

On the 'Resolute' Reading of the *Tractatus*¹

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It is customary to divide Wittgenstein's work into two broad phases, the first culminating in the *Tractatus*, and the second comprising the writings that began upon his return to philosophy in 1929 and culminating in the *Investigations*. It is also commonly assumed that the *Tractatus* propounds various doctrines concerning language and representation, doctrines which are repudiated in the later work, and often criticized explicitly. One problem with this view of the *Tractatus* is Wittgenstein's claim in 6.54 that its propositions are "nonsensical,"² a claim which on its face is at odds with the idea that they present substantive philosophical theories. The usual way of handling this problem is to assume that the claim is not to be taken literally, that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are not nonsense in the sense of mere gibberish, but are intended somehow to engender in the attentive reader a grasp of certain important aspects of the relationship between language and the world.

Beginning with her seminal paper "Throwing Away the Ladder," Cora Diamond has proposed reading the *Tractatus* in a way that takes literally 6.54's claim of the book's nonsensicality, and rejects the idea that its sentences represent a kind of elevated nonsense intended to

1. This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at a symposium on the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* at the 1999 Central Division meetings of the American Philosophical Association in New Orleans. Michael Kremer was the other symposiast, Cora Diamond responded, and James Conant was chair. I profited greatly from what they said both during and after the symposium. I would also like to thank Ian Proops, Kevin Scharp, and Joan Weiner for helpful conversations. After completing the original version of this paper, two more useful discussions of the resolute reading were brought to my attention: Conant's "The Method of the *Tractatus*" develops the view he presents in the papers cited herein in more detail, with particular emphasis on what he takes to be Fregean themes in Wittgenstein's work; and P. M. S. Hacker's "Was He Trying to Whistle It" amasses a great deal of textual evidence against the resolute reading. Both are now published in Alice Crary and Rupert Read, eds. *The New Wittgenstein* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

2. All references to the *Tractatus* are to the translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

convey, by indirection, something of significance.³ This reading, which has been elaborated by James Conant⁴ and which has been dubbed by Thomas Ricketts the “resolute” reading of the *Tractatus*, would, if accepted, occasion a radical revision in our understanding not only of the *Tractatus* itself, but of Wittgenstein’s later writings as well, since the former is commonly taken to be among the objects of criticism of the latter, and Wittgenstein’s younger philosophical self to be one of the targets of his later interlocutory style. The upshot of the resolute reading would be to forge a close affinity between the two phases of Wittgenstein’s work, an affinity assigning nearly the entire importance of Wittgenstein’s thought to its antiphilosophical tendencies.

I am among those unattracted by this proposal, and want to try to explain why. I see three broad areas of difficulty with the resolute reading: first, there are questions about its internal coherence, taken on its own; second, it seems to be at odds with the available evidence about how Wittgenstein himself viewed the *Tractatus*; and finally, while I agree that there is more continuity between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* than is commonly supposed, the resolute reading strikes me as drawing the wrong sorts of connections between them, and as obscuring some of the more interesting affinities that obtain between the two phases of his work.

Let me start by sketching what I shall take the liberty of calling the *standard* reading of the *Tractatus*. There is, of course, no single received reading, but something like this view, or at least large portions of it, is put forward by Anscombe,⁵ Pears,⁶ Hacker,⁷ Geach,⁸

3. Cora Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*,” in *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). I shall also refer to her paper “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” in R. Heinrich and H. Vetter, eds., *Bilder der Philosophie, Wiener Reihe 5* (Vienna, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1991).

4. James Conant, “Must we Show What We Cannot Say?,” in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, Richard Fleming and Michael Payne, eds. (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989); “Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder,” *The Yale Review* 79 (1989): 328–364; “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam, eds. (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1993).

5. G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

6. David Pears, *The False Prison* Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

7. P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

8. Peter Geach, “Saying and Showing in Wittgenstein and Frege,” in *Essays in Honor of G. H. von Wright*, J. Hintikka, ed. *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 28 (1976).

McGuinness,⁹ Fogelin,¹⁰ Hintikka and Hintikka,¹¹ and many other commentators. The view I sketch does not pretend to be original, but ought not to be attributed in its entirety to anyone else either.

On the standard reading, the *Tractatus* embodies a number of specific philosophical doctrines, chief among them the picture theory of elementary propositions, an account of complex propositions as truth-functional constructions of elementary propositions, and an atomistic metaphysics. The picture theory holds that elementary propositions depict atomic states of affairs, which are possible configurations of simple objects. Elementary propositions depict these states of affairs by displaying names of the simple objects arranged in a pictorial or logical form which is shared by the depicted state of affairs. A proposition *shows* or exhibits a state of affairs, and shows or exhibits the pictorial form it shares with it, and by virtue of this *says* that the state of affairs obtains.

It is a consequence of the picture theory and the ensuing account of complex propositions that nothing can be *said* about propositions, their constituents, or pictorial form. Wittgenstein does not actually give an argument for this, but it isn't hard to construct one. Given his treatment of the quantifiers and his endorsement of the theory of descriptions, in order to say anything about propositions we would have to be able to describe specific propositions – to say, for instance, that a particular proposition which says that Brutus killed Caesar consists of names of Brutus and Caesar arranged in such-and-such a pictorial form. According to the picture theory, we could only do this by exhibiting a configuration of names of those names arranged in that very pictorial form. But such a “proposition” would then share a pictorial form with the state of affairs of Brutus' killing Caesar, and so would be nonsense (or at best would say that the name of Brutus killed the name of Caesar). So the picture theory

9. Brian McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Proponents of the resolute reading sometimes claim McGuinness as a precursor, citing his paper “The So-called Realism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,” in Irving Block, ed., *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981). This seems strained. McGuinness is concerned with the relative weight that should be accorded the *Tractatus*' semantics and metaphysics, and he does not in the least suggest that the book does not present substantive philosophical theories.

10. Robert Fogelin, *Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

11. Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka, *Investigating Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

does not allow us to talk about propositions and the other elements of the *Tractatus*' central doctrines.¹²

Yet the sentences of the *Tractatus*, taken at face value, appear to be almost entirely about propositions, logical form, objects, and so on. So they are, Wittgenstein announces in 6.54, *unsinnig*, nonsense. But according to the standard reading, he does assign to them a significant conceptual role. A reader who, let me say, "works through" them in the right way is supposed to grasp something important, namely, the relationship between language and the world, how the former consists of constituents that go proxy for the constituents of the latter, and how the two have in common a logical form. He is also supposed to come to "see the world aright" (6.54), and in so doing to grasp the limits of the sayable. He is not supposed to actually *understand* the sentences of the *Tractatus*, for they *say* nothing, yet by working through them he supposedly attains an important conceptual condition, though one devoid of propositional content.

Some versions of what I'm calling the standard reading – McGuinness', for example¹³ – express this in a misleading way, by claiming that while the sentences of the *Tractatus* *say* nothing, they nevertheless *show* something. But this is to misapply the show/say distinction. It is genuine propositions – those of "natural science" (6.53) – that show or display objects, states of affairs, names, and logical form. The pseudopropositions of the *Tractatus* are misfired attempts to say what it is that genuine propositions show. Working through them enables one to grasp what is involved in genuine propositions' showing what they do, and so to grasp the relation between language and the world.

Of course, just how this "working through" a body of sentences that don't say anything is supposed to proceed is difficult to make out. But lest it seem more problematic than need be, we should remember that according to the standard reading, the theory the *Tractatus* embodies is a *bad* theory, one which Wittgenstein came to repu-

12. We can of course talk straightforwardly about *propositional signs*, which Wittgenstein says in 3.14 are "facts." But "a proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world" (3.12). The distinction between propositions and propositional signs is a delicate one, but it is clear that it is the former that possess logical or pictorial form and cannot be described. Propositional signs on the other hand possess, say, spatial form but not logical form, and are perfectly describable.

13. McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life*.

diate.¹⁴ So the fact that it implies the unintelligibility of the *Tractatus* does not actually render the latter any more unintelligible than, say, the writings of Kant, Frege, or Russell. No doubt Wittgenstein came to regard all of these as problematic in the way he thought that all systematic philosophical writing is problematic; and no doubt seeds of this aversion are already present in his thought at the time of the *Tractatus*. But unlike the resolute reading, which takes his declaration that his book is nonsense to be an expression of a full-blown version of this general attitude towards attempts at systematic philosophy, the standard reading traces it to certain specific philosophical doctrines he held but came to abandon.

Let me now sketch the resolute reading, drawing on both Diamond's and Conant's presentations of it. Its central claim is that the sentences of the *Tractatus* should be regarded as "plain nonsense," on a par with 'Socrates is frabble' and 'piggly wiggle tiggie.'¹⁵ They do *not* attempt to describe or otherwise gesture at important aspects of language or the world which can't be spoken about, but which can be illuminated or conveyed in an indirect fashion. There is no category of what might be called elevated nonsense, intermediate between straightforwardly intelligible sentences and plain nonsense. There are only the latter two categories, and the sentences of the *Tractatus* fall into the second.

This view of the *Tractatus* as plain nonsense supports a distinctive way of reading the book, a way which might be called (and here the word for once seems apt) *deconstructive*. To read it as Wittgenstein intended it to be read is to be led to realize that what at first appear to be meaningful assertions are really plain nonsense. At each stage the sentences of the *Tractatus* undermine or deconstruct the sentences that have preceded them, so that by the end there remains only

14. While Wittgenstein came to reject the picture theory of elementary propositions, I have argued in *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) that he continued to maintain something like the distinction between showing and saying which figures so prominently in the standard reading, and to hold that language's semantic properties are shown or manifested. This helps alleviate the impression that on the standard reading the *Tractatus* is obviously and intentionally incoherent, which proponents of the resolute reading see as supporting their view. The incoherence is due to the fact that the flawed picture theory bars Wittgenstein from sensically drawing the distinction between showing and saying which was central (and continued to be central) to his conception of language.

15. Diamond, "Throwing Away the Ladder," p. 197, and "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," p. 58.

silence – not the pregnant silence of a reader who has come to grasp something significant but ineffable about the relationship between language and the world, but the plain silence of one who has come to realize that the illusory ambition that appeared to animate the *Tractatus* at the outset yields only gibberish.¹⁶

There is thus no such thing as *understanding* the *Tractatus*, since its sentences are literally meaningless. But what *can* be understood, and what Wittgenstein's intended reader is asked to understand, is the book's author. Wittgenstein speaks in the preface and in 6.54 not of understanding the *Tractatus* but of understanding *him*; and to understand *Wittgenstein* is to read the book in the way just described, to read it as making more and more explicit the nonsensical character of what at first appears to make sense.¹⁷

But since the sentences of the *Tractatus* can appear to be meaningful, there is something the successful reader of the book has to be able to do in order to read it in this way, and that is to adopt, through an exercise of the imagination, the viewpoint of a person who is under the illusion that the book's nonsensical sentences say or convey something.¹⁸ The question of what this kind of imaginative projection involves seems to me to be one of the most problematic aspects of the resolute reading, and I shall return to it.

The initial case for the standard reading is one of coherence, and is largely internal to the text. It holds that despite its apparent obscurity, the *Tractatus* sets out a detailed and tightly structured set of doctrines and arguments (the best exposition of which I believe to be Fogelin's), including a metaphysics and a semantic theory bearing a symbiotic relation to one another. Some of these doctrines – e.g., the atomistic metaphysics and the doctrine of the determinacy of sense – are simply adopted rather than argued for, but taken together they form an interlocking whole. Moreover, the initial intuition behind the picture theory – that in order for language to represent reality there must be some sort of isomorphism between the two – isn't a silly one, even if in retrospect it looks like a distorting philosophical imposition. These interlocking doctrines have the consequence that certain aspects of language and reality are not describable, and so the *Tractatus*' attempt to convey them is judged to be a futile attempt to exceed the limits of language, productive

16. Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," pp. 216–218.

17. Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of the *Tractatus*," p. 65.

18. *Ibid.*

of a kind of nonsense. But since it is already one of the book's central themes that language is capable of *showing* things it can't describe – among them logical space and the logical form of the world – it isn't at all ad hoc to treat the *Tractatus*' sentences as a kind of elevated nonsense intended to get the reader to “see” these things. This may indeed be incoherent – as Ramsey said, if you can't say it you can't say it, and you can't whistle it either. And it certainly involves contortions and what Diamond calls “chickening out.”¹⁹ But if we ask why Wittgenstein resorted to such contortions, rather than regard this consequence as a *reductio* of the book's theses, an answer is not hard to come by. In the preface Wittgenstein tells us that he is convinced that “the *truth* of the thoughts that are here communicated [is] unassailable and definitive” (p. 5); and it is difficult not to think of the *Tractatus* as a paradigm example of the kind of distorting philosophical picture Wittgenstein later wrote of with what seems to be an almost autobiographical intensity – the kind of philosophical presupposition whose grip on one can lead one to distort the facts to fit it, and to discount what, but for the picture's spell, would be plain to see.

The case for the resolute reading is more indirect, which should not be surprising since according to it the significance of the *Tractatus* does not lie in its substance. Attention is called to the preface's admonition that the book should not be read as a textbook (*Lehrbuch*) (pp. 2–3), and to the preface's and 6.54's suggestion that what the reader should try to understand is not the book but its author. The resolute reading also suggests a way of debunking the silly view that Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook underwent such a radical transformation that the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are so opposed to each other that they might as well have been written by different philosophers. It does this by attributing to him the same deflationary attitude towards the philosophical impulse early and late.

But the main appeal of the resolute reading is its clarity and straightforwardness. It simply invites us to take Wittgenstein at his word when he declares in 6.54 that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, and it suggests that reading the book in this way will prove fruitful and illuminating. It does not force us to saddle him with the contortions involved in chickening out and holding that it conveys something of significance in spite of this declaration, and it

19. Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” p. 181.

does not lead us to posit a category of elevated nonsense intermediate between ordinary meaningful sentences and plain nonsense or gibberish. There is, it maintains, no such category, and Wittgenstein was not subject to the delusion that there is. It is the standard reader of the *Tractatus* who is deluded, and Wittgenstein's aim in the book is to unmask this delusion for what it is. This kind of clarity and directness which the resolute reading claims for itself has a powerful appeal, especially if the reading can also supply an account of how the project of philosophical unmasking Wittgenstein is said to be engaged in is supposed to proceed.

The first difficulty for the resolute reading I want to explore is its account of how the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* (as well as of discourse that purports to be ethical in character) are to be read. I said that the main attraction of the resolute reading is its apparent clarity and straightforwardness; yet I think that this appearance is deceptive. As Austin remarked in another connection, there's the part where you say it, and the part where you take it back. And the part where the resolute reading's apparent clarity turns murky is in its explanation of how the reader is to understand not the *sentences* of the *Tractatus*, but its *author*, the speaker of plain nonsense. Diamond recognizes a challenge her reading faces, for it appears to render Wittgenstein's view of language that purports to be ethical the same as Carnap's; yet she takes Wittgenstein's views to be more nuanced and resonant than Carnap's.²⁰ Moreover, there is the obvious problem posed by the prevalence of versions of the standard reading: if the sentences of the *Tractatus* are plain nonsense, what are we to make of the fact that so many of its readers are under the illusion that something important is said or conveyed by them? Finally, the very possibility of the kind of deconstructive reading of the book Diamond and Conant propose assumes that its sentences can in *some* sense be "entered into" as one comes to realize that what at first appear to be significant philosophical pronouncements really say nothing at all.

The answer to these worries, according to Diamond, "is that the *Tractatus*, in its understanding of itself as addressed to those who are in the grip of philosophical nonsense, supposes a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of

20. Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," p. 60.

nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something *in* it. If I could not as it were see your nonsense as sense, imaginatively feel its attractiveness, I could not understand you.”²¹ The resolute reading thus presupposes “a very particular use of the imagination”: the resolute reader, knowing full well that the sentences of the *Tractatus* (and of purportedly ethical discourse) are plain nonsense, is nevertheless able to imagine occupying the position or viewpoint of someone who is under the *illusion* that they say or convey something meaningful and significant.²²

Now if one is unsympathetic to the resolute reading, one is apt to think that this presupposition elevates the nonsense of the *Tractatus* to a privileged category of nonsense that can be entered into in the way Diamond suggests, by contrast with plain nonsense or gibberish. This is *not* her view: there is no entering in to be done, for there is nothing in these sentences to enter. Conant is even more explicit in rejecting this view of the matter. The difference between a person adducing the sentences of the *Tractatus* while under the illusion that they are sensical, and a person spouting ordinary gibberish has nothing to do with kinds of language they are uttering – both are plain nonsense. The difference between them is, he says, purely “psychological,” and not a difference in the kinds of noises they are making.²³

What might this mean? Diamond draws an important distinction between two different conceptions of psychology, or two different standpoints from which a person’s psychology might be described.²⁴ The first is that of *empirical psychology*. Empirical psychology might supply an inventory of, say, the signs he entertains, the imagery accompanying those signs, the kinds of feelings and inclinations accompanying them, the way in which they succeed one another in the person’s consciousness, the laws governing these mental occurrences, how he will react to various sorts of stimuli, and so on. What empirical psychology does *not* tell us is what this person is *thinking*, or what his *thoughts* are (a theme familiar from Wittgenstein’s discussion of understanding in the *Investigations*). To do this we have to adopt a psychological standpoint in which we ascribe thoughts to

21. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Conant, “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?,” p. 249.

24. Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” pp. 65–67.

him, using meaningful propositions. And in doing so we entertain the thoughts he entertains, and thereby attain an *internal* understanding of him – we understand him, as it were, from the inside.

But the problem with understanding the utterer of tractarian nonsense is that neither of these standpoints seems to supply the requisite sort of empathetic understanding. Diamond writes: “What is such an understanding supposed to be? When you understand someone who utters nonsense you are not, on the one hand, remaining as it were outside his thought and describing what goes on from the standpoint of empirical psychology. But, on the other hand, you are not inside his thought as you are when he makes sense and you understand what he says, because there is no such internal understanding, there is no thought that such-and-such to understand. . . . There is, as I said, no inside. But what it is to understand a person who utters nonsense is to go as far as one can with the idea that there is.”²⁵

Consider some uncontroversial cases of the production of plain nonsense or meaningless tokens. One such case might be that of a deranged person standing on the sidewalk, loudly declaiming, with every appearance of communicative intent, deliberation, and conviction, sheer gibberish. Another one: my cat strides purposefully across the room, squares himself before me on his paws, and delivers a richly modulated and nuanced sequence of meows, with apparent assertoric force. In cases like these, I take it, the only standpoint available (if it *is* available) is the standpoint of empirical psychology. There simply is no such thing as understanding these producers of nonsense from the inside, or of coming to occupy, through an exercise of the imagination, the position of one who is under the illusion that the noises being produced mean something. But in the case of the producer of tractarian nonsense (or of the standard reader of the *Tractatus*), even though we can't attain an internal understanding of his thoughts (for he isn't thinking anything), we are supposed to be able to go some distance towards such an understanding, by coming to share, through an effort of the imagination, his illusion that he means something *by* these sentences – sentences which remain plain nonsense, on a par with the deranged person's ravings and my cat's meows. We can of course enter into some kind of imaginative relation with the deranged person, or even my cat. I might attempt

25. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

to enter into the spirit of the proceedings by feigning expressions of encouragement, agreement or disagreement, and so on. But this is not to enter into an illusion that the *sentences* or sentence-like tokens being produced possess some specific meaning, which is what Diamond asks us to do with the producer of the *Tractatus*' sentences.

What would it be to attain this kind of imaginative understanding of a speaker of tractarian nonsense, or of the standard reader of the *Tractatus*? Diamond doesn't really say, but Conant does give an indication of what it would involve. "The criterion of our having successfully performed this act of imaginative identification," he writes, "is that we are able to go on successfully on our own and correctly anticipate the (apparent) logical relations that he will imagine obtain between the nonsensical string in question and other (pseudo-) propositions."²⁶ This would surely have to be part of it, but entering into the illusion supposedly gripping the standard reader would also, I assume, involve (being under the illusion of) raising certain kinds of pertinent questions ("What is it for objects to be colorless?"), having certain qualms ("The argument against non-tautological necessary propositions in 6.36111 is terrible"), raising interpretative questions ("Is Fogelin right in claiming that the *Tractatus*' treatment of multiply-general propositions is defective?"), and of struggling to reconcile 6.54's declaration that the book is nonsense with the sense of illumination it may have engendered. That is, it would involve imaginatively entering into the *illusion* of thinking all these things about the illusory content of the *Tractatus*, all the while realizing that this is *just* an illusion, that one is not really thinking any thoughts at all, that the book is wholly devoid of content, and that its sentences are meaningless gibberish.

What is supposed to be the difference between the successful resolute reader and the standard reader? The standard reader is supposed to be deluded and the resolute reader not; yet phenomenologically, and from the standpoint of empirical psychology, they are virtually indistinguishable: the same silent sentences ring in their mind's ears (save that for the resolute reader each may be accompanied by the tag "but of course this is nonsense"), connected by the same silent "hence"s and "therefore"s, and accompanied by the same feelings of assent, doubt, puzzlement, and comprehension. It's just that the standard reader fails to realize that he isn't actually thinking any thoughts,

26. Conant, "Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder," p. 346.

while the resolute reader knows that she isn't. Moreover, the resolute reader's ability to attain this complex and peculiar psychological condition owes nothing to the character of the sentences of the *Tractatus* at its core, which remain plain nonsense.

I do not find this assessment of the difference between the two readers, and of the status of the *Tractatus*' sentences, credible. The successful resolute reader is not, after all, supposed to be following a script or acting under hypnotic suggestion in tracing out the (putative) logical connections between its sentences and seeming to follow out their implications; rather, as Conant says, she *does it on her own*. This seems to require imputing to these sentences some kind of form and content – for how could she do it otherwise? But the possession of form and content is incompatible with their status as plain nonsense. Moreover, why should we agree that it is the standard reader who is deluded, rather than the resolute reader? This cannot be established through introspection, and given the complexity and richness of her psychological condition, it seems to me at least as plausible, if not more plausible, to say that it is the resolute reader who is deluded in thinking that she isn't really entertaining any thoughts at all, but merely imagining an illusion of thinking. Feigning incomprehension is, after all, a familiar philosophical strategy. I am not of course suggesting that proponents of the resolute reading are feigning incomprehension of the *Tractatus*. The point is rather that philosophical claims of incomprehensibility cannot simply be taken at face value, and that it is not at all obvious how to establish them in the face of testimony, and theoretical elaboration consonant with that testimony, to the contrary.

The suggestion then is that the resolute reader and the standard reader have, at bottom, a similar "understanding" of the *Tractatus* (remember that the condition of the standard reader isn't supposed to be a straightforward one of propositional attitude), but that the resolute reader mischaracterizes it as incomprehension; and that this kind of understanding is not compatible with the view of the *Tractatus*' sentences as plain nonsense. This speaks to the *possibility* of a resolute reading of the book. What though of the question of whether Wittgenstein intended the reader to *try* to read it in this way (whether or not it is possible to do so)?

The evidence of the *Tractatus*' preface, and of Wittgenstein's later remarks about his earlier views, seems to tell decisively against the resolute reading. Diamond takes the preface together with the *Trac-*

tatus' concluding remarks to constitute a kind of "frame" which indicates how the book should be read.²⁷ The preface tells us that the *Tractatus* is not a "textbook" (*Lehrbuch*), which she takes to mean that the book is not intended to propound a set of doctrines; a claim reinforced by the *Tractatus*' concluding remarks where Wittgenstein speaks of the reader who has understood *him*, as opposed to the book's nonsensical sentences. The suggestion then is that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are not expressive of a body of thought.

Yet the preface is full of statements which suggest just the opposite. Wittgenstein speculates that his book may be understood only by someone who has "already had the thoughts that are expressed in it" (p. 3), and he goes on to say that its value consists in the fact "that thoughts are expressed in it" (p. 3). He regrets that he has not expressed these thoughts as well as he might have, and hopes that others may come along and do better. And he concludes by saying that "the *truth* of the thoughts that are here communicated seems to me unassailable and definitive" (p. 5). On their face, these remarks certainly suggest that views of some sort are being conveyed, especially since Wittgenstein speaks of both *communication* and *truth*.

But the main significance of the preface lies, I think, in Wittgenstein's account of the overall aim of the *Tractatus*: "to draw a limit to thought, or rather – not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)" (p. 3). This drawing of the limits of the expression of thoughts, that is, to the limits of language, can only be done from the inside, as it were: it is only "in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense" (p. 3). But this account of the book's aim is at odds with the resolute reading, and with the methodology it posits. Let me explain.

The standard reading's account of how the *Tractatus* tries to achieve its aim is fairly straightforward. The *Tractatus* presents, in the picture theory and in the ensuing account of complexity, a theory of genuine propositions, a theory "of the propositions of *any* sign-language *whatsoever*" (4.5). Genuine propositions are those satisfying the requirements of this theory, and these turn out to be "the propo-

27. Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," pp. 55–57.

sitions of natural science" (6.53). Putative propositions that don't satisfy these requirements are pseudopositions, and say nothing. These include the sentences of purportedly ethical discourse and, notoriously, those of the *Tractatus* itself. The limits of language are thus drawn from inside language, by delimiting the class of genuine propositions. And the *Tractatus* purports to delimit this class by presenting (somehow) a positive general theory of genuine propositions.

Yet on the resolute reading the *Tractatus* presents no such account. But then the only way it could set about the task of demarcating the limits of the sayable would be by using the deconstructive strategy attributed to it by the resolute reading to unmask pieces of disguised nonsense for the patent nonsense they are. It is worth noting the conspicuous absence of a plausible account of how this strategy is supposed to operate. The point now though is that *any* strategy of this sort would have to operate on a case by case basis: it would have to start with something suspected of being a piece of disguised nonsense ("The world is the totality of facts, not of things"), proceed to demonstrate that it really says nothing at all, and then move on to another piece of suspected nonsense. It is an inherently *piecemeal* procedure, and as such inherently incapable of achieving the *Tractatus'* avowed aim of demarcating the limits of the expression of thought, the limits of language. It can only establish that particular sentences don't fall within those limits, but it can't establish or indicate what those limits are.

It might be said that for Wittgenstein one of the principal bodies of pseudodiscourse that fails to fall within the limits of the sayable are the pronouncements of philosophy, and that this gives some indication of what he takes those limits to be. I have often been struck by how little attention is paid, in discussions of Wittgenstein's antiphilosophical tendencies, to what a "philosophical" statement is supposed to be. It is hardly a notion to be taken for granted – indeed, I don't think it possible to give a general characterization of philosophical statements at all. Philosophers themselves are notorious for disclaiming philosophy's pretensions: one need only recall Berkeley's attempt to have Philonous pass off idealism as a piece of philosophically uncontaminated common sense. One can of course give examples of what counts as "philosophy" in something like Wittgenstein's sense: Russell's work no doubt, and Kant's. But what about Frege's? Or what about Augustine's? What about Emerson's? Or Nietzsche's? Or Quine's? Or Rawls'?

Perhaps philosophical discourse can be thought of as the product of a distinctive sort of intellectual impulse or attitude. Diamond suggests that the opening sentences of the *Tractatus* (“The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.”) spring from an illusory point of view from which one attempts to consider the world as a *whole*. And Wittgenstein, in the “Lecture on Ethics,” suggests that the attempt to talk of the ultimate meaning of life or of absolute value manifests a tendency “to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language.”²⁸ I think there is something right about these suggestions; but I also think they are of no help in the present context. For one thing, how are we to ascertain when the use of words like “world,” “language,” “object,” or “proposition” issues from an impulse “to run against the boundaries of language”²⁹ or to form a conception of the world as a whole – as opposed to representing what Wittgenstein calls in the *Investigations* a “humble” use (PI 97)? I’m also sceptical of the idea that the products of such an impulse would be the kind of plain nonsense posited by the resolute reading. Wittgenstein describes “the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable” as issuing from “a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and [which] I would not for my life ridicule . . .”³⁰ I have argued elsewhere that something like the impulse to form a conception of the world as a whole lies behind the poetry of high romanticism.³¹ And I would hope that to suggest this is not to reduce *The Prelude* to nonsense on a par with “Jabberwocky”.

Conant sees the methodology of the *Tractatus* as the same as the one Wittgenstein describes in the *Investigations*: “My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense” (PI 464). Cavell has often emphasized that this is an aim incapable of being finally achieved, and that the “battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (PI 109) has to be constantly renewed and sustained, on a case by case basis. The *Tractatus* is (not to its credit) a tidier and more programmatic work than the *Investigations*, and its stated aim is different: to demar-

28. Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” in James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, eds., *Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 44.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics,” p. 44.

31. In “The Romance of Realism,” *New Literary History* 28, no. 4 (1997).

cate the limits of language from within. This aim (which could never be mistaken for the aim of the *Investigations*) cannot, it seems to me, be accomplished by means of the later methodology Conant attributes to it, but only by way of a positive general theory of propositions of a kind the resolute reading denies the book contains.

The evidence of Wittgenstein's later remarks about the *Tractatus* is straightforward and, I think, even more decisive. I shall cite just a few examples.³² In a letter to Russell written in 1919 he says that the "main point" of the book "is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by propositions – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy."³³ In the 1929 paper "Some Remarks on Logical Form" (which he repudiated after its publication) Wittgenstein mounts an effort to salvage his account of elementary propositions from the difficulty posed by propositions ascribing colors, and qualities that come in degrees. Without mentioning the *Tractatus* by name, he refers repeatedly to his earlier thoughts and opinions: "One might think – and I thought so not long ago – that a statement expressing the degree of a quality could be analyzed into a logical product of single statements of quantity and a single supplementary statement."; "The mutual exclusion of unanalyzable statements of degree contradicts an opinion which was published by me several years ago and which necessitates that atomic propositions could not exclude one another."³⁴ He expresses similar qualms about

32. Further examples can be found in the paper by Hacker mentioned in note 1.

33. Brian McGuinness and G. H. von Wright, eds., *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 124. In the symposium referred to in note 1 Michael Kremer argued that this remark should be taken ironically, since Wittgenstein's characterization of showing as "the cardinal problem of philosophy" was a hint to Russell that it was among the "problems of philosophy" the preface to the *Tractatus* says arise from a misunderstanding of the logic of language. I find this reading quite strained. The problems of philosophy alluded to in the Preface are most naturally taken to be those the *Tractatus* actually discusses, including realism, solipsism, epistemology, causality, induction, synthetic a priori knowledge, and ethics. These are to be dissolved by the proper understanding of "the logic of our language" (which includes the showing/saying distinction) the book is meant to instill in us. The 1919 letter supports this interpretation, for in it Wittgenstein goes on in a postscript to talk at length about what a particular proposition containing two names shows but does not say, without a trace of ironic intent.

34. Wittgenstein, "Some Remarks on Logical Form," in *Philosophical Occasions*, pp. 32, 33.

his earlier views in his conversations with Schlick and Waismann at about the same time.³⁵ Shortly after this, in the notebooks on which *Philosophical Grammar* is based, he writes of “the pictorial character of thought,” but criticizes his development of this idea in the *Tractatus*: “In the *Tractatus* I had said something like: it is an agreement of form. But that is misleading.”³⁶ Later in *Philosophical Grammar* he again refers explicitly to his views in the *Tractatus*, saying that his view of analysis there “was wrong,” and repeating his remark that the *Tractatus*’ construal of the pictorial character of language as consisting in “an agreement of form” was “an error.”³⁷ He continues this criticism of “what logicians have said about the structure of language (Including the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.)” (PI 23) in the *Investigations*, focusing in particular on the tractarian assumption of a logical form shared by thought or language and the world: “Other illusions come from various quarters and attach themselves to the special one spoken of here. Thought, language now appear to us as the unique correlate, picture of the world.” (PI 96); “Thought is surrounded by a halo. – Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world: that is, the order of *possibilities*, which must be common to both world and thought.” (PI 97). The illusions here are clearly supposed to be ones found in the *Tractatus*, illusions by which Wittgenstein takes himself to have once been gripped. I do not see how to reconcile any of these later assessments with the resolute reading.

Against all this it might be said that Wittgenstein’s writings and intentions are murky, and that any reading of his work ought to be judged by its fruitfulness – by the extent to which it endows his work with a sense of richness and depth, suggests previously unnoticed dimensions, and draws interesting connections between his early and later writings. I think there is much to be said for this interpretative strategy. But I also think that it tells against the resolute reading, which seems to me to flatten Wittgenstein’s work, and to draw the least interesting sorts of connections between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*.

35. B. F. McGuinness, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), p. 64.

36. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 163.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 210–212. I am grateful to Ian Proops for bringing these remarks to my attention.

The resolute reading emphasizes Wittgenstein's antiphilosophical tendencies to the exclusion of the more constructive themes present in his writings. Chief among these I think is the notion of *showing*, which the resolute reading virtually reads out of the body of his thought. Though cloaked in the *Tractatus* in the trappings of the picture theory, which Wittgenstein certainly did renounce, showing is basically the idea that there are certain aspects of language and the world which can only be "grasped" or "apprehended," but which are not straightforwardly factual, the objects of propositional attitudes, or amenable to theoretical elaboration of a familiar sort. I think that showing, in this broad form, continues to be a central theme in Wittgenstein's later work, and that a line of investigation exploring this connection between his earlier and later work not only better accords with Wittgenstein's own conception of it, but is also liable to provide a more fruitful account of that work in the long run.³⁸

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38. I have tried to begin this line of investigation in *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought*.