

WITTGENSTEIN, CARNAP AND THE NEW AMERICAN WITTGENSTEINIANS

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James Conant, a proponent of the 'New American Wittgenstein', has argued that the standard interpretation of Wittgenstein is wholly mistaken in respect of Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics and the attendant conception of nonsense. The standard interpretation, Conant holds, misascribes to Wittgenstein Carnapian views on the illegitimacy of metaphysical utterances, on logical syntax and grammar, and on the nature of nonsense. Against this account, I argue that (i) Carnap is misrepresented; (ii) the so-called standard interpretation (in so far as I have contributed to it) is misrepresented; (iii) Wittgenstein's views, early and late, are misrepresented. I clarify Wittgenstein's conception of logical syntax and of the nonsense that results from transgressing it.

I. THE NEW WITTGENSTEIN AND THE AMERICAN WITTGENSTEIN

Hot on the heels of *The New Wittgenstein* we now have *Wittgenstein in America*. The contributors to the American Wittgenstein include the leading proponents of the New Wittgenstein, namely, Cora Diamond and James Conant. The Old American Wittgensteinians included such figures as Alice Ambrose, Max Black and Norman Malcolm, who had studied under Wittgenstein. They shed light on Wittgenstein's philosophy, both in elucidating its general contour-lines and in illuminating problems that he had addressed. They also made use of what they had learnt from Wittgenstein to address numerous fresh problems in the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy, clarifying one or another aspect of our conceptual scheme.

The New American Wittgensteinians, by contrast, tend to be preoccupied with a relatively narrow range of issues. Their interpretations of Wittgenstein that have aroused debate centre primarily on two themes. The first is whether the *Tractatus* is plain nonsense through and through (as Conant and Diamond claim), or whether it is a self-consciously nonsensical endeavour to say what, according to its argument, can only be shown. The second is whether Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense is 'austere' or 'substantial',

and whether it remains constant throughout the whole corpus of his work. The issues are not without interest. But the narrowness of the concerns is unfortunate. All the great debates about Wittgenstein's philosophy over the last fifty years, e.g., on family resemblance concepts, the nature of philosophy, criteria, private language, following rules, had multiple ramifications. One need not have been a follower of Wittgenstein to have been justified in attending to these debates, and to have hoped to learn from them. The New American Wittgenstein offers no such rewards. It will not alter the way non-Wittgensteinian philosophers pursue their work – nor need it do so. They will, I fancy, pass by with the ironic observation that all that followers of Wittgenstein can now do is quarrel over what sort of nonsense Wittgenstein's early work was. It is sad to see matters come to such a pass.

In Conant's numerous papers on the pair of his favoured themes, he claims that 'most commentators' on Wittgenstein have been fundamentally mistaken about his philosophy, early and late. Instead of clarifying the true nature of his philosophical thought, they have set up 'the standard interpretation' of Wittgenstein, which is not merely mistaken, but is exactly what Wittgenstein adamantly denied from his first masterpiece to his last writings. The standard interpretation, Conant claims,

1. holds that Wittgenstein sought to expose metaphysical utterances as nonsense on the grounds that they transgress specific rules of logical syntax (according to the *Tractatus*) or grammar (according to the later philosophy)
2. ascribes to Wittgenstein a substantial conception of nonsense, according to which metaphysical utterances consist of meaningful expressions combined in an illegitimate way
3. attributes the illegitimacy of the sentential combination to the fact that the meanings of these expressions cannot be so combined.

This conception of nonsense, Conant alleges, characterizes Carnap's philosophy in 1932, not Wittgenstein's. Hence too the conception of metaphysics and of philosophical method in criticizing metaphysics that it ascribes to Wittgenstein is Carnapian. But in fact it is a *misconception*, one that Wittgenstein, from the *Tractatus* onwards, sought to eradicate. In place of this misconceived parody, Conant purports to disclose to the philosophical public the true face of Wittgenstein's philosophy for the very first time.

Although it seems clear that by 'the standard interpretation' Conant means the interpretations propounded by such figures as Russell, Ramsey, Anscombe, Geach, Malcolm, von Wright, Kenny and Pears, I myself (together with Gordon Baker) am identified in dozens of places as representative of this misguided class of commentators. I am happy to find myself

in the company of such distinguished philosophers. Nevertheless it seems to me to be doubtful whether talk of ‘most commentators’ (unnamed and unquoted), and of ‘the standard interpretation’ (allegedly shared by ‘most commentators’), is a fruitful way to discuss exegetical matters. Burning straw men produces more heat than light. I know of no one who has embraced all three of the above theses. I myself would accept (1). Thesis (2), however, is unclear. The notion of meaningfulness that is there invoked needs to be clarified. What conception of meaning (*Bedeutung*) and of being meaningful (*bedeutungsvoll* or *sinnvoll*?) is being ascribed to Wittgenstein? Is it the conception of meaning he had in the *Tractatus* or the quite different conception he later embraced? Are we dealing with the conception of nonsense in the *Tractatus* that is bound up with the picture theory of representation, or with Wittgenstein’s later conception that has been cut free of this encumbrance? I emphatically reject (3) – as did Carnap (as I shall show), and, I suspect, as did or do the other philosophers to whom Conant refers as ‘most commentators’.

In a previous paper, ‘Was He Trying to Whistle It?’,¹ I provided the evidence to show that the New Wittgensteinian interpretation of the *Tractatus* was methodologically incoherent as well as inconsistent with the text of the book, and incompatible with many dozens of Wittgenstein’s remarks in letters, conversations, lectures and writings about the *Tractatus*. In *Wittgenstein in America* Gordon Baker and I are again taken to be the main representatives of the ‘standard interpretation’, and Conant now declares that the disagreement over whether the *Tractatus* did or did not cleave to the doctrine that there are truths that cannot be said but can only be shown is not the crucial difference between him and us. The really deep matter, he holds, is over whether Wittgenstein, early and late, espoused an ‘austere’ conception of nonsense, or whether, as Gordon Baker and I are alleged to have claimed explicitly or implicitly, he espoused a ‘substantial’ conception of nonsense.²

It matters little whether Conant misunderstands my writings, and it does not matter greatly that he misrepresents my views and arguments. But Baker and I are accused of having misled the philosophical public for decades. The views which we are *alleged* to hold are also ascribed to a large but unspecified

¹ Originally published as a dissenting voice in A. Crary and R. Read (eds), *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000), and reprinted with additions in P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

² James Conant, ‘Two Conceptions of *Die Überwindung der Metaphysik*’ (hereafter ‘UM’), in T.G. McCarthy and S.C. Stidd (eds), *Wittgenstein in America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), fn. 42. Much the same ideas, and much the same attack on, and misrepresentation of, my views were advanced by Edward Witherspoon in his paper ‘Conceptions of Nonsense in Carnap and Wittgenstein’, in Crary and Read (eds), *The New Wittgenstein*. I hope that I shall not engender a *Prioritätsstreit* if I address only Conant.

group of ‘most commentators’. Furthermore, Carnap is falsely accused of the same intellectual sins as are misascribed to us. Perhaps this warrants an attempt (a) to spell out yet again what Wittgenstein *did* claim in these matters, and (b) to correct Conant’s misrepresentations of Carnap.

II. AUSTERE AND SUBSTANTIAL NONSENSE – CARNAP

According to the standard interpretation, Conant claims, there are two kinds of nonsense: (i) mere nonsense, which is simply unintelligible and expresses no thought, and (ii) substantial nonsense, which is composed of intelligible ingredients, combined in ways that are precluded by the meanings of the constituent expressions. Substantial nonsense expresses a thought that is logically incoherent. It expresses a proposition that has a fully determinate sense, but the kind of sense it has is nonsense (UM, p. 23). This conception of nonsense and its forms, Conant claims, is characteristic of Carnap in his paper ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language’.³ It is also allegedly characteristic of the standard interpretation of Wittgenstein. By contrast, Conant advocates, and attributes to Wittgenstein, both early and late, the view that there is only one kind of nonsense, namely, austere nonsense, consisting of a meaningless concatenation of *meaningless* signs. According to Wittgenstein, Conant claims, there is nothing logico-syntactically awry with metaphysical sentences. All that is wrong with them is that we have not given any meaning to the constituent expressions.

Conant’s project is to recover the sense of three terms in the *Tractatus*, all of which, he claims, have been distorted or obscured by the standard interpretation. These terms are

- (i) nonsense
- (ii) logical syntax
- (iii) elucidation.

I shall show that both Carnap and the interpretation advanced by Baker and myself (as well as many others) are misrepresented by Conant, that this interpretation neither distorted nor obscured the senses of these terms, and that Conant’s ‘recovery’ of them both distorts and obscures them.

³ R. Carnap, ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language’ (hereafter EM), repr. in translation in A.J. Ayer (ed.), *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), pp. 60–81. All references to Wittgenstein’s works will be by the customary abbreviations, and references to the *Nachlass* will be by the von Wright number: see G.H. von Wright, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), pp. 35ff.

I turn first to Conant's misrepresentations of Carnap on the matter of nonsense. According to Conant, Carnap held that there are two kinds of nonsense, mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. Substantial nonsense is composed of significant words, which are combined contrary to the rules of logical syntax. Accordingly, *they express a kind of thought or proposition which lacks sense*. This view is (bizarrely) attributed to Carnap on the basis of the following passage (EM, p. 61, translated by Pap):

In saying that the so-called statements of metaphysics are *meaningless*, we intend this word in its strictest sense.... In the strict sense ... a sequence of words is *meaningless* if it does not, within a specified language, constitute a statement. It may happen that such a sequence of words looks like a statement at first glance; in that case we call it a *pseudo-statement*. Our thesis, now, is that logical analysis reveals the alleged statements of metaphysics to be pseudo-statements.

Conant claims that there are two possible interpretations of this passage, a stronger and a weaker one. The stronger reading is that metaphysical utterances are nonsensical pseudo-statements – meaningless sequences of words. The weaker is that metaphysical propositions have a meaning in virtue of which they fail to *assert* anything; hence they fall short of being *statements*. On this conception, some propositions satisfy the conditions necessary for being a statement, and others do not. The propositions of metaphysics belong to the latter class. The above quotation, Conant asserts (UM, p. 21),

is one of a number of passages in (the original German version of) Carnap's essay that invite the stronger version more readily than the weaker reading. If Carnap, in the course of his essay, resolutely adhered to what the stronger reading of this passage takes him to be saying, then he would be espousing the austere conception of nonsense. It is central to the teaching of the *Tractatus* that it is extraordinarily difficult to succeed in being resolute in this matter. Carnap does not succeed.

Conant's interpretation is bizarre. Since there is no suggestion in Carnap's original German of any distinction between proposition and statement, or any intimation that nonsensical sequences of words have a sentential meaning or express a proposition, at most it might have been *Pap* who was guilty of a mistranslation that encourages a misreading. But in fact, *contra* Conant, *there is no such suggestion in Pap's translation either*. Carnap asserted unambiguously that *so-called* statements of metaphysics are nothing more than *meaningless sequences of words* and that these meaningless sequences of words *constitute pseudo-statements*.⁴ The 'weaker reading' that Conant claims to

⁴ In 'On the Character of Philosophic Problems', *Philosophy of Science*, 1 (1934), pp. 5–19, Carnap wrote 'the logical analysis of the pretended propositions of metaphysics has shown that they are not propositions at all, but empty word arrays, which ... arouse the false appearance of being propositions' (p. 5). It would be difficult to be more explicit.

find has no textual warrant; and the insinuation that elsewhere in his paper Carnap committed the blunder of which he is accused is baseless. Conant in effect accuses Carnap of a major philosophical mistake, while producing no evidence whatsoever to support this accusation.

The second accusation against Carnap is that he believed that the syntax of natural languages allows the formation of sequences of words that are individually meaningful, but are so combined that the resultant sequence is meaningless. Thus far, this is a correct characterization of Carnap's view. Carnap wrote as follows (EM, p. 61):

A language consists of a vocabulary and a syntax, i.e., a set of words which have meanings and rules of sentence formation. These rules indicate how sentences may be formed out of the various sorts of words. Accordingly there are two kinds of pseudo-statements: either they contain a word which is erroneously believed to have meaning, or the constituent words are meaningful, yet are put together in a counter-syntactical way, so that they do not yield a meaningful statement.

But Conant goes farther. For he ascribes to Carnap the view that nonsensical sequences of meaningful words are nonsensical 'because of the incompatible meanings of the words involved' (UM, p. 21). For this he offers no textual evidence. Conant claims that Carnap's remarks on violations of logical syntax again admit of a strong and a weak 'reading'. The strong reading is that when Carnap says that meaningful words may be combined according to rules of ordinary grammar and yet constitute a nonsensical sequence of words, that is exactly what he means. On the weak reading, Carnap is accused (UM, p. 21) of holding that

there are certain kinds of thought – logically incoherent thoughts – which cannot be expressed in a proper logical syntax. These thoughts have a logical structure, but the sort of structure that they have renders them incapable of being either true or false. They therefore belong to a logically defective species of thought.

As before, no textual evidence is adduced to support the attribution of any such idea to Carnap – and indeed perusal of his article will show that there is none. However, Conant insists that Carnap 'wants to be able – needs to be able – to have it both ways', i.e., sometimes to adopt a 'strong reading' and sometimes a 'weak' one. He examines Carnap's discussion of the word sequence 'Caesar is a prime number'. Carnap says of this sentence that (a) it is grammatically correctly formed from meaningful words, but (b) they are combined in such a way as to violate the rules of logical syntax that require that the predicate 'is a prime number' be attached to number words alone, so (c) it is nonsense. Conant, however, ascribes (UM, p. 23) to Carnap the following further view:

The resulting nonsense is ... due ... to precisely the meanings that the words already have: meanings which clash with one another when imported into this context. It is supposed to be an example of a kind of nonsense which is due to the way in which the meanings of the parts of the sentence fail to fit together so as to make sense.

Anyone familiar with the later Wittgenstein's writings on this matter will recognize that Conant is in effect accusing Carnap of having a 'meaning-body' (*Bedeutungskörper*) conception of words and their combinatorial possibilities.⁵ For the meaning-body conception, like the conception Conant ascribes to Carnap, conceives of the meanings of words as akin to invisible entities existing behind words, that may mesh together or (as Conant puts it) 'clash with one another' and 'fail to fit together so as to make sense'.

However, Conant's accusation (UM, p. 23) against Carnap is confused:

The determinately specifiable respect in which Carnap's case of substantial nonsense possesses a (flawed) 'sense' is the following: it represents 'an attempt' to put *that* proper name for a person into *that* argument place where only a numerical expression will fit. But it won't fit – thus we get nonsense; not mere nonsense, but a special variety of nonsense which arises from the attempt to do something logically impossible.

This is confused, since far from its being logically impossible, there is no difficulty at all in putting an inappropriate expression into a sentential position from which it is precluded by a rule. More importantly, as both Wittgenstein (cf. RLF, p. 162) and Carnap agreed, there is no difficulty in putting an inappropriate expression into a certain sentential position, *while still conforming to the ordinary rules of syntax*, which do not suffice to exclude all logical errors, and do 'not in all cases prevent the construction of non-sensical pseudo-propositions' (*ibid.*). Most importantly, Carnap did not even intimate a conception of a form of nonsense 'which arises from the attempt to do something logically impossible',⁶ and Conant adduces no evidence whatsoever to support the accusation that he did. The meaning-body error is to attempt to explain *why* the rules of logical syntax or of grammar prohibit whatever they prohibit, *by reference* to the meanings of the relevant expressions, *conceived as entities that may or may not 'fit' together*. This is precisely

⁵ See *PI*, §§138, 559; *PG*, p. 54; *PLP*, pp. 234ff. The conception is of the meaning of an expression as being akin to a three-dimensional geometric glass form, only one face of which is coloured and hence visible, and which can be combined with other such objects to form a two dimensional picture. But the combinatorial possibilities of the coloured surfaces are determined by the invisible shapes behind the visible surfaces. Accordingly the meanings of expressions 'fit' or fail to 'fit' the meanings of other expressions.

⁶ Carnap *can* be accused of adopting a variant of the *Bedeutungskörper* conception in his account of analyticity, for he held that analytic truths *follow* from the meanings of expressions. But no such conception is involved in his explanation of nonsense in EM. For detailed discussion see G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 312–17, 331, 341.

what Carnap did not do. He explained the nonsensicality of pseudo-propositions not by reference to a lack of fit between the meanings of the words, but by reference to transgressions of rules of logical syntax – as Wittgenstein did (*ibid.*).

Although Conant is prone to beating Carnap with the stick of Frege's context principle, which he alleges Carnap failed to heed, he is in effect imputing Frege's confusions to Carnap. Frege did indeed hold both (i) that only certain kinds of combination of *thought-constituents* could logically cohere to form a thought, and (ii) that only certain sorts of meanings (*Bedeutungen*, e.g., object and concept, first- and second-level concepts) will *hold together* – which is why Wittgenstein chose Frege as exemplifying the misguided meaning-body conception.⁷ In *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic* II, §91 and §158, to which Wittgenstein refers, Frege argued against the formalists in mathematics that the rules for the use of an expression are *answerable* to the meanings of the signs. According to Frege, the rules we lay down must follow from, and be determined by, the meanings. This is precisely what Wittgenstein objected to in his dictations to Waismann. On his view, the rules for the use of an expression are *constitutive* of its meaning. So one cannot explain or justify the rules by reference to meanings (as Frege supposed), and hence, too, one cannot explain why a certain combination of words is nonsense by reference to the lack of fit of meanings, conceived as entities that underpin the rules for the uses of expressions.

Frege's example in 'Foundations of Geometry' is '2 is a prime number':

An object, e.g., the number 2, cannot logically adhere to another object, e.g., Julius Caesar, without some means of connection. This, in turn, cannot be an object but rather must be unsaturated. A logical connection into a whole can come about only through this, that an unsaturated part is saturated or completed by one or more parts.... Now it follows from the fundamental difference of objects from concepts that an object can never occur predicatively or unsaturatedly.... The first constituent 'two' is a proper name of a certain number; it designates an object, a whole that no longer requires completion. The predicative constituent 'is a prime number', on the other hand, does require completion and does not designate an object.⁸

It is surely no coincidence that Carnap, who was a pupil of Frege's, picked on the nonsense sentence 'Julius Caesar is a prime number'.⁹ But what is

⁷ See *PLP*, pp. 234–7, based on dictations from Wittgenstein. I shall not be concerned here with Frege's confusions at the level of sense, as opposed to meaning. For a critical discussion of Frege's misconceived *Gedankenbausteine* (thought building-blocks) conception, see G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Frege: Logical Excavations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 380–5.

⁸ Frege, 'Foundations of Geometry', in his *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 281.

⁹ Of course, Frege held that such a sentence is false rather than nonsense. Here Wittgenstein and Carnap alike sided against Frege.

important is, *contra* Conant, precisely that Carnap did *not* commit the meaning-body error to which Frege had succumbed in the *Basic Laws*. He did not explain the nonsensicality of ‘Caesar is a prime number’ by reference to the alleged fact that the meaning of ‘Caesar’ cannot combine with the meaning of ‘is a prime number’. Rather he held it to be a rule of logical syntax that the predicate ‘is a prime number’ may be attached only to a number-word as a subject to form a significant sentence, and he did not try to justify the rule by reference to the ‘realm’ of meanings.

Carnap would agree with Conant that there are no such things as propositions that have a sense that is nonsense, or as sentences that express a thought that lacks sense. The only disagreement on *this* issue would be over Conant’s unwarranted imputation of the contrary view to him; and the same applies to Baker and myself. Conant produces no evidence whatsoever that Baker and I have ever advocated or even intimated a ‘meaning-body’ conception, or have ever suggested that a metaphysical nonsense expresses a proposition or thought with a sense that is nonsensical. Accordingly I shall not try to defend our interpretation against groundlessly imputed guilt. But it is patent from everything we did write (including what we wrote in volumes Conant refers to) that we adamantly repudiate any conception of nonsense understood as a sequence of words that expresses a proposition that lacks a sense. Of course it does not follow that we accept Conant’s conception of ‘austere nonsense’ either. For we do hold that philosophical nonsense results from the illicit combination of meaningful words. Neither a scribble nor an Escher etching represents a possible state of affairs, but there is all the difference in the world between an Escher etching and a scribble. The difference, however, is *not* that the etching depicts an impossible state of affairs.

The correct point at which to locate disagreement is over whether the constituent words of ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ are meaningless, as Conant holds (as meaningless as the constituent expressions of ‘Juwiwalera ig lilliburlero?’). Carnap would rightly find that claim puzzling – one can, after all, translate the sentence; one can look Julius Caesar up in an encyclopaedia and find out who he was, and look up ‘prime number’ in a dictionary, which will specify what the expression means. That the sentence ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ is nonsensical is not due to the meaninglessness of its constituent words, but to its failure to conform to the requisite combinatorial rules. But of course that they are not meaningless does not imply that they *stand for* a meaning (a *Bedeutung*). ‘Julius Caesar’ is the name of the author of *The Gallic Wars*, but the author of *The Gallic Wars* is not the meaning of his name. ‘Is a prime number’ is a meaningful phrase, it has a use, and in ‘Caesar is a prime number’ it is being misused, used

contrary to the rules for its use. But its meaning (which is given by the explanation ‘is a number divisible only by 1 and by itself’) is not an entity for which it stands (such as a Fregean concept). ‘Well and good’, Conant might reply, ‘but do these expressions *have a meaning in this* type-sentence (or tokens of it)?’. To this Carnap might respond ‘If that means “Are they *correctly used* in this sentence?”, then the answer is “*Obviously not!*”’. They are *misused* – used contrary to the rules of logical syntax. But it would be exceedingly misleading to express *that* by saying that “Julius Caesar is a prime number” is a meaningless combination of meaningless words.

III. LOGICAL SYNTAX – CARNAP AND WITTGENSTEIN

Logical syntax in the *Tractatus*, Conant claims, is concerned neither with what Carnap calls ‘logical syntax’, nor with what Russell calls ‘a theory of types’. For it is concerned neither with the proscription of combinations of signs nor with the proscription of combinations of symbols. Logical syntax in the *Tractatus* does not proscribe combinations of signs, since it does not treat of mere signs at all, but of symbols. And it does not proscribe combinations of symbols, because there is nothing to proscribe (UM, p. 42). In ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics’, Carnap asserts that ‘The syntax of a language specifies which combinations of words are admissible and which inadmissible’ (EM, p. 67). In Conant’s opinion, this misconceived view allows Carnap to equivocate over whether logical syntax deals with mere signs, i.e., uninterpreted marks on paper, or with symbols.

According to Conant, in the *Tractatus* only symbols, and not mere signs, can be said to be governed by logical syntax. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein never speaks of ‘violation of logical syntax’; and, Conant insists, it is crucial to realize, as Carnap did not, that the only kind of ‘violation’ that is conceivable according to the *Tractatus* is cross-category equivocation, i.e., allowing different occurrences of the same sign to symbolize items of a different logical category (cf. *TLP* 3.324–3.325). Carnap, by contrast, allegedly envisages, as a form of ‘violation’ of logical syntax, the generation of *substantial nonsense*, i.e., ‘the result of putting an item of one logical category in the place where an item of another logical category belongs’ (UM, p. 44). But, Conant holds, according to the *Tractatus* there can be no such thing. Theories of logic which seek to proscribe certain combinations of symbols are trying to take care of something that essentially takes care of itself. When Wittgenstein says that one cannot give a sign a wrong sense, ‘he is claiming that there is no such thing as infringing the bounds of sense, and thus no bounds of the sort that Carnap (or Wittgenstein, early or late, according to

most readings of him) seeks to demarcate' (UM, p. 45). Logical syntax in the *Tractatus*, Conant claims, 'is not a combinatorial theory (which demarcates legitimate from illegitimate sequences of signs)' (*ibid.*). Not only does Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* never speak of 'violations of logical syntax', but even in his later works, Conant proclaims (UM, fn. 52), he 'only occasionally mentions the idea of 'violations of grammar', and always in the service of encouraging the reader to be puzzled by what such a thing could be'.¹⁰

I agree with Conant that logical syntax in the *Tractatus* is not a theory of logical types. Wittgenstein did not think that there *could* be any such thing as a theory of types as conceived by Russell. The theory of types was an attempt to justify logical syntax by reference to reality, i.e., by reference to the nature of what is represented – and there can be no such justification (*NB* 1st edn, p. 106). But, *pace* Conant, what the theory of types tried futilely to achieve is, according to Wittgenstein, achieved by logical syntax. That is why he said 'All grammar is a theory of logical types: and logical types do not talk about the application of language. Russell failed to see this' (LWL, p. 13); and that is why he wrote 'Grammar is a "theory of logical types"' (*PR*, p. 54).

I agree with Conant that logical syntax is not a combinatorial theory, since logical syntax is not a theory. It is a set of rules for the use of expressions, and a set of rules is not a theory about anything, not even a theory about expressions. Carnap said that 'The syntax of a language specifies which combinations of words are admissible and which inadmissible' – a claim that Conant castigates as showing complete incomprehension of Wittgenstein. Indeed, he says of Baker and myself that in attributing such a conception of logical syntax (and, in the later work, of grammar) to Wittgenstein, we are attributing to him a view 'that he was already seeking to exorcize in his early work – one that conceives of the possibilities of meaningful expression as limited by "general rules of language" (be they called "rules of logical syntax" or "rules of grammar") and which imagines that by specifying these rules one can identify in advance which combinations of words are licensed and which prohibited' (UM, p. 39).

This is a serious accusation. Fortunately the issue can be settled simply by attending to what Wittgenstein said and wrote. And since Conant's explanation of Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense is held to apply not only to the *Tractatus* but, *mutatis mutandis*, to the whole of Wittgenstein's work, we need have no qualms at looking at his writings and discussions in

¹⁰ Here Conant quotes Wittgenstein from *Philosophical Grammar*, p. 392: 'How can one put together ill assorted concepts in violation of grammar [*gegen die Grammatik*], and therefore nonsensically, and significantly ask about the possibility of the combination?'. I shall examine this passage below.

1929–30, when he actually addressed these matters *explicitly*.¹¹ I offer for examination the following quotations, first on syntax:

1. Commenting on *TLP* 2.012, Wittgenstein remarked ‘If you already know how to use a word and understand it, *you must already know in what combinations it is not allowed, when it would be nonsense to use it*, all its possibilities. So in logic there are no surprises; we must know all the possibilities’ (LWL, p. 120; my italics).
2. ‘By syntax in this general sense of the word, I mean the rules which tell us in which connections only the word gives a sense, thus excluding nonsensical structures’ (RLF, p. 162).
3. “‘I cannot feel your toothache” is sheer nonsense. Such a sentence [*Satz*] is prohibited by syntax’ (WWK, p. 49).
4. ‘If you understand the word “circle” in the same meaning as us, the rules of syntax prohibit you from determining the co-ordinates of a circle (its radius) twice. It is simply a definition of a circle that yields the rule of syntax and the definition tells us, then, what sense statements about a circle have’ (WWK, p. 78).
5. ‘Syntax is the totality of rules that specify in what combinations a sign has meaning. It describes nothing, it sets limits to what is describable’ (WWK, p. 220).

These quotations suffice to refute Conant’s claims regarding logical syntax. They also vindicate the interpretation of Wittgenstein’s conception of logical syntax as a system of rules licensing certain combinatorial possibilities of expressions (and excluding others as nonsense) so castigated by Conant.

Now we may examine the following remarks on grammar, the first three of which were made at much the same time as Carnap wrote ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics’:

6. ‘The rules of a symbolism give it a certain degree of freedom which is expressed in the rules of its grammar, which tell us which combinations are allowed and which are not allowed’ (LWL, p. 41).
7. ‘Grammar ... consists in giving the rules for the combination of symbols, i.e., which combinations make sense and which don’t, which are allowed and which are not allowed’ (LWL, pp. 46–7).
8. ‘What is permitted or forbidden by the rules [in Euclidean geometry, which constitutes a grammar of space] then corresponds in the grammar to the words “sense” and “nonsense”’ (*PR*, p. 322).
9. “‘The room has a length” can be used as a grammatical statement. It then says that a sentence of the form “The room is ... feet long” makes sense’ (*BB*, p. 30).

¹¹ While Wittgenstein rapidly became aware of deep difficulties in his earlier work, he did not abandon the conception of logical syntax until a year or more after his return to Cambridge.

10. 'It is correct to say "I know what you are thinking" and wrong to say "I know what I am thinking"'. (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar)' (*PI*, p. 222).

These quotations suffice to refute the accusation that Carnap's conception of logical syntax was, in the respects elaborated by Conant, a travesty of Wittgenstein's. It is evident that, unlike Conant, Wittgenstein thought that logical syntax, as conceived in the *Tractatus* and later (until 1930–31), and grammar, as conceived after 1930–31, consist of general rules that lay down which combinations of words are licensed and which excluded. In so doing they determine the bounds of sense, fixing what makes sense and what is nonsense. Far from seeking to exorcize this view, Wittgenstein advanced and defended it. (As Baker and I wrote, in a passage that Conant berates, at *UM*, p. 39, Wittgenstein's 'rules of grammar' patently serve to *distinguish sense from nonsense*, they *settle what makes sense*, and they *determine what is a correct use of language*.)

Conant's claim (*UM*, p. 42) that according to Wittgenstein logical syntax concerns only symbols and not signs is similarly false. It is a confused statement of the correct point that, according to the *Tractatus*, there can be nonsensical signs, but not nonsensical symbols, since a symbol just is a sign used according to the rules for its correct use. 'Syntax', Wittgenstein dictated, 'is the totality of rules that specify in what combinations a sign has meaning. It describes nothing, it sets limits to what is describable. A symbol is what can be perceived of a sign plus the rules of its use, of its syntax. An understanding of language presupposes knowledge of the meaning and syntax of signs' (*WWK*, p. 220). Accordingly, the logical syntax of a sign is partly *constitutive* of the resultant symbol, for, as he said in his lectures, 'everything which is necessary for the sign to become a symbol is part of the symbol' (*LWL*, p. 26).

I agree with Conant that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* never speaks of 'violations of logical syntax'. He says only that in a logically correct notation, expressions will be used in accordance with logical syntax (*TLP* 3.325). But obviously there can be no such thing as using a sign in accordance with logical syntax if there is no such thing as using it in contravention of logical syntax. It is, however, surprising to see Conant insist that Wittgenstein, in his later works, 'only occasionally mentions the idea of "violations of grammar"', and *always in the service of encouraging the reader to be puzzled by what such a thing could be*' (*UM*, fn. 52; my italics). This is false, as is shown by the following quotations (italics are mine):

1. 'When philosophers use a word and enquire after its meaning, one must always ask oneself whether the word, in the language for which it is made, is ever

- actually so used. One will mostly find that it is not so and *that the word is being used contrary to its normal grammar*. (“Know”, “being”, “thing”) (MS 109, 246 = TS 211, 405 = TS 212, 1192 = TS 213, 430).
2. ‘Incidentally, the only proof that an analysis is false is that it leads to obvious nonsense, i.e., to an expression *that obviously transgresses the grammar* that corresponds to the given mode of application’ (MS 110, 23 = TS 211, 132).
 3. ‘*What is against the rules is a violation of syntax*’ (WWK, p. 104).
 4. ‘And let’s remember: in ordinary life it never occurs to us [that everything flows] – as little as the blurred boundaries of our visual field.... How, on what occasion, do we think that we become aware of it? Isn’t it when we want to form sentences *contrary to the grammar* of time?’ (MS 114, 21V = TS 211, 763 = BT 427).
 5. ‘Just as laws only become interesting when there is an inclination to transgress them // when they are transgressed // *certain grammatical rules are only interesting when philosophers want to transgress them*’ (BT 426).

Moreover, Conant misinterprets the single passage from *Philosophical Grammar*, p. 392 (see fn. 10 above) which he offers to show that Wittgenstein expressed amazement that anyone could even think that there is any such thing as transgressing the rules of grammar. The puzzlement Wittgenstein expresses there, and then tries to resolve, does not concern misapplications of rules of grammar in the formation of what purport to be true or false descriptions. It concerns mathematical propositions, *which are themselves rules of grammar*, in particular impossibility proofs. He is discussing the problem of the trisection of an angle with a compass and rule – a problem mathematicians struggled with for two thousand years before finding an impossibility proof. And the problem posed is that if the trisection of an angle *is* logically impossible (i.e., if the form of words ‘trisecting an angle with compass and rule’ lacks sense), how could mathematicians have raised the question of the possibility of trisecting an angle? But, Wittgenstein continues, this is no different from asking whether 25×25 is 620 or 625; we are dealing with a question that is categorially unlike the question of whether a certain street is 620 or 625 metres long. This discussion patently does not concern the question of whether, in applying words with the intention of forming a descriptive sentence, one can transgress the rules of grammar and hence talk nonsense.¹² (It is noteworthy that Conant is evidently committed to the view that impossibility proofs are impossible, and, by parity of reasoning, to the same view of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments.)

¹² For a discussion of the trisection problem, see P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), exegesis of §463. For a discussion of the negation of grammatical propositions, see Baker and Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity*, in the essay entitled ‘Grammar and Necessity’, §3.

IV. NONSENSE AND LOGICAL SYNTAX

Carnap claimed that nonsense could result from failure to comply with ordinary grammar (e.g., ‘Caesar is and’). It could result from one or more words in a word sequence not having any meaning. And it could result from conjoining meaningful words in a manner licensed by ordinary grammar, but prohibited by logical syntax, e.g., ‘Caesar is a prime number’.

Conant objects. He thinks the latter possibility is excluded by the *Tractatus* and by Wittgenstein’s later philosophy alike. The *Tractatus* commitment to the context principle (*TLP* 3.3), Conant claims, implies that a word in a nonsensical word-sequence has no meaning. Wittgenstein says that ‘Socrates is identical’ means nothing (*heisst nichts*) because we have given no meaning to ‘identical’ as an adjective (*TLP* 5.4733). From this Conant concludes that according to Wittgenstein nonsense cannot result from combining meaningful words in a meaningless way, i.e., contrary to logical syntax. The only kind of transgression of logical syntax recognized by the *Tractatus*, Conant claims, is ‘cross-category equivocation’, i.e., the result of allowing different occurrences of the same sign to symbolize items of a different logical category. This, he rightly points out, need not produce nonsense. There is nothing nonsensical about ‘Mr Green is green’. So, Conant concludes, logical syntax is not concerned with excluding nonsense by articulating rules for the uses of expressions. It is not possible to ‘violate’ a rule of logical syntax and thereby generate a nonsensical sentence. ‘There is no such thing as infringing the bounds of sense and thus no bounds of the sort that Carnap ... seeks to demarcate’ (UM, p. 45). The only logical differences between ordinary grammar and logical grammar are differences in notational perspicuity (UM, p. 46).

Conant’s interpretation is mistaken, for the following reasons.

(i) Conant explains that the sentences the *Tractatus* condemns as nonsense are nonsense *only* because one or more word that occurs in them has not been given a meaning. So ‘Red is a colour’ or ‘1 is a number’ are nonsense, not because a formal concept-word is being used as if it were a genuine concept-word, but only because we have given no meaning to ‘colour’ or ‘number’ as predicates.

But Wittgenstein explains that formal concepts have a *correct use* (which corresponds to the use of a bound variable, as in ‘There are three objects on the table’ or ‘There is a number of plates on the table’), and an *incorrect use*, *viz* as pseudo-concept-words. When used *incorrectly*, as in ‘There are objects’ or ‘1 is a number’, nonsensical pseudo-propositions are the result

(*TLP* 4.1272). The latter do indeed involve transgressions of logical syntax, i.e., failures to accord with the rules for the use of these expressions – rules that assign them a use as bound variables. To use them in any other way is to *misuse* them, for nothing has been stipulated concerning the use of these signs as genuine predicates (so *of course* they then have no meaning, i.e., are mere pseudo-concept-words and *do not stand for a meaning* – unlike genuine concept-words, which, according to the *Tractatus*, stand for a meaning). Conant's view is akin to claiming that the pawn in chess cannot be moved three squares at a time, since if one were to move a piece thus, it would not be a pawn – a transcendental argument to prove that one cannot cheat in chess. One *could* speak thus, but would it make any difference? Is it any *clearer* than the way we ordinarily speak?

(ii) Conant claims that it is not possible to generate nonsense by 'putting an item of one logical category in the place where an item of another logical category belongs' (UM, p. 45).

Wittgenstein, by contrast, claimed that in Russell's concept script, 'arguments *of the wrong kind* make the proposition itself nonsensical' (*TLP* 5.5351; my italics). Hence it is not necessary to prefix propositions of *The Principles of Mathematics* with ' $p \supset p$ ' (understood as ' p is a proposition') to exclude from the argument-places everything but propositions (as Russell tried to do). Indeed, it is not possible either, since ' p is a proposition' is nonsense.

It is further noteworthy that in his lectures in 1930, Wittgenstein continued to insist (*contra* Conant) that substitution of expressions of different logical categories generates nonsense:

Substitution is only possible when the words are of the same kind. Thus –

This book is blue

This book is brown

I am tired

Here *brown* and *blue* can be substituted for each other, *tired* for neither and neither for *tired*.¹³ Such substitution makes nonsense because the words are not all of the same kind. *Blue* and *brown* are of the same kind, for the substitution of one for the other, though it may falsify the proposition, does not make nonsense of it (LWL, p. 3).¹⁴

This is the view Conant ascribes to Carnap, and claims to be inconceivable according to Wittgenstein.

(iii) Carnap held that in the sentence 'Caesar is a prime number' the words have a meaning, although the sentence is meaningless. Indeed, one could hardly argue that 'we have failed to give a meaning to one of its

¹³ The latter remark is an unfortunate slip. The examples could have been better chosen.

¹⁴ By 'possible' in the first line is meant 'licit'. Wittgenstein was later to lose faith in the test of substitutability *salva significatione* as a test for words that belong to the same kind or category.

constituents',¹⁵ since the proper name 'Caesar' signifies the author of *The Gallic Wars* and the predicate expression 'is a prime number' signifies the property of a number of being divisible only by 1 and by itself. What Wittgenstein might have argued is that in this sentence the words have been combined in a way contrary to the logico-syntactical rules for their use. Hence the sentence is nonsense, and the expressions in it do not stand for anything, i.e., *do not stand for their customary meanings* – since the sentence is not a picture of a possible state of affairs. Of course, so to argue involves the misconception of 'meaning' that pervades the *Tractatus*.

According to the *Tractatus*, every simple name in a proposition has a meaning, which is the simple object in reality for which it stands. A name has a meaning only in the context of a proposition, i.e., in the context of a representing fact – a picture of a possible state of affairs. For only then does it actually stand for an object (just as the toy cars and figures in the Paris law courts only stand for specific cars and people when arranged as a model of the accident represented, and not when returned to the toybox). Given this (mis)conception of word-meaning and propositional representation, it is obvious that in a pseudo-proposition that represents nothing, the constituent words no more stand for anything than do the toy cars when they are in the box. Wittgenstein's picture-theoretic reasons for adopting the context principle in the *Tractatus*, and hence his understanding of it, differ profoundly from Frege's, whose reasons are wholly determined by function-theoretic considerations alien to Wittgenstein. However, the claim that words have a meaning only in the context of a sentence, taken *au pied de la lettre*, is patently wrong for a multitude of reasons (e.g., if it were true, dictionaries would not be able to specify the meanings of words). What is right, as Wittgenstein later intimated, is that the minimal move in the language-game involves the use of a sentence (which may be a one-word sentence).

Carnap rightly rejected the *Tractatus* conception of word-meaning and the picture theory of propositional representation. So when he speaks of word-meanings, he is not speaking of entities that are part of the substance of all possible worlds. When he claims that in the pseudo-proposition 'Caesar is a prime number' both 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' have a meaning, although their combination is meaningless, he does not mean that they stand for entities in reality that are their meanings. According to Carnap, the necessary and sufficient condition for a word to be meaningful are (i) that its syntax is determined; (ii) that its deducibility relations are fixed; and (iii) that the truth-conditions or verification-conditions of elementary sentences in which it is embedded are settled (EM, pp. 62–3). So he too

¹⁵ A name, as Wittgenstein emphasized, is a *class of signs* (cf. *TLP* 3.203, NB 1st edn p. 104).

accepts a version of the context principle, albeit with a different rationale from those offered by Frege and Wittgenstein. On his account, both 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' are meaningful, i.e., the rules for their use in sentences have been stipulated. But these rules preclude the combination 'Caesar is a prime number', in as much as the rules for the use of this predicate preclude its occurrence except as a predicate of numbers, and the rules for the use of the proper name 'Caesar' exclude its occurrence as the subject term for such predicates.

Any conflict between Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense in the *Tractatus* and the view adopted by Carnap in his article turns primarily on picture-theoretic considerations which Wittgenstein abandoned after 1929. Of course, this is the period during which he regularly met Carnap (with Schlick, Waismann and Feigl), and he would hardly have influenced Carnap to adopt picture-theoretic views which he himself had relinquished, e.g., that the meaning of a name in a fully analysed sentence with a sense is the object it stands for.

Conant takes Carnap to task for his treatment of Heidegger's notorious discussion of Nothing and its antics, and intimates a contrast between what Wittgenstein might have thought about Heidegger's ideas and Carnap's unsympathetic criticisms. It is, however, striking that in Wittgenstein's discussion of Heidegger's nonsenses concerning Nothing and its activities (TS 302, 28–30, which Conant does not mention), he asks the very questions the answers to which Carnap characterizes as determining the meaning of an expression, i.e., how is it to be verified? What does it follow from and what follows from it? What is its role? Is it a cognitive proposition? What place does it occupy in the structure of knowledge? And so forth. Conant contrasts Carnap's condemnation of Heidegger with Wittgenstein's response to Heidegger. Conant thinks that because Wittgenstein said that he can imagine what Heidegger means by 'Being' and 'Anxiety' (WWK, p. 68), therefore his approach to Heidegger's notorious passage is quite different from Carnap's. Wittgenstein, Conant claims, unlike Carnap, attempts to imagine what Heidegger might mean by his words (EM, p. 55n.). In fact Wittgenstein tries to imagine what *misconceived picture* underlies Heidegger's nonsense, which is, he suggests, the picture of an island of Being surrounded by a sea of Nothing (TS 302, 28), and he does so in the belief that bringing that picture into the light of day will free one from one's *confusions* (and here, Wittgenstein observes, there is a non-coincidental analogy with psychoanalysis). Far from being sympathetic to Heidegger, Wittgenstein stigmatizes Heidegger's remarks on Nothing as a 'free-wheeling cog in the language machine'. A sentence such as '*Das Nichts nichtet*', Wittgenstein wrote, is in a certain sense a *substitute for an inarticulate sound* with which one sometimes feels

it necessary to preface philosophy when one's disquietudes are rooted in unclarity concerning grammatical relations within a given domain of language. The difference between Carnap and Wittgenstein on this issue lies largely in the bedside manner.

(iv) Conant writes that Wittgenstein did not think that it was the task of logical syntax to demarcate the bounds of sense, and that he thought that the sole logical defects of ordinary grammar are defects of notational perspicuity.

Wittgenstein, by contrast, wrote (RLF, p. 162):

By syntax in this general sense of the word I mean the rules which tell us in which connections only a word gives sense, thus excluding nonsensical structures. The syntax of ordinary language, as is well known, is not quite adequate for this purpose. It does not in all cases prevent the construction of nonsensical pseudo-propositions (constructions such as 'red is higher than green' or 'the Real, though it is an *in itself*, must also be able to become a *for myself*', etc.).

Elsewhere he observed that 'A class of true propositions is delimited in a completely different way from a class of propositions with a sense. In the first case the limit is drawn in experience, in the second case by the syntax of language. Experience delimits the propositions from the outside, syntax from the inside' (WWK, p. 213). On the theme of colour exclusion, i.e., on the nonsensicality of '*A* is red all over at *t*, and *A* is blue all over at *t*', he wrote 'It is, of course, a deficiency of our notation that it does not prevent the formation of such nonsensical constructions, and a perfect notation will have to *exclude such structures by definite rules of syntax*' (RLF, pp. 170–1; my italics).

(v) Wittgenstein, in his later writings, held that such sentences as 'It is five o'clock on the sun', '*A* is simultaneously red all over and green all over', are nonsense. But he did not claim that the phrases 'five o'clock' and 'on the sun' or that the sentential clauses '*A* is red all over' and '*A* is green all over' are meaningless (let alone that the connective 'and' is meaningless). If the meaning of a word (or phrase) is its use, then to be sure these words have a use, and hence a meaning. There are rules for their use, given by explanations of their meaning. But of course in *these* combinations they are being used in a way contrary to, or in violation of, the rules for their use. So these word-sequences are indeed meaningless. If one wishes, one can express this by saying that *in these contexts* no meaning has been assigned to these words or phrases (i.e., the combination is meaningless). But one should not therefore embrace Conant's conception of 'austere nonsense' and say that this meaningless combination of words is composed of meaningless words, and hence that all that is wrong with it is that we have given these words no

meaning in such contexts. For, among other things, one should also note that if one were to assign to a significant word or phrase a meaning in contexts from which it is excluded, *then one would have changed its meaning*. So one would, as Wittgenstein noted, be talking of something else.

There are, to be sure, *many* differences between Carnap and Wittgenstein, even in 1930–32 and even concerning logical syntax¹⁶ – but Conant, I am sorry to say, has not correctly identified them. (There is a striking inconsistency in Conant’s position, on which I have not dwelt. On the one hand, he accepts Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* judgements over what is and what is not a pseudo-proposition, e.g., that ‘1 is a number’ (*TLP* 4.1272) and that ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ (*TLP* 6.2) are pseudo-propositions. On the other hand, he dismisses as nonsense Wittgenstein’s reasons for taking these propositions to be nonsense. So it remains more than a little opaque why Conant thinks that Wittgenstein held them to be nonsense. Of course, the later Wittgenstein did not think these propositions are nonsense at all – they are grammatical propositions. It remains even more obscure why Conant himself holds them to be nonsense.) Part of the trouble, no doubt, stems from Conant’s failure to attend to the fact that Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘meaning’ (*Bedeutung*) in the *Tractatus* is, as he himself later pointed out, confused. His later use of the expression is fundamentally different. So one cannot, without more ado, amalgamate early remarks on meaning with later ones. Similarly one cannot divorce his early conception of meaning, and his early interpretation of the context principle, from the picture theory. So here too one cannot extrapolate from early views to later ones, when the picture theory has been abandoned and the context principle given a very different interpretation.

V. ELUCIDATIONS

The third topic that Conant wishes to ‘retrieve’ from the misrepresentations of the ‘standard view’ is that of elucidations in the *Tractatus*. The term ‘elucidation’ (*Erläuterung*) or a cognate of it occurs thrice in the book, in 3.263, where the explanation of indefinables is discussed, in 4.112, where the nature of philosophy is sketched, and in 6.54, where the sentences of the *Tractatus* are characterized as nonsense. It is important for English readers to realize that the German ‘*Erläuterung*’ and its cognates are not

¹⁶ For discussion of some of the differences (and of Carnap’s misunderstandings of Wittgenstein) see Hacker, *Wittgenstein’s Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), and ‘On Carnap’s Elimination of Metaphysics’, repr. in *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies*.

technical terms, but common or garden ones. ‘Clarification’ and ‘clarify’ would perhaps have been less formal translations, and accordingly less prone to entice readers into thinking that they are faced with a special term of art. There are many different things that require clarification in philosophy, and many different ways of clarifying things. One should not therefore presume that the three mentions of clarification are all concerned with the same matter, or that the clarifications are of the same kind.

Tractatus 3.263 is concerned with explaining the meanings of primitive signs. It is, as I have argued elsewhere, precisely parallel to *Principia* *I.¹⁷

Tractatus 4.11–4.116 are patently not concerned with explaining the meanings of primitive signs. They are concerned with specifying the status, aim and nature of philosophy. The moot question is whether the conception of philosophy that is adumbrated applies to the *Tractatus* itself, or whether it is a programme for future philosophy, envisaged as the only correct way to proceed once the lessons of the *Tractatus* have been learnt. It seems clear that it is programmatic. For the clarificatory tasks allocated to philosophy are

- (a) The logical clarification of thoughts, or the clarification of sentences – in particular to make it clear that apparently vague thoughts are actually sharp (hence ‘*das Klarwerden von Sätzen*’)
- (b) Setting limits to what can and cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought – i.e., philosophy will signify what cannot be said by presenting clearly what can be said.

The first of these patently includes showing by analysis that what seem to be vague thoughts are not really so, since any indeterminacy is determinately indeterminate. Analysis will show that the requirement of determinacy of sense is met despite apparent vagueness, in as much as vague sentences are analysable into disjunctions of determinate possibilities. But this is evidently not something undertaken by the *Tractatus*. The second seems to be the task of analysing empirical propositions in order to display their logical form. This goal was indeed pursued in a preliminary way for elementary propositions involving colour ascriptions in ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’. But again it is not undertaken in the *Tractatus*. For (i) the *Tractatus* is not concerned with the application of logic, and (ii) the *Tractatus* does *not* set limits to thought by working outwards through what can be thought. On the contrary, it purports to describe the limits of thought *directly*. Moreover, we are told that the task of *indirectly* signifying what cannot be said is one that philosophy *will* achieve (in the future), by presenting clearly what *can* be said (whereas the *Tractatus* endeavours to say what *cannot* be said).

¹⁷ ‘Naming, Thinking and Meaning in the *Tractatus*’, repr. in *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies*: see pp. 175–6.

Tractatus 6.54 does not speak of ‘clarifications’ or ‘elucidations’, but merely says that ‘*my sentences clarify*’, in as much as someone who understands their author will eventually recognize them as nonsense. Again it appears obvious that these ‘clarifyings’ are not those envisaged in 4.112. They are the self-conscious attempts of the author to say what can only be shown, and which is shown by the well formed propositions of language. They transgress the bounds of sense, but in so doing, they gradually bring the perceptive reader to a correct logical point of view.¹⁸

Conant, however, thinks that the *Tractatus* ‘shows what it shows (i.e., what it is to make sense) by *letting language show itself* – not through “the clarification of sentences” but through allowing “sentences themselves to become clear” (through *das Klarwerden von Sätzen*, §4.112)’ (UM, pp. 60–1).

This has no textual warrant and is of questionable intelligibility. If Conant is using the expression ‘to show’ in the same way as Wittgenstein, then it is mistaken to suppose that the sentences of the *Tractatus* show anything. For nonsense does not show anything. The *Tractatus* does not show what it is to make sense – it tries to *say* what it is (namely, to agree and disagree with the possibilities of the obtaining and non-obtaining of states of affairs: *TLP* 4.2). And since, according to the *Tractatus*, one cannot say what cannot be other than it is, the endeavour to spell out the essential nature of sense inevitably transgresses the bounds of sense. ‘Language shows itself’ is not a phrase Wittgenstein uses in the book. Conant never explains what he means by saying that the *Tractatus* ‘lets language show itself’. We have indeed assigned no meaning to these words in this combination. There are no grounds for thinking that the *Tractatus* ‘allows sentences themselves to become clear’. It is, indeed, unclear whether that is something that sentences can do. For what Wittgenstein is speaking of is the analysis of apparently vague sentences into disjunctions of determinate possibilities, and that is not something sentences do off their own bat.

The fundamental difference between Carnap and Wittgenstein with respect to elucidation, Conant claims, is that

Carnap seeks a method that will furnish criteria that permit one to establish that someone else is speaking nonsense, whereas Wittgenstein (both early and late) seeks a method that ultimately can only be practised by someone on himself. Wittgenstein’s method only permits the verdict that sense has not been spoken to be passed by the one that speaks (UM, p. 61).

If that was what Wittgenstein was seeking, it is evident that he never found it. For the method of the *Tractatus* certainly involved extensive criticisms of

¹⁸ Compare ‘Escher’s etchings gradually bring the perceptive viewer to a correct perceptual point of view’.

Frege and Russell, which, if correct, demonstrate that on a wide variety of themes in the philosophy of logic, language and mathematics they made nonsensical claims. These criticisms do not require that Frege and Russell practised anything on themselves. And the methods of the later Wittgenstein certainly demonstrate that Frege's conception of the bifurcation of the sentence into a sense-bearing component and a force indicator is incoherent (*PI*, §22), that Russell transgressed the bounds of sense in his theory of belief and desire in *The Analysis of Mind* (*PR*, ch. 3), and that neither James' nor Schopenhauer's conceptions of voluntary movement make sense (*PI*, §§61ff.). The verdict that sense has not been spoken is passed by Wittgenstein, on the grounds of arguments that demonstrate the incoherence of the ideas under scrutiny. And, as Wittgenstein wrote, 'we must not give any arguments that are not absolutely conclusive' (MS 161, 1v–2r). He was, after all, engaged in philosophy, not transcendental meditation.¹⁹

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