as a result of reading it been persuaded to take seriously precisely the ideas that they were meant to be freed of. Not until Diamond and Conant wrote did anyone even suspect that they were undergoing therapy, let alone being cured. But, quite apart from the queerness of the alleged therapy, what we are being offered looks something quite paltry by comparison with what most of us believe we have learnt from our engagement with the book. For me at any rate, the book, viewed this way, would no longer be the major work of philosophy I have always believed it to be, but just an eccentric sport in the history of philosophy.

(2) At first sight, the account we are now considering has apparently made itself irrefutable, since the citation of any text from the *Tractatus* that seems to contradict it can be dismissed as simply part of the ladder that we are meant to throw away. There is however always the larger question of the way in which this interpretation would fit in with what else we know about Wittgenstein and his writings. Here, all that we are offered is the suggestion that a “therapeutic” reading would somehow establish a continuity between the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein’s later work. This suggests to me a deep misunderstanding both of the *Tractatus* and of the sense in which the *Investigations* may be regarded as therapeutic in intent. Only the former point is my present concern. Although I disagree with many of the details of his presentation, Peter Hacker has marshalled an overwhelming case for thinking that those of us who believe Wittgenstein was offering us a vision of the way language related to reality—simple objects, elementary propositions mirroring states of affairs and the rest—are thinking of the book in precisely the same way that he himself did. Without rehearsing his evidence, I shall just cite here one example. When Wittgenstein returned to philosophy in the early 1930s his first substantial writing was what has now been published as the *Philosophical Remarks*. In that we find Wittgenstein at first attempting to modify and repair the *Tractatus* account of the relation of language to reality, before finally subjecting it to criticisms that led him to dismantle it. If the moral of the *Tractatus* was meant to be, in Ricketts’s words “When we throw away the ladder, we give up attempts to state what this conception of representation and truth demands of the world,” this is completely unintelligible: why was Wittgenstein continuing the attempt? It appears that even in his own case the therapy was a complete failure, and one could only say “Physician, heal thyself.”

The challenge that Hacker has made here seems to me simple and decisive, and yet I know of nowhere where the proponents of the therapeutic reading even attempt to address it. Unless they do so, their interpretation of the *Tractatus* is spinning in the void, out of touch with the rest of what Wittgenstein actually said outside the *Tractatus*.

(3) There is one particular aspect of the “external evidence” for the interpretation of the *Tractatus* that is particularly important here. Before returning to
Cambridge, Wittgenstein had dealings with the Vienna Circle. Despite the fact that he was initially welcomed by them as someone who had pioneered their opposition to metaphysics, there soon developed on both sides a recognition that there was a deep incompatibility between what they were both saying. This is most naturally understood as residing in the fact that there was a deep difference in their respective oppositions to traditional metaphysics: for them traditional metaphysics was simply nonsense, but for Wittgenstein what was wrong with traditional metaphysics was that it tried to present a theory—to say what could only be shown. On the interpretation we are now considering, there is nothing shown, there is just a therapeutic project to disabuse us of the temptation to do metaphysics. Conant and Diamond both wish to distance Wittgenstein’s position from that of the Vienna Circle, but where is the difference now supposed to be? It now seems the only difference is the trivial one that, while agreeing with them that all metaphysics was simply nonsense, he thought it worthwhile to engage in his therapeutic project—which, whatever they made of it, scarcely indicates any difference of philosophical belief from their own.

(4) The account is presented as resting on a distinction between a “frame” and the rest of the *Tractatus*. The frame—initially the preface and 6.54—are those sentences in which Wittgenstein speaks *in propria persona*, guiding us how to read the rest of the book. Thus, instead of the nonsense sentences of the *Tractatus* being revealed as nonsense by their spontaneous combustion, some of the sentences of the book are treated in a quite different way from the others, where the sentences thus treated are far from exhausted by the initial account of the frame. These propositions (e.g. the context principle at 3.314, the difference between formal concepts and genuine concepts at 4.126, the account of nonsense at 5.4733, and the claim that there is only logical necessity at 6.37) are given critical significance in the whole exposition. Despite the apparently global nature of Wittgenstein’s claim that his sentences are nonsense at 6.54, these propositions are plucked as brands from the burning, and treated as significant propositions, registering crucial philosophical insights—insights that have the consequence that some of the other sentences of the book are nonsense. Such propositions, called by these authors the “frame,” provide the clues necessary for interpreting the rest of the book.

There are a number of reasons why such a separation of some sentences in the *Tractatus* from the others in this way is quite unacceptable, even apart from the fact that it was not what we are led to expect from 6.54. Even if everyone will allow Wittgenstein a decent amount of poetic licence, so that trivial exceptions, such as those sentences in which Wittgenstein simply mentions what Frege or Russell has said, will be allowed to be significant, 6.54 seems to suggest that there was something nonsensical about everything that has led up to that point. Once we try to exempt quite crucial elements in the previous exposition from this universal stricture, we run into difficulties on all sides. In the first place, the book now seems to be atrociously written. We now have sentences whose status is utterly different jumbled randomly together: significant claims being apparently commented on by
nonsense sentences and vice versa. The book is now radically disorganized, with the crucial methodological remarks appearing scattered without rhyme or reason. But the point here is not merely stylistic: there are complex relations of dependence between the propositions of the *Tractatus* that explain their position within the structure, and what will frequently occur when one examines the propositions which here are presented as the “frame” is that they are presented in the book as justified by sentences that are presumably nonsense. Let us look at one straightforward example. Conant attaches great significance to 4.111–4.112, but these propositions are part of a sequence and appear quite intelligibly as a gloss on 4.1:

4.1 A proposition represents the existence or non-existence of states of affairs.

4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or, the totality of the natural sciences).

4.111 Philosophy is not a natural science.
    (The word “philosophy” must mean something, which stands above or below, but not alongside the natural sciences.)

4.112 The aim of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.
    Philosophy is not a doctrine, but an activity.
    A work of philosophy consists essentially in elucidations.
    The result of philosophy is not “philosophical propositions,” but the clarification of propositions.
    Philosophy is to make clear and sharply to delimit propositions which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.

4.1121 Psychology is no nearer to philosophy than any other natural science.

It is obvious that this is intended as a continuous train of thought, in which the central theme is the settling of a boundary dispute, separating philosophy off completely from science. But it takes its point of departure in 4.1—every proposition being the representation of the existence and non-existence of states of affairs. The thought is as follows: *every* significant proposition is concerned with contingent matters of fact—which states of affairs exist and which do not—something that it is the business of the natural sciences to find out. Hence if we are not to confuse the task of philosophy with something that is properly speaking the business of the natural sciences, we see that philosophy cannot be seen as having a domain of propositions that belong especially to it—since *all* propositions are the business of the natural scientist. Hence we have to see the philosophical task differently—as not establishing propositions at all, but as clarifying what is going on when people put forward propositions. This is a clear line of thought, but it is presented naturally as flowing from 4.1. However, if any of the
propositions of the *Tractatus* are to count as nonsense by Wittgenstein’s criteria, 4.1 is surely one such. But unless 4.1 is in play, 4.111 and 4.112 stand in mid-air without justification or explanation. Conant is therefore faced with an unpalatable alternative. Either 4.1 is to be regarded as a significant proposition, in which case it becomes completely obscure which propositions, if any, belong to the ladder we are meant to throw away; or, as actually happens, 4.111 has to be interpreted quite out of context, as an oracular pronouncement of Wittgenstein’s, coming from nowhere, and simply presented on a take it or leave it basis. From this perspective, e.g. an innocent word like “Erläuterung” suddenly becomes a quasi-technical term to be glossed by 6.54, taking the remark out of its original context, where it no longer has a home, and placed in an alien one.

Time and again, remarks that are treated by Conant or Diamond as registering insights in terms of which we can see that the purported “metaphysics” of the *Tractatus* is merely a nonsensical illusion are most naturally understood as consequences of that very metaphysics. Cut adrift from that “metaphysics,” these “insights” simply appear as dogmatic assertions on Wittgenstein’s part, which no one who is not simply overawed by Wittgenstein is going to acquiesce in without further explanation. Remarks such as “there is only logical necessity” or “the result of philosophy is not ‘philosophical propositions’” run counter to deeply engrained ways of thinking and talking. It is only when we see them in context that we do not simply write them off—the first as a “Humean prejudice” and the second as the result of an unduly narrow conception of “proposition,” say. But the context in which such remarks make sense and have purchase is when we see them as part of the gradual unfolding of the vision announced in the very opening sentences of the book (“The world is everything which is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things . . .”). It is because the world is *everything* that is the case, and the totality of what is the case is the totality of facts of the kind that it is the business of the natural scientist to find out, that the general form of proposition will be developed in such a way as to leave no room for any necessary truths other than empty tautologies, and to leave no propositions as the business of the philosopher as opposed to the natural scientist. The attempt to extricate certain sentences as “frame” sentences from the rest, so that the rest will be shown to be nonsense by that frame, is in this way always to fail to appreciate the extent to which those “frame sentences” are themselves put forward only as consequences of such clear examples of nonsense as “The world is the totality of facts.”

The most serious difficulty of all, however, is that Wittgenstein’s reasons for regarding his sentences as nonsense upon examination apply with full force to the great majority of the sentences that have here been singled out as belonging to the “frame.” I shall look here at two of the plainest examples. Diamond talks of “There is only logical necessity” (6.37) as being “a wonderful remark,”64 but continues that “it is ironically self-destructive.”65 It is indeed, though not quite for the somewhat obscure reasons she herself gives. It is self-destructive precisely because it itself is not something that could be shown on logical grounds alone, but equally it is put
forward not as a contingent matter of fact but as itself a necessary truth, thus becoming its own counter-example. Therefore, if Wittgenstein’s remark is not simply to be rejected as self-contradictory, it can only be because in putting forward the remark he was drawing attention to something that could not be said, but that was shown by the fact that the only necessary propositions allowed for by the general form of proposition were tautologies and contradictions. But the sentence itself then has to count as nonsense to draw our attention to what cannot be said. In a very similar way, the sentences in which Wittgenstein introduces the distinction between formal concepts and genuine concepts are self-defeating. Consider the sentence which is critical for the whole of the present debate from 4.26:

If something falls under a formal concept as its object, this cannot be expressed by a proposition. But it is shown in the symbol for the object itself.

Here the first clause is general, and ought to have as its substitution instances of such propositions as “A is an object,” yielding “If A is an object [falls under the formal concept object], then we cannot express the proposition that A is an object”—which is palpably self-defeating: the consequent takes away the possibility of making sense of the antecedent. In this kind of way the whole introduction of the distinction between formal concepts and genuine concepts runs into the problem of the distinction itself declaring it to be impossible to say what we are apparently saying when we draw the distinction. Hence it turns out that not only is it impossible to say that something falls under a formal concept, it is impossible to say that it is impossible to say that. Confronted by this paradoxical situation we have no alternative but to declare the whole language used in the attempt to introduce the distinction to be nonsensical. If we then adhere to an austere nonsense, and further claim that all we can do with a nonsense sentence is expose the illusion that it makes sense, we cannot say that Wittgenstein has introduced a notion of “formal concept” at all, and the whole debate cannot even get off the ground.66

What we see then are what are, to my mind, a wide range of insuperable difficulties besetting the therapeutic interpretation on the one hand, and on the other hand the weight of the claim made by the therapeutic interpreters that we must take 6.54 seriously, and not make Wittgenstein “chicken out” or be “irresolute.” Only if there were compelling reason to think that there was no good way for the orthodox reading to take the measure of the final paragraphs of the Tractatus would we have any reason to regard the therapeutic reading as an interpretation with any merit.
V. Throwing Away the Ladder

Therefore the final debt I have to discharge is to say how we are to understand the final paragraphs. In the light of what has gone before, this is actually quite straightforward. As I read them, the authors with whom I am concerned tend to run together three different worries: whether it makes sense to talk at all of “features of reality” that cannot be put into words, whether that which cannot be said can be thought, and whether Wittgenstein can be regarded as having successfully specified features of reality by using sentences that are confessedly nonsensical. These are all important worries, and, although I am primarily concerned here with the third, and although it is the third point to which they direct most of their attention, as providing the linchpin for their argument for a therapeutic reading of the *Tractatus*, I should at least briefly address the other two.

1. When Wittgenstein introduces the notion of features (*Züge*), he says that he is doing so in the sense in which we speak of someone’s facial features (4.1221). Although that is obviously only an analogy, it is a useful one. Someone’s features are precisely those which are familiar to everyone, and, in a straightforward sense, we may know what someone looks like, even though we are characteristically unable to put what we know into words—at least in the sense that it is only with great difficulty that we can describe someone we know to someone else in such a way that they will be able to recognize them from our description, while we ourselves manifest our knowledge of what they look like by our practical everyday instant recognition of them. In such a situation, there are features of reality with which we are all familiar, and which we are typically unable to put into words, but where we manifest our grasp of those features in our everyday transactions with people. The major difference between this and Wittgenstein’s concern with features of reality which show themselves in our use of words, and where we show our knowledge and understanding of those features in our ability to use language significantly, is that in the latter case we are in principle unable to say what those features are and can manifest our grasp of those features only in our mastery of the significant use of language. However, since Wittgenstein provides strong arguments why this is so, the onus is very much on those who recoil from the idea of ineffable features of reality to show why that recoil is more than a prejudice.

2. If this work is of value, it consists in two things. First, that thoughts are expressed in it, and the value will be greater the better the thoughts are expressed.

4.1 A thought is a significant [*sinnvolle*] proposition.

6.54 . . . anyone who understands me finally recognizes that my sentences are nonsense [*unsinnig*].
There is a clear, and surely deliberate, tension between these three claims that Wittgenstein makes, whatever we do with that tension. The simplest resolution of the tension would be to say that the first of these quotations was intended ironically, as the first stage in the therapeutic process, and that eventually we would recognize that Wittgenstein had not been expressing thoughts at all. But, although the simplest resolution, it is surely highly implausible. “The Preface” is the most unnatural element in the book to read ironically, particularly in the case of the present text, where Wittgenstein continues:

Here I am conscious of having fallen far short of what is possible—simply because my powers are insufficient to master the task. May others come and do it better.70

To interpret the last sentence ironically would involve ascribing to Wittgenstein a perverse sense of humor that would be completely out of character. The natural way to read the sentences from this part of the Preface is that Wittgenstein is presenting the book as the product of hard intellectual labor, but whose outcome presented him with an intolerable problem of putting into words what he had seen—particularly as it was integral to what he had seen that any direct presentation of that outcome was impossible.

One thing is clear: we cannot present Wittgenstein as holding that the sentence “Objects form the substance of the world” is nonsense, and hence that one could not say “Objects form the substance of the world,” but that nevertheless that was what he thought.71 If “Objects form the substance of the world” is nonsense, “Wittgenstein thought that objects form the substance of the world” is nonsense.

What we have to say is something along the lines of Wittgenstein’s letter to Russell, in which he wrote:

A proposition e.g. $\varphi(a, b)$ or $(\exists \varphi, x, y)$ doesn’t say that there are two things, it says something quite different; but whether it’s true or false, it SHOWS what you want to express by saying “there are 2 things.”72

This careful formulation avoids saying that “There are two things” either says or shows anything—it is and remains simply nonsense, while at the same time acknowledging the (psychological) fact that there are circumstances in which we find precisely these words appropriate. Although that is obviously initially a psychological fact, there is no reason why that fact may not itself be induced by genuine understanding.73

Let us suppose that there is that which is shown by our significant use of language, but something that, for the reasons I sketched in the opening section of this article, cannot be expressed propositionally. Let us suppose further that Wittgenstein believes himself to have insight into what can only be shown, and wishes to communicate what we has seen. This is certainly the natural way to read
both the *Tractatus* and all of the surrounding remarks made by Wittgenstein at the
time. Should we call the having of such insights “thinking”? On a legalistic
interpretation of §4, no. But that only shows that §4 is concerned with giving an
account of *thinking that p*. The concept of *thinking* is, however, a fluid concept,
and there are a wide variety of contexts in which it is entirely appropriate to speak
of someone thinking where you cannot render what is going on simply by a direct
propositional content to their thought. Did Schubert think when he composed
*Winterreise*? And, if he did, does that mean that a series of propositions accompanied
his composition *sotto voce*? Do chess players think? If so, do we have to suppose
that they will always be able to produce propositions that justify their moves? Is it
the case that a user of metaphor will always be able to produce a propositional
prose equivalent of their metaphor? In the light of this the most we can conclude
from this excursion into “What cannot be said, cannot be thought” is something
that ought to be common ground between the orthodox reading of the *Tractatus*
and their “therapeutic” opponents—namely, that if “Objects form the substance
of the world” is nonsense, then whatever it was that Wittgenstein sought to convey
when he wrote this, it was not his thought that objects form the substance of the
world. But that is a very long way from saying either that he was deluded in
thinking that he was conveying something by writing this, or else that his only
purpose in writing this was to tap into an illusion to which we are all prone, in
order subsequently to expose it as such.

How are we to understand the final paragraphs of the *Tractatus*, and in particular
the metaphor of “throwing away the ladder” at 6.54? For Conant this is simple:

> The sign that we have understood the author of the work is that we can
> throw the ladder we have climbed up away. That is to say, we have finished
> the work, and the work is finished with us, when we are able to *throw* the
> sentences in the body of the work—sentences about “the limits of language”
> and the unsayable things which lie beyond them—*away*.74

Here he has just made clear that what he means by this is that the book up to this
point is an exercise whose purpose is purely to lead us to recognize that these
sentences are simply nonsense, and hence that “throwing them away” is being
freed from the illusion that they contain profound insights into the nature of logic,
language and reality.

The only thing that gives any plausibility to this interpretation is the assumption
that you can do nothing with a nonsense sentence, that you cannot use it to
communicate—or rather that the only thing that you could use it for is the minimal
use required by the therapeutic reading, that you could use it to bring someone
to see that it was nonsense. This assumption is supposed to be justified by the stress
on the fact that there is no such thing as “substantial nonsense”: all nonsense is
“simply nonsense.” However, the indisputable point that, as far as meaning is
concerned, all nonsense is on a par only justifies the claim that you can do nothing
with a nonsense sentence if one refuses to draw any distinction between the
meaning and the use of a sentence. But, whatever can be said for a simple refusal
to draw any distinction between the meaning of a sentence and the use some-
one makes of it, it is at the very least highly unTractarian not to draw one. If,
however, we think again of Bronstein’s annotation, then it is clear that “Bj10
would have been even stronger” lacks any meaning—is simply nonsense—and,
what is more, is nonsense in virtue of the criterion preferred by Diamond and
Conant. That is to say, it is nonsense “because we have given no meaning to some
of its constituent parts” (5.4733). But equally clearly that does not prevent
Bronstein from giving the sentence a use—a use in which he leads us to appreciate
certain features of reality. It is by analogy with this that we may best understand
both what Wittgenstein is up to in the body of the text, and also what he means
by “throwing away the ladder.”

In his Introduction, Russell wrote:

In accordance with this principle the things that have to be said in leading
the reader to understand Mr Wittgenstein’s theory are all of them things
which that theory itself condemns as meaningless. With this proviso we will
endeavour to convey the picture of the world which seems to underlie his
system.

Ignoring any pedantic scruples we may have about Russell’s use of the word
“theory,” this seems to me exactly right, and right on a fundamental point where
Diamond and Conant are wrong. What Russell is saying here is something that
they cannot in the nature of the case say. That is, Russell presents the reader as being
led by Wittgenstein’s use of nonsense sentences to see something, and then, as a
result of what they have been led to see, coming to appreciate that the sentences that led
them there were nonsense. The question here is: “What leads us to recognize that
the sentences of the Tractatus are nonsense?” It is to that question that I believe
Conant and Diamond can give no adequate answer. When we say that “There are
objects” is nonsense, we are not saying that that string of words is necessarily
nonsense. As Wittgenstein stresses, this string of words is not nonsense in itself.
There are plenty of ways in which this sentence could have a meaning: for instance
my dictionary gives as a possible meaning of the word “object,” “a deplorable
spectacle,” and there is no good reason to regard the sentence “There are objects,”
taken in that way, as anything other than a straightforward significant proposition.
Clearly that meaning is irrelevant—what we mean when we say “There are objects”
is nonsense is that these words can be given no appropriate meaning. But what in
this context is meant by “no appropriate meaning”—appropriate to what?

There are two natural answers to this question, neither of which seems available
to Conant or Diamond. The first, most obvious, answer is that the word “object”
is to be given the meaning that is consistent with Wittgenstein’s use of the word
in the rest of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein is clearly using the word in a way that is far from the everyday use, but that emerges from the problem-context in which he and Russell were working. It is therefore the word “object” being used in a way whose meaning is contextually established by Wittgenstein by the remarks he makes using the word. The sentences in which he establishes that meaning—above all the second main section of the *Tractatus*—are, however, among the clearest examples in the whole book of sentences which the reader is intended to recognize as simply nonsense. On the orthodox interpretation, such as that indicated by the passage from Russell just quoted, that is not an insuperable problem. These sentences are “the things that have to be said in leading the reader to understand Mr Wittgenstein’s theory”: nonsense sentences are here assigned a role in bringing the reader to see Wittgenstein’s picture of the relation of language to reality, and we can gather how he is understanding such a word as “object” from its place within that picture. However, by contrast, these sentences, as far as meaning is concerned, are just gibberish—and simply to be rejected on the basis “nonsense is nonsense.” Hence it is impossible to see how we gather from them how Wittgenstein is understanding the word “object” in such a way that we can judge that on that understanding “There are objects” is nonsense. We have on this account been deprived of the yardstick of correct usage to condemn particular sentences as nonsense in accordance with that usage.

The second answer is that indicated by Russell—that the sentences of the *Tractatus* “condemn themselves” as nonsense. It is that initially paradoxical answer which goes to the heart of what Wittgenstein is about in the *Tractatus*. As we shall see, it is also an answer that, by implication, is not available to Conant and Diamond—“piggly wiggle” cannot by any stretch of the imagination be seen as “condemning itself as nonsense.”

The appearance of paradox emerges if you put the answer in the following crude form: “Once you understand the sentences, you realize that they imply that they are themselves nonsense.” It is at bottom because Conant and Diamond believe that the proponents of the orthodox reading of the *Tractatus* are committed to something like that crude formulation that they are led to reject that reading. Of course, the crude formulation cannot stand: if the sentences are nonsense, there is no such thing as understanding them, and equally it makes no sense to talk of them as “implying” anything whatever.

To replace that crude formulation by something better we need to look at the concrete detail of what is going on. The *Tractatus* presents itself as a long and sustained argument for the general form of proposition given at §6, a variable ranging over every possible significant proposition. However, we see that none of the sentences that have led to the general form of proposition at §6, nor even §6 itself, can be made to conform to the formula given there: the sentence “Every proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions” cannot be made out to be analyzable as itself a truth-function of elementary propositions. Hence, if the purpose of establishing the general form of proposition was to give an exhaustive
account of what we could significantly say, it seems that on its own terms it is something that cannot be significantly said. This is the paradoxical situation we need to understand: that §6 apparently gives us the grounds we have for declaring §6 to be nonsense. If §6 is indeed nonsense, then it does not tell us what the general form of proposition is, and hence seems to give us no grounds for believing that it itself is excluded from the general form of proposition. There are a large number of sentences of the Tractatus that, like §6, are in this way directly “self-refuting”—sentences that apparently lay down formal conditions that any significant proposition must satisfy, but where the propositions themselves could not satisfy the very conditions they posit.78 The intriguing question is whether 6.54 is not, on reflection, as self-refuting as any other proposition of the Tractatus. Now the fact that a sentence is “self-refuting” in this way does not prove it is nonsense. All that can be concluded from such self-refutation is that if the proposition is significant then it is necessarily false. After all, there are a large number of sentences—“Every sentence is nonsense,” “Every significant sentence is in the passive voice” . . . —that have the requisite power of self-refutation, but where that does not show that the propositions in question are nonsense, simply that they are blatant falsehoods. We seem to be saying that it is only in so far as we give credence to §6 that it reveals itself to be nonsense! The notion of a sentence that “says of itself that it is nonsense” still remains an elusive and unsatisfactory notion.

We therefore need to give a somewhat different account of what is going on, when we talk of the sentences as “condemning themselves as nonsense”. We need a reading that takes seriously the idea that, whether or not the reader realizes it, from the very outset Wittgenstein is self-consciously using sentences that are nonsensical. The reason for this is neither perversity nor some therapeutic goal, but because of his conviction that what he wished to communicate could not be conveyed by normal means, but only indirectly. This conviction was prompted initially by reflection on Russell’s theory of types and the way in which Russell, in order to set up the type theory, was constantly forced to use sentences that violated the very restrictions that the theory itself imposed. It is in Principia Mathematica that we may find the prototype for the “self-refuting sentences” of the Tractatus. But what Russell was unwittingly forced into, Wittgenstein was doing self-consciously. The confused presentation we find in Principia— the appeals to the meanings of signs in order to establish the rules for their significant use as though we had access to those meanings independently of the way the signs for those meanings functioned, the implicit use of quantifiers that range over entities of different type etc.—were for Wittgenstein not accidental but integral to the very project Russell had embarked on. As Wittgenstein continually stresses, the kinds of things that Russell was talking about were things that could not be described in language using significant propositions, but which were instead shown by the way the symbols of the language actually work.

The purpose of the Tractatus is to specify what it is that can only be shown in this way, and why it can only be shown. If he is to do so, and do so in a way that
actually works, he must depart from the “only strictly correct method” (6.53) of bringing someone to see that they had given no meaning to what they had said when they attempted to say what could only be shown. He then has no alternative but to stop working to rule and to use sentences that are nonsense, but to use them in such a way as to bring to the reader’s attention both those features of the way that language works that cannot be put into words, and why they cannot be put into words. This “incorrect” method can work precisely because we are all tacitly aware of those features—as is shown by our ability to negotiate the significant use of language. If Wittgenstein succeeds, then the reader will come both to appreciate what those features are, and why they cannot be described in significant propositions. This will lead to a reappraisal of the sentences that led to this point—that they themselves cannot be regarded as expressing significant propositions, precisely because if they were so regarded they would have to be describing those very features that can’t be described. The sentences serve to draw attention to those features of the way language relates to reality that condemn the sentences themselves as nonsense. Thus §6 serves to draw attention to the criteria that we actually employ in the concrete case for deciding what is and what is not a significant proposition, for distinguishing sense from nonsense, and what those criteria amount to. If it succeeds, then we realize that, for that very reason, §6 cannot be regarded as a correct statement of the general form of proposition, which is now seen as something that can only be shown, shown by the way we do in fact distinguish what is and what is not a significant proposition. Hence it is a mark of having understood Wittgenstein that “anyone who understands me finally recognizes my sentences as nonsense.” The nonsense sentences of the Tractatus serve as the catalyst whereby the reader comes to see what can only be shown. These sentences serve as a ladder leading to our seeing these features, but doing so in such a way that we appreciate that the sentences that have led us there, the ladder we have climbed, cannot be seen as appropriately describing what they initially seemed to describe, because no sentences could appropriately do that. We therefore finally “throw away the ladder”: we recognize what it is that these sentences have brought us to see, but finally dispense with the sentences themselves after recognizing that, far from offering us a true metaphysical theory, they are simply nonsense.

How does what I have just said differ from what Conant and Diamond are saying? They diverge in the following vital respect. For them the book is purely designed to expose an illusion: the sentences of the Tractatus are sentences that are not designed to lead to any metaphysical insight, other than that the metaphysical project they are concerned with leads to nonsense and hence is impossible. There is nothing that “shows itself,” nothing ineffable, and the idea of “what shows itself” is part of the ladder to be thrown away. However, the crucial element in what I have said is that it is precisely because the sentences of the Tractatus can, for all their nonsensicality, draw attention to what shows itself, that they succeed in finally leading the reader to recognize them themselves as nonsense. Remove the idea of what shows itself and you remove the dialectical structure of the entire book—
the way in which Wittgenstein first leads us to see what can only be shown in order then to see that since what we have seen can only be shown, the sentences which led us there cannot be regarded as significant propositions, but as sentences condemned as nonsense by what they themselves have led us to see—a ladder to be dispensed with once it has fulfilled its function. The reader then says of Wittgenstein what he says of solipsism: “What Wittgenstein is after [meint] is quite right, only it can’t be said, but shows itself” (5.62).

However, to reiterate, the only reason we are being given for rejecting the idea that there is that which can only be shown, but not said, is that the sentences in which Wittgenstein seeks to bring this to our notice are nonsense, einfach Unsinn. That fact, however, would lead to the rejection of the idea that they can serve to allow the reader to see what can only be shown, only if it were to follow from the fact that a sentence had no meaning that it could have no use. Whereas in fact we use nonsense sentences all the time, and to good purpose.

Notes
1 Vermischte Bemerkungen (Culture and Value), p. 38. My translation.
2 I depart from custom here in translating “Satz” as sentence, not because I have an axe to grind but simply because there is an oddity to my ear in describing something which is nonsense as a proposition.
3 Letter to Russell, August 19, 1919.
4 Tractatus, Introduction, p. 22. Since Wittgenstein was highly unspecific in his angry reaction to Russell’s Introduction to the book, it is impossible to be dogmatic as to what he had in mind, but it may well be this part of what Russell wrote that most prompted Wittgenstein to describe the Introduction as “superficiality and misunderstanding” (Letter to Russell, May 6, 1920). In his first extended discussion of “what could be shown but not said,” the notes dictated to G.E. Moore in Norway in 1914 (Notebooks 1914–16, p. 108), Wittgenstein had already blocked off Russell’s “resolution” of the difficulty: “In order that you should have a language which can express or say everything that can be said, this language must have certain properties; and when this is the case, that it has them can no longer be said in that or any language.” It should be noted that in earlier parts of the Introduction Russell had expressed himself in ways that were both more insightful and at least apparently more sympathetic to Wittgenstein’s concerns.
6 It is worthwhile stressing something that is emphasized in the excellent discussion between A.W. Moore and Peter Sullivan, “Ineffability and Nonsense,” Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 2003, 77:1, pp. 165–223. There is extraordinary diversity, and disagreement, among the authors who are grouped together by the advocates of the “therapeutic” reading of the Tractatus as “orthodox” commentators. As a result, a tendency in this debate to cite one “orthodox” commentator who makes an infelicitous remark as evidence that this is what orthodox commentators believe is radically misguided. In particular, the differences in the way the crucial passages are interpreted by “orthodox” interpreters, such as Peter Hacker, who regard Wittgenstein’s position as indefensible, and those, such as Elizabeth Anscombe, who seek to defend it, are every bit as great as the differences between them and the advocates of “the New Wittgenstein.”


11 One reason for thinking that there are distinct strands in Wittgenstein’s thought here is that some of the ideas that follow are much more directly tied than others to the way Wittgenstein thought language worked in the Tractatus. As a result, some of the ideas will survive the rejection of particular aspects of the Tractarian account of the relation of language to reality more readily than others. Above all, some of these ideas depend upon the specific version of the general form of proposition that we find in the Tractatus, whereas other strands in Wittgenstein’s thought here will survive into Philosophical Investigations, where he explicitly rejects the idea of the general form of proposition.

12 Because of this variety, it is, I believe, a definite mistake to try to reduce the ways in which we are meant to learn from the nonsensical sentences in the Tractatus to one single formula. Thus when A.W. Moore writes: “Does he not . . . intend his sentences to produce their effect by means of the reader’s ultimate failure, in trying to construe them as the network of truth-evaluable statements that they appear to be, to make anything of them?” (“Ineffability and Nonsense,” p. 183), that description seems to fit some parts of the Tractatus (e.g. “The world is my world”) much better than others. There is a great deal in Moore’s article with which I am sympathetic. However, if I understand him, he seems to wish to reduce what Wittgenstein wishes us to learn from the Tractatus to “a capacity to recognise as nonsense not only the nonsense in the Tractatus, but other, similar ‘metaphysical twaddle’” (p. 184). If that were all, it is no surprise that he is led to say, borrowing a phrase of David Wiggins, that “suddenly it seems that what makes the difference between [the traditional reading and the new reading] has the width of a knife edge” (p. 180). But although recognizing philosophical nonsense for what it is was undoubtedly a central aspect of what Wittgenstein was wishing to bring us to see, it is clear to me that in addition to this negative task Wittgenstein also had in mind a positive goal which he later characterized as “grasping the essence of the world” (Philosophical Remarks, p. 85): “philosophy as custodian of grammar can in fact grasp the essence of the world, only not in propositions of language, but in rules for this language which exclude nonsensical combinations of signs.” I take the dispute between the traditional reading and the new reading to be over the question whether there is this positive aspect to the Tractatus, in addition to its undoubted negative aspect.

13 Vermischte Bemerkungen, p. 27.

14 It is instructive to compare this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought with Quine’s frequent insistence on the “inscrutability of reference.”

15 Letter to Russell August, 1919, from Cambridge Letters, p. 126. The opening quotation is Russell’s comment to which Wittgenstein is replying.

16 Preface, p. 27.


20 If we were to read “Nothing is F” as “No thing is F,” it would then be equivalent to the absurd “Anything [or ‘Any thing’] that is F is not a thing.”

21 It should be mentioned that for Wittgenstein the dodge of trying to render “There are objects” by “(∃x) (x = x)” is ruled out by his argument that identity is not a relation.

22 I am almost exclusively concerned with the logical aspects of the showing/saying distinction. There is considerable evidence that Wittgenstein himself regarded the final remarks about ethics and religion as the most important aspect of the *Tractatus*. By comparison with the earlier parts of the book, I find these remarks deeply unsatisfactory. Sir Arthur Sullivan wanted to be remembered for his church music, but it does not follow that people who have preferred the Savoy operas have made any mistake.

23 In the rest of this article I shall not be concerned with the remarks about ethics and religion, but there is a question to be addressed to Diamond in particular. She does not for me succeed in making her position clear in articles like “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of the *Tractatus*” (her contribution to *The New Wittgenstein*, pp. 149–173) but there appears to be a sharp contrast between the brusque “Nonsense is Nonsense” approach that she adopts in general in her interpretation of the *Tractatus*—the approach that I am principally concerned with here—and the far gentler treatment of the “nonsense” remarks about ethics and religion—here we do seem on her view to have nonsense sentences which nevertheless point to something. The question is: is there an inconsistency here? If so, which of her positions should be modified? If not, how are her remarks to be reconciled?

24 I leave it as an open question whether Wittgenstein may not be joining up with the tradition of mystical theology in the final remarks about God at 6.432. My main concern is with the earlier references to what cannot be said but only shown.

25 Cf. 5.5562:

> “If we know on purely logical grounds that there must be elementary propositions, then this must be known by everyone who understands propositions in their unanalysed form.”

26 *Tractatus*, Preface, p. 27.

27 Cf., e.g. Peter Carruthers, *The Metaphysics of the Tractatus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 5: “Nevertheless, Wittgenstein thinks that tautologies and contradictions (and even, in some obscure way, the nonsensical propositions of philosophy, since these can help us to see the world aright—6.54) can *show* us something about the essential structure of language and the world.” Or Cf. R.J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein*, 2nd edn, London, Routledge, 1987, p. 102: “3.25 A proposition has one and only one complete analysis.” This proposition seems to be about propositions and say of them that they have one and only one complete analysis. We can call this the *manifest* content of the proposition—using this phrasing to leave open the question whether we have a genuine propositional content. We next notice that this sentence is quite literally nonsensical, but then this very recognition is supposed to show us something. The peculiarity of this situation is that what we are shown is just what was manifestly (though not genuinely) said.


30 “Fool: Have more than thou showest, / Speak less than thou knowest, / Lend less than thou owest, / Ride more than thou goest, / Learn more than thou trouwest, / Set less than thou throwest, / Leave thy drink and thy whore, / And keep in-a-door, / And thou shalt have more /
Than two tens to a score. / Kent: This is nothing, fool. / Fool: Then ’tis like the breath of an unsee’d lawyer; you gave me nothing for’t. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle. / Lear: Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing” (King Lear, I.iv).

31 Because of that variation, I am more concerned to express my disagreement with a position than a particular author. For instance, many of the remarks made by Diamond in particular could be interpreted from my point of view in meliorem partem, and many of the authors who ascribe to what I am calling the “orthodox” or “natural” reading express themselves so incautiously that I would side with Diamond against them. At the very least, she has done Tractatus studies the service of stressing that we must take seriously that when Wittgenstein says “nonsense,” he means “nonsense” and not, e.g., “nonsense in a technical sense,” whatever that may mean.

32 Thomas Ricketts, “Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense,” in H. Sluga and D. Stern, eds., The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, section V. (In line with the previous note, this passage could be read in such a way that it could be accepted by the most “traditional” interpreter of the Tractatus.)


34 It seems to me that Russell’s presentation of the Theory of Types is a much more plausible target for Wittgenstein’s criticism than Frege, but even Russell would not say that there was such a thing as significant nonsense. The most that could be said was that he was unwittingly treating sentences that, by his own lights, were nonsense as if they made sense.

35 If the reference is to Grundgesetze I §32, then he claims there that he has set up his Begriffsschrift in such a way that every “legitimately constructed name of a truth value has a sense,” because he has ensured that all the names of which it is composed have a meaning (Bedeutung). It is unclear to me where this differs from what Wittgenstein himself goes on to say.


37 “Saying and Showing,” p. 55.

38 One should also consider in this connection, the following passage from Frege’s Posthumous Writings:

the word “true” has a sense that contributes nothing to the sense of the whole sentence in which it occurs as a predicate. / But it is precisely for this reason that this word seems fitted to indicate the essence of logic. Because of the particular sense that it carried any other adjective would be less suitable for this purpose. So the word “true” seems to make [or “be trying to make”] the impossible possible: it allows what corresponds to the assertoric force to assume the form of a contribution to the thought. And although this attempt miscarries, or rather through the very fact that it miscarries it indicates what is characteristic of logic. And this, from what we have said, seems something essentially different from what is characteristic of aesthetics and ethics. For there is no doubt that the word “beautiful” does indicate the essence of aesthetics, as does “good” that of ethics, whereas “true” only makes an abortive attempt to indicate the essence of logic, since what logic is really concerned with is not contained in the word “true” at all but in the assertoric force with which a sentence is uttered.


To my ear, this passage has a very Wittgensteinian ring.
Note that if the advocates of the therapeutic reading of the *Tractatus* stress that Wittgenstein talks in 6.54 of “anyone who understands me” rather than “anyone who understands my sentences,” so too Frege talks of “a reader who would be ready to meet me halfway” (my italics).


Great Expectations, chapter XXIV.


“Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” pp. 156 ff.

*Philosophical Investigations*, §308.

Richard II, II.iii.86.


In fairness to Diamond, she says (my italics), “you show him that, as far as meaning goes, ‘piggly wiggle’ would do as well as some word he used” (“Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” p. 155).

“Frege and Early Wittgenstein,” p. 197.

“Throwing Away the Ladder,” p. 195.

See e.g., “Throwing Away the Ladder,” pp. 195 ff.

In the fairy story, the Grandfather Clock can both function as a normal clock and talk and think. In one sense of “understand” children understand that perfectly well, without it striking them that what they are reading must be nonsense.

This is Geach’s worry about Wittgenstein’s extension of his idea of what could be shown but not said to ethics and theology. See “Saying and Showing,” pp. 69 ff.

At one point, Diamond says (“Throwing Away the Ladder,” pp. 181 f.): “To speak of features of reality in connection with what shows itself in language is to use a very odd kind of figurative language. That goes also for ‘what shows itself.’” If she had pursued that line of thought further, it might have turned out that I would have had no quarrel with her. From subsequent developments, however, I suspect that the phrase “a very odd kind of figurative language” is intended unnecessarily pejoratively. Such a use of figurative language does of course cry out for careful description.


Cf. “Frege and the Early Wittgenstein,” p. 198: “the illusion of sense is exploded from within.”

Ricketts. “Picture, Logic, and the Limits of Sense.”


Conant also gives the following list, although this is not intended to be exhaustive (“Frege and Early Wittgenstein,” p. 216): The Preface, §§3.32–3.326, 4–4.003, 4.111–4.112, 6.53–6.54.

The originator of this way of dividing the sentences of the *Tractatus* into two may well be Max Black—who splits the sentences into propositions of “formal syntax” regarded as perfectly respectable, and only nonsense in that they are not “empirical remarks” (p. 381) — and those whose “absurdity is irredeemable” (p. 382 of *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1964, pp. 378 ff.). He did not of course advocate that the *Tractatus* be read “therapeutically,” but took 6.54 as simply Wittgenstein announcing his failure to construct the metaphysics he had intended. However, as with Conant and Diamond, the sentences he wishes to salvage

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from the charge of being nonsense include many where Wittgenstein himself would have regarded it as particularly important that we should recognize them as nonsense.

The traditional reading can and should resist any attempt to divide the sentences of the *Tractatus* into two different camps. Even 6.54 should be regarded as an attempt to bring the reader to see something that can only be shown. When Wittgenstein says “anyone who understands me finally recognizes my sentences as nonsense,” it is not as though those sentences are nonsense *per se*. It is not as though we couldn’t give them a sense; it is, rather, that, if we do give them a sense, it is not that sense which Wittgenstein intends. It is only when we see them as misbegotten attempts to put into words what can only be shown that they are revealed as nonsense: but that too is something that can only be shown, not said. To put the point paradoxically, 6.54 should be regarded as nonsensical as any other sentence in the *Tractatus*.

Although Wittgenstein’s use of the decimal numbering of his propositions to indicate the importance he attaches to them does not seem to be infallible, it usually makes reasonable sense. It is noticeable, however, how many of the propositions appealed to most by Conant and Diamond are relegated by the numbering system to a relatively subordinate position by Wittgenstein. Apart from “4,” all of the propositions on Conant’s list have at least two numbers after the decimal place.

“besides, that’s not a regular rule: you invented it just now.” / “It’s the oldest rule in the book,” said the King. / “Then it ought to be Number One,” said Alice.

*(Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, chapter 12)*

64 “Throwing Away the Ladder,” p. 198.
65 Ibid., p. 198.
66 To see how difficult it is to separate out some propositions as “frame sentences” to guide one in the interpretation of the rest, consider the sentence at 4.1272 “So you cannot, e.g., say ‘There are objects’ as one says ‘There are books.’” This sentence initially appears among the significant claims made in the course of the *Tractatus*. However, Wittgenstein does not mean that you cannot utter these words; what we want to say he means is that you cannot say “There are objects,” *giving the words their intended meaning*: but there is no intended meaning, only the illusion of an intended meaning, and the sentence at 4.1272 has to count as much a nonsensical sentence used to bring you to see something as any other sentence in the book. This is one of the main points of 5.4733.

67 It is important to keep such questions separate. Thus Warren Goldfarb characterizes the “irresolute” reading as maintaining that “these sentences, while nonsensical, somehow gesture at something that is going on, some inexpressible state of affairs or true but inexpressible thought” (“Metaphysics and Nonsense”, p. 61). That conflates quite different issues: whether nonsense sentences can “gesture at” something, and whether what they gesture at can be characterized as a state of affairs or a truth. The traditional reading should certainly reject the idea that what is shown but cannot be said is a state of affairs, or a truth, if that means the truth of some proposition.

68 It goes far beyond my present brief to explore this question further in this context, but I would agree with those who would resist the idea that grasping such features of reality could be regarded in any way as a matter of recognizing the truth of certain ineffable propositions about the world.

69 *Tractatus*, Preface, p. 29.
70 Ibid.
71 Cf. “Was He Trying to Whistle it?,” p. 364: “What Wittgenstein is saying to Russell when he denies that one can say that there are $x_0$ objects is precisely *pace* Diamond . . .: *if* there are, all right, *only that there are* has to be expressed—has to be shown—in another way, namely by features of our symbolism.” Hacker here ascribes to
Wittgenstein a conception which Wittgenstein is always careful to avoid in his remarks to Russell. If Wittgenstein were subscribing to this clearly incoherent position, I would have to side with either his detractors, or with those who seek to give him a “therapeutic” way out. But there is absolutely no reason to ascribe such a self-refuting position to Wittgenstein. There is a great deal in Hacker’s article that is very good, and that makes a strong challenge to the therapeutic reading that I have not seen answered. It is therefore to my mind a pity that he unnecessarily ascribes this position to Wittgenstein. He goes on to describe this position as “inconsistent,” but it is worse than that: it is absurd, so absurd that it is not credible that it should ever have been Wittgenstein’s actual position. Since in his correspondence with Russell, Wittgenstein carefully phrases his position so as not to be committed to what Hacker commits him to here, there is every reason not to follow Hacker in this respect, even if in other aspects of what he says I follow him happily.

72 Letter to Russell, August 19, 1919.

73 The word “psychological” tends to be used pejoratively in this context, but without there being any obvious justification for this. It is better to use the word neutrally, at least initially, leaving it open whether we are dealing with a purely pathological phenomenon requiring therapy, or something prompted by a genuine insight.


75 Many commentators have seen the Wittgenstein of Philosophical Investigations as not drawing any such distinction, but although some passages suggest that Wittgenstein thought that, if two different uses were made of the same sentence, that ipso facto showed they had different meanings, there are other passages which indicate that his position was more subtle and nuanced than that.

76 Tractatus, Introduction, p. 11.

77 Of course some people have presented Wittgenstein as so committed: I believe that Fogelin quoted above is saying precisely this.

78 Instructively, these include Wittgenstein’s many remarks to the effect that we cannot say such-and-such, or that “such-and-such” is nonsense. If these remarks are not to be seen as just banishing strings of words from the language, but “such-and-such” is being banished as a failed attempt to say what cannot be said, then the remarks fail to say what Wittgenstein is after every bit as much as “such-and-such” itself. 4.126 gives good examples of such self-refuting remarks. These all have the ring of someone trying to say to us that they can’t say “Shibboleth.”