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WITTGENSTEIN'S
TRACTATUS

An Introduction

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It requires no art to say something with brevity when, like Tacitus, one has something to say. If, however, one has nothing to say and still writes a book, giving the lie to truth itself and its *from nothing nothing can come*, now that's what I call an accomplishment.

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1775/76)

My difficulty is only an – enormous – difficulty of expression.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (March 8, 1915)

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Related to this, Hertz offers another reason for limiting his mechanics in this manner. That reason is very similar to the one given by Kant: the term "force" blurs the boundary between living beings and dead matter; it therefore invites the treatment of the living being as just another mechanical object. This, Hertz says, would "offend against a feeling which is sound and natural. It is therefore more cautious to limit the probable validity of the law to inanimate systems."⁷⁵

Wittgenstein will have the last word, of course. He, too, "denies *knowledge* to make room for *faith*." Those who believe that they can talk just as sensibly about absolute or ethical value as they can about cars and cookies are actually conflating them. According to them, "that an experience has absolute value *is just a fact like other facts*." Wittgenstein rebels against this conflation since it diminishes the intent of our ethical or religious tendencies (just as "God" is diminished when transformed into a mere object of experience by our claims to have knowledge in matters of faith):

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., § 320.

⁷⁶ "Lecture on Ethics" (LE), p. 44. Compare *PI*, p. 119: "The results of philosophy are the discovery of some or another plain nonsense and bruises that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language. The bruises let us recognize the value of that discovery."

CHAPTER 2

The argument

We have now seen why one might want to declare nonsensical all sentences except for the propositions of logic and science and our ordinary descriptions of the world. Within the critical tradition this amounts to a perfectly sensible determination of the limits of language and knowledge. What we have not seen as yet is why we should draw those limits where Wittgenstein draws them.

The previous chapter presented an assortment of sometimes compelling philosophical convictions, it suggested motivations and showed how the views of Kant, Lichtenberg, Hertz, and Wittgenstein reinforce each other, but it did not give us more than hints of how to defend their critical conclusions. We might agree, for example, that it is better to dismiss certain questions as nonsensical rather than to remain haunted forever by the inadequacy of all proposed answers. But do we really have a credible account of the agreement between representations and reality, and does it really make us see how all metaphysical matters are evidently nonsensical?

We must therefore begin to investigate how Wittgenstein makes his case in the *Tractatus*, how he establishes his conclusions about sense and nonsense, and then, of course, whether his argument is invalidated because, on his own terms, he writes philosophy in the nonsensical language of unphilosophy.

STRICTLY PHILOSOPHICAL AND SIMULTANEOUSLY LITERARY

In two famous letters to a prospective publisher of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein provides a few hints to the novice reader of his book. The first of these letters inquires only whether Herr Ludwig von

Ficker, editor of the journal *Der Brenner*, would want to look at the manuscript:

About a year before becoming a prisoner of war I finished a philosophical work on which I had worked for the preceding seven years. It is essentially the presentation of a system. And this presentation is *extremely* compact since I have only recorded in it what – and how it has – really occurred to me . . . The work is strictly philosophical and simultaneously literary, and yet there is no blathering in it.

A little later, in October or November 1919, he submitted the manuscript to von Ficker and added more detailed instructions:

But now I am counting on you. And there it may be of some help to you if I write you a few words about my book: since – I am quite sure of that – you won't get very much at all out of reading it. For, you won't understand it; its subject matter will appear entirely foreign to you. But in reality it isn't foreign to you, for the sense of the book is an ethical one. I once wanted to include a sentence in the preface which doesn't in fact appear there now. But I am writing it to you now because it might serve you as a key: For I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: the one you have in front of you and all that I have *not* written. And just that second part is the important one. Because the ethical is delimited by my book as it were from within; and I am convinced that *strictly* it can *only* be delimited like that. In short, I believe: Everything that *many* are *blathering* about today, I settled by being silent about it. And that's why this book, unless I am very mistaken, says much that you yourself want to say, but perhaps you won't see that it is said in it. I would now recommend that you read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, since these express the sense most immediately.¹

Aside from suggesting that the *Tractatus* presents an overarching train of thought which is announced in the preface and carried to a conclusion at the end, these letters emphasize that Wittgenstein's presentation records only what occurred to him and also *how* it occurred to him. By presenting what occurred to him, his book is "strictly philosophical." By preserving how and under what conditions this occurred to him, the book is "at the same time literary." This emphasis on the dual character of the book, philosophical as well as literary, can also be found in the preface of the *Tractatus*:

¹ "Letters to Ludwig von Ficker" (LvF), pp. 32–35. The first of these two letters is extensively quoted and the second reproduced in its entirety also in von Wright 1982, pp. 81–83.

If this work has a value it consists in two things. First that in it thoughts are expressed, and this value will be the greater the better the thoughts are expressed. The more the nail has been hit on the head. – Here I am conscious that I have fallen far short of what is possible. Simply because my powers are insufficient to cope with the task. – May others come and do it better.

On the other hand the *truth* of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am therefore of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved. And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in that it shows how little has been achieved when these problems are solved.

Though Wittgenstein claims here to solve once and for all the problems of philosophy, the value of his book does not consist in this. Its philosophical value consists in showing that almost everything remains untouched by this solution. And its equally important literary value consists in the fact that thoughts are expressed in it, hopefully without blathering and hopefully well.

This and the next chapter follow Wittgenstein's lead and treat the philosophical and the literary character of his book separately. Only in chapters 4 and 5 will we pursue the suggestion that the book really "has a [single] value," which "consists in *two* things." Before considering the interplay, perhaps mutual dependency of the literary and philosophical dimensions of the *Tractatus*, let us begin by considering the thoughts that occurred to Wittgenstein and how they add up to an overarching train of thought.

IDENTIFYING THE CONCLUSION

The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* clarifies the business of logic, it proposes the picture theory of language, details the internal relation between representation and reality, offers a philosophy of science, and includes reflections on ethics, aesthetics, and the will. With all this and more going on, how can we even speak of an overarching argument in the *Tractatus*?²

Only interpretive success can establish the plausibility of the claim that from the preface to the concluding remarks Wittgenstein

² By arguing for a linear overarching argument, this chapter also takes issue with Eli Friedlander's suggestion that the *Tractatus* does not move from the preface to a conclusion, but that it has a circular structure (2001, pp. 17 and 22f., but see p. 15).

expresses a single, perhaps "ethical" sense. In the meantime, it may serve us to recall that in the critical tradition all the particular philosophical points are subservient to the critical task of delimiting reason or language from within, and of showing that what lies on the other side of the limit is unknowable or nonsensical. If delimitation is the critical goal, our reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument might begin by specifying this goal: where is the conclusion that states the intended limitation and that is established by the overarching argument of the *Tractatus*?

We naturally look for the conclusion at the very end of a book, and there we find the remark that carries the number 7: "Whereof one cannot speak, about that one must be silent." Our suspicion might be confirmed by Wittgenstein's remark to von Ficker that preface and conclusion "express the sense most immediately." Also, in the preface we find Wittgenstein announcing his conclusion:

The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the formulation of these problems rests on a misunderstanding of the logic of our language. Its entire sense could be summed up somewhat as follows: what can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot talk about that one must be silent.

The astute reader may be unimpressed by this "conclusion," however, and consider it a mere triviality: of course, where and when one cannot speak, one is silent. The apparent triviality becomes meaningful only if one sees it as a corollary to remark 6.522: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical." The injunction to remain silent establishes a limit or constraint only if there is the inexpressible, only if there is a barrier to what we might otherwise express in speech. I therefore propose that we should consider as the conclusion of Wittgenstein's overarching argument that "There is indeed the inexpressible" or, translated more accurately, that "There is indeed the inexpressible in speech."

These few words deserve closer scrutiny, if only because they are carefully crafted to admit of various interpretations. First of all, there is that curious construction "inexpressible in speech," English for "*unaussprechlich*." In ordinary contexts, the German "*aussprechen*" concerns our ability to clearly speak, pronounce, or articulate words. As such, the German word is a hybrid of sorts between "*ausdrücken* (to

express, quite literally in the sense of squeezing out)" and "*sprechen* (to speak)." Wittgenstein's use of "*aussprechen*" and the translation "express in speech" therefore reflects that the word refers to a particular mode of expression. When we express something in a gesture, sentence, or song, we give it an external manifestation of sorts: we make a feeling or an idea public by putting it into that gesture, sentence, or song. "*Aussprechen*" is a special case of "*ausdrücken*" or expression: it concerns what we put into words or language, thus suggesting yet another translation of *TLP* 6.522: "There is indeed what cannot be put into words."³

Why does it matter whether we get this translation just right, why can we not simply write "There is indeed the unsayable"? Though "to say" and "to express" can be used interchangeably, Wittgenstein employs them very differently and reserves "to say" for a rather narrow context. Saying has nothing to do with expression and need not involve a human subject at all, as when Wittgenstein writes: "'p' says p" (*TLP* 5.542). Taken by itself, a sentence is merely a picture of a possible state of affairs – only when it is said or asserted does that sentence become a claim, true or false, concerning some particular state of affairs. So if "saying" only relates to sentences in the first place and as it were switches them on, the statement that there is indeed the unsayable would have to mean that there are otherwise impeccable sentences which, for some reason or another, cannot be asserted. This is not at all what Wittgenstein's conclusion is about, however. We notice that something is "inexpressible in speech" when we fail in our efforts to create a sentence in the first place, when we fail to give meaning.⁴

³ Thus, in this book, "express" is a more general term and not shorthand for "express in speech." By way of translation, one might also try "There is indeed the unspeakable," were it not for the many meanings of indescribable horror or moral offense that have accumulated around the "unspeakable" in English. Compare also Engelmann 1967, p. 7, which translates "*unaussprechlich*" as "unutterable."

⁴ To be sure, there is a passage in the *Tractatus* (*TLP* 4.113–4.116) which suggests a conflation of the "sayable" and the "expressible in speech" (and the "thinkable"). It elaborates the two aspects of the critical task of philosophy – delimiting the unthinkable from within the thinkable and indicating the unsayable by clearly presenting the sayable. Diamond 2000, pp. 149f. points out that these two aspects of the task are not identical (see the preface of the *TLP*). They overlap, however, in that the clear presentation of the sayable provides a paradigm for what can be clearly thought and also for what can be clearly expressed in speech. Now, this use of "unsayable" does not bear on whether the construction "there is indeed the unsayable" is

So, rather than involve Wittgenstein's technical notion of saying, *TLP* 6.522 concerns what can or cannot be expressed, pronounced, or articulated in speech. What we produce or make manifest in the act of speaking are words, sentences, pictures, and facts (since sentences are pictures and pictures are facts; *TLP* 4.021, 2.141). One example of what we cannot produce or make manifest in the act of speaking is things:

I can only *mention* the objects. Signs represent them. I can only speak of them, *express them in speech* I cannot. (*TLP* 3.221)

What if there were something outside the *facts*? Which our sentences are unable to express? But there we have the *things*, for example, *and we feel no desire at all* to express them in sentences.⁵

While we may feel a desire to express thoughts, feelings, values, ideas, and somehow ourselves in speech, it does not even occur to us that we should express things or objects in speech: we are quite content merely to express their names, that is, to refer to them, to name or mention them. But what is important to Wittgenstein is that facts can be expressed in speech, and we do so by producing particular configurations of words that share a logical form with configurations of objects and that can therefore picture them, agree with them, and so on. So, things are one example of what is inexpressible in speech. While we have no desire to do so in their case, the concluding remarks of the *Tractatus* suggest that there are other cases where we may have

possible. *TLP* 4.115 states only that the clear presentation of the sayable creates a contrast-class of the unsayable ("[philosophy] will indicate (*bedeuten*) the unsayable by clearly presenting the sayable"). In other words, philosophy tells us what is required for a sentence to be assertible; ungrammatical sentences and logical truths are "unsayable." Even if one chose, less plausibly, a mystical translation of "*bedeuten*" ("[philosophy] will hint at (*bedeuten*) the unsayable") this would not yet imply that the realm hinted at is a realm of being. Incidentally, *TLP* 4.115 is the only occurrence of "sayable" and "unsayable" in the *Tractatus*. This stands in striking contrast to the liberal use of these terms in interpretations of the *Tractatus*.

⁵ NB, May 27, 1915. *TLP* 3.221 juxtaposes "*sprechen von* (to speak of)" and "*sie [die Dinge] aussprechen* (to express them [the things] in speech)." The second passage from the *Notebooks* provides a context for the formulation of *TLP* 3.221 on which it elaborates by asking what our sentences cannot express ("*was unsere Sätze nicht auszudrücken vermögen*"). Together, the four remarks of May 17, 1915 clearly indicate that Wittgenstein equates "*aussprechen*" with "*in Sätzen ausdrücken* (to express in sentences)." (Remember that the contrast to expressible in speech is expressible in music, expressible through a gesture, expressible through the life one leads, etc.)

a desire to do so: "There is indeed the inexpressible in speech. This shows itself; it is the mystical."⁶

At this point arises a second question of interpretation, and this one relates to the two words "there is." One straightforward way of reading *TLP* 6.522 adds another word to it: "There is indeed *something* inexpressible in speech." This interpretation takes the remark to have what logicians call existential import: it tells us that something exists in the world, namely the mystical or the higher. Though we may not know what these terms refer to (they are not names of objects), they do refer to *something*. And while we cannot speak of the mystical or the higher, we are literally silent *about* it, indeed, our silence gestures toward this ineffable realm of being.

Another way of reading Wittgenstein's remark avoids existential import or a claim about the existence of a something that is inexpressible in speech. *TLP* 6.522 may just be the denial of the sweeping assertion "Everything I desire to express in speech *is* expressible in speech." In this broadly confident statement, the "everything I desire to express" is not limited to existing somethings but corresponds to a perfectly generic "whatever it may be that I desire to express." Against this confidence, Wittgenstein's remark answers "No, not everything you desire to express in speech is expressible in speech: there is indeed the inexpressible in speech. The failure of your sweeping claim shows itself, and what you run up against in your failure is what we might call the mystical." In other words, when *TLP* 7 requires that "whereof one

⁶ The second half of this remark casts a curious light on the example of things: we can see how things might show themselves, but in which sense are they mystical? If we assume that they are inaccessible like Kant's thing in itself, this would echo the considerations of chapter 1: the circumstance that things are inexpressible in speech while facts are expressible, exemplifies that agreement between object and representation is an internal relation. Things are very different from thoughts, feelings, values, ideas, Kant's phenomena, or Wittgenstein's facts. Only the things are strictly "out there," we have no direct acquaintance with them, etc. Also, while things cannot be expressed in speech, we can speak of them, that is, we need not be silent about them. In order to construe *TLP* 7 as a corollary of 6.522, the latter must concern the nontrivial case of what is inexpressible in speech and neither named or referred to in a sentence. In other words, the example of things does not suffice to establish Wittgenstein's conclusion. As we will see, the case of ethics does establish it. It also illustrates just how important it is to distinguish between "expression" in general and the special case of "expression in speech." While sentences cannot express (*ausdrücken*) ethics or anything higher (*TLP* 6.42), and while ethics cannot be expressed in speech (*aussprechen*, *TLP* 6.421), the *Tractatus* nowhere suggests that ethics cannot be expressed at all, for example through conduct or action.

cannot speak, about that one must be silent," the notion of "aboutness" carries no promise: our silence may well be a silence about nothing.

While there has been some debate about choosing the correct reading of *TLP* 6.522 and 7,⁷ the matter might have to remain open. Indeed, we should consider that in the tradition of critical philosophy the issue is undecidable – and rightly so: we would go beyond the limits of language or reason if we attempted to determine whether or not a something corresponds to what is inexpressible in speech. On this account, *TLP* 6.522 and 7 are artfully or systematically ambiguous – noncommittal by design.

There is one more problem regarding Wittgenstein's conclusion in *TLP* 6.522. He anticipates that problem in *TLP* 4.127: "The question concerning the existence of a formal concept is nonsensical. For no sentence can answer such a question. (Thus one cannot ask, for example: 'Are there unanalyzable subject-predicate sentences?')" Surely, if one cannot ask, let alone answer whether there are subject-predicate sentences that cannot be analyzed,⁸ then one cannot ask, let alone decree whether there is what is inexpressible in speech. Wittgenstein's remark thus appears to be intriguingly self-exemplifying – nonsensical, a failure to express something, or a sign of there being the "inexpressible in speech"?⁹

While this last problem refers us to chapters 4 and 5, our next step is to show how the *Tractatus* establishes its conclusion.

⁷ See, for example, Conant 1989, Diamond 1991 and 2000, and Hacker 2000.

⁸ The example refers to a discussion (with or against Russell) at the very beginning of the *Notebooks*. The statement "There is (no) subject-predicate sentence of this kind" does not relate a predicate to a subject. While we can decide for any given subject-predicate sentence whether it has sense and, if yes, whether it is true or false, there are no such decision procedures for "there is" sentences. Unrestricted claims of existence like these do not concern what is or is not the case; they concern what shall count as, say, an "unanalyzable subject-predicate sentence" – and this depends entirely on what we mean by our terms. Instead of a determination of truth or falsity, we are getting into a dispute about definitions.

⁹ I will spare the reader a digression regarding the only unscrutinized word in remark 6.522 – the "indeed" which is a translation of "*allerdings*." This term does not necessarily provide emphasis, it can also qualify a remark. One can ask "*gibt es das?* (does this exist?)" and answer "*das gibt es allerdings* (yes, indeed, it exists)." One can also say "*es ist allerdings wahr, dass es das gibt, aber* (while it is true that such a thing exists)" or "*dann gibt es allerdings noch* (then, however, there is also this)." Again, Wittgenstein's remark admits of both readings. Such issues of translation are the reason why, starting with the first English edition of the *Tractatus* in 1922, all of his works have been published bilingually with German and English on facing sides – a treatment usually reserved for dead poets.

THE PERFORMANCE OF FAILURE

We have just discovered the systematic ambiguity of the statement that there is indeed the inexpressible in speech – does it refer to a really existing, yet inexpressible something, or does it contradict our supreme confidence that we can express in speech whatever we wish to express? Accordingly, one might think that two rather different strategies are required to establish this conclusion.

If one wanted to establish that there is something that is inexpressible in speech, a suitable argument would appeal to some kind of evidence: *here* is something that is inexpressible in speech. Such an argument would consist of two parts. First one identifies a thought or feeling that supposedly stands for something real. Then one produces a proof of the limits of language. Properly put together (ensuring that the meanings are clear and stable over the course of the entire argument), the two parts might establish that the thought or feeling lies *beyond* the limits of language and is therefore inexpressible *in* speech.

Now if someone wanted to deny once and for all that everything is expressible in speech, a suitable argument would proceed quite differently. It would begin with an illusion,¹⁰ namely the hopeful conviction that I can express in speech whatever it may be that I desire to express. Sooner or later, and try as one may, one will encounter failure while attempting to follow through on that conviction, and this failure establishes the conclusion. Instead of piecing together various parts of an argument, this strategy consists of a single movement that starts out with an illusion and ends in disillusionment, a movement that requires no interpretation but only the frustration of confidence.

As different as they appear, these two strategies combine fairly easily, and their combination allows Wittgenstein to establish both versions of his conclusion at once. Wittgenstein illustrates this especially well in his "Lecture on Ethics," where he begins with an appeal to evidence, namely a meaningful experience, then tries to put that experience into words and finds that he succeeds only to the extent that he strips his experience of its essential content. What he therefore runs up against

¹⁰ This is Cora Diamond's term in Diamond 2000.

is a failure to express that essential content in language. A reflection on the nature of sentences then shows why this failure is inevitable.

Wittgenstein begins this argument in the "Lecture on Ethics" by describing certain experiences of the absolute, for example the feeling of absolute safety in a Vienna theatre. He then turns to another feeling, namely his desire to express in language that something is absolutely good: "the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or would feel guilty for not bringing about."¹¹ The absolute good does not just happen to be good, it cannot be otherwise. Its goodness does not depend on anything, it is not a matter of choice which would allow us to say: "This state of affairs could be good or not good, let's call it (absolutely) good."

But try as he may, Wittgenstein cannot express this notion of "absolute goodness" in language. After all, any sentence in our language has the feature that it is easily negated – all we need to do is add a "not" to it and "This state of affairs is (absolutely) good" becomes "This state of affairs is not good." There is thus an ineluctable element of choice in asserting or negating the sentence, since language moves easily between both. Like all sentences, therefore, "this is absolutely good" is contingent and not absolute. Whether we actually assert or negate it will depend on something, and this something is what can make the sentence true or false. Indeed, as with all sentences, the meaning or significance of this one will come from knowing what would make it true: we will call something absolutely good if such and such conditions are satisfied (our mood is right, a standard has been met, and so on) and, accordingly, our assertion "this is absolutely good" will end up meaning "the mood is right" or "the standard has been met." But yet again, the whole point of "absolutely good" is that it is unconditionally good, that nothing is required to make it so – it just is.

Our desire to express this sense of absolute value in language thus ends up with sentences that can only express contingency and what happens to be. They never express what absolutely must be just as it is. Is there really no way out of this dilemma "that we cannot express what we want to express"?¹² Someone might suggest "that after all

what we mean by saying that an experience has absolute value *is just a fact like other facts*." But this is exactly the point: a fact just like other facts can be expressed in language, but we would strip the notion of "absolute good" of its essential content if we considered it a fact just like other facts: "no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a statement of absolute value."¹³ Facts are what happen to be the case, they are contingent and not absolute. And statements of fact are significant or have sense because we can tell what would make them true or false. "Now when [it] is urged against me," Wittgenstein therefore continues, that the experience of absolute value is just a fact,

I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio*, on the ground of its significance . . . For all I wanted to do . . . was just to *go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language.

All of this illustrates how in 1929 Wittgenstein combined the two strategies: he used for evidence a familiar experience or desire and then subjected it to a motion that began with confidence and ended in failure, proving moreover that this failure was unavoidable: the desire is at odds with the world, and its failure establishes the inexpressibility of absolute value in language. And to say that absolute value is indeed inexpressible in speech leaves quite open whether absolute values are somethings such as, for example, objects in a Platonic realm of eternal ethical ideas. Indeed, it leaves open whether there are absolute values or whether the notion of absolute value makes sense in the first place.

Unlike the "Lecture on Ethics," the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* does not tell a story of how we start and what happens then, nor does it adopt the strategy it recommends as the right method of philosophy.

The right method of philosophy would really be this: to say nothing but what can be said, that is, the sentences of natural science – that is something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then always, whenever others want to say something metaphysical, to reveal to them that they had failed to give meaning to certain signs in their sentences. (*TLP* 6.53)

¹³ Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹ LE, p. 40. ¹² Ibid., p. 44.

The "right method of philosophy" would also frustrate the desire to express what cannot be expressed. Following this method, however, Wittgenstein would not be demonstrating why it is impossible to express a notion of absolute value in a language that renders everything contingent. Instead, he would let the desire of others run up against his constant question "What do you mean?" And whenever we would think that we had succeeded in creating a meaningful sentence, Wittgenstein would show us either that it is still not meaningful, or – if meaningful – that it expresses something rather different from what we had been trying to express, namely a contingent matter of fact and not some unassailable metaphysical truth.¹⁴

Wittgenstein's description of the right method of philosophy remains programmatic, of course. While this is how it should be, it cannot be like that in a book. The *Tractatus* thus recommends a method of philosophy that it itself cannot pursue.

Instead of telling a story about the failure to express the absolute, and instead of listening silently while others fail to give meaning, the *Tractatus* uses the picture theory of language to show "that we cannot express what we want to express." Or perhaps one should say that the discovery of the picture theory showed Wittgenstein that we cannot remain confident about being able to express in speech any sense whatsoever. Omitting only a brief technical aside, here in its entirety is the passage from Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* in which the picture theory makes its dramatic appearance (which Wittgenstein accentuated here and in the continuation via a liberal use of exclamation marks).

26.9.14

What is the basis of our – surely well-founded – confidence that we shall be able to express any sense whatsoever in our two-dimensional script?

27.9.14

After all, a sentence can only express its sense by being its logical depiction! . . .

29.9.14

The general concept of the sentence carries with it also a completely general concept of the co-ordination of sentence and state of affairs: the solution to all my questions must be *extremely* simple!

¹⁴ He does this in *ibid.*, p. 38: "the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain standard. Thus when we say that this man is a good pianist we mean that he can play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity."

In a sentence a world is put together experimentally. (As when a traffic accident is represented in the Paris courtroom by means of dolls, etc.)

This must yield the nature of truth immediately (unless I were blind).

Consider hieroglyphic scripts in which every word represents its meaning! Consider that *actual* pictures of states of affairs can be *correct* and *incorrect*.

»<A><: If in this picture the figure on the right represents the man A, and the one on the left designates man B, then the whole might state something like "A fights with B." The sentence in pictorial script can be true and false. It has a sense independent of its truth or falsity. Everything essential must be demonstrable in regard to it.

One can say that while we are not certain that we can put all states of affairs as pictures onto paper, yet we are certain that we can depict all the *logical* properties of states of affairs in our two-dimensional script.

We are still very much on the surface, but apparently on a good trajectory.¹⁵

Wittgenstein's exploration of the "surely well-founded" confidence that any sense whatsoever can be expressed in the two-dimensional script of our language thus leads him to the realization that we can be confident only that the logical properties of states of affairs can be so expressed: his original confidence was not so well founded, after all.¹⁶ Indeed, the very first step of his exploration spells doom for his initial confidence: it introduces a notion of "sense" so narrow that it cannot possibly accommodate "any sense whatsoever."

When Wittgenstein takes note of our confidence that we shall be able to express in language any sense whatsoever, he uses the term "sense" in a general, nonlinguistic manner. This notion of sense (the German is "*Sinn*") encompasses our ideas concerning the meaning of life, the significance of a gesture, custom or action, the meaning of an artwork or feeling – in short, everything that either makes sense or is meaningful (has sense). About all these kinds of sense

¹⁵ For more exclamation marks see the subsequent entries on September 30 ("A picture can represent relations that do not exist!!!"), October 2 and 3.

¹⁶ In earlier discussions, Wittgenstein is less clear about the difference between "a language which *can* express everything" and "a language which can express or *say* everything that *can* be said"; see his "Notes dictated to G. E. Moore" from April 1914 included in *NB*, p. 108. In contrast, *TLP* 4.002 presupposes an already established notion of specifically linguistic sense when it declares that human beings have the ability to construct languages "capable of expressing every sense."

Wittgenstein asks why we are so confident that we can express them in language.

His answer begins with the reminder that sentences can only express what they (logically) depict. The sense of a sentence is therefore limited from the very beginning to what is depictable. While we can picture how things are or might be, we do not picture the meaning of life, what sense an action makes, and so on. Indeed, if a sentence puts a world together experimentally, it is not a suitable vehicle to express what does not resemble a world and is not put together or assembled like a factual or hypothetical state of affairs. The characterization of what a sentence is draws a narrow limit to what counts as "sense" in the realm of language: "In the sentence a situation is as it were put together experimentally. One can just about say: instead of, this sentence has this or that sense; this sentence represents this or that situation" (*TLP* 4.031).¹⁷

Just as the attempt to express absolute value in language always finds itself expressing contingent but not absolute matters, so the attempt to express any sense whatsoever in two-dimensional script will always end up expressing a picturable state of affairs or nothing at all.

In the "Lecture on Ethics," according to the "right method of philosophy," and also in this crucial passage from the *Notebooks* we begin with the confident pursuit of a desire and find that it runs up against certain limits that contradict our confidence. In all three cases we are therefore dealing with variants of an argument known as *reductio ad absurdum*. We will see that the *Tractatus* also adopts this style of argument to establish its conclusion. Indeed, I will argue that it does so in a rather precise manner.¹⁸

¹⁷ The second half of *TLP* 4.031 appears in the *Notebooks* on October 2, 1914 – still in the wake of the newly discovered picture theory.

¹⁸ I will point out below that my reconstruction of the argument differs from extant *reductio*-interpretations (which emphasize the self-defeating aspect of the *Tractatus*, see p. 8 above and Sullivan 2004, p. 38) by considering a method of indirect proof that establishes a conclusion. Meredith Williams lists three familiar approaches: "The standard interpretation construes *T* 6.54 as Wittgenstein's acknowledgement that his theory of meaning undercuts the meaningfulness of the sentences used to state that theory. Here Wittgenstein tolerates paradox, using the doctrine of showing to ameliorate its irrationality. The austere interpretation construes the passage as the key to understanding the *Tractatus* as a whole. Paradox is no part of the *Tractatus*, but is an illusion created by the meaningless word strings that constitute the corpus of the text. The *reductio* interpretation makes paradox the point of the work, which

INDIRECT PROOF

Here is an example of a typical *reductio ad absurdum*, what logicians also call indirect proof. It starts with the claim that Ludwig Wittgenstein died in World War I. From this claim it follows that the *Tractatus* was never published. This then implies that these words about the argument of the *Tractatus* would not have been written. And from this it finally follows that you are not reading these words. But this is absurd since you *are* reading them. We thus arrive at a contradiction: you know that you are reading these words and our claim implies that you are not. But when a deduction leads into a contradiction, we know that there is *something* wrong with the premises – they cannot all be true. (A valid deductive argument with premises that are all true must have a true conclusion; a contradiction, however, cannot be true, it cannot be the case that you are and are not reading these words now.) So, if the premises cannot all be true, which one is the culprit? In this case, there appears to be only one candidate, namely the claim that Wittgenstein died in World War I. By "reducing this claim to absurdity," that is, by showing that it leads us to a contradiction, we establish that it cannot be true and provide an indirect or negative proof that Wittgenstein did not die in World War I.

Here is a formal representation of this argument as one might find it in a textbook of logic.¹⁹

is to repudiate the entire picture theory of language on the grounds that it is self-defeating" (Williams 2004, p. 26). The following adds a fourth or "indirect proof" interpretation where paradox serves to establish a conclusion regarding the limits of language. (David Stern 2003 provides a more comprehensive taxonomy of readings: logical atomist, logical positivist, metaphysical, irrationalist, and therapeutic – the current approach reconciles the therapeutic reading with the logical positivist and metaphysical ones.)

¹⁹ Each letter represents a sentence (p: Wittgenstein died; q: the *Tractatus* was published, etc.), " \supset " means "if-then" and " \neg " means "not" ($p \supset \neg q$: if p then not q). Our hypothesis is designated as H. For each subsequent step of the argument we indicate whether it represents a background assumption (B) or whether it was derived from previous statements by some standard rule of inference (MP, C, RAA). Background assumptions are supposedly unproblematic statements that could be logical theorems, truisms, or undisputed matters of fact. The rule MP ("*modus ponens*," sometimes translated "affirming the antecedent") allows us to infer q from the two premises $p \supset q$ and p. The "conjunction" rule C allows us to combine any two premises (p and q on separate lines become p & q on one line). RAA (*reductio ad absurdum*) states that $\neg H$ can be inferred once a contradiction is shown to follow from the hypothetical assumption H (if necessary, with the help of one or several Bs).

(1) Ludwig Wittgenstein died in World War I.	p	H(hypothesis)
(2) If Ludwig Wittgenstein died in World War I, the <i>Tractatus</i> was never published.	$p \supset \neg q$	B(background assumption)
(3) So, the <i>Tractatus</i> was never published.	$\neg q$	M(odus) P(onens) from lines 1 and 2
(4) If the <i>Tractatus</i> was never published, these words were not written.	$\neg q \supset \neg r$	B
(5) So, these words were not written.	$\neg r$	MP from 3 and 4
(6) If these words were not written, you are not reading them.	$\neg r \supset \neg s$	B
(7) So, you are not reading these words.	$\neg s$	MP from 5 and 6
(8) You are reading these words.	s	B
(9) You are and you are not reading these words.	$s \ \& \ \neg s$	C(onjunction) of 7 and 8
(10) Therefore, Wittgenstein did not die in World War I.	$\therefore \neg p$	RAA (<i>reductio ad absurdum</i>) from 1 to 9

All *reductio*-arguments begin with a claim or hypothesis (H). The vertical line indicates that a hypothesis has been introduced and that we are temporarily relying on it. The vertical line thus signals a change of the grammatical mood in a deductive argument that ordinarily proceeds in the indicative mood where one assertion prepares for or follows from another. For example, an ordinary deductive argument sounds like this: "Since it *is true* that all critical philosophers establish limits of meaningful expression and that Wittgenstein was a critical philosopher, it *follows* that Wittgenstein established such limits."²⁰ In contrast, the hypothetical character of the *reductio ad absurdum* places the argument into a subjunctive "what if" mood, as indicated by the vertical line: "What *would follow*, if the hypothesis *were true*?"

²⁰ This formulation presents a particular instance of an argument that has the general form *modus ponens*. In this instance, the truth of the premises is asserted. Logicians typically study only the forms themselves and these are indifferent to the actual truth or falsity of the premises (a valid argument will continue to be valid even if the premises are false). In other words, instances of deductive arguments (other than *reductio*-arguments) typically occur in the indicative mood.

All successful *reductio*-arguments culminate in a contradiction that immediately establishes the falsity of the hypothesis. At this point, we leave the hypothetical mode, the vertical line ends, and we reach a positive conclusion.

The *reductio*-argument or indirect proof demonstrates the impossibility of maintaining a hypothesis: one can no longer uphold it once the implied contradiction reveals its absurdity. Since a contradiction is utterly meaningless (one cannot mean what it professes to say), we would obviously fail to preserve the meaningfulness of our thoughts were we to add the hypothesis to the stock of our beliefs. While we might discover this problem by ourselves as we subject H to a "what if" test, we could also be taught through the "right method of philosophy": one person confidently maintains a hypothesis or belief, the other does not offer an opposing point of view but through a series of questions elicits that the hypothesis is untenable. Whether by ourselves or through dialogue, the procedure resembles a thought experiment: "So this is what you think; let's try this out and see where it takes us." The thought experiment thus provides an internal critique of the hypothesis, a criticism from within. It presupposes only what we take to be the shared beliefs B and does not invoke a different point of view or any opinion that stands outside the hypothesis and our shared beliefs.

While these features of *reductio*-arguments are familiar by now from our various examples, other features will become important later on. We might note, for example, that the conclusion of this argument is only as strong as our faith in the background assumptions B. The contradiction tells us nothing more than that one of the premises must be wrong: it points to H as the culprit only if we can be quite sure that our background assumptions are true. The *reductio*-argument will persuade only those who have already agreed that the hypothesis is much weaker, far more vulnerable than any of the other premises.²¹

²¹ For the sake of illustration, imagine someone who believes that the weakest premise in our example is (4): "If the *Tractatus* was never published, these words were not written." This person firmly believes that Wittgenstein died in World War I and, consequently, that the *Tractatus* was never published. But she has no problem imagining writers who disguise their own views by taking as their subject a fictitious philosophical work. She will argue that the *reductio*-argument exposes the absurdity of the assumption that just because the book

The contradiction reveals at once a definitive conclusion only thanks to this antecedent agreement. And only thus, once the hypothesis is consumed in contradiction, does its negative after-image immediately appear: it shows itself.

Finally, the *reductio*-argument is peculiar in that it moves in two directions at once: it proceeds forward from the hypothesis, deducing its consequences or articulating its implications. All the while, however, it aims to reflect back on the hypothesis and evaluates it. In this way *reductio*-arguments resemble the so-called transcendental arguments of Kant and the Kantian tradition. These are arguments that begin with something given (science, experience, language, and so on) and develop, analyze, or articulate it by reflecting on its preconditions. A transcendental philosophy such as Kant's therefore provides a theory of science and experience as well as (simultaneously) a theory of what must be the case if science and experience are to be possible in the first place. One might say that the hypothesis of a successful *reductio*-argument has failed to pass a transcendental test: as we articulate its implications, we discover that its condition of possibility is not satisfied.²² And unlike any other deductive argument, once the hypothesis has failed this test, we may never appeal to it again. Indeed, the whole *reductio*-argument must be thrown out and none of the inferential steps that led to its conclusion can ever be cited again.²³ We may as well erase them from memory: every inference was tainted by the fact that in light of our concluding contradiction, the hypothesis was not even possible to start with.

THE HYPOTHESIS OF THE TRACTATUS

A *reductio*-argument serves as a ladder enabling us to reach our conclusion, and once we arrive, the ladder must be thrown away.

does not exist, I could not sit down and pretend to write these words about it. (Maybe we can persuade her by showing her a copy of the *Tractatus*, thus producing another contradiction . . .)

²² To be sure, this "transcendental test" cannot be identified with Kant's "transcendental method," which seeks to identify and explicate conditions of possibility (whereas the *reductio ad absurdum* can only detect impossibility).

²³ While the unproblematic background beliefs B can be reintroduced at any time, none of the lines that rely on the hypothesis (in our example, lines 3, 5, 7, 9) may be cited or used again.

Wittgenstein uses this metaphor in *TLP* 6.54 to describe how he proceeds in the *Tractatus*: "My sentences serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, having climbed through them – on them – beyond them. (One must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after one has climbed up on it.) One must overcome these sentences and then see the world right."

The metaphor of the ladder suggests that there is, in the *Tractatus*, a linear development of an overarching train of thought. Climbing the ladder rung by rung, the readers come to reach a new philosophical plateau. Upon arrival they must conclude that from the ladder, which was obviously instrumental in getting them there, they saw the world wrong. With the conclusion of the *Tractatus*, the reader has assumed a vantage-point from which at least some of its premises appear nonsensical. This is just as in indirect proof: the hypothesis of a *reductio*-argument helps establish the conclusion, but one sees the world wrong while entertaining it.

We have now identified the systematically ambiguous conclusion of the *Tractatus* and we have strong indications that it is established by indirect proof or *reductio ad absurdum*. This leaves us finally with the task of identifying the hypothesis, how and where Wittgenstein leads it into contradiction such that the conclusion immediately shows itself.

Of course, if the *Tractatus* employs a *reductio*-argument we already know what the hypothesis is: it is the opposite of the conclusion. The opposite of "there is indeed the inexpressible in speech" is the "surely well-founded" confidence that any sense whatsoever is expressible in speech. According to this hypothesis, the limits of language – if there are such things – are wide enough to accommodate anything that may have meaning: the world, an action, an artwork, a claim about what is the case, a feeling or intention, an ethical attitude, and so on. All this is supposed to be representable in language, that is, it can be recognized when put into words. Aside from denying any effective limits of language, this confidence admits of no distinction between expression and representation: when a feeling, a value, a belief is properly expressed in the medium of language, it will be recognizably represented there. We can put this in very simplistic terms that appear

quite familiar since, on some level, all of us would like to believe in the possibility of this: according to the hypothesis, our feelings can move into a sentence and from the sentence others can recover the feeling; our linguistic expression *is* an objective representation of what is expressed.²⁴ All sense or all meaning is therefore within the limits of language and, as such, also within the world: it is externalized and objectively contained in a sequence of words – a person can die and what she expressed can live on in the sentence.²⁵

This, then, is the hypothesis of the overarching argument of the *Tractatus*.

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| (o) We are able to express any sense whatsoever in our two-dimensional script, that is, nothing is inexpressible in speech and all sense is in the world and within the limits of language. | H(hypothesis) |
|---|---------------|

This fundamental trust in the power of language applies to the hypothesis itself. Since it admits of no distinction between expression and representation, sentence (o) is a representation of our surely well-founded confidence, and this confidence is the sense that is supposed to be expressed in (o). Along with the assertion of (o) comes, therefore, the conviction that (o) and philosophical sentences like it are not nonsensical. This corollary should be included with a more complete statement of the hypothesis:

²⁴ Even Wittgenstein himself kept experiencing the pull of this naïve supposition. "In the correctly written sentence, a particle detaches from the heart or brain & arrives as a sentence on paper," he noted in his diary on October 31, 1931 (MT, diary p. 114). He immediately adds a remark that qualifies and criticizes this supposition: "I believe that my sentences are mostly descriptions of visual images that occur to me." His own sentences are not particles from the heart but descriptions of images, and this is true also of the one in which he speaks about particles that detach from the heart and arrive on paper – for what else is this but a visual image?

²⁵ This account of the seemingly well-founded hypothesis deliberately avoids a problematic middle term: "thought." Does all thought have a linguistic character and is all our thinking therefore a kind of quiet speaking? And is "any sense whatsoever" first and foremost a thought? In the preface of the *Tractatus* and in *TLP* 4.002 Wittgenstein makes it quite clear that we cannot solve our problem quite so simply (see below, pp. 81–94). And in his diary he notes on May 9, 1930: "One often thinks – and I myself *often* make this mistake – that everything one thinks can be written down. In reality one can only write down – that is, without doing something stupid & inappropriate – what arises in us in the form of writing. Everything else seems comical & as it were like dirt. That is, something that needs to be wiped off" (MT, diary p. 27).

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| (o _A) We are able to express any sense whatsoever in our two-dimensional script, that is, nothing is inexpressible in speech and all sense is in the world, within the limits of language. | H(hypothesis) |
| (o _B) Statements such as sentence o _A are not nonsensical. | Corollary of hypothesis |

Now, before we go on to show how and where this hypothesis (o_{A&B}) is led into contradiction, an urgent objection must be addressed. "This is all well and good," the objection reminds us, "but this hypothesis is nowhere stated in the *Tractatus*." Indeed, the *Tractatus* does not offer these formulations anywhere, but is this to say that the *Tractatus* does not begin with this hypothesis?

Most readers would maintain (and the appearances obviously speak in their favor) that the *Tractatus* begins with *TLP* 1: "The world is everything that is the case." Attached to the numeral "1" is a footnote: "The decimal figures as numbers of the separate propositions indicate the logical importance of the propositions, the emphasis laid upon them in my exposition." Thus it would seem that *TLP* 1 marks a thunderous beginning, laying down the law. Hans-Johann Glock, for example, declares in his *Wittgenstein Dictionary* that "[t]he famous beginning of the *Tractatus* is the climax of a realist tradition which assigned importance to facts as mind-independent constituents of the world."²⁶ On Glock's account, the rest of the *Tractatus* proceeds from this realist commitment. And even if it does not develop with the stringency and clarity of a deductive argument, it shares with standard deductive arguments that everything follows from here. What comes after this first premise moves unidirectionally forward toward *TLP* 2, 3, and ultimately 7.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, the *Tractatus* begins right in the middle of things and *TLP* 1 is not really its beginning at all. The sentence "The world is all that is the case" presupposes our hypothesis (o_{A&B}); it is an expression or manifestation of the seemingly well-founded confidence that such metaphysical verdicts are expressible in speech. Indeed, "The world is all that is the case" can open the *Tractatus* only by implicitly claiming about itself that it is not nonsense.

²⁶ Glock 1996, p. 115.

Elaborating on Wittgenstein's ladder metaphor, one might say that *TLP* 1 is the first rung of the ladder and *TLP* 7 the last, but that only the two parts of our hypothesis ($O_{A\&B}$) provide the rails that support the rungs and turn them into a ladder.

As one reads on, the *Tractatus* soon provides another indication that *TLP* 1 is not properly a beginning from which everything else flows in a forward direction. This appears in a famously difficult passage, which is so puzzling precisely because the remarks seem to move forward and backward at once:

2.02 The object is simple.

2.0201 . . .

2.021 The objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be composite.

2.0211 If the world had no substance, whether a sentence has sense would depend on whether some other sentence is true.

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

This progression of remarks can be seen, firstly, as the continuation of a forward movement that began with "The world is all that is the case." Briefly put, this progression articulates the ontology of the *Tractatus*: the world consists of facts and not of things, since "what is the case" is always a factual configuration of things in a state of affairs. The elements of these configurations (the things or objects) are simple. Since these simple elements form the substrate or material out of which the facts are composed, they are the substance of the world. This relation between objects and their configuration in states of affairs makes it possible to form pictures of the world (since sentences are configurations of names of objects that can picture the configurations of objects).²⁷

²⁷ Here is a closer ontological reading of 2.02 to 2.0212. Quite in line with Glock's comment about Wittgenstein's realist commitment, the series of remarks begins with an ontological claim (laying down the law again: the object is simple) and its elaboration in 2.021. In a somewhat cryptic manner, 2.0211 further elaborates this view: if simple objects form the substance of the world, whether a sentence has sense does not depend on the truth or falsity of some other sentence. This may be clarified by an example of the kind that would have been familiar to Wittgenstein's contemporary "technical" readers: if simple objects did not form the substance out of which facts are composed, our sentences might refer to composite things ("the present king of France") and form sentences like "the present king of France is bald." However, the truth or falsity of this sentence can be decided only if France has a

Significantly, however, the series of remarks also forms a backward movement that may have begun with *TLP* 2.1, "We make pictures of the facts," or on September 29, 1914, when Wittgenstein noted that "a traffic accident is represented in the Paris courtroom by means of dolls." The series of remarks makes explicit what are the implicit preconditions for our ability to form pictures. The ability itself is simply a given, but what must the world be like so as to be representable by pictures that are true or false?²⁸ For example, it must have discrete elements of which we can clearly say whether or not they stand in such-and-such a relation to one another, that is, it must have a substrate of simple objects that can enter into possible states of affairs. The states of affairs that actually obtain are the facts, and all the facts are all that is the case. This epistemological or transcendental reconstruction of the preconditions of our ability to make pictures leads to the necessary ontological supposition that the world is always what at a given moment just happens to be the totality of facts (*TLP* 1, 1.1).²⁹

king. Therefore, another sentence must be true ("France has a king") for our sentence to have sense. But if we allowed only simple objects like "France" and "king," we could only form sentences like "France has a king and that king is bald." In this case, if France had no king, the conjunction would simply be false but perfectly sensible as it stands.

The remarks continue with 2.0212, which performs a shorthand *reductio ad absurdum* on the denial of this consequence: if one assumed that the sense of a sentence relied on the truth of another one, what we do all the time should be impossible to do, namely to form pictures of the world (we might refer here to 2.1 or simply to the newspaper article about the model used in a Parisian traffic court). Taken together, 2.0211 and 2.0212 show by indirect proof that from 2.02 and its elaboration 2.021 follows something true: the proposed ontology is consistent with our ability to form pictures of the world.

This interpretation skirts the controversial question of what, exactly, Wittgenstein means by "simple object." While he sometimes appears to require that simple objects would have to be discovered through a drawn-out logical analysis (and that logically simple objects should be physically simple, too), I adopt for present purposes his suggestion that the simplicity of objects is relative to the state of affairs in which they occur. See, for example, the entry on June 14, 1915 in the *Notebooks*: "It seems that the idea of the SIMPLE is already to be found in that of the complex and in the idea of analysis, and in such a way that we come to this idea quite apart from any examples of simple objects, or of sentences which mention them, and we realize the existence of the simple object – *a priori* – as a logical necessity." (Compare the entire discussion on June 14 to 18.)

²⁸ See *NB*, October 10, 1914: "A statement cannot deal with the logical structure of the world, for in order for a statement to be possible at all, in order for a sentence to be *capable* of having *sense*, the world must already have just the logical structure that it has. The logic of the world is prior to all truth and falsehood."

²⁹ This "backward" reading of the series of remarks further highlights why *TLP* 1, "The world is all that is the case," could not serve as a solid beginning or foundation for a philosophical work, even in the realist tradition: according to *TLP* 1, the facts are not mind-independently

While this only begins to properly contextualize *TLP* I, the discussion so far suggests that the opening of the *Tractatus* can be reconstructed as in table I.

INDIRECT PROOF OF THE CONCLUSION

Since the *Tractatus* does not explicitly state the premise of its overarching argument, it took some work to establish it. Matters become a good deal easier when we turn to its conclusion. We can safely bypass many intricate particulars along the way and find ourselves well prepared to recognize how and where the hypothesis of the *Tractatus* is led into contradiction, thus yielding the conclusion that "there is indeed the inexpressible in speech."

This and the previous chapter have indicated already how 2.1 and 2.01 will be developed, how the epistemological fact that "We make pictures of the facts" is related to the ontological posit "A state of affairs is a connection of objects. (Items, things.)" Agreement between our representations and their objects is possible because our sentences are true or false pictures of the world: the relation between these pictures and the world is an internal relation because both sentences and states of affairs are configurations of simple things (names, objects) that can be correlated to one another, one serving as a model for the other. As we have seen, both therefore share the character of contingency. Each state of affairs either obtains or does not obtain. Each sentence can be negated and it is always the case that either its assertion or its negation is true – and which of these is true depends

in the world and the world is not the succession of what is the case at any given time. Instead, the facts *are* the world and there is a constant succession of worlds, each by itself perfectly static and unchanging (see below, chapter 4, note 9). According to *TLP* I, when I cross out "new" and instead write "different" fact, a new world has come into being: the previous totality of facts contained my sentence about a "new fact," the current world my sentence about a "different fact." *TLP* I thus posits a very peculiar and not at all trivial or intuitive (realist) ontology, namely the one that is implicit in our attempts to picture the world. Indeed, this ontology may not be philosophically defensible at all (when an action occurs and produces a change in the world that action cannot be part of a world even if, say, it instantiated an empirically observed constant conjunction of cause and effect). However, on the transcendental interpretation Wittgenstein does not and need not defend this bad ontology, only explicate it as an implicit presupposition of our representational practice. As opposed to the ontological interpretation of these remarks, the transcendental or epistemological one establishes more than the consistency of the posited ontology and our ability to form pictures of the world. Instead, it explicates a necessary precondition.

Table I *The opening of the Tractatus*

0 _A	We are able to express any sense whatsoever in our two-dimensional script, that is, nothing is inexpressible in speech and all sense is in the world, within the limits of language.	H(ypothesis)
0 _B	Statements such as sentence 0 _A are not nonsensical.	Corollary of hypothesis
I	The world is all that is the case.	Ontological posit presupposing 0 _B and, by extension, 0 _A ; necessary precondition for 2.1
1.1	The world is the totality of facts, not of things.	Elaboration of I
...
2.02	The object is simple.	Elaboration of I etc., restatement of the conclusion in 2.02I
...
2.02I	The objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be composite.	Elaboration of 2.02 and conclusion of RAA in 2.02II to 2.1
2.02II	If the world had no substance, whether a sentence has sense would depend on whether some other sentence is true.	H* of nested <i>reductio</i> -argument and a first implication of H*
2.02I2	It would then be impossible to form a (true or false) picture of the world.	From 2.02II, leading H* into contradiction with 2.1
...
2.1	We make pictures of the facts.	A given fact (as in traffic court); consequence of and occasion for I etc.
...
4.03I	In the sentence a situation is as it were put together experimentally.	Further development of I, 2.01, 2.1, etc., still presupposing 0 _{A&B}

entirely on whether, in fact, the state of affairs does or does not happen to obtain. In the language of philosophy, one would therefore say that the truth of the sentence is contingent upon what is the case. And inversely, the world that is presupposed by this account of the agreement – a world that is picturable – is one in which everything is as it is and happens as it happens, a contingent world where

nothing *has* to be and nothing *has* to happen: the existence or non-existence of a state of affairs does not logically depend on anything else.³⁰

This account delimits language from within by singling out the descriptive or representational function of language. Only when we use a sentence to picture a state of affairs can we specify the truth-conditions and thus the meaning of what we say. For, our sentences have sense just to the extent that they are internally linked to states of affairs. This linkage unambiguously decides whether the sentence is true or false: if this state of affairs obtains, the sentence is true, if it does not, then the sentence is false. If we can specify what will make the sentence true or false, then the sense expressed by that sentence is contingent; if we cannot specify such truth-conditions, the sentence has no sense.

This limitation of language from within therefore implies that only descriptive sentences have sense. Since the (complete) description of the world is the task of science, Wittgenstein remarks: "The entirety of the true sentences is the entire natural science (or the entirety of the natural sciences)" (*TLP* 4.11). When we inspect this entirety of true sentences with the analytical tools provided by Wittgenstein, we will find that each of them represents a fact, that none of them is necessarily true, that all are contingent, and finally that none of them logically implies the other, that each is independent (1.21, 2.062, 4.211, 5.134).³¹ There is, therefore, no hierarchy or rank ordering among these sentences, all of them are equivalent or, literally, of equal value: "All

³⁰ To be sure, Wittgenstein needs to grapple with an obvious objection: what about science and the causal laws of nature, don't they show that when one thing is the case (the cause) another must follow (the effect)? Wittgenstein dismisses this objection in section 6.3. He has Hume on his side when he insists that only logic tells us "what must be": there is nothing in between the two poles of logical necessity and (empirical) contingency. "The investigation of logic is the investigation of *all* lawfulness. And outside of logic everything is contingent" (6.3). Accordingly, "that the sun will rise tomorrow is a hypothesis; and that means: we don't *know* whether it will rise" (6.36311). Science with its laws is "the attempt to construct all the *true* sentences that we require for the description of the world according to one plan" (6.343) and these true sentences include everything we *know* to be true about the position of the sun relative to the earth.

³¹ Wittgenstein admits, of course, that certain composite sentences can imply more elementary ones. So, the sentence "p and q" implies "q." Much of the *Tractatus* is devoted to the question of how we might arrive at a set of elementary sentences such that (i) all the true sentences in that set produce a complete description of the world, and (ii) all the sentences in that set are truly independent of one another, the truth or falsity of one not affecting the truth or falsity of any other. Compare *TLP* 4.26, 4.51, 5.13ff. Wittgenstein's requirement of "independence" has

sentences are of equal value" (*TLP* 6.4). Since all sentences express facts, there can be no hierarchy among them such that some express what ranks logically, metaphysically, or ethically higher (*TLP* 5.556f., 6.42).³²

So, should anyone believe that values, feelings, meanings are something other than contingent facts, any attempt to express these will fail. This failure can take two forms. Either the attempt yields no sensible sentence at all and out comes a kind of gibberish that is poetic at best. In this case, instead of speaking clearly and sensibly, one speaks in riddles, enigmatically, perhaps "mystically" (also in the pejorative sense of that term). Or, a sensible sentence is produced, but in virtue of its having sense, this sentence presents a contingent fact, after all, and thus not what it was meant to express. One is left then with the feeling that there may be an ineffable, mystical something that eludes all attempts to adequately express it in speech (where this "something" may refer to a "higher" realm of being or, more likely, to an uncertain hunch, sentiment, impulse, hope, feeling, and so on). Having arrived at 6.4, Wittgenstein describes both kinds of failure, thus leading the hypothesis into contradiction.

6.4 All sentences are of equal value.

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it happens. *In* it there is no value – and if there were, it would have no value.

If there is a value that has value, it must lie outside everything happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is contingent.

What makes it non-contingent cannot lie *in* the world, for then this would be contingent again.

It must lie outside the world.

Wittgenstein formulates the contradiction twice: if there were value in the world, it would have no value; if something that lies in the world turns what is contingent into something noncontingent, this noncontingent thing would be contingent again. (If there were value

been taken very seriously by certain interpretations, such as those of Griffin 1964, Graßhoff 1997 and 1998, and Lampert 2000 and 2003. Ricketts 1996, p. 84 reduces it to an implicit requirement rather than an explicit metaphysical commitment.

³² Compare *NB*, October 30, 1914: "Every sentence can be negated. And this shows that 'true' and 'false' means the same for all sentences. (This is of the greatest possible importance)." See also the entry dated October 12, 1916 and *PT*, an unnumbered remark on facsimile page 86 (p. 238 of the edition by McGuinness *et al.*).

in the world, it would be the "value" of contingency, a value without value that makes all sentences equivalent, "gleichwertig" or of equal value). Following the pattern of most *reductio*-arguments, the penultimate draft of the *Tractatus* delivers its conclusion (the denial of the hypothesis) just as soon as the contradiction of the hypothesis appears:

Therefore also there can be no propositions of ethics. Sentences cannot express anything higher.

There is indeed the inexpressible in speech. This *shows* itself, it is the mystical.³³

That same draft preserves the logical structure of Wittgenstein's overarching argument even more tightly when, a few pages earlier, it takes the reader straight from "All sentences are of equal value" to "Whereof one cannot speak, about that one must be silent" in the very next line.³⁴ When Wittgenstein reshaped this arrangement, he did so in two steps that preserved the relation between hypothesis, contradiction, denial of hypothesis, and the final statement of the *Tractatus* (see table 2).³⁵ First, he numbered the remarks of his penultimate draft and thereby widened the gap between "all sentences are of equal value" and "whereof one cannot speak, about that one must be silent." The latter statement now took its place as its ultimate conclusion at the very end of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein used the gap to make explicit the connection between the two statements, that is, by inserting first of all the final two steps of the *reductio*-argument (the statement of the contradiction and the conclusion that there is indeed the inexpressible in speech). He also inserted various remarks that explore the far-reaching implications of the insight that sentences cannot express anything higher. This left the final remark of the *Tractatus* rather detached from the argument that led up to it. In a second step, Wittgenstein changed the numbering of the remarks. By moving "there is indeed the inexpressible in speech" into the

³³ See p. 75 in the facsimile reproduction of *PT*, also p. 230 of the edition by McGuinness *et al.*

³⁴ Page 71 in the facsimile edition of *PT*.

³⁵ Wittgenstein added a numbering system to the *Prototractatus* and edited that system for the *Tractatus*. Therefore, two different numbers are assigned here to "There is indeed the inexpressible in speech." The critical edition by Grafshoff and Lampert of the various typescripts of the *TLP* shows that Wittgenstein made no subsequent changes to the order of these remarks.

Table 2

<i>Prototractatus</i> (order of text)	<i>Prototractatus</i> (numbering)	<i>Tractatus</i>
All sentences are of equal value (6.4)	6.4 6.41	6.4 6.41
Whereof one cannot . . . (7)	6.42	6.42
. . .	6.43 (will be <i>TLP</i> 6.522)	
The sense of the world must lie outside the world . . . (6.41)	. . . 6.431 to 6.521 6.421 to 6.521 . . .
Sentences cannot express anything higher (6.42)	6.53 (The right method of philosophy) 6.54 (My sentences elucidate through this)	6.522 (was 6.43 in <i>PT</i>) 6.53 6.54
There is the inexpressible in speech (6.43/6.522)	7	7

immediate vicinity of the concluding remark, he tied the whole conclusion of the *Tractatus* back into the *reductio*-argument. In this final version of the *Tractatus* (see table 3) the general reflections about the problems of life in 6.42 to 6.521 are bridged by an arch that extends from "sentences cannot express anything higher" (*TLP* 6.42) to "there is indeed the inexpressible in speech" (*TLP* 6.522). Also, 6.522's denial of Wittgenstein's hypothesis that "we are able to express any sense whatsoever in our two-dimensional script" is now closely followed by a corollary that denies the corollary of this hypothesis: while 6.522 rejects O_A , 6.54 rejects O_B and its claim that, surely, the statements that make up the *Tractatus* are not nonsensical.³⁶

This detailing of Wittgenstein's *reductio*-argument closes as it began, namely by emphasizing the artful construction of the text. As we saw, Wittgenstein's conclusion leaves undecided whether or not there is a something that we must be silent about. Now we see

³⁶ More precisely, 6.522 can be read as the denial of O_A : there is something (namely, the mystical) that cannot be expressed in speech, and thus we are not able to express any sense whatsoever in two-dimensional script. With 6.54 as its corollary, 6.522 can also be read as the denial of O_B : some attempts to produce sense result in failure (that is, in an enigmatic or mystical way of talking); thus, the trust that anything we believe to be expressible can be expressed in speech breaks down just as soon as Wittgenstein's attempt to express that trust is shown to be nonsensical.

Table 3 *The closing of the Tractatus*

6.4	All sentences are of equal value.	From 1, 2.01, 2.02, 2.1, etc., still presupposing $O_{A\&B}$ – epistemological corollary of 6.41B
6.41A	The sense of the world must lie outside the world.	Contrary to O_A 's "all sense is in the world," anticipated consequence of 1 to 6.41E
6.41B	In the world everything is as it is and happens as it happens. <i>In</i> it there is no value –	From 1, 2.01, 2.02, etc. – ontological corollary of 6.4
6.41C	– and if there were [value in the world], it would have no value.	From O_A , 6.4, 6.41B; $O_{A\&B}$ is led into contradiction
6.41D	If there is a value that has value, it must lie outside everything happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is contingent.	Elaboration of 6.41B
6.41E	What makes [all happening and being-so] noncontingent cannot lie <i>in</i> the world, for then this would be contingent again.	From O_A , 6.41B&C; restatement of the contradiction in 6.41C
6.41F	It [that is: what makes all happening and being so noncontingent; what has value; the sense or meaning of the world] must lie outside the world.	From 6.41B&C; ground for the rejection of O_A , but still dependent on O_B
6.42 to 6.521	[Beginning with "therefore also there can be no propositions of ethics," elaboration of sense that <i>also</i> wants but fails to realize adequate expression in speech: "Sentences cannot express anything higher."]	Expansion of 6.41F
6.522	There is indeed the inexpressible in speech. This <i>shows</i> itself . . .	RAA $O_{A\&B}$ to 6.41A–E shows the denial of O_A
6.53	The right method of philosophy would really be this: To say nothing but what can be said, namely the sentences of natural science . . .	Corollary of 6.522 (preparing for 6.54 and 7 with a reminder of 4.11)
6.54	My sentences elucidate through this: who understands me recognizes them in the end as nonsensical . . .	Corollary of 6.522; denial of O_B
7	Whereof one cannot speak, about that one must be silent.	Corollary of 6.522

that he uses the *reductio*-argument not only to refute our fundamental trust in the power of language to express whatever we please. He uses it also to refute the implicit faith shared by the author with his readers that at least we can express in language what belongs to the philosophical investigation of our fundamental trust.

RESOLUTELY ANTIMETAPHYSICAL LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

Only scholars of Wittgenstein's work want to know how this reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument relates to extant interpretations. To conclude this chapter here are a few remarks directed at them. Others may safely skip these pages.

To be sure, many philosophical commentators have remarked that the *Tractatus* undercuts traditional metaphysics, that more or less credibly it subverts the language in which it was written. However, only Max Black proposed explicitly that it was the overall aim of the *Tractatus* to produce a self-defeating argument in analogy to a negative proof or *reductio ad absurdum*:

Our problem is that of understanding how a terminology can have a rational use, even if the ultimate verdict has to be that there is nothing better to do with that terminology than to discard it. In mathematics, as it happens, we can find many examples of this sort, which may provide the clue that has so far been lacking . . . A simple example would be the attempt to assign a meaning to division by zero (i.e. to a symbol of the form $x/0$), consistent with the antecedently given rules for the division and multiplication of numbers. It very quickly appears that no such meaning can be assigned, since $x/0 = y$ would imply $x = y \cdot 0$. . . and so we could infer $x = y \cdot 0 = 0$, which could not hold in the general case. Here the problematic symbol $x/0$ is used in *determinate* ways in the calculations that lead up to its rejection . . . The investigation might therefore be called an instance of "the indirect proof of nonsense." That the desired extension is inadmissible, though a negative result, is as valuable as such other negative results in mathematics as the impossibility of trisecting the angle, and the like. The work done to reach this result cannot reasonably be regarded as wasted – nor the method employed in reaching it as irrational . . . A negative metaphysics, such as that of the *Tractatus*, has its own rules of procedure: the ladder must be *used* before it can be thrown away.³⁷

³⁷ Black 1964, pp. 382 to 386. Black's notation does not include a sign for multiplication: if x divided by 0 equals y , then x equals y multiplied by 0 ; thus x would equal 0 . Imagine putting any number whatsoever in the place of x , and the general (absurd) result would be

These remarks make Max Black one of the few critics who takes literally Wittgenstein's claim that the sentences in the *Tractatus* are nonsensical: "Their absurdity is irredeemable, and their ultimate fate must be rejection." This interpretation differs from the one advanced here in that it finds the hypothesis in the proclamations of the *Tractatus* itself rather than in the underlying fundamental trust in the power of language. Also, on Black's account, aside from exposing the incoherence of its own metaphysical doctrine, the *Tractatus* has no conclusion – "through severe mental labor" Wittgenstein's assumptions are finally defeated in 6.54 with its verdict concerning their nonsensicality. Wittgenstein thus ends up merely revealing the "incoherence" of his own "new vision" of the world.³⁸ The price for taking literally Wittgenstein's final verdict therefore seems to be that we can no longer take the *Tractatus* seriously – all this severe mental labor only to learn that it was a complete waste of time?³⁹

In his discussion of *reductio*-interpretations, Logi Gunnarsson elaborates this point.⁴⁰ On Black's account, we discover that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, but this affords no inference as to whether any other sentences are nonsensical, too – the *Tractatus* does not allow us to see *why* its sentences are nonsensical since, due to their nonsensicality, they cannot tell or teach us this. Black's difficulty is therefore that a sentence like *x/o* means nothing and can teach us nothing – except solely that it is illegitimate. In contrast,

that all numbers equal 0. Black gives credit to pp. 444f. of Ambrose 1959. Her use of the term "conversion-analysis" (as opposed to "actual analysis") also suggests a form of indirect proof. More recently, Kremer 2001 entertained the notion.

³⁸ Black 1964, pp. 382 and 386, see note 18 above, and Sullivan 2004, p. 38. Compare the following passage from Stenius 1960, pp. 224f.: "What is of lasting value in the *Tractatus* is not the philosophical system which is its alleged result, but the views proposed in the different steps of the argument 'leading' to it, that is, of the ladder which according to 6.54 is to be thrown away after one had climbed up on it . . . an essential aim of the philosophical activity in the *Tractatus* actually was to *make* philosophy aimless. The 'definitiveness' of the truth of the thoughts expressed in the book thus meant that Wittgenstein considered this aim to be reached."

³⁹ According to Black the accomplishment of the *Tractatus* consists in providing a quasi-mathematical proof of the impossibility of philosophizing about "the world." Brockhaus 1991, pp. 6 and 330f. appears to make a similar point: "seeing that we must fail constitutes a considerable philosophical victory which frees us forever from pseudo-ethical rhetoric." For Brockhaus, however, this victory signals an "ineffable solution" to a metaphysical problem. His is therefore a "vain attempt to have it both ways," or, to use Diamond's term, his interpretation serves as an example of "chickening out" (Diamond 1988, pp. 20ff.).

⁴⁰ Gunnarsson 2000, pp. 41f., 45.

Wittgenstein's sentences are to elucidate in spite of being nonsensical (*TLP* 4.112, 6.54). Indeed, their being nonsensical is not the first and only thing we learn from them. There is only one way in which they can teach us their nonsensicality, and that is by first teaching the workings and limits of language and logic. Before we can appreciate the illegitimacy of division by zero, we need to know how division and multiplication work. This is overlooked also by Cora Diamond's remark that we understand the *Tractatus* and its author when we understand where they go wrong.⁴¹ For how have we learned to recognize where they go wrong if not by reading the *Tractatus*? P. M. S. Hacker puts the question as follows:

The predicament is serious. It is not merely . . . that Wittgenstein deliberately saws off the branch upon which he is sitting, since if the account of the conditions of representation given in the book is correct, then the sentences of the book are mere pseudo-propositions. But rather, if that is so, then the account of the conditions of representation is itself nonsensical. And that seems a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very argument that led to the claim that the sentences of the book are one and all pseudo-propositions.⁴²

In order to get ourselves out of this predicament, what we need to understand is how – as opposed to *x/o* – Wittgenstein's sentences are nonsensical without being utterly self-defeating, nonsensical *and* instructive or elucidatory.

Cora Diamond and James Conant have taken on this rather more difficult task. Separately developed and formulated, their views so intimately reinforce one another that for our present purposes they can be taken to provide a unified interpretation. While it offers important cues for the account developed here, it fails to fully explore these cues and ends up with a rather narrow, curiously entangled view of Wittgenstein's philosophy. In particular, though it recommends an austere or resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, it attributes metaphysical doctrines precisely where Wittgenstein remains radically agnostic and antimetaphysical.⁴³

⁴¹ Diamond 2000, pp. 155f. ⁴² Hacker 2000, p. 356.

⁴³ Since their interpretation has proven to be enormously influential, the following discussion of Conant's and Diamond's views establishes a kind of undercurrent or countercurrent to my investigation. On various occasions I develop the similarities and differences further. See

The most notable point of contact with Conant and Diamond's interpretation is that they also construe the *Tractatus* as a *reductio*-argument of sorts. What are reduced to absurdity are not just the sentences of the *Tractatus* itself but also the reader's illusion that these sentences make sense. This illusion corresponds to the hypothesis in our reconstruction of the argument, though it renders this hypothesis rather differently.⁴⁴ Here is how James Conant summarizes the overall structure of the *Tractatus*:

The *Tractatus* aims to show that (as Wittgenstein later puts it) "I cannot use language to get outside language." It accomplishes this aim by first encouraging me to suppose that I can use language in such a way, and then enabling me to work through the (apparent) consequences of this (pseudo-)supposition, until I reach the point at which my impression of there being a determinate supposition (whose consequences I have throughout been exploring) dissolves on me . . . On this reading, first I grasp that there is something which *must* be; then I see that it cannot be said; then I grasp that if it can't be said it can't be thought (that the limits of language are the limits of thought); and then, finally, when I reach the top of the ladder, I grasp that there has been no "it" in my grasp all along (that that which I cannot think I cannot "grasp" either) . . . Thus the elucidatory strategy of the *Tractatus* depends on the reader's provisionally taking himself to be participating in the traditional philosophical activity of establishing theses through a procedure of reasoned argument; but it only succeeds if the reader fully comes to understand what the work means to say about itself when it says that philosophy, as this work seeks to practice it, results not in doctrine, but in elucidation, not in [philosophical sentences] but in [the becoming clear of sentences]. And the attainment of this recognition depends upon the reader's actually undergoing a certain *experience* – the attainment of which is identified in 6.54 as the sign that the reader has understood the author of the work: the reader's experience of having his illusion of sense (in the "premises" and "conclusions" of the "argument") dissipate through its becoming clear

the final section of the introduction above; chapter 4, notes 47 and 58; chapter 5, beginning of the first section, notes 5 and 86; the third section of the conclusion; and throughout.

⁴⁴ Like Black, Diamond and Conant leave us with a rather narrow vision of the *Tractatus*. Ultimately, the illusion we are to be cured of is that some nonsense is more substantial than other nonsense. Unlike the fundamental trust that all sense whatsoever is expressible in speech, theirs is not a widespread or dangerous illusion but confined to a small group of interpreters of Wittgenstein. Also, we learn that those and just those propositions are "nonsensical" that help advance us on Wittgenstein's ladder, namely the elucidatory propositions that are essential to philosophy. See Diamond 2000, p. 163f. and Conant 2000, pp. 196, 198, and 216.

to him that (what he took to be) the [philosophical sentences] of the work are [nonsense].⁴⁵

As described by Conant – and here is another important point of contact – the *reductio* does not consist in the establishment of a sentence or doctrinal conclusion but rather in the failure of an activity that leads to an experiential recognition:⁴⁶ under the spell of our illusion we attempt to give meaning or grasp a sense that keeps eluding us until we realize that it cannot be grasped. Conant and Diamond go a step further, of course, when they say that it cannot be grasped *because* there is nothing there that could be grasped in the first place: "I grasp that if it can't be said it can't be thought (that the limits of language are the limits of thought); and then, finally, when I reach the top of the ladder, I grasp that there has been no 'it' in my grasp all along (that that which I cannot think I cannot 'grasp' either)." This is the most contentious aspect of their proposal and it is here where they attribute too readily a substantial metaphysical doctrine to Wittgenstein.

Their interpretation relies heavily on two sentences of Wittgenstein's preface, on remarks 4.112, 4.113 to 4.116, 5.61, and also on the concluding remarks of the *Tractatus*. These (and perhaps some other remarks) they refer to as the "frame" of the work because they contain instructions to the reader which Diamond and Conant exempt from the verdict that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Conant 2000, pp. 196f. The bracketed terms are English translations where Conant uses the original German expressions. Compare Diamond 2000, pp. 159f.

⁴⁶ Chapter 5 will show in greater detail how significant it is that the *reductio*-argument is an activity.

⁴⁷ See Conant 2000, p. 216: "Question: *which* sentences are (to be recognized as) nonsensical? Answer: those that elucidate. 4.112 does not say 'A philosophical work consists *entirely* of elucidations.' It says 'A philosophical work consists *essentially* of elucidations.' Not every sentence of the work is (to be recognized as) nonsense. For not every sentence serves as an elucidation." Conant suggests that the elucidations will be recognized as nonsense while we learn that we cannot give sense to them. This would imply that we experience no such failure with sentences that are taken to belong to the nonelucidatory frame, for example, "the limits of language are the limits of thought." Logi Gunnarsson makes explicit the further consequence of Conant's view, namely that only in the frame of the *Tractatus*, in the instructions to the reader, are thoughts expressed (2000, pp. 51–53 and 103). See Williams's critical challenge (2004, p. 19) and the reply by Conant and Diamond 2004, pp. 57–62. Hacker 2000, p. 360 criticizes this approach as "methodologically inconsistent." The inconsistency is not that some sentences of the *Tractatus* are considered nonsensical elucidations and others not. Instead, the inconsistency is that Conant and Diamond take

However, if one takes the sentences of natural science as a paradigm of meaningful sentences (as in *TLP* 4.11, for example) and the elucidations of the *Tractatus* as paradigms of nonsense, it is hard to comprehend how we can grasp successfully the sense of the following passage that belongs to the frame and figures prominently in Diamond and Conant's interpretation:

The book will therefore draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts: For, in order to draw a limit to thinking, we would have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we would have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

Therefore the limit can only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense. (*TLP*, preface)

Assuming for now that this passage makes sense (or that nonsensical sentences can be interpreted), how are we to understand it? While it agrees rather precisely with the interpretation developed earlier in this and in later chapters, it does not support Diamond and Conant's interpretation. The passage does not assert what they take it to signify, namely (i) that the limits of language are the limits of thought, (ii) that what is simply nonsense cannot reach for, gesture, allude to something that is inexpressible in speech, and, therefore, (iii) that there is only one kind of nonsense, namely "plain nonsense".⁴⁸

great pain (see below) to show how one fails to grasp anything at all in certain uses of the term "object," while they take the sentences of the frame to be unproblematic, indeed, to authorize profound metaphysical commitments. The present proposal attempts to treat all the sentences of the *Tractatus* on a par while showing how these (literally) nonsensical sentences manage to elucidate.

⁴⁸ Instead of translating "will simply be nonsense" Conant and Diamond insist on "will be plain nonsense," which underscores their contention that one should not distinguish between kinds of nonsense (mere nonsense and a profound nonsense that gestures at the ineffable). As a rule for interpretation (difficult enough to satisfy even for Conant and Diamond themselves), their contention is warranted. However, it cannot be justified in reference to this passage of Wittgenstein's preface. Instead of emphasizing – as Conant and Diamond assume – that beyond the limit in language lies "einfacher Unsinn (simple or plain nonsense)," Wittgenstein here uses "einfach (simply)" as a procedural term that characterizes his strategy: once the conditions are specified that make sentences meaningful, whatever fails to meet them is simply or automatically nonsense ("was jenseits der Grenze liegt, wird einfach Unsinn sein"). Or, once certain attempts to express something in speech produce a contradiction and thereby come up against the limits of language, the recognition follows simply or automatically that such attempts can produce nothing but nonsense. To translate "will be plain nonsense" would require an adverbial construction that ordinarily occurs only as an exclamation in the present tense "das ist doch einfach Unsinn!" as in, "that's just nonsense!" (Incidentally, in *Pf* 119 Wittgenstein does speak of "plain nonsense," namely "schlichter Unsinn.")

The preface states that the primary value of the *Tractatus* is that in it thoughts are expressed, thoughts that will be understood perhaps only by those who have already thought them themselves.⁴⁹ Judging from this context alone, the quoted passage claims only the following: (i) one cannot draw a limit to thought; however, (ii), one can draw limits to the expression of thought; (iii) one such limit will be drawn in the *Tractatus*, namely the limit to expression in speech; and (iv) once it is drawn, other speech that lies beyond this limit is simply nonsense. In this passage Wittgenstein sets up an instructive and programmatic contrast. As opposed to an envisioned limit of thought beyond which there is no thinking, one *can* speak on both sides of the limit of language, namely sense on this side, nonsense on the other. (Indeed, we might take this passage to suggest that in order to draw a limit to the expression of thought, Wittgenstein will have to speak on both sides of this limit, that is, speak nonsensically with sentences that cannot express thoughts – but in the course of doing so he will, by way of a *reductio*-argument, manage to express thoughts concerning the limits of language.)

Taken by itself, this passage contradicts Conant's strong interpretive claim "that the limits of language are the limits of thought," which prepares for the next rung of the ladder, namely "that that which I cannot think I cannot 'grasp' either." Conant could object by pointing out that in the body of the *Tractatus* (3 to 3.01, 3.2, 4.01, perhaps 5.61)⁵⁰ and in associated texts Wittgenstein does appear to equate the

⁴⁹ That is, the preface begins and ends with comments about the thoughts that are expressed in the *Tractatus*. It states that one cannot draw a limit to thought. This makes very puzzling, indeed, the interpretations proposed by James Conant or Logi Gunnarsson. The latter writes, for example: "The *Tractatus* aims to draw a limit to the expression of thought; beyond that limit there are no thoughts" (2000, pp. 59f.). Surely, the second part of his remark is not implied by the first – the first part states only that beyond that particular limit there is no expression of thought in speech.

⁵⁰ Less circumspect than Conant, Logi Gunnarsson claims explicitly that *TLP* 4.114 and 4.115 "seem to repeat" the passage of the preface: "[Philosophy] is supposed to limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable. It is supposed to delimit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable. It will indicate the unsayable by clearly presenting the sayable." Gunnarsson goes on to suggest that the shared meaning of these passages is that "nothing counts as a thought when it cannot be said" and then refers the reader for further support to 5.61: "Therefore we cannot say in logic: This and that is in the world, but not that. [For that would require that] logic must get outside the limits of the world . . . What we cannot think, that we cannot think; we therefore cannot say either what we cannot think" (2000, pp. 51 and 101f.). Gunnarsson's comments disagree with the statement of the preface that one cannot

limits of language with the limits of thought, after all.⁵¹ However, the required reconciliation undermines his all-important distinction between a meaningful "frame" and the nonsensical elucidations in the main body of the text. Also, it is telling that Conant would resolve the issue toward the strong claim that the limits of language are the limits of thought. He could have adopted a weaker interpretation: at best, the tension between Wittgenstein's various statements about limits of thought and language testifies to his critical agnosticism, and at worst it indicates an unresolved ambiguity in his use of the term "thought." Either way, Wittgenstein does not on this weaker interpretation pretend to deliver in the *Tractatus* a metaphysical theory of mind.⁵²

draw a limit to thought. They also disagree with 5.61, which implies only that logic cannot draw a limit to thought, that thought has to take care of itself – what can be thought, can be thought, and what cannot be thought, cannot be thought and cannot be said either.

⁵¹ In a letter to Russell, for example, Wittgenstein writes: "The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (*gesagt*) by sentences – i.e. by language – (and which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by sentences but only shown (*gezeigt*); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy" (*CL*, p. 124, see also 125). And in the *Notebooks* we find an entry dated December 9, 1916: "Now it is becoming clear why I thought that thinking and language were the same. For thinking is a kind of language. For a thought is, of course, *also* a logical picture of the sentence, and therefore it just is a kind of sentence." But note the ambiguities in this entry (he once *thought* that thinking and language were the same; the thought is *also* but perhaps not only a logical picture) and see the conflicting entries of October 5 and December 8, 1914.

⁵² Here is my proposal of how to resolve this tension. Wittgenstein uses the preface to orient the reader toward the expression of thought in speech. As he enters the body of the text he thus leaves behind the more general question whether or not something is a thought only if it can be expressed. He does hold on to the intuition, however, that if a thought is not expressed clearly, it remains in effect unexpressed. While this intuition holds for musical thought as well as for propositional thought about the world, *TLP* 3 introduces "thought" as it is to be used for the present purposes (namely to determine the limits of expressibility in speech): "The logical picture of the facts is the thought." This curious expression falls short of a general definition of what thoughts are (Wittgenstein does not write: "Thoughts are logical pictures of the facts"). However, he also does not restrict the statement to a subset of "thoughts" by writing "Logical pictures of facts are thoughts (and other things may be thoughts, too)." One reason for the peculiar construction may be found in the history of its composition. In the *Prototractatus* (p. 3 of the facsimile) he changed "The logical picture of the facts is the sentence" into "is the thought." Another reason for exhibiting so peculiarly "is the thought (*ist der Gedanke*)" may have been that this alludes to Frege. Indeed, the two passages quoted in the preceding note suggest that, as opposed to the preface, a far more specific notion of "thought" is operative in them, namely Frege's nonpsychological representation of representations. Thought thus stands in a particular relation to the world, like a sentence it "says" something about it, and whatever can merely be shown has nothing corresponding to it in thought. As a representation of a representation, thought is "expressed" only by becoming "perceptible to the senses" (*TLP* 3.1, 3.2) in an actually produced sentence.

It was already suggested that a similar criticism applies to the next and last rung of Wittgenstein's ladder. According to Conant, we realize here that that which we cannot think we cannot grasp either, that is, that there never was an "it" that we meant to express but failed to. In this instance, Conant and Diamond, along with their critic Hacker overstep critical bounds. Conant and Diamond maintain that the *Tractatus* undermines the illusion of ineffable truths that can only be shown. The mandate of silence in *TLP* 7 is therefore a "symptom of philosophical discourse," that is, a silence signifying nothing but emptiness.⁵³ In contrast, Hacker maintains that this silence can be pregnant with meaning regarding the essence of the world and the nature of the sublime.⁵⁴ We have seen that Wittgenstein's "There is indeed the inexpressible in speech" (*TLP* 6.522) artfully skirts existential import and therefore leaves these metaphysical options open: whether or not there is something to be silent about is precisely what lies beyond the limits of language and knowledge.

Diamond and Conant are right that all nonsense involves the same failure, namely that of "giving no meaning to certain signs of the sentence" (*TLP* 6.53). If nonsense can show anything at all, it surely shows no facts, no features or aspects of the world, or anything that can be described. But this does not mean, as James Conant maintains, that it cannot show anything at all. In his criticism of their work, Hacker provides a long list of what the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* purport to show (and chapter 5 below will adduce arguments of its own).⁵⁵ Diamond and Conant exclude this possibility in order

An expressed thought just *is* the meaningful sentence (*TLP* 4) just as it *is* a logical picture of the facts. In contrast, the preface asks what – of all the things that occur in our minds, that is: thoughts – can find adequate expression in speech. On my interpretation, just as Wittgenstein shifts from a generic, unspecifiable "any sense whatsoever" to "sense expressible in two-dimensional script" (also in *TLP* 4.002, of course), so he shifts from a generic and unspecifiable thought (which may include musical, propositional, evaluative, desirous thought) to a restricted notion of nonpsychological, propositional, representational thought. Wittgenstein later remarks: "'Thought' sometimes means a particular mental process which may accompany the utterance of a sentence and sometimes the sentence itself in the system of language" (*PG*, part I, I, 13; cf. *PI* remarks 339–342).

⁵³ See Conant 1992, p. 216. ⁵⁴ See Hacker 2000, p. 382.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 353–355. To be sure, Hacker also maintains that "Wittgenstein's own propositions . . . are, by the lights of the *Tractatus*, nonsensical pseudo-propositions. They show nothing at all" (p. 356). A few pages later, he writes: "But one may, the author of the *Tractatus* thought, deliberately and self-consciously flout the rules of logical syntax [that is, talk nonsense] with the intention of bringing one's readers to apprehend something that cannot be said but

to defend their austere conception of only one kind of nonsense. As we have seen, through this exclusion they inadvertently take on less than austere metaphysical commitments. A final example will show that this pertains not only to matters beyond the stated scope of the *Tractatus*, namely the relation of thought to language and what there is to be silent about. It also pertains to questions at the heart of the *Tractatus*. Indeed, it was for these questions that Cora Diamond first developed her interpretation.⁵⁶

Diamond, Conant, and their critic Hacker agree that Wittgenstein holds that "one cannot, for example, say 'There are objects' as one says 'There are books'" (*TLP* 4.1272). They agree, moreover, that ordinarily it would be plain nonsense to say "There are objects." They even appear to agree why this is so, namely that this is a misuse of language which mistakes formal concepts for names – as if the word "object" had in this context an object to which it refers. This misuse amounts to a failure to give meaning: we would be hard-pressed to specify what "object" refers to, what state of affairs is pictured by "there are objects" and what would make this statement true or false. Their disagreement arises in a rather peculiar manner, namely in that Hacker liberally assumes that there are objects, or at least that there is nothing in Wittgenstein's argument about sense and nonsense which precludes their existence. It is just *that there are objects* cannot be expressed by the statement "there are objects." Instead, it is expressed by perfectly sensible sentences such as "The gloves are

is shown" (p. 367). While the first of these statements refers as it were to Wittgenstein's doctrine (to the verbal provisions of the *Tractatus*), the second refers to his philosophical practice. While this distinction between doctrine and practice renders Hacker's interpretation consistent, his interpretation of the *Tractatus* claims no consistency for Wittgenstein: "It is a mistake of Diamond to suppose that the *Tractatus* is a self-consistent work" (p. 370). That Conant and Diamond (and I) make this supposition and that Hacker does not make it marks a decisive difference between hermeneutic strategies. Like any (philosophical) text, the *Tractatus* becomes fruitful and challenging precisely in that it demands of its readers to render it self-consistent. For the same reason, however, I agree with Hacker that it is "hermeneutically unsound" to interpret the *Tractatus* in isolation (as Conant and Diamond do) and to leave this interpretation inconsistent with other documents pertaining to the creation of the *Tractatus* (Hacker 2000, p. 371). The most interesting defense of the notion that the *Tractatus* is not self-consistent but tolerates paradox was provided by Williams 2004, p. 27. On this interpretation, the *Tractatus* becomes a *reductio*-argument only when viewed from the point of view of *PI*.

⁵⁶ Diamond 1991 characterizes the procedure of the *Tractatus* as follows: it proposes statements like "A is an object," then strips them of any meaning that one might conceivably assign to them, and thus shows that there cannot be a science of logic.

in the box" as well as by perfectly nonsensical (pseudo-)sentences such as "These keys are the cousins of the cook."⁵⁷ Hacker finds the liberal acknowledgment of objects also in remarks by Wittgenstein, for example: "The formal concept ['object'] is already given with the object[!] which falls under it" (*TLP* 4.12721). Indeed, Wittgenstein's injunction to silence is philosophically *more* significant rather than *less* so once we allow that, of course, *there are objects* except to say so is to say nothing at all.

Conant questions this liberality: "Hacker is untroubled by the lack of difficulty he encounters in telling us *what* it is that cannot be said."⁵⁸ Of course one should not and cannot be untroubled by this, but one needs to explore how the statement "there are objects" retains its semblance of intelligibility even after we discover that it neither says nor shows anything except our failure to express something with it. Our lack of difficulty in speaking of what cannot be said is a curious fact, indeed. However, Conant's treatment cuts us off even from raising this question.

Imagine someone saying "Electromagnetic fields are objects" or "Reality is no figment of the imagination since there are objects other than myself." Imagine further that she is subsequently pressed by the questioner envisioned by Wittgenstein in *TLP* 6.53. This questioner says nothing having to do with philosophy, but merely wants to know from the speaker whether she has given meaning to all the signs in her sentence, in particular to the word "object." Under pressure from the questioner, she will ultimately come to a point of exasperation that is captured by Conant: "Just forget about the logical rôle that the term appears to have in my use of it, damn it all! What I mean to refer to is just *that* which is represented by a variable [such as the term 'object'] and don't begrudge me the requisite pinch of salt!" Conant shrewdly exposes the inadequacy of this strenuous, desperate effort to consider an idea in the mind as a representation of something in the world, in other words, to reach out with a concept in the hope

⁵⁷ See Hacker 2000, p. 363: as opposed to A's being in the box, "we do not take A's being an object to be something that is the case and might not be the case, we take it as something that could not be otherwise. And of course that is *one* reason why Wittgenstein does not think that these sentences express genuine propositions: they do not satisfy the essential requirement on a proposition with a sense, namely bipolarity. They attempt to say something that cannot be said."

⁵⁸ For this and the following, see Conant 2000, pp. 206–208.

of touching reality. "What is the reference of 'that' here?" Conant asks, and continues: "Can a sufficiently emphatic use of the word 'that' reach all the way to the '—which is expressed by a variable'?" Conant denies this and points out that one would miss the point of the *Tractatus* by thinking "that meaning can thus be conferred on an expression through a psychological act" of intending something or projecting an inner feeling of sense.⁵⁹

Indeed, any such attempt at conferring meaning must fail: only those sentences have sense that represent a state of affairs. Sentences can express facts only and no effort of the will can squeeze a feeling or an idea into a meaningful sentence (other than by substituting for them a representation of objects and events). The fundamental trust that any sense whatsoever can be expressed in a sentence thus runs up against the limits of language. But is this to say that there was nothing at stake in this failure, that there was no intention or feeling of inner sense that we did not manage to express? And after experiencing this failure, must we clean house among our feelings, ideas, values to make sure that we never find ourselves in the position of intending to express them again? Conant suggests just that.⁶⁰ According to him, the ultimate aim of the *Tractatus* is to lead us "to the point where our conviction that we understand what a sentence such as 'A is an object' is even attempting to say completely dissolves on us (and all we are left with is a string of words in which we are no longer able to discern even an abortive attempt to mean something)."

This formulation of Wittgenstein's ultimate aim mistakes austerity for severity. According to a more modest statement of its aim, the *Tractatus* prevents us from doing something inappropriate. It teaches us to be aware that some of the things that occur to us cannot be adequately expressed in language, that at best they become distorted in the attempt and therefore better remain unspoken. To be sure, our inability to articulate them and to take them for a representation of any kind, renders their status highly questionable. But that may

⁵⁹ Note that Conant learned this point of the *Tractatus* not from the frame but from the body of the work.

⁶⁰ To be sure, this is how Conant would consider Wittgenstein's injunction to silence to be philosophically *more* significant rather than less so. It silences also the pretensions of the mind according to which there is more to it than what it can express in speech. On Conant's interpretation of Wittgenstein, there is nothing to the mind and certainly no thought that exists independently of what is expressible in speech.

be all there is to the matter – any more definite verdict regarding the existence or nonexistence of what we had been trying to express would transgress the limits of knowledge and language.

Given Diamond and Conant's interpretation of 6.54, it is odd that they would adopt such a more restrictive, severe, and, indeed, substantial stance.⁶¹ They emphasize Wittgenstein's remark in 6.54 that "anyone who understands *me* eventually recognizes *them* [my sentences] as nonsensical." On Diamond and Conant's reading, Wittgenstein's sentences are plainly nonsensical and therefore cannot be understood at all. Even the sentences that elucidate or expose the illusion of an intelligible philosophical argument are such incomprehensible nonsense. Though we cannot understand any of his sentences, Conant and Diamond pick up on Wittgenstein's suggestion that we can nevertheless understand their author.⁶² They only begin to explore, however, what it means to understand the author as a person and how this can be done without understanding the sentences that were produced by him.⁶³ But even their suggestion of this possibility offers yet another important cue for the present investigation: an understanding of the author of the *Tractatus* involves the discernment of character, personality, intentions, and perhaps of values, feelings, and convictions. That is, in order to understand the author one must discern some kind of sense that Wittgenstein manages to express in or through the *Tractatus*, even if he does not do so in the particular sentences of which it is composed. Hereby, Diamond and Conant implicitly attribute to Wittgenstein a distinction between two kinds

⁶¹ They acknowledge as much in Conant and Diamond 2004, p. 93. As opposed to Williams 2004, I do not accuse Conant and Diamond of assuming that there are certain logical conditions on legitimate sentence construction (Conant and Diamond 2004, p. 58). On the contrary, I suggest that their restraint in this regard amounts to throwing the baby out with the bathwater: Conant and Diamond make metaphysical commitments by insisting too adamantly on the impossibility of stating conditions of grammaticality, of identifying limits of sense, of contrasting assignments of meaning in descriptive and expressive modes of speech.

⁶² See Diamond 2000, pp. 155f., Conant 2000, p. 198.

⁶³ The urgency of this matter is amplified by Gunnarsson 2000, p. 101: "To understand the book (or its author) is not the same as understanding the sentences in the book. They are nonsense and cannot be understood." Since Conant and Diamond both exempt certain sentences of Wittgenstein's from the charge of nonsensicality (they are not elucidatory but set the frame), they might argue that one can learn to understand the author from the frame he devised and expressed intelligibly. As we have seen, rather than save Wittgenstein by rendering his view self-consistent, this suggestion diminishes the scope of his critical philosophy.

of sense: the sense of a sentence (its truth-conditions) and whatever is encompassed by the broader notion of "any sense whatsoever." When Conant writes that the *Tractatus* takes us to the point where "all we are left with is a string of words in which we are no longer able to discern even an abortive attempt to mean something," this still allows that we can understand the author of this string of words and that, for example, we may discern in it Wittgenstein's abortive attempt to express himself. The failure to express oneself in speech is a failure of someone who wishes to accomplish something – and such a failure does not make this someone or something go away.⁶⁴

Everyone can, therefore, agree that "there are no different *senses* of the word 'nonsense.' Nor are there *kinds* of nonsense — nonsense no more comes in kinds than it comes in degrees." However, Hacker and the present investigation part company from Diamond and Conant by continuing as follows:

But the nonsense of the pseudo-propositions of philosophy, in particular of the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, differs from the nonsense of "A is a frabble," for it is held to be an *attempt to say what cannot be said but only shown*. In this sense it can be said to be "illuminating nonsense." It is the motive behind it and the means chosen for the objective (e.g. the illegitimate use of formal concepts) that earmarks the nonsense of the *Tractatus*.⁶⁵

A trivial example can bring this discussion to a close. Even after Max Black's *reductio*-argument, I still understand "division by zero"

⁶⁴ This insistence that failure does not extinguish motive is a far cry from a substantial interpretation according to which failure teaches us precisely what we have been looking for. See Fann 1969, p. 38: "although the 'question' of the meaning of life is strictly speaking not a question, the *process* of raising the question, trying to answer it and finally realizing the non-sensicality of the question *shows* the meaning of life to the one who has gone through the process. He is better off for it, the sense of life becomes clear to him." This is what Conant and Diamond rightly criticize as an "irresolute" ineffability-interpretation that wants to have it both ways. Here is another example of such an interpretation: "The ascent over the ladder alludes to the mystical ascent; the world that one sees from the height of this ascent, is the world seen from outside the world (*ekstasis*); and the throwing away of the ladder and transcending of the propositions establishes the function of the *Tractatus* as a *via negativa*" (Nieli 1987, p. 118).

⁶⁵ Hacker 2000, p. 365. Conant and Diamond recognize and reject Hacker's distinction as a psychological one. Conant writes that "the *Tractatus* is not concerned to argue that there are *no* ways to distinguish between kinds of nonsense . . . but only that there are *no logically* distinct kinds of nonsense" (2000, p. 209). According to Conant, the point of the *Tractatus* is that logic teaches a lesson to psychology, namely that the psychological distinction evaporates. Compare Conant 2000, p. 196 and the somewhat different take in Diamond 2000, p. 161.

in a rather peculiar way even though I cannot find it intelligible. I may ask myself, for example, "Why is it again that there cannot be division by zero?" Answering my own question, I remind myself by rehearsing Black's argument: "Ah yes, if I allowed division by zero and placed different numbers in the numerator, each of these different numbers would equal 0 and this is a patently absurd consequence." Like any activity, the instructive failures that are rehearsed by the *Tractatus* have a definite temporal structure and can be repeated any number of times (as Wittgenstein suggests in *TLP* 6.53). The "somethings" that are to be expressed remain a pawn in the game; they can and perhaps need to be conjured up again and again: "In philosophy we are deceived by an illusion. But this illusion is also something, and I must at some time place it completely and clearly[!] before my eyes, before I can say it is only an illusion."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ MS 110, p. 239, quoted (from Stern 1995) by Conant 2000, p. 197. In the manuscript Wittgenstein changed "But this illusion" into "But an illusion."