

# From Frege to Wittgenstein

Perspectives on  
Early Analytic Philosophy

Edited by  
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*To the memory of my mother,  
Anna Reck*

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## The Method of the *Tractatus*

James Conant

I've written a book called "Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung" . . . *Nobody* will understand it; although I believe it's all as clear as crystal.

Wittgenstein, *Letter to Russell*, 1.3.3, 1919

How could Wittgenstein have believed that he had written a book that was as clear as crystal and that nobody would understand? One criterion of the clarity of a book is that most readers are able to understand it. The clarity to which Wittgenstein alludes is one that he anticipates will elude most readers. In this essay, I hope to shed some light on the sort of clarity Wittgenstein believed he had attained (and sought to impart) in the *Tractatus*. This requires shedding some light on the criterion that Wittgenstein himself furnishes, at the end of his book, for what it would be to understand the book: he says that anyone who understands him eventually recognizes his propositions as *nonsensical*.

Two standard readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* have shaped the ways in which contemporary philosophers think about nonsense—both as a term of philosophical criticism generally and as a term that figures specifically in the pages of the *Tractatus*. These readings might be termed the *positivist reading* and the *ineffability reading*, respectively. In this essay, I argue (1) that these two mutually opposed readings of the *Tractatus* presuppose a common conception of nonsense, one which the *Tractatus* itself sought to undermine; (2) that the sources of Wittgenstein's own conception are to be found in the work of Frege; (3) that, once we trace this conception back to its sources, we will be in a better position to see what sort of criticism (of Frege and others) the *Tractatus* seeks to advance; and (4) that, once we see this, we will be in a better position to understand the relation between Wittgenstein's early and later work.

### I. Two Readings of the *Tractatus*

How do I arrive at the concept of a kind of description that I cannot possibly give?

Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*

What I am calling "the positivist reading"<sup>1</sup> of the *Tractatus* came first historically and has allegedly been discredited. But the reports of its demise are greatly exaggerated. It continues to shape most interpretations of Wittgenstein's early work and, in particular, of what Wittgenstein means by the term "nonsense." According to the positivist reading, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* holds that much of what we say in ordinary language is at best misleading or vague and at worst empty. The logically imperfect character of ordinary language renders such defects in our ordinary modes of expression inevitable and makes possible the confusions of the metaphysicians. The defects in the metaphysician's utterances are disguised by the logically imperfect character of ordinary language, causing the metaphysician to be attracted to forms of words that purport to describe various superempirical states of affairs. In such cases, the utterances of the metaphysician can be demonstrated to be nonsense by exposing them as logically (or conceptually) flawed, where these flaws are to be traced to specifiable infringements upon the conditions of meaningful discourse. Particular versions of the positivist reading differ over matters of detail—some will say these infringements arise through violations of "the principles of logical syntax," others will appeal to "criteria of cognitive significance," yet others to "rules of grammar." What all such readings have in common is the idea that Wittgenstein seeks a theory that would enable him (a) to furnish a method for exposing the sentences of metaphysicians as intrinsically nonsensical, and (b) through the application of such a method to demarcate meaningful from meaning/less discourse.

What I am calling "the ineffability reading"<sup>2</sup> arose in opposition to the positivist reading. According to the ineffability reading, the *Tractatus* seeks to distinguish between *kinds* of nonsense—in particular, between *misleading* nonsense and *illuminating* nonsense. According to this reading, the former sort of nonsense is to be committed to the flames, but the latter is to be cherished for a special sort of insight it is able to impart. According to the ineffability reading, the error of the positivist reading is to be traced to its twofold assumption that (1) for the *Tractatus* all nonsense is misleading nonsense, and (2) someone would traffic in nonsense only if he did so unknowingly.<sup>3</sup>

In recent decades, the positivist reading has fallen out of favor, and the ineffability reading has become the standard reading. This development can be traced to the brute fact that the positivist reading of the *Tractatus* faces—as a *reading* of Wittgenstein's text—a number of exegetical embarrassments. The most notorious of these is what the book has to say concerning the status of its own propositions: that they are nonsense. The work openly declares that it traffics in nonsense knowingly. The most notorious of these declarations is to be found at the climax of the work, where the reader is presented with the trope of the ladder: the reader is told

that she has been offered a series of nonsensical propositions that form a ladder—a ladder that she is apparently meant (somehow) to ascend, and the ascension of which apparently (somehow) enables the attainment of a (presumably otherwise unattainable) sort of insight. Any attempt to take this climactic trope seriously as a description of the literary strategy of the work would seem to commit one to ascribing to the work a conception of nonsense that is sufficiently broad to allow for the possibility of illuminating nonsense. Most recent commentary has assumed that some version of the ineffability interpretation is the only viable alternative to the positivist interpretation; and thus, if one wants to take what the work has to say about the status and purpose of its own propositions seriously, the only alternative.

According to the ineffability interpretation, illuminating nonsense illuminates by "showing" what cannot be said.<sup>4</sup> The enlightened philosopher intentionally avails himself of this kind of nonsense in order to convey certain truths that exceed the reach of (the meaningful employment of) language. This special kind of nonsense flouts the rules of logic (syntax, grammar, or whatever) in its own special kind of way and thereby succeeds in conveying a special kind of thought.<sup>5</sup> The philosopher who avails himself of these logically self-defeating forms of expression does so, not (pace the positivists) because he is unaware of their logically flawed character, but because he seeks to make manifest features of reality that well-formed sentences of language are unable to represent. Whereas the positivist reading takes the *Tractatus* to be (at least in intention) a resolutely antimetaphysical work, the ineffability reading takes the work to be resolutely opposed only to the possibility of the (meaningful) expression of metaphysical insight. The ineffability reading thus ascribes to the *Tractatus* not only a distinction between kinds of nonsense (misleading nonsense and illuminating nonsense), but also a parallel distinction between kinds of thought: sayable and unsayable ones. The latter is a kind of thought that outruns the limits of language: a kind of thought that we must not try to—because we cannot—state, but that we should nonetheless endeavor to think.<sup>6</sup> So this reading agrees with the positivist reading that Wittgenstein (i) draws limits to what can be said, and (ii) urges us to relegate what cannot be said to silence—but, on this reading, (a) the limits are drawn to "show" what cannot be said, (b) the silence in question is a pregnant silence in which *something* (unsayable) is "passed over," and (c) that which is "passed over" is disqualified only as a candidate for talk—it remains an eligible candidate for thought. This places two additional demands on Wittgenstein's theory (over and above those ascribed to it by the positivists): (iii) to explain how the logical structure of language obstructs the possibility of expressing certain insights in well-formed propositions, and (iv) to show how that obstacle can be circumnavigated so as to allow such insights to be nonetheless communicated.

In this essay, I will argue that neither the positivist reading nor the ineffability reading is simply untrue to the text. Each of these readings advances a conception of the task of philosophy (and a correlative conception of the target of philosophy) that figures centrally in the *Tractatus*—only not as its doctrine, but rather as a candidate for (what the *Tractatus* calls) *elucidation*. The *Tractatus*, according to the reading set forth in this essay, aims to demonstrate how each of these conceptions is the mirror image of the other, each feeding on and sustaining the other. There is (what the *Tractatus* calls) "an understanding of the logic of our

language" that is common to these two readings of the *Tractatus*—one that the *Tractatus* itself seeks to expose as a misunderstanding. It is this (mis)understanding of the logic of our language that allows the positivist to imagine that he can furnish a method for exposing the sentences of the metaphysician as intrinsically meaningless (and thereby to imagine that he has found the key to doing away with metaphysics once and for all), and that allows the antipositivist to imagine that he can grasp a kind of a thought which cannot be accommodated by the logical structure of language (and thereby to imagine that, albeit at the cost of banishing it to wordlessness, he has found the key to rescuing metaphysics once and for all).

The correlative conceptions of language (i.e., of sense and nonsense) and philosophical illumination (i.e., of how a reader of the work is to be brought to insight) presupposed respectively by the positivist and ineffability readings are the expressions of philosophical impulses that the *Tractatus* seeks to engage. The reader is to feel the force of each of these mutually antagonistic impulses, but not to remain in the thrall of either. The conceptions to which these impulses give rise figure in the work as dialectical way stations that are to be successively recognized as the antepenultimate and penultimate rungs on the ladder that the reader is invited to ascend and—once having ascended—called upon to throw away. To throw away the ladder is to throw away the allied conceptions of language and philosophical elucidation upon which these two (apparently) mutually opposed readings rest: to recognize them as only apparently sustainable conceptions.

## II. Elucidation and Nonsense

There are authors in whose work form matches content not merely as clothes do the body but as the soul does the body.

Karl Kraus, *Aphorismen*

One subsidiary aim of this essay is to furnish some materials for answering the following question: Why does the *Tractatus* have the form that it does? (Why does this funny-looking book look like *this*?) Is the form of the work (as philosophers are wont to say) "merely a matter of style"—an outer layer of literary ornamentation of which the work can (and perhaps should) be divested without violence to the content it harbors? I shall approach Wittgenstein's early work (and hope to provide some materials that might encourage one to approach his later work) with the contrary assumption—namely, that the work's mode of presentation bears a profoundly intimate relation to its philosophical ambitions. To understand why the text comes in the shape it does, we need to understand what those ambitions are; and, to understand how those ambitions are pursued within the body of the work, we need to understand why the text comes in the shape that it does.

This essay aspires, in particular, to supply two of the pieces of the puzzle that need to be in place before we can make out the point of the famous penultimate section of the *Tractatus*: "My propositions serve as *elucidations* in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as *nonsensical*, when he has used them—as steps—to climb out through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)"<sup>7</sup> This

passage tells a reader of the work what he must "eventually recognize" in order to understand its author. No understanding of the *Tractatus* is possible apart from an understanding of what this passage asks of its reader—apart, that is, from an understanding of what the authorial strategy of the work as a whole is. Wittgenstein says of Carnap that he failed to understand this passage and *therefore* failed to understand "the fundamental conception of the whole book."<sup>9</sup> What did Carnap fail to understand, and how did that failure lead him to misunderstand the fundamental conception of the whole book?

Two important terms occur in this passage. Not only Carnap, but also several subsequent generations of commentators have paid insufficient heed to what the *Tractatus* itself has to say about how these terms (as deployed within the work) are to be understood. The two terms in question are:

1. to elucidate (*erläutern*)
2. nonsense (*Unsinn*)

This essay is about how to understand these two words in the *Tractatus*. Only once we understand the specific valence these terms have in this work will we be in a position to understand what the *Tractatus* says (in §6.54) about its method.

The aim of the *Tractatus* as a whole is twofold: (i) to elucidate the logic of our language (i.e., to render perspicuous the difference between sense and nonsense), and (ii) to elucidate certain philosophical matters (i.e., to show how the apparent sustainability of certain philosophical conceptions rests upon a misunderstanding of the logic of our language). We learn, at the end of the work, that the sentences of the work have succeeded as elucidations when we recognize them as *Unsinn*. But in order to recognize them as such, we must first come to terms with the question of wherein such recognition consists and hence with the understanding of *Unsinn* that the work as a whole seeks to impart. Thus our task is one of trying to break into a circle. In order to understand the *Tractatus*, one needs to understand what each of these two terms in this book—"elucidation" and "nonsense"—means. But an understanding of these terms as deployed within the work requires an appreciation of the structure and method of the work as a whole. So these two forms of understanding—an understanding of the point of the work as a whole, and an understanding of what each of these terms means within the work—must come together or not at all. The obscurity of the work is a function of the peculiarity of its method, one of trafficking in nonsense—which, in turn, is a function of the peculiarity of its aim: (which we are told is) elucidation.

The first translator of the *Tractatus*, C. K. Ogden, thought the work *unnecessarily* obscure. Since he knew that Wittgenstein had been working on the book for years, Ogden made bold to inquire (in a letter to Wittgenstein) whether there might not be, lying about the house somewhere, a collection of material with which the work might be supplemented—passages that had not been included in the book but that further develop some of the lines of thought contained in it. Wittgenstein writes back: Yes, Ogden is delighted. He asks Wittgenstein if it might not be possible to incorporate some of this supplementary material into the English edition of the work. Surely, it could only be a great help to readers if material were added to the book. Wittgenstein demurs, and one of the reasons he gives is of particular interest for our purposes: "I am very sorry indeed I cannot send you the supplements. There can be no thought of printing them. . . . The supplements are exactly

what must *not* be printed. . . . THEY REALLY CONTAIN NO ELUCIDATIONS AT ALL. . . . As to the shortness of the book I am *awfully* sorry for it, but *what can I do?* If you were to squeeze me like a lemon you would get nothing more out of me" (Wittgenstein, 1973, p. 46).<sup>10</sup> These supplementary passages (*Ergänzungen*) "are exactly what must *not* be printed," for they contain no elucidations. What is wrong with adding passages that contain no elucidations? Here is a preview of the answer to this question, which this essay will defend: to add passages to the work that do not subserve its elucidatory aim would be to compromise its fundamental conception.

In §4.1212 of the *Tractatus*, we are told that a work of philosophy "consists essentially of elucidations." "Philosophy" here means: philosophy as practiced by the author of the *Tractatus*. The notion of elucidation is tied in §4.1212 to the idea of philosophy being a certain kind of *activity*: "Philosophy is not a theory [*Lehre*] but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations" (§4.112). The word '*Lehre*'—which Ogden translates as 'theory'—is rendered as 'body of doctrine' by Pears and McGinniss. Wittgenstein claims that the work of philosophy, as he pursues it, does not consist in putting forward a doctrine but rather in offering elucidations. This provides a criterion of adequacy that must be met by any textually faithful account of what Wittgenstein means by "elucidation": it must be able to illuminate how Wittgenstein could intelligibly have thought that the philosophical work accomplished by the *Tractatus* "consists essentially of elucidations"—where "elucidation" is the name of an activity that contrasts with the (conventional philosophical) activity of presenting the reader with a doctrine.<sup>11</sup> When Wittgenstein says (in §4.112) that a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations, the term "elucidation" is a rendering of the same German word (*Erläuterung*) that occurs in §6.54 and that also, as we shall see in a moment, figures pertinently in Frege's writings.<sup>12</sup>

When Ogden first attempts to translate §6.54, he renders the opening line of the passage as follows: "My propositions are explained in that he who understands 'explain' to 'elucidate,'" and he changes the verb from an intransitive to a transitive one: "My propositions elucidate—whatever they do elucidate—in this way." What object does the transitive verb take? (*What* does an elucidation elucidate?) Wittgenstein tells Ogden that what requires elucidation are "philosophic matters."<sup>13</sup> How does elucidation differ from explanation? (*How* does an elucidation elucidate?) We are told in §6.54: his propositions serve as elucidations by *our*—that is, the reader—coming to *recognize* them as nonsensical. But how can the recognition that a proposition is *nonsense* ever elucidate—ever shed light on—anything?<sup>14</sup> Evidently we need a better understanding of how this work thinks about nonsense. We need to look closely at those passages in which the work tells us what it takes *Unsinn* to be and, in particular, what it tells us it takes it *not* to be.

This is what the *Tractatus* has to say about what is distinctive about its own conception of nonsense: "Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts" (§5.4733). Wittgenstein here contrasts a formulation of Frege's<sup>15</sup> with one of his own. At first blush, it is hard to see how they differ. The critical difference between Frege's formulation and the one the *Tractatus* endorses

is that the former implicitly distinguishes between those propositions that are legitimately constructed and those that are not, while the latter rejects the idea that there is such a thing as a logically illegitimately constructed proposition: "Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed." It is this difference (that Wittgenstein sees between his own view and Frege's) that we need to understand. As this passage suggests—and as the preface of the *Tractatus* makes clear—a good place to seek further understanding is "the great works of Frege."<sup>16</sup>

### III. The Neglect of Frege?

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* has captured the interest and excited the admiration of many, yet almost all that has been published about it has been wildly irrelevant. If this has had any one cause, that cause has been the neglect of Frege. . . . In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein assumes, and does not try to stimulate, an interest in the kind of questions that Frege wrote about.

G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*

How can the neglect of Frege be the reason why much of the commentary on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is wildly irrelevant to a proper understanding of that work? What more widely accepted platitude about the book could there be, than that it develops and responds to ideas put forward by Frege and Russell? But Anscombe's point presumably is not that Frege is seldom mentioned in discussions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Her point must rather be that we do not know who Frege is for the author of the *Tractatus*—an appreciation of that work presupposes an immersion in a certain philosophical background ("an interest in the kind of questions that Frege wrote about"), which most of the commentary on that work has lost sight of. It is not that we are unfamiliar with Frege's or Wittgenstein's texts, but that we have failed to see what it is that is at issue in them. We fail to get hold of the questions that figure most centrally in these texts and of the kind of questions these questions are for Frege and for Wittgenstein. One aim of this essay is to draw attention to two aspects of that background of which we have lost sight: Frege's thought about the character of philosophical nonsense and Frege's conception of elucidation.

The central claim of this essay can be summarized as follows: 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 nonsense 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."<sup>17</sup>

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. Along with these two different conceptions of nonsense go two different conceptions of elucidation: according to the substantial conception, the task of elucidation is to "show" something that cannot be said; according to the austere conception, it is to show that we are prone to an illusion of meaning something when we mean nothing. The *Tractatus* is standardly read as championing the substantial conception. This is to mistake the bait for the hook—to mistake the target of the work for its doctrine. On the reading of the *Tractatus* I shall try to sketch here, the *Tractatus* is to be seen as resolving the tension in Frege's thought between these two conceptions of nonsense in favor of the austere view.<sup>18</sup> The strategy of the *Tractatus* is to short-circuit Frege's view from within by bringing these two halves of Frege's thought in immediate proximity with each other.

The substantial conception of nonsense represents the (previously indicated) common ground between the positivist and ineffability interpretations of the *Tractatus*. (It is in opting for this conception, according to the *Tractatus*, that the crucial move in the philosophical conjuring trick is made, and it is the one that we are apt to think most innocent.) This tiny patch of common ground can seem insignificant in comparison with the vehemence with which the ineffability interpretation laments the obtuseness of the positivist interpretation (epitomized by its failure to allow for the possibility of illuminating nonsense) and the equal vehemence with which the positivist interpretation rejects the mysticism of the ineffability interpretation (epitomized by its hankering after ineffable forms of insight).<sup>19</sup> In seeking to emphasize their differences from one another, proponents of the two interpretations tend to articulate the details of the substantial conception in apparently distinct ways. It will therefore help to distinguish between two (apparently distinct) variants of the substantial conception. I shall term these the *positivist variant* and the *ineffability variant* (after the readings of the *Tractatus* in which they respectively figure).<sup>20</sup> According to the former variant, violations of logical syntax are a kind of *linguistic* phenomenon: identifying a violation of logical syntax is a matter of isolating a certain kind of (logically ill-formed) linguistic string. According to the latter variant, a violation of logical syntax is a kind of phenomenon that can only transpire in the medium of thought and necessarily eludes the medium of language. Though proponents of the ineffability variant hold that language is powerless to express such thoughts, they nonetheless deem language an indispensable tool for "conveying" such thoughts. They hold that language can "hint" at what it cannot say.

Before we turn to how the *Tractatus* seeks to resolve the tension in Frege's thought between the substantial and austere conceptions of nonsense, it will help first to see that Frege can be read as a champion, not only of the substantial conception *per se*, but specifically of the ineffability variant.<sup>21</sup> To see this requires that we see how what is typically taken to be the central and most original doctrine of the *Tractatus*—the doctrine that there are certain insights that can only be "shown" and cannot be said—can be discerned (by some readers of Frege) to be a central doctrine of Frege's philosophy. That such a doctrine already figures in Frege's thought has been argued particularly forcefully by Peter Geach; and, indeed, Geach attributes the occurrence of such a doctrine in the *Tractatus* to the influence of Frege: "Reflection upon 'the great works of Frege' . . . can never be

out of place for anybody who seriously wants to understand Wittgenstein. . . . The influence of Frege on Wittgenstein was pervasive and life-long, and it is not of course just confined to places where Frege is mentioned by name or overtly referred to. . . . Fundamental aspects of the Wittgensteinian saying/showing contrast are already to be discerned in Frege's writings" (Geach, 1976, p. 55). I think Geach is right to think that Wittgenstein found in Frege a conception of what cannot be said but only "shown"—and that the *Tractatus* has therefore been credited in putting forward such a conception with an originality to which it cannot justly lay claim. Geach continues: "Paradoxical as is the doctrine of aspects of reality that come out but cannot be propositionally expressed, it is hard to see any viable alternative to it so long as we confine ourselves to philosophy of logic; and in this domain Wittgenstein revised Frege's views without unfaithfulness to Frege's spirit" (p. 68). Geach here attributes a certain doctrine to both Frege and the *Tractatus*: the doctrine that there are *certain aspects of reality* that cannot be expressed in language but can nonetheless be conveyed through certain sorts of employment of language. I think Geach is mistaken in supposing that the *Tractatus* seeks simply to incorporate this Fregean doctrine into its own teaching. That is to say, I think Geach is right to find this doctrine propounded where most commentators have failed to look for it (namely, in Frege), and wrong to find it propounded where most commentators assume they are supposed to look for it (namely, in the *Tractatus*). I shall therefore be concerned to argue that the *Tractatus*, in its criticism of Fregean doctrines, seeks to mount a criticism of the very doctrines that are standardly attributed to it.

In order to see this, we first need to refrain from speaking about the distinction between saying and showing in the usual loose fashion. Where most commentators on the *Tractatus* discern only one distinction, we need to see that there are two different distinctions at work. A version of each of these distinctions is already at play in Frege's work. But these distinctions are drawn in Frege's work in such a way as to be deeply entangled in one another, whereas they are refashioned in the *Tractatus* in a manner that allows them to become disentangled. The first distinction is drawn *within* the body of meaningful propositions. (Thus, according to this first sense, only meaningful propositions can *show*.) The second distinction marks off, from various ways of employing language, a particular way of employing (apparently meaningful) sentence-like structures—an employment that "takes as its object" (what Wittgenstein calls in his letter to Ogden) "philosophic matters" (Wittgenstein, 1973, p. 51). (Thus, according to this second sense of 'show', nonsense can show.)<sup>22</sup> The first of these distinctions is (at least terminologically) the more familiar and notorious of the two: it is (the one that gets called in the *Tractatus*) the distinction between saying and showing (or, more precisely, in Tractarian jargon, the distinction between what a *proposition* says and what it shows).<sup>23</sup> The second distinction is relatively neglected and is the one with which the rest of this essay is concerned. It is a distinction between two different kinds of use of language:<sup>24</sup> constative uses,<sup>25</sup> in which a proposition states what is the case (or, in Tractarian jargon, represents a state of affairs), and elucidatory uses, in which an apparently constative use of language (one that offers an appearance of representing a state of affairs) is revealed as illusory.<sup>26</sup> It is primarily through the manner in which the *Tractatus* reshapes the second of these Fregean distinctions

that the criticism of Frege is mounted. Only once we understand how the *Tractatus* seeks to modify Frege's conception of elucidation (*Erläuterung*) will we be in a position to understand what the *Tractatus* means to say about itself when it declares that it is a work which "consists essentially of elucidations."

#### IV. Frege on Concept and Object

The style of my sentences is extraordinarily strongly influenced by Frege. And if I wanted to, I could establish this influence where at first sight no one would see it.

Wittgenstein, *Zettel*

Here is how Geach summarizes the region of Frege's thought that is "revised without unfaithfulness" in (what he takes to be) the Tractarian distinction between saying and "showing": "Frege . . . held . . . 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 in the vernacular are logically improper and admit of no translation into well-formed formulas of symbolic logic" (Geach, 1976, p. 55).<sup>27</sup> Frege's favorite example of a logical-category distinction that clearly shows itself in a well-constructed formalized language (but that "cannot properly be asserted in language") is the distinction between concept and object—and it is an example that continued to exercise Wittgenstein throughout his life.<sup>28</sup> For something to be an object (or a concept), for Frege, is not for it to possess certain metaphysical or psychological characteristics, but rather for it to belong to a particular logical category. Frege takes it to be "a sure sign" of confusion if logic seems to stand in "need of metaphysics or psychology" (Frege, 1967a, p. 18).<sup>29</sup>

Frege's most famous discussion of the distinction between concept and object is his article entitled "On Concept and Object"—an article that is structured around his reply to an objection put forward by Benno Kerry.<sup>30</sup> Kerry objects to Frege's claim that concepts cannot be objects and objects cannot be concepts. Kerry proposes as a counterexample to Frege's claim the statement "the concept *horse* is a concept easily attained." This statement seems to assert that something—the concept *horse*—falls under a concept (namely, that of being a concept easily attained). Now anything that falls under a (first-level) concept must—on Frege's conception of an object—be an object. That is what it is to be an object for Frege—to be the kind of a thing of which concepts can be predicated. So, for Frege, the grammatical subject of Kerry's statement—the concept *horse*—(since it falls under a concept) must be an object. But, if what the statement says is true, then it is a concept easily attained; and if it is a concept easily attained, then it is a kind of a concept. The two prongs of Kerry's argument, based on his putative counterexample, can thus be summarized as follows: (a) given Frege's conception of what it is to be an object, we have reason (by virtue of its logical role in the statement) to conclude that "the concept *horse*" is an object; and (b) given the (apparent) truth of what the statement itself asserts, we have reason to conclude that it is a concept. So

Kerry concludes that his statement furnishes us with an example of something—the concept *horse*—that is both an object and a concept.

Frege's article responding to Kerry begins with the following remark:

The word 'concept' is used in various ways; its sense is sometimes psychological, sometimes logical, and perhaps sometimes a confused mixture of both. Since this license exists, it is natural to restrict it by requiring that when once a usage is adopted it shall be maintained. What I decided was to keep to the strictly logical use. . . . It seems to me that Kerry's misunderstanding results from his unintentionally confusing his own usage of the word 'concept' with mine. This readily gives rise to contradictions, for which my usage is not to blame. (Frege, 1984, p. 182)

Frege insists here that he uses the word 'concept' in "a strictly logical sense" and that Kerry's misunderstanding of his view is due to his failure to appreciate this. In particular, Frege will charge that Kerry's apparent counterexample is generated by equivocating between "a strictly logical" and (what Frege will call) a "psychological" sense of the term 'concept'.<sup>31</sup> But what is it to use the word 'concept' in a strictly logical sense? This question is best approached through a consideration of Frege's three principles (which he presents at the beginning of his *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*):

- In the enquiry that follows, I have kept to three fundamental principles:
- (1) always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective;
  - (2) never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition;
  - (3) never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object. (Frege, 1968, p. x)

Each of these principles is reworked and plays a central role in the *Tractatus*.<sup>32</sup> These three principles are closely linked: to deny any one of them is to deny each of the other two. Frege himself immediately goes on to explicate how a denial of the first principle leads to a denial of the second: "In compliance with the first principle, I have used the word 'idea' always in the psychological sense, and have distinguished ideas from concepts and from objects. If the second principle is not observed, one is almost forced to take as the meanings of words mental pictures or acts of the individual mind, and so to offend against the first principle as well" (p. x). If we disobey the second principle and ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, we shall look for an answer in the realm of the psychological—we shall explain what it is for a term to have a meaning in terms of mental accompaniments (such as the psychological associations the word carries with it), or in terms of mental acts (such as the linguistic intention with which we utter it); and *that* will constitute a violation of the first principle.

Underlying these principles is a doctrine of the primacy of judgment. Frege writes: "I do not begin with concepts and put them together to form a thought or judgment; I come by the parts of a thought by analyzing the thought" (Frege, 1979, p. 253). Frege here opposes an extremely intuitive view of how we come by a

thought: namely, by taking hold of its independently thinkable components and putting them together so as to form a coherent whole.<sup>33</sup> The sort of "parts"<sup>34</sup> that are at issue here are only to be identified by comparing and contrasting the logical structure of whole propositions and seeing how the respective "parts" resemble and differ from one another in the contributions they make to the respective wholes.<sup>35</sup> Here is one of Frege's many exhortations to the reader not to lose sight of the primacy of the propositional whole over its parts: "[W]e ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning. It may be that mental pictures float before us all the while, but these need not correspond to the logical elements in the judgement. It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on the parts also their content" (Frege, 1968, p. 71).<sup>36</sup> To determine the meaning of a word, according to Frege, we need to discover what contribution it makes to the sense of a proposition in which it figures. We need to know what logical role it plays in the context of a judgment.<sup>37</sup> What we want to discover is thus not to be seen at all, if we look at the mere isolated word rather than at the working parts of the proposition in action.<sup>38</sup> Thus, for example, the mere fact that the words at the beginning of Kerry's sentence purport to refer to (something called) "the concept *horse*" hardly suffices, by Frege's lights, to ensure that they indeed successfully refer to a concept. When Frege insists that he is going to keep to a strictly logical use of the word 'concept', he is declaring his interest in how a certain kind of working part of a judgment—what he calls the unsaturated or predicative part—contributes to the sense of a judgment as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

There are no symbols for terms such as 'function', 'concept', and 'object' in Frege's *Begriffsschrift*. Nevertheless, these terms play an ineliminable role in his explanations of his symbolism. He thinks that an understanding of these terms is required if one is to master the notation of the symbolism and properly understand its significance. Yet he also insists that what he thus wishes to draw our attention to—when he employs, for example, the word 'concept' in its strictly logical sense—is not something that can be properly defined. It can only be exhibited through (what Frege calls) an elucidation.<sup>40</sup> Such elucidations, in turn, play only a transitional role: once they have successfully conveyed the logical distinctions that form the basis of Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, we are to see that there is no way to express the thoughts which they (appear to be attempting to) convey in a *Begriffsschrift*.<sup>41</sup> Yet if we appreciate the logically fundamental character of the distinctions upon which Frege's *Begriffsschrift* is based, then we will see that anything that can be thought can be expressed in *Begriffsschrift*. In grasping the distinction between that which can and that which cannot be expressed in a *Begriffsschrift*, we furnish ourselves with a logically precise articulation of the distinction between that which ("in a strictly logical sense") is, and that which is not, a *thought*. Thus Frege's elucidations are meant to play the role of a ladder that we are to climb up and then throw away.<sup>42</sup> Frege might have said about his own elucidatory remarks, echoing §6.54 of the *Tractatus*: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: he who understands me recognizes that my propositions cannot be expressed in my *Begriffsschrift*, once he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has used it to climb up to my *Begriffsschrift*."



## V. Fregean Elucidation

God can do everything, it is true, but there is one thing He cannot do, and that is speak nonsense.

Leo Tolstoy, *The Gospel According to Tolstoy*

The distinction between elucidation and definition in Frege rests upon a prior distinction between what is primitive and what is defined in a theory. Any theoretical term that is not susceptible of a formal definition requires elucidation. Every science must employ some primitive terms whose meanings must be presupposed from the outset. Even in a logically perfect language there will be some terms that are not (and cannot) be introduced by definition and that must remain undefinable. The purpose of elucidations is to convey the meanings of such terms:

Definitions proper must be distinguished from elucidations. In the first stages of any discipline we cannot avoid the use of ordinary words. But these words are, for the most part, not really appropriate for scientific purposes, because they are not precise enough and fluctuate in their use. Science needs technical terms that have precise and fixed meanings, and in order to come to an understanding about these meanings and exclude possible misunderstanding, we give elucidations [*Erläuterungen*] of their use. (Frege, 1979, p. 207, translation emended)

In "On Concept and Object," Frege is concerned with only one species of the genus elucidation, namely, the activity of elucidating what is *logically primitive*.<sup>43</sup> When one is engaged in this particular species of elucidation, Frege thinks one is compelled to come out with sentences that cannot be translated into a proper Begriffsschrift.

One might ask: Doesn't Frege furnish us with examples of statements that define what a concept or an object is? Frege will answer that nothing his own sentences (appear to) assert about the nature of concepts or objects can ever, without entering into a confusion, be taken as (a contribution to) a definition of what kind of a thing a concept or an object is.<sup>44</sup> For something to count as a definition, for Frege, it must be possible to invoke it in proofs. Wherever the definiendum occurs in a sentence, it must be possible to replace it with the definiens. Nothing of the sort is possible, Frege maintains, for those terms occurring in his elucidatory remarks that refer to logically primitive categories.<sup>45</sup> Their meaning must be presupposed from the outset. The most one can do is to lead the reader to what is meant by such terms—what it is one's words are trying to gesture at—by means of a series of *hints*.<sup>46</sup> Early on in his reply to Kerry, Frege insists upon the ineliminable role of hints in offering an elucidation of that which is logically fundamental and hence indefinable:

Kerry contests what he calls my definition of 'concept'. I would remark, in the first place, that my explanation is not meant as a proper definition. One cannot require that everything shall be defined, any more than one can require that a chemist shall decompose every substance. What is simple cannot be decomposed, and what is logically simple cannot have a proper definition. Now something logically simple is no more given to us at the outset than most of the chemical elements are: it is reached only

by means of scientific work. If something has been discovered that is simple, or at least count as simple for the time being, we shall have to coin a term for it, since language will not originally contain an expression that exactly answers. On the introduction of a name for what is logically simple, a definition is not possible; there is nothing for it but to lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the word as it is intended. (Frege, 1984, pp. 182–83)

Yet only a few lines further on, Frege offers something that has the appearance of offering a specification of the meaning of the term 'concept': "A concept (as I understand the word) is predicative. On the other hand, a name of an object, a proper name, is quite incapable of being used as a grammatical predicate." Frege immediately goes on to say: "This admittedly needs elucidation, otherwise it might appear false" (p. 183). The term 'elucidation' here stands for the activity of leading the reader by means of hints to what is intended by a term that denotes something logically primitive. This requires not only that we count on the patience and goodwill of our audience while we encourage them to guess at our intended meaning, but also that—here in the antechamber to that most precise of all sciences: the science of logic—we resort to figurative modes of expression (e.g., to talk about objects being "saturated" and concepts being "unsaturated"<sup>47</sup>). Worse still, Frege thinks that in the elucidation of logically primitive notions (such as that of *concept* or *object*) there is an ineliminable role to be played by (the artful employment of) nonsense.<sup>48</sup> According to Frege, in elucidating the meaning of terms such as 'object' and 'concept', we attempt to help our audience to latch on to the intended meaning of a term for something logically fundamental by coming out with forms of expression that misfire, and then helping our audience to see how and why they misfire.

It is of crucial importance when offering such an elucidation, Frege goes on to say, that the originator of the elucidation himself understand the transitional character of the talk that he engages in, and that he know at every point what he means by a particular term and remain throughout in agreement with himself:

Since definitions are not possible for primitive elements, something else must enter in. I call it elucidation [*Erläuterung*]. . . . Someone who pursued research only by himself would not need it. The purpose of elucidations [*Erläuterungen*] is a pragmatic one; and once it is achieved, we must be satisfied with them. And here we must be able to count on a little goodwill and cooperative understanding, even guessing; for frequently we cannot do without a figurative mode of expression. But for all that, we can demand from the originator of an elucidation [*Erläuterung*] that he himself know for certain what he means; that he remain in agreement with himself; and that he be ready to complete and amend his elucidation [*Erläuterung*] whenever, given even the best of intentions, the possibility of a misunderstanding arises. (Frege, 1984, pp. 300–301, translation emended)<sup>49</sup>

Frege frankly concedes that such a process of offering hints and relying on guesswork might, in principle, never culminate in the desired meeting of minds between the elucidator and the audience of an elucidation. He hastens to reassure us, however, that it turns out that, in practice, we are quite good at guessing what another person means even when all we are offered is a series of such hints: "Theo-

retically, one might never achieve one's goal this way. In practice, however, we do manage to come to an understanding about the meanings of words. Of course we have to be able to count on a meeting of minds, on others guessing what we have in mind. But all this precedes the construction of a system and does not belong within a system" (Frege, 1979, p. 207, translation emended). This last sentence alludes to a point touched on earlier: once the elucidation is successful, the recourse to figurative modes of speech and bits of nonsense can be dispensed with; the elucidations will have served their transitional pragmatic purpose and are to be thrown away. The activity of elucidation "has no place in the system of a science." Its role is entirely that of a propaedeutic.<sup>50</sup>

Frege's procedure in "On Concept and Object" relies on an understanding of the logical structure of language implicit in his reader's everyday command of ordinary language. Frege's purpose—when he introduces terms such as 'concept' and 'object'—is to isolate and coin terms for the logically discrete functioning parts of a judgment: parts that can be seen to play logically distinct roles in the antecedently understood content of the sentences of everyday language. In aiming to communicate the meaning of these terms he has coined, Frege (since he cannot resort to definition) appeals to "the general feeling" for our common language (our shared sense of the contribution which the parts of a proposition of ordinary language make to the sense of the whole).<sup>51</sup> It is through our general feeling for our common language that we achieve agreement on what is a proper logical segmentation of a sentence of our language and hence what is (and what is not) a concept or an object.

The elucidatory strategy of the essay "On Concept and Object" can (according to this reading of Frege in the spirit of Geach) be seen as proceeding in five steps: (1) to make explicit a logical distinction implicit in our everyday linguistic practices, (2) to demonstrate that Kerry's employment of the terminology of 'object' and 'concept' fails to track the distinction in question, (3) to furnish statements (employing the terminology of 'object' and 'concept') that aim to track the distinction in question, (4) to elicit an appreciation of what is defective about such statements, and (5) to indicate how a recognition of the defective character of such statements enables one to attain an insight (into, e.g., what a concept is) that could not have been communicated in any other way. Thus Frege might have said: he who recognizes my elucidatory remarks in "On Concept and Object" as *defective* understands me. Such a reading of Frege (in the spirit of Geach)—according to which Fregean elucidation is to be understood as a strategy for conveying insights into ineffable features of reality—as we shall see, closely parallels the reading of the *Tractatus* favored by proponents of the ineffability interpretation.

## VI. Elucidatory Nonsense

Don't, for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.

Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

By way of further response to Kerry's counterexample, Frege goes on in "On Concept and Object" to make a remark that is likely to cause even an inattentive reader

to pause. He says: "The concept horse is not a concept." This remark is evidently intended to be paradoxical. The self-defeating character of Frege's counterthesis, which he opposes to Kerry's thesis, is meant to draw attention to what is already self-defeating (though less self-evidently so) in the form of words that Kerry calls upon to express his claim. If one is partial to a reading of Frege that aligns him with the standard reading of the *Tractatus* (as Geach is), then one will think that part of Frege's point here is to draw our attention to how Kerry's words represent an attempt to say something that cannot be said. Such a reading of Frege attributes to Frege a commitment to the ineffability variant of the substantial conception of nonsense. In a passage such as the following, Frege can be heard as pressing a claim (concerning how a primitive feature of the logical structure of language can never itself figure as the subject of a logically well-formed judgment) of a sort that many have taken to be a Tractarian claim: "What is . . . asserted about a concept can never be asserted about an object. . . . I do not want to say it is false to assert about an object what is here asserted about a concept; I want to say it is impossible, senseless, to do so" (Frege, 1984, p. 189).<sup>52</sup> The idea that what such an attempt (to assert of a concept what can only be asserted of an object) ends up saying is not merely false, but senseless, is one that runs throughout Frege's writings.<sup>53</sup> But what are we to make of such an admission? In claiming that what Kerry says is nonsensical, Frege commits himself to the conclusion that what he himself wants to say about concepts (both in response to Kerry and elsewhere) is also nonsensical.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Frege seems at various junctures to be disarmingly ready to embrace such a conclusion about the status of many of his own remarks:

In the case of a concept we can also call the unsaturatedness its predicative nature. But in this connection it is necessary to point out an imprecision forced on us by language, which, if we are not conscious of it, will prevent us from recognizing the heart of the matter: i.e. we can scarcely avoid using such expressions as 'the concept *prime*'. Here there is not a trace left of unsaturatedness, of the predicative nature. Rather, the expression is constructed in a way which precisely parallels 'the poet Schiller'. So language brands a concept as an object, since the only way it can fit the designation for a concept into its grammatical structure is as a proper name. But in so doing, strictly speaking, it falsifies matters. In the same way, the word 'concept' itself is, taken strictly, already defective, since the phrase 'is a concept' requires a proper name as grammatical subject; and so, strictly speaking, it requires something contradictory, since no proper name can designate a concept: or perhaps better still [would be to say that], it requires something nonsensical. (Frege, 1979, pp. 177–78, translation emended)<sup>55</sup>

Frege's discussion here turns on the idea that we know *what* it is that we are trying to say (when we employ an expression such as 'the concept *prime*'), but when we try to say "it," we realize that what we are trying to say requires that what we actually say be something nonsensical. We have in passages such as this the idea that we can discern what a piece of nonsense is *trying* (but failing) to say. When we use such expressions as 'the concept *X*', we are trying to refer to a concept, but in the mode of expression with which we end up—when we try to express our thought—there is not a trace of unsaturatedness left.<sup>56</sup> We are left

with something that does not have a predicative nature, and, Frege therefore concludes, we have failed to refer to a concept. An attempt to treat a concept as an object is an attempt to do something *impossible*, an attempt to do something we *cannot* do:

If I want to speak of a concept, language, with an almost irresistible force, compels me to use an inappropriate expression which obscures—I might almost say falsifies—the thought. One would assume, on the basis of its analogy with other expressions, that if I say 'the concept *equilateral triangle*' I am designating a concept, just as I am of course naming a planet if I say 'the planet Neptune'. But this is not the case; for we do not have anything with a predicative nature. Hence the meaning of the expression 'the concept *equilateral triangle*' (if there is one in this case) is an object. We cannot avoid words like 'the concept', but where we use them we must always bear their inappropriateness in mind. From what we have said it follows that objects and concepts are fundamentally different and cannot stand in for one another. And the same goes for the corresponding words or signs. Proper names cannot really be used as predicates. Where they might seem to, we find on looking more closely that the sense is such that they only form part of the predicate: *concepts cannot stand in the same relations as objects*. It would not be false, but impossible to think of them as doing so. (pp. 119–20)<sup>57</sup>

This passage (and many others, in Frege's work, like it) make reference to there being a *thought* underlying the nonsense we come out with (when we attempt to assert of a concept what can only be asserted of an object). Language itself obstructs us from expressing the thought we are after: "language, with an almost irresistible force, compels me to use an inappropriate expression which obscures—I might almost say falsifies—the thought." The nonsense we come out with represents an unsuccessful attempt to put that (unsayable) thought into words. Thus, for example, in responding to Kerry, Frege says certain things that by his own lights are nonsense, and what we (his readers) are to do is attend not simply to what he says (since it is, after all, nonsense) but to "the thought" that his words fail to express but attempt to gesture at.<sup>58</sup>

One such example of Fregean elucidation occurs in a letter to Russell:

In the proposition 'Something is an object', the word 'something' . . . stands for a proper name. Thus whatever we put in place of 'something', we always get a true proposition; for a function name cannot take the place of 'something'. Here we find ourselves in a situation where the nature of language forces us to make use of imprecise expressions. The proposition 'A is a function' is such an expression: it is always imprecise; for A stands for a proper name. . . . While I am writing this, I am well aware of having again expressed myself imprecisely. Sometimes this is just unavoidable. *All that matters is that we know we are doing it and how it happens.* (Frege, 1980, p. 136, my emphasis)<sup>59</sup>

The proposition 'A is a function' is here invoked as an example of the paradoxical character inevitably attaching to the sort of utterances one comes out with when one attempts to elucidate what a function is. Consider the following four propositions:

- (1) A is an object.
- (2) Everything is an object.
- (3) A is a function.
- (4) Nothing is a function.

In (1), the word 'A' stands for a proper name; and so, by Frege's lights, whatever we plug in for 'A' will occupy the argument place for an object, and thus (according to Frege's second principle) will be an object. Thus it would appear that no matter what we plug in for 'A', (1) will be true. But if (1) is true no matter what we plug in for 'A', it would seem to follow that (2) is true! Similarly, in (3), as in (1), the word 'A' stands for a proper name; and so, once again, whatever occupies this argument place will be an object. Thus it would appear in this case that no matter what we plug in for 'A', (3) will be false. But if (3) is false no matter what we plug in for 'A', it would seem to follow that (4) is true! The point of this elucidation is not to secure the truth of the paradoxical claim that "Nothing is a function" (or "There are no functions"). On the contrary: it is to offer a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea that the proposition 'A is a function' can just straightforwardly say what Russell (for the sake of his argument with Frege) wants it to. The point is to show that sentences in which the expression 'function' occurs misfire, and to show that—as long as we know what we are doing with such sentences—such self-defeating sentences can nonetheless be put to use to communicate an insight into what a function is. What matters when we employ such sentences, as Frege's final sentence (in the passage quoted above) indicates, is that we know what we are doing (i.e., uttering nonsense) when we come out with them, and that we know how it has come to pass that we find ourselves doing it.

The point of the paradoxical assertions that constitute the preceding elucidation is to show us (a) that we end up speaking nonsense when we try to say what a function is, (b) that we here "find ourselves in a situation where the nature of language itself" makes it impossible for us to say that which we want to say, (c) that to grasp how it is that the nature of language itself thus stands in the way of saying what we want to say (when we want to say what a function is) is to grasp what a function is. The point is thus not *merely* to expose what we end up saying when we employ such a term as nonsense (in order to debar us from engaging in such ways of speaking) but, rather, to teach us how *self-consciously* to cultivate such ways of speaking (in order to allow us to attain insight into the nature of functions). The point of cultivating such ways of speaking is to enable us to recognize *why* it is that we end up with nonsense when we try to say such things. The attainment of such a recognition constitutes the sign that we have grasped an elucidation of the meaning of a term (such as 'function') that denotes something logically primitive.<sup>60</sup>

Frege repeatedly says, when offering such elucidatory examples, that he is *forced* or *compelled* to express himself in an infelicitous manner: he is attempting to struggle against "an imprecision forced on us by the nature of language," one that "compels" him "to use an inappropriate expression which obscures—falsifies—the thought." Now, as I have already indicated, what is significant about such remarks for our purposes is that they reveal a parallel between a possible reading of Frege and a standard reading of the *Tractatus*. On this reading, Frege (1) takes himself in such cases to be trying to say something that, properly speak-

ing, cannot be said; and (2) speaks in such cases of there being a *thought* that his words struggle but fail adequately to express. In a famous passage in "On Concept and Object" he writes: "I admit that there is a quite peculiar obstacle in the way of an understanding with the 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 half-way—who does not begrudge a pinch of salt" (Frege, 1984, p. 193, my emphases).<sup>61</sup> His words miss his thought (and end up being nonsense); so there is a thought they are aiming at: an understanding of what his words intend to say depends upon his reader latching onto the thought his words fail properly to express. This failure is due, according to Frege, to "a kind of necessity of language." If he is to convey, the thought he here seeks to convey, he has no alternative but to have recourse to (elucidatory) nonsense.

A reading of Frege (on the impossibility of asserting of a concept what can only be asserted of an object) such as the one sketched above involves attributing to Frege a commitment to the substantial conception of nonsense; that is, it involves attributing to Frege the very conception of philosophically illuminating nonsense that is standardly thought to be the innovation of the *Tractatus*. Once one sees how this conception is at odds with other aspects of Frege's philosophy—those aspects of his philosophy that the *Tractatus* is most concerned to inherit—one is in a better position to see where the philosophical innovation of the *Tractatus* truly lies.<sup>62</sup> But before we turn to a discussion of those aspects of Frege's philosophy, it will help to have before us a slightly fuller sketch of where the philosophical innovation of the *Tractatus* has standardly been thought to lie.

## VII. The Standard Reading of the *Tractatus*

What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said.

Bertrand Russell, introduction to the *Tractatus*

According to most readings of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is the preeminent champion of the substantial conception of nonsense. But commentators in their expostions of Tractarian doctrines tend to waver between ascribing to him the positivist and the ineffability variants of the substantial conception of nonsense. The positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception differ over where the violation transpires when a transgression of logic occurs—and hence apparently over what the transgression itself really consists in. The positivist variant takes the locus of transgression to be the medium of language and takes the transgression itself to consist in an illegitimate combination of linguistic signs; the ineffability variant takes the locus to be the medium of thought and the transgression to consist in an illegitimate combination of logical categories: in an ill-fated attempt to express in language that which inherently resists linguistic expression. These two variants of the substantial conception lean toward opposite metaphysical doctrines. The former fits comfortably with the doctrine that the limits of

thought cannot outrun the limits of language. The latter presupposes the doctrine that thought not only can but (as putatively evidenced by our capacity to frame in thought such transgressions of logical syntax) demonstrably does outrun these limits.

Most commentators on the *Tractatus* do not distinguish between these two variants of the substantial conception. Proponents of the ineffability interpretation, however, do seek to distinguish, in some way or other, between what counts for the *Tractatus* as *misleading nonsense* and what counts as *illuminating nonsense*.<sup>63</sup> The tendency among commentators who do so distinguish is to characterize misleading nonsense in terms that accord more comfortably with the positivist variant of the substantial conception and to characterize illuminating nonsense in terms that presuppose the ineffability variant.<sup>64</sup> Thus misleading nonsense is characterized as a strictly linguistic affair, while illuminating nonsense is characterized as a vehicle for grasping that which cannot be said. In the case of misleading nonsense, our task is merely to recognize that an abuse of language has been committed and that nothing has been said. But in the case of illuminating nonsense, we are to recognize that the abuse of language was committed as a means to a further end. Our task as a reader of the *Tractatus* is to grasp (not what the nonsense says—because it says nothing, but rather) that which the linguistic performance "intends." In both cases, these commentators will say, there is nothing the words say—there is no thought that corresponds to the words—in the one case, because there is no thought; in the other, because the thought in question eludes the words. In the case of misleading nonsense, there is no thought available to be grasped because there is no thought which is the thought those words intend. When a metaphysician commits such an abuse of language, he is to be brought to see that he has failed to say anything.<sup>65</sup> In the case of illuminating nonsense, there is a thought available to be grasped—a thought which is the thought those words intend. But the thought our words here intend cannot be said: our audience must be made to look beyond what our words merely say.

Here is Peter Hacker's description of how illuminating nonsense is supposed to illuminate:

Within the range of philosophical . . . nonsense we can distinguish . . . between . . . illuminating nonsense and misleading nonsense. Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to *apprehend what is shown* by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who *grasp what is meant*, its own illegitimacy . . .

The *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseudo-propositions. Of course, what Wittgenstein *meant* by these remarks is, in his view, quite correct, only it cannot be said. Apparently what someone *means* or *intends* by a remark can be *grasped* even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense. (Hacker, 1986, pp. 18–19, 26, my emphasis)

Hacker here attributes to the *Tractatus* the idea that there is a kind of thought (a kind of "grasping" or "apprehending" what is "meant" or "intended") that outruns the limits of language.<sup>66</sup> One might ask: if nonsense is nonsense in virtue of its failure to make sense, then how are we to "grasp" what is "meant"? How are we to discern the presence of meaning in the absence of meaning?<sup>67</sup> Well, it is not

what the words say that we are after, but—to echo Frege—what they *hint at*. But, ordinarily, we grasp what someone's words hint at by first grasping what his words actually say, and then going on to read between the lines. But how do we grasp what nonsense hints at? The ineffability reading of the *Tractatus* invokes the idea of a violation of logical syntax to solve this problem (of how nonsense can so much as hint at something). According to the ineffability variant of the substantial conception, these violations arise through attempts to try to express fundamental features of the logical structure of language *in* language.<sup>68</sup> These attempts, as Peter Hacker puts it, “unavoidably violate the bounds of sense, misuse language, and produce nonsense” (Hacker, 1986, p. 21). The rules of logic render the “it” (which such nonsense is attempting to express) unsayable. The logical structure of language keeps us from being able to say “it”—because of the logical structure of our thought there is something we *cannot* do: we cannot think against the grain of logic. When we try, we come out with bits of nonsense. But these bits of nonsense are, nonetheless, useful; they can convey the unsayable thing our words were after but could not reach.

Hacker, like most commentators, takes Wittgenstein's conception of “showing”<sup>69</sup> in the *Tractatus* to represent a departure from the views of Frege and Russell. Nevertheless, it should be evident by now that this conception of “showing” parallels (according to the reading of Frege sketched above) Frege's conception of elucidation.<sup>70</sup> Peter Geach, as we saw earlier, is sensitive to this affinity between Frege's views and those standardly attributed to the *Tractatus*. Here is how Geach summarizes what he takes Wittgenstein to have learned from Frege:

Wittgenstein holds that *various features of reality* come out . . . in our language, but we cannot use this language to say, assert, that reality has these features: if we try to frame propositions ascribing these features to reality, then it will be possible to show that strictly speaking these are not propositions, only sentence-like structures which violate the principles of logical syntax and are thus devoid of any sense, true or false. All the same, these nonsensical . . . structures may be useful; they may serve to convey from speaker to hearer *an insight* that cannot be put into proper propositions. (Geach, 1976, p. 54, my emphases)

This reading—in order to make sense of the idea that nonsense is able to provide metaphysical illumination—attributes to the *Tractatus* the idea that there are features of reality that cannot be expressed because of the logical structure of our thought. But they can nevertheless be conveyed by language. According to this reading of the *Tractatus*, these features of reality can be made manifest by language because they correspond to features of language: they are reflected in the mirror of the logical structure of language. The relevant features of language taken together comprise the logical form of language. According to the standard reading of the *Tractatus*, we cannot express “it”—the logical form of language—in language; but we can gesture at it.

### VIII. A Closer Look at the Substantial Conception

[C]ertain kinds of verbal association, certain grammatical expectations fulfilled, stand for a good part of our impres-

sion that a sentence has a meaning and is dominated by the Unity of one Thought. Nonsense in grammatical form sounds half rational . . . Each word, in such a sentence, is felt, not only as a word, but as having a meaning.

William James, *The Principles of Psychology*

The ineffability interpretation of the *Tractatus* relies not only on the distinction between kinds of *philosophical* nonsense (illuminating and misleading), but also on the further distinction (which it shares with the positivist interpretation) between philosophical nonsense and mere nonsense. Both kinds of philosophical nonsense are taken by proponents of the ineffability interpretation to be more “substantial” than mere nonsense. This more substantial kind of nonsense is a kind in which we can recognize the place in the syntax of a sentence for an item of a certain logical category, but something of the wrong category has been put in that place. Mere nonsense is a kind of nonsense in which we are unable to discern sufficient syntactic structure to identify any part of a linguistic string as being the place for an item of a certain logical category. Mere nonsense is not, as it were, even trying to play by the rules of logic. Substantial philosophical nonsense, on the other hand, involves (what Carnap—one of the first and most lucid proponents of the positivist variant of the substantial conception—calls) countersyntactic formation: it plays by the rules up to a point and then breaks them. By breaking the rules of logic, substantial nonsense brings these rules out into open view. Let us take a closer look at how this is supposed to work.

Following Geach's lead, we have sketched a reading of Frege that ascribes the ineffability variant of the substantial conception to him. One commentator who attributes to Frege (something that might appear at first glance to be) a version of the positivist variant is Michael Dummett. There is never any reference in Dummett's exposition of Frege to thoughts that can only be gestured at or to that which Frege's elucidations might be attempting—but failing—to express.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, Dummett's exposition diverges markedly from that of Geach. Yet, in other respects, Dummett's account of substantial nonsense in Frege parallels the account offered by most commentators on the *Tractatus* of what “a violation of logical syntax” is. Here is Dummett on Frege's theory of how such violations arise:

[It] is a theory of what expressions can be accepted as significant: only certain functions—those of the appropriate type—can “occur significantly” as arguments of other functions; expressions which violate the theory of types are simply meaningless. . . .

We, therefore, have to have some conception of logical valency, of different categories of expression, governed by rules determining that expressions of certain categories will fit together to form a sentence, while expressions of certain other categories will not. (Dummett, 1983, pp. 50, 62)

Dummett employs here the chemical metaphor of valency: just as certain elements can be combined so as to form a compound while others cannot be so combined, so items of certain logical categories can be combined so as to form a proposition and others cannot be so combined. Underlying this conception of logical valency





sense they each possess) to this one. The determinately specifiable respect in which Dummett's case of substantial nonsense possesses a flawed sense is the following: it represents "an attempt" to put *that* proper name into *that* argument place for a first-level function. But it will not fit—(in Frege's words) "the parts cannot logically adhere," "it makes no sense to fit them together," "they will not hold together"—thus we get nonsense; but not mere nonsense, but a special variety of nonsense that arises from attempting to do something logically impossible. Wittgenstein's critique of Frege turns on his critique of this idea—an idea that is common to both the positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception: the idea that we can so much as try to put a logical item into an argument place in which it does not fit—the idea that we can have a proposition that has a fully determinate kind of sense but the kind of sense that it has is nonsense.

### IX. The Tractarian Critique of the Substantial Conception

The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn't do.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Is it possible to identify an expression as being of a particular logical category if it occurs in the wrong place? It is here, in its response to this question, that the *Tractatus* sees a tension in Frege's view. A number of Frege's doctrines and a great deal of his own methodological practice suggest that the answer to this question should be: No! It is reflection on these aspects of Frege's thought and practice that leads Wittgenstein to embrace the austere conception of nonsense. If one takes Frege's three principles to heart—as the author of the *Tractatus* does—then you will say to Dummett: if you want to know whether a particular word in a proposition is an object-expression or a concept-expression, you cannot just rely on your previous commerce with that word; you have to analyze the logical structure of the judgment and see what logical role is played by that segment of the proposition—how it contributes to the sense of the whole.

Frege warns in "On Concept and Object" (and elsewhere) that the same word in ordinary language can be used in some contexts as a proper name and in others as a concept word. Frege's favorite example of such a word is 'moon'.<sup>73</sup> It can also happen in ordinary language that an object-expression that has *never* been previously used to express a concept can suddenly be used, for the first time, as a concept-expression; and that we can understand what is meant by such an unprecedented usage. A famous example of a proper name suddenly being used as a concept-expression is Lloyd Bentson (in the 1988 vice presidential debate) saying to Dan Quayle: "You're no Jack Kennedy." Bentson's point was not that two individuals (Quayle and Kennedy) are not identical, but rather that there is a concept (of, say, exemplary statesmanship) that Quayle does not fall under. Frege offers as an example of this sort of creative use of language the lovely sentence "Trieste is no Vienna": "We must not let ourselves be deceived because

language often uses the same word now as a proper name, now as a concept word; in our example ["There is only one Vienna"], the numeral indicates that we have the latter; 'Vienna' is here a concept-word, like 'metropolis'. Using it in this sense, we may say: 'Trieste is no Vienna'" (Frege, 1984, p. 189). In this example, Frege says, we encounter a word that usually functions as a proper name playing the role of a concept-expression. Frege's reading of this sentence is arrived at through reflection upon what possible use this combination of words might have; that is, by asking himself: in what context would one utter such words, and what thought would one then be expressing? If we reflect on when we would utter such a sentence and what we might mean by it, Frege suggests, we will see that 'Vienna' here could mean something like 'metropolis' (or perhaps even beautiful or majestic metropolis)—and thus the sign 'Vienna' used in this way should be expressed in a proper logical symbolism by a completely different kind of symbol than that which we would use to express the occurrence of the word 'Vienna' in the sentence "Vienna is the capital of Austria." Notice that Frege does not conclude that what we have here in his lovely sentence about Trieste is a piece of nonsense—one that results from trying to put a proper name where a concept-expression should go. He concludes instead that what appears in the guise of a concept-expression here is a concept-expression—and then makes a suggestion about what the sentence as a whole might mean (and hence about which concept might be meant). Thus Frege's methodology here is to begin with our *understanding* of the proposition as a whole and to use that as a basis for segmenting it into its logically discrete components.<sup>74</sup> One can see Frege's methodological practice here as illustrating the close relationship between his three principles. If we disobey the second principle in our approach to this example, we end up violating the third: when we consider the word in isolation we take 'Vienna' for an object-expression, yet in this context it does not denote an individual; so if we fail to attend to the logical role of the word in this context, we mistake a concept for an object. What fuels such a mistake is one's tendency to think that one already knows what 'Vienna' means taken all by itself outside the context of that proposition—it means one presumes roughly what it means in a sentence like "Vienna is the capital of Austria." Although we do not realize it, Frege thinks that what is really going on when we think in this way is that we succumb to the all but irresistible urge to transgress against his first principle. When we ask for the meaning of the word in isolation, we unwittingly end up looking for the meaning in what Frege wants to teach us to recognize as the realm of the psychological. It may well be true that when I utter the word 'Vienna' in saying the sentence "Trieste is no Vienna," I intend to mean the same thing as when I utter the word 'Vienna' in saying "The capital of Austria is Vienna"—the same mental image of the spires of the *Steifansdom* rising up over the skyline of the city of Vienna may float before my mind's eye—but that, Frege thinks, does not bear on whether the word has the same meaning in these two sentences.

The methodological import of Frege's three principles is developed in the *Tractatus* through the claim that in ordinary language it is often the case that the same sign symbolizes in different ways. The distinction between sign (*Zeichen*) and symbol (*Symbol*) which this claim presupposes can be summarized as follows:

sign an orthographic unit, that which the perceptible expressions for propositions have in common (a sign design, inscription, icon, grapheme, etc.)<sup>75</sup>

symbol a logical unit, that which meaningful propositions have in common (i.e., an item belonging to a given logical category: proper name, first-level function, etc.)

Armed with the Tractarian distinction between sign and symbol, we can formulate the contrast between the two conceptions of nonsense (which Wittgenstein sees Frege as torn between) in a more precise manner. To recall, the two conceptions of nonsense were:

the substantial conception which holds that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense: *substantial nonsense* and *mere nonsense*

the austere conception which holds that there is, from a logical point of view, only one kind of nonsense: *mere nonsense*

The italicized terms in the above formulations can now be defined as follows:

substantial nonsense a proposition composed of signs that symbolize, but which has a logically flawed syntax due to a clash in the logical category of its symbols

mere nonsense a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax

I have, until now, pretended to be able to distinguish between the positivist and ineffability variants of the substantial conception. But, armed with the distinction between symbol and sign, we can start to see why the distinction between these two variants is an inherently unstable one.<sup>76</sup>

Any attempt to clearly articulate the positivist variant will lead to its collapse either into the ineffability variant or into the austere conception. Either the proponent of the positivist variant holds that a violation of logical syntax involves an impermissible combination of symbols, or he holds that it involves an impermissible combination of signs. If he holds the former, then the positivist variant collapses into the ineffability variant; if the latter, then he abandons the substantial conception altogether. To take an example of the former case, Dummett's account of "Chairman Mao is rare" teeters throughout on the brink of collapse into a version of the ineffability variant. The items combined in Dummett's example—items which (in Frege's words) "cannot logically adhere," which "it makes no sense to fit together," which "will not hold together"—can not be mere signs. For the four signs 'Chairman', 'Mao', 'is', and 'rare' can be combined (as can any four signs). What cannot be combined, says Frege, is that which the signs symbolize: items belonging to incompatible logical categories. The expressions of which the example is composed are taken by Dummett to be incompatible (not because of their typographic properties, but) because of what he takes these expressions to symbolize: an object and a second-level function, respectively. But if the flaw lies in what is symbolized by the resulting combination, then, it would seem, there is something which these words, so combined, symbolize—an "it" which logic de-

bars but which Dummett is nonetheless able to frame in thought and identify as involving a violation of logic. If, on the other hand, the proponent of the positivist variant holds that a violation of logical syntax involves an impermissible combination of (mere) signs, then he teeters on the brink of abandoning the substantial conception altogether (in favor of the austere conception). For if his account of the impermissibility fails to turn on any logical feature(s) of the allegedly impermissible string, then he has deprived himself of the resources requisite for claiming that there are two logically distinct kinds of nonsense.

In order to begin to see why this is so, it will help to look more closely at the distinction between sign and symbol as it is drawn in the *Tractatus*. It is introduced as part of the commentary on §3.3, which is the *Tractatus*'s reformulation of Frege's second principle.<sup>77</sup> Section 3.3 runs as follows: "Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning." Then, beginning immediately thereafter (with §3.31), comes the following commentary:

Every part of a proposition which characterizes its sense I call an expression (a symbol).

(The proposition itself is an expression.)

Everything essential to their sense that propositions can have in common with one another is an expression.

An expression is the mark of a form and a content.

An expression presupposes the forms of all propositions in which it can occur. It is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions (§§3.31–3.311)

An expression has meaning only in a proposition (§3.314)

I conceive the proposition—like Frege and Russell—as a function of the expressions contained in it. (§3.318)

The sign is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses. (§3.32)

Two different symbols can therefore have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common—they then signify in different ways. (§3.321)

It can never indicate the common characteristic of two objects that we symbolize them with the same signs but by different *methods of symbolizing*. For the sign is arbitrary.

We could therefore equally well choose two different signs [to symbolize the two different objects] and where then would remain that which the signs shared in common? (§3.322)

The point of the commentary is in part to clarify the notion of "proposition" which figures in the context principle (only the *proposition* has sense; only in the context of a *proposition* has a name meaning<sup>78</sup>). The relevant notion is one of a certain kind of a symbol—not a certain kind of a sign—something that only has life in language.<sup>79</sup> The sign, Wittgenstein says, "is that in the symbol which is perceptible by the senses" (what is now sometimes called the sign design). The symbol is a logical unit; it expresses something that propositions—as opposed to propositional signs—have in common.<sup>80</sup> Thus the sentences "Trieste is no Vienna" and "Vienna is the capital of Austria" have the sign 'Vienna' in common. These two sentences taken together offer an instance of what Wittgenstein means when he



says (in §3.321) "two different symbols can have the sign (the written sign or the sound sign) in common—they then signify in different ways." The sentences "Trieste is no Vienna" and "Vienna is the capital of Austria" have no symbol in common—all they have in common are the signs 'Vienna' and 'is'. In (what Wittgenstein calls) a proper logical grammar, each sign would wear its mode of symbolizing on its sleeve. We can, somewhat anachronistically, use modern logical notation to illustrate this point:

- (a) Vienna is the capital of Austria  $v = c$   
 (b) Trieste is not the capital of Austria  $t \neq c$   
 (c) Trieste is not (identical to) Vienna  $t \neq v$
- (a') Trieste is no Vienna  $\sim Vt$   
 (b') Trieste is no metropolis  $\sim Mt$   
 (c') Trieste is a Vienna  $Vt$

When written in ordinary language, sentences (a) and (a') have two signs ('Vienna', 'is') in common; when expressed in a proper logical notation, they are inscribed in such a way that their lack of a common symbol is reflected in the absence of a common sign. When written in ordinary language, sentences (c) and (a') have three signs ('Trieste', 'Vienna', 'is') in common; when expressed in a proper logical notation, it is rendered perspicuous that they have only a single symbol in common. Once transposed into a proper logical notation, it would also be manifest which of the following three propositions have a propositional symbol in common:

- (a) Socrates was bald.  
 (b) Socrates, who taught Plato, was bald.  
 (c) A philosopher whose teacher was Socrates was bald.

It would become clear, from the manner in which these three propositional symbols were expressed in the notation, that (a) and (b) have a propositional symbol in common (though they have no sequence of words in common), and that (a) and (c) have no propositional symbol in common (despite their having the sequence of words 'Socrates was bald' in common). Taken together, (a) and (b) furnish an example of how in ordinary language different sequences of signs can have the symbol in common; and, taken together, (a) and (c) furnish an example of how in ordinary language the same sequence of signs can have no symbol in common, and thus how the same signs can belong to different symbols. Wittgenstein comments on these features of ordinary language:

In the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways—and therefore belongs to two different symbols—or that two words, which signify in different ways, are applied in the same way in the proposition.

Thus the word "is" appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence; "to exist" as an intransitive verb like "to go"; "identical" as an adjective; we speak of *something* but also of the fact of *something* happening.

(In the proposition "Green is green"—where the first word is a proper name and the last an adjective—these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*.) (§3.323)

It is worth elaborating how Wittgenstein's example in the last paragraph illustrates the point of the first paragraph of §3.323. The propositional sign 'Green is green' can be naturally taken as symbolizing in any of three different ways<sup>81</sup>—and hence can be understood as an expression for any one of three different thoughts:

- (a) Mr. Green is green.  $Gg$   
 (b) Mr. Green is Mr. Green.  $g = g$   
 (c) The color green is the color green.  $(\forall x)(Gx \leftrightarrow Gx)$

One way of noticing how the same sign symbolizes differently in each of these three cases is to focus on the word 'is'. In each of the propositions expressing each of these three different thoughts, the sign 'is' symbolizes a different logical relation. In (a), the sign 'is' symbolizes the copula (a relation between a concept and an object); in (b) we have the 'is' of identity (a relation between objects); in (c), we have the 'is' of coextensionality (a relation between concepts).<sup>82</sup> In the ordinary language version of (a)—"where the first word is a proper name and the last an adjective"—'green' can be seen to be not merely ambiguous with respect to its meaning (the way 'bank' is in "The bank is on the left bank"), but ambiguous with respect to its logical type: "these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*." The point of the example is to show us that we cannot gather from the notation of ordinary language how a given sign (e.g., 'green', or 'is') symbolizes in a given instance. Wittgenstein suddenly follows this example with the observation: "Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)" (§3.324). In a proper Begriffsschrift, a different sign would express each of these "different methods of symbolizing," thus enabling us to identify the sources of certain confusions. In §3.325, Wittgenstein immediately goes on to say that in order "to avoid such errors" we require a symbolism that obeys the rules of *logical* grammar. How can such a Begriffsschrift enable us to avoid "the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full)"? In order to answer this question, we need first to explore what sorts of "confusions" these are and what role a Begriffsschrift plays in their elucidation.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that once we appreciate how Frege's three principles work in conjunction with one another, we will see that there will always be room for a question as to whether a given sign, when it occurs in two different sentences of ordinary language, is symbolizing the same way in each of those occurrences. And this question cannot be settled simply by appealing to the fact that the same word (sign) ordinarily occurs (symbolizes) as a name<sup>83</sup> (e.g., as a name of the capital of Austria); nor by appealing to the fact that if I were asked what I meant when I uttered one of those sentences, I would reply that I meant the word in the same sense as I have on other occasions; nor by appealing to the fact that I, on this occasion of utterance, exert a special effort to mean the word in the same way as before. How can this question be settled? Wittgenstein says: "In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the context of significant use" (§3.326). We must ask ourselves on what occasion we would utter this sentence and what, in that context of use, we would then mean by it. (This is what we saw Frege do in his handling of the example "Trieste is no Vienna.") In asking ourselves this, we still rely upon our familiarity with the way words (signs) ordinarily occur (symbolize) in propositions to fashion a segmentation of the propo-

sitional sign in question.<sup>84</sup> The point of §3.326 can be brought out by returning to Dummett's example. If, for example, we attempt to provide a context of significant use for "Chairman Mao is rare," it becomes possible to see the symbol in the sign in ways which Dummett does not consider. There are two equally *natural* ways to segment this string: (1) to construe 'Chairman Mao' as symbolizing a first-level function (on the model of "You're no Jack Kennedy"),<sup>85</sup> (2) to construe 'rare' as symbolizing a first-level function.<sup>86</sup> These are "natural" ways of "reading" the string because each reading segments the string along lines dictated by an established usage (i.e., an established method of stringing along by means) of signs.<sup>87</sup> The expression '\_\_\_\_\_ is rare' has an established use in the language (in sentences such as "An honest politician is rare") as a second level function; the expression 'Chairman Mao' has an established use in the language (in sentences such as "Chairman Mao ate only boiled rice") as a proper name. Each of these established uses dictates a possible segmentation of the string—each of which excludes the other.<sup>88</sup> There is not anything that is simultaneously segmenting the string along both lines at once.<sup>89</sup> Segmenting it either way, we supply a possible context of significant use and thus confer upon the string 'Chairman Mao is rare' a sense. According to the *Tractatus*, until we have done this, we have yet to confer any method of symbolizing on any of the signs that make up the string.

In §3.326, "the context of significant use" translates *sinnvollen Gebrauch*; "recognize" translates *erkennen*, which might also be translated "perceive." The latter is the same word that occurs in §6.54: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually *perceives* them as nonsensical." To perceive a Satz as *sinnvoll* is to be able to perceive the propositional symbol in the propositional sign. To perceive a Satz as *Unsinn* is to be unable to recognize the symbol in the sign. For the *Tractatus*, these two forms of recognition eclipse one another.<sup>90</sup> Building on Frege's three principles, the *Tractatus* argues that in the case of a piece of nonsense—that is, in the absence of the provision of a context of *sinnvollen Gebrauch* determining a possible logical segmentation of the Satz—we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a propositional sign; for, *ex hypothesi*, there are no working parts of "the proposition." One can identify the contribution the senses of the parts of a proposition make to the sense of the whole only if the whole has a sense—if it stands in some identifiable location with respect to the other occupants of logical space. According to the *Tractatus*, there are no examples of a proposition's failing to make sense because its parts do not "fit" together. Thus there are no examples of the sort Dummett was looking for—examples of putting a proper name where a concept word belongs—for if one can properly make out that what belongs in that place is a concept word, then that is a sufficient condition for treating whatever is in that place as a concept word. There is not anything, on the conception of *Unsinn* which the *Tractatus* advances, that corresponds to a proposition's failing to make sense because of the meaning that the parts already have taken in isolation.<sup>91</sup> On the Tractarian conception, the *only* way a sentence can be *Unsinn* is by its failing to symbolize.<sup>92</sup> This conception does not rule out the possibility of Sätze (such as tautologies and contradictions) that have logical structure and yet are devoid of *Sinn*. (To think that it did would be to lose sight of the distinction between that which is *Unsinn* and that which is *sinnlos*.<sup>93</sup>) It only rules out a sentence's having a fully determinate yet logically impossible sense—a sense that

it cannot have because of the logically determinate but logically mutually incompatible senses that its parts already have.

## X. Carnapian Elucidation

It was Wittgenstein who first exhibited the close connection between the logic of science (or "philosophy," as he calls it) and syntax . . . . He has shown that all the so-called sentences of metaphysics are nonsense.

Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*

The contemporary understanding of the *Tractatus*'s conception of nonsense has been shaped in large part by the enthusiastic reception of the *Tractatus* by members of the Vienna Circle and the subsequent role that their understanding of its doctrines played in the development of their own highly influential doctrines. Carnap, in his essay "The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language" (Carnap, 1959, pp. 59–81),<sup>94</sup> puts forward a conception of logical syntax that seeks to articulate a version of the positivist variant of the substantial conception.<sup>95</sup> The word "elimination" in the title of Carnap's essay is a translation of the German word *Überwindung*, which might be better translated "overcoming", or even "subjugation". In the final sentence of §6.54, it is said of the reader of the *Tractatus* that *er muß diese Sätze überwinden*: he must overcome (or defeat) these sentences<sup>96</sup>—the ones that serve as elucidations and are, eventually, to be recognized by the reader as nonsense. We can get clearer about how Wittgenstein's Sätze are meant to serve as elucidations by pressing the following question: How faithful an inheritance of Wittgenstein's project (to teach his reader to "overcome" the sentences of the *Tractatus*) is Carnap's project of "overcoming" metaphysics?<sup>97</sup>

Carnap took his understanding of the sources of metaphysical nonsense (and the role of the tools of logical syntax in effecting its cure) to be enormously indebted to the *Tractatus*; and he borrowed heavily on (what he took to be) the ideas of the *Tractatus* in elaborating his own (successive versions of an) *Überwindung der Metaphysik*.<sup>98</sup> Due to the considerable influence of Carnap's own ideas on several generations of analytic philosophers, subsequent commentators on the *Tractatus* have, often quite unknowingly, read Wittgenstein's work through Carnap's spectacles, construing the *Tractatus*'s often quite distinctive notions along more familiar Carnapian lines and importing additional Carnapian terminology to fill in the gaps in Wittgenstein's original exposition.<sup>99</sup> In §4.003 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes: "Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical. . . . Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language." On what has become the standard interpretation of the *Tractatus*, this passage is interpreted to mean (1) that "the nonsensical pseudo-propositions of the philosophers" are nonsensical because they "violate the rules of logical syntax," (2) that this is what philosophers need to be brought to see about their pseudopropositions, (3) that this requires that they be

