The New Wittgenstein (review)

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account not for philosophical reasons but for technical ones" (278). Frege's program founders on Russell's paradox, Russell's on the problems raised by the axiom of reducibility, Wittgenstein's on its ability to account for only a limited part of arithmetic, Hilbert's on Gödel's second incompleteness theorem, Carnap's on Gödel's first incompleteness theorem. So powerful are these technical constraints that Potter is nearly despairing at the end of the book about the prospects for a satisfactory answer to his two questions. Short of some compressed and obscure concluding comments about the role of "the self" in unifying hierarchies of languages, he offers no answer. But his critical examination of half a century of failed attempts should help point the way: as he says in his introduction, "I do not think any of [these accounts] is wholly right, nor that any is wholly wrong, but the best way to see what is right about them is surely to understand what is wrong" (19).

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Alice Crary and Rupert Read, editors. *The New Wittgenstein.* New York: Routledge, 2000.
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Judging by its title and date, *The New Wittgenstein* hopes to become a pole for Wittgenstein debate in the new millennium. Its emphasis on the concept of "nonsense" even distantly echoes anxieties about Y2K computer babble. The essays, many of them written for this volume, are united around revisionist ideas in Wittgenstein scholarship. Crary sees their central theme as a view of Wittgenstein's philosophy, early and late, as "therapeutic." More apparent, though, is that they find Wittgenstein opposing a neo-Kantian project of drawing limits to sense or logic *in order to make room for other kinds of thoughts.* There are only meaningful propositions and humble nonsense, he allegedly holds; there *is* nothing illogical or ineffable to be thought or said. (I'll call this view "resolutism," after Warren Goldfarb.)

    Part I focuses on Wittgenstein's later work. Here resolutism is manifested in the idea that by situating meaning within "forms of life" Wittgenstein shows that Kripkian skepticism about rule-following is incoherent. As David Finkelstein writes in "Wittgenstein on rules and platonism" (a response to Crispin Wright): "According to Wittgenstein, it is only when we conceive of words as cut off from the applications that living beings make of them that there even appears to be a question concerning how . . . rule-informed judgments . . . can be true" (69). John McDowell also expresses this in "Non-cognitivism and rule-following": we cannot view language-world relations "from sideways on," for "we cannot occupy the independent perspective platonism envisages; and it is only because we confusedly think we can that we think we can make any sense of it" (44). This rejection of the longing for a metaphysical arbiter of meaning outside of our social practices also characterizes Martin Stone's "Wittgenstein on deconstruction," a particularly rich entry in the field of Wittgenstein-Derrida comparisons. In "Wittgenstein's philosophy in relation to political thought," Crary uses similar ideas to

argue that "meaning as use" neither denies nor affirms the possibility of criticizing cultural norms.

The novelty in these interpretations is mainly their commitment to a connection between Wittgenstein's later communitarian views about meaning and his earlier conception of nonsense. But one could imagine Wittgenstein objecting to the emphasis on the "incoherence" of skeptical paradoxes. What makes them tempting is their having the coherence of a persuasive if misleading analogy. Perhaps this avoids the semantic abyss that is urged on us here.

Part II centers on the writings of Cora Diamond and James Conant, whose resolutism hinges on a literal reading of *Tractatus* 6.54 ("my propositions . . . [are] nonsense"); a rejection of the idea that it expresses ineffable ethical or metalinguistic truths; and a strict adherence to Frege's "context principle." In "Ethics, imagination and the method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*" Diamond suggests that the *Tractatus* solicits imaginative identification with the author's "nonsense," which then produces insights about why the author's sentences are mistaken for meaningful ones. Conant, in "Elucidation and nonsense in Frege and early Wittgenstein," and David Cerbone, in "How to do things with wood," argue that Wittgenstein found Frege vacillating between denying the possibility of illogical thought and hinting at something unsayable, and resolved this tension in the *Tractatus*.

Resolutists write with a certain zeal against the idea that nonsensical sentences can express thoughts, or that Wittgenstein suggests that they can. But it is quite counterintuitive to hold, as they do, that we can't say or think *what* a nonsensical utterance tries vainly to express, or what *features* make it nonsensical. Moreover, in my view the notion that utterances have sense within language games is directly *opposed* to Frege's contextualism; "Slab!" refutes Fregean semantics, by my lights. Resolutists also need to account for later writings in which Wittgenstein appears to hold that the *Tractatus* expresses false doctrines, not mere nonsense, as P. M. S. Hacker argues in his dissenting contribution, "Was he trying to whistle it?"

In fact, in "Does bismark have a beetle in his box?" Diamond claims that the *Tractatus* offers an *argument* against the idea that others have private mental objects that only they can name. This seems to all but abandon the interpretation of the *Tractatus* as mere nonsense. And Conant asserts that after all "not every sentence of the work is . . . nonsense," nor is there any "fixed answer" to what is and isn't nonsense (216). This suggests that "the new Wittgenstein" is even newer than, and inconsistent with, their own recent interpretations.

Disagreements aside, no one can miss the depth of Diamond's numerous insights into Wittgenstein's work; her essays alone make the collection worthy of attention for anyone interested in Wittgenstein. Juliet Floyd's painstakingly researched examination of Wittgenstein's comments on trisecting the angle, in "Wittgenstein, Mathematics and Philosophy," stands out among other notable essays. For coherence of conception and the quality of its essays *The New Wittgenstein* ranks high among Wittgenstein collections.

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