

## “Russell’s Merit”<sup>1</sup>

“It is a great thing to find a puzzle; because so long as it is puzzling, one knows one has not got to the bottom of things.”

Bertrand Russell to Lucy Donnelly, June 13, 1905

### I. Russell’s merit – the obvious interpretation

In the preface to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein, never a great one for acknowledging his intellectual debts, writes (27-29)<sup>2</sup>:

... what I have here written makes no claims to novelty in points of detail; and therefore I give no sources, because it is indifferent to me whether what I have thought has already been thought by another. I will only mention that to the great works of Frege and the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell I owe in large measure the stimulation of my thoughts.

References to Frege and Russell are scattered throughout the work, but one stands out for the praise awarded to the latter in connection with some of the central themes of the

*Tractatus*:

4.0031 All philosophy is “Critique of language” (but not at all in Mauthner’s sense). Russell’s merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form.

This paper concerns the proper understanding of “Russell’s merit” – what did Wittgenstein take Russell to have shown, and why was this lesson of such crucial philosophical importance?

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I dedicate this paper to the memory of my beloved wife, Angela Gugliotta, who passed away on June 1, 2010. Angela was in the audience when I presented the paper in London, and I still remember the smile and embrace she gave me at the end.

<sup>2</sup> References to the main text of the *Tractatus* are by numbered proposition; references to the Preface (as here) by page number in the Ogden/Ramsey translation. Generally I will cite from the Ogden/Ramsey translation, with occasional modifications drawn from the Pears/McGuinness translation.

There is an “obvious” interpretation of Wittgenstein’s remark about Russell’s merit, which I daresay has been advanced by almost everyone writing on this topic. According to this interpretation, Wittgenstein is referring to Russell’s theory of descriptions, first introduced in “On Denoting.” We are to understand his remarks primarily in connection with a theme introduced just two paragraphs earlier, in 4.002:

Language disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot infer the form of the thought they clothe, because the external form of the clothes is constructed with quite another object than to let the form of the body be recognized.

As early as 1913, Wittgenstein praised Russell’s theory of descriptions as “quite CERTAINLY correct.”(*Cambridge Letters*, 61.) The theory of descriptions, so the story goes, introduced to Wittgenstein the crucial distinction between the surface, or grammatical form of a proposition, and its real, logical form. For example, the proposition “The present king of France is bald” appears to be of simple, subject-predicate form, comparable to “Nuel Belnap is bald.” Russell’s analysis shows, however, that while the second sentence has a simple logical form that can be represented in a proper logical symbolism as

*Bn*

the first has a quite distinct logical form, namely

$(\exists x)((y)(Ky \equiv y=x) \bullet Bx)^3$

in which “the present king of France is bald” is exhibited as an “incomplete symbol,” corresponding to no single part of the true logical form of the proposition.

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<sup>3</sup> Although this sentence makes use of the identity sign, which Wittgenstein tells us can be dispensed with in a proper logical notation, there is nothing wrong with the sentence from Wittgenstein’s point of view. It can be reformulated using exclusive variables, as recommended by Wittgenstein, as follows:  $(\exists x)(Kx \bullet (y)\sim Ky \bullet Bx)$ .

Thus, in showing how a logical notation can reveal the true logical form of a proposition, Russell contributed to the project of clarification announced in 4.112:

The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.  
Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.  
A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.  
The result of philosophy is not a number of “philosophical propositions”,  
but to make propositions clear.  
Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which  
otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred.

This interpretation of “Russell’s merit” is virtually taken for granted in the secondary literature. It finds expression in Schulte and McGuinness’s citation of the following text from *Notes on Logic* as a precursor to 4.0031: “Distrust of grammar is the first requisite for philosophizing.” (*Kritische Edition*, 41.) In the *Notes on Logic*, that sentence is almost immediately followed by “Philosophy is the doctrine of the logical form of scientific propositions (not only of primitive propositions),” which is easy to see as an early version of 4.112. (*Notebooks*, 106.)

Nonetheless, while this interpretation has been taken to be obvious by many astute readers of the *Tractatus*, I will argue (surprise!) that it is mistaken. Showing this, moreover, will not be a matter of merely correcting the reading of one minor comment in the *Tractatus*; it will shed light both on Wittgenstein’s own philosophy, and on what he thought he had learned from his friend and teacher, Russell.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The interpretation developed in the main text below agrees with the “obvious” interpretation in taking Wittgenstein to be referring to Russell’s theory of definite descriptions. However, Wittgenstein was also deeply influenced by the broader Russellian notion of an “incomplete symbol,” and especially by Russell’s analysis of terms for classes as incomplete symbols. This contextual definition of classes achieved an ontological economy greater than that permitted by the theory of descriptions. Russell analyzed any simple predication with a definite description as subject into a sentence entailing the existence of something satisfying the description. But a simple predication with a class term as subject is analyzed by Russell into a sentence which quantifies only over individuals and propositional functions, and entails the existence of no classes. There is evidence that Wittgenstein wanted to use this analysis as a model for an analysis of terms for complexes as incomplete symbols, presumably resulting in a similar ontological economy. (See *Tractatus* 2.0201, 3.24.) In the 1914-16 *Notebooks*, he scrawled versions of Russell’s analysis of classes at

## II. Problems with the obvious interpretation

The “obvious” interpretation faces three main difficulties, which will provide criteria of adequacy for the alternative interpretation that I will develop in this paper. First, the interpretation does not really explain why *Russell* is credited with “Russell’s merit,” as opposed to Frege (among others).<sup>5</sup> Second, the interpretation links 4.0031 to 4.002, but only by leap-frogging over 4.003, to which, according to the numbering scheme of the *Tractatus*, 4.003 is appended as a comment. Third, the interpretation does not make clear in what way Russell has really contributed to the idea of a *critique* of language, as 4.0031 suggests. I now take these up in turn.

### A. Why not Frege?

Gregory Landini, in his recent study of *Wittgenstein’s Apprenticeship with Russell*, remarks of Wittgenstein’s praise of Russell’s merit (227):

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several places. (Anscombe omitted them, along with various other “passages of symbolism,” from the first edition of the *Notebooks* on the grounds that “nothing could be made of them,” but included photocopies of the relevant extracts at the end of the second edition. (*Notebooks*, 1, 133ff.)) Wittgenstein’s experiments with Russell’s theory of classes at times occur cheek-by-jowl with ruminations on the analysis of complexes. For example, the entry for 5.9.14 begins with a formula “ $\varphi(a).\varphi(b).aRb = \text{Def } \varphi[aRb]$ ,” commonly taken as an attempt at a contextual analysis of the complex-term “aRb” (“a in relation R to b”). (*Notebooks*, 4.) This is followed immediately by two formulas, the second of which ( $\Phi(\hat{z} \psi z) = \text{Def. } \varphi x \equiv_x \psi x \supset_{\varphi} \Phi\varphi$ ) is a version of Russell’s analysis of class terms. (*Notebooks*, 133.) After some discussion of class identity, Wittgenstein turns in the entry for 7.9.14 to the general problem of analyzable and unanalyzable subject-predicate sentences. At the end of this entry he again writes a version of the contextual analysis of classes:

$$a \in \hat{z} (\varphi z) = \text{Def. } \varphi x \equiv_x \psi x \supset. a \in \varphi.$$

Such examples show the importance of the analysis of classes for Wittgenstein.

I believe that similar points to those developed in this paper for the theory of descriptions can be made for Russell’s use of the theory of classes to unmask such philosophical puzzles as that of “the one and the many,” the status of the axiom of infinity, and the Russell paradox, as ultimately depending on a “confusion of types.” (*Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 135.) Matters are made more complex, however, by the fact that Wittgenstein criticizes Russell’s explanation of this fundamental form of logical confusion as itself embodying similar confusions in a more subtle form. (3.331-3.333) I therefore set aside discussion of these matters for possible future work. Useful discussions can be found in Ishiguro, “Wittgenstein and the Theory of Types,” and Jolley, *The Concept ‘Horse’ Paradox*, chapter three.

<sup>5</sup> Cora Diamond makes this point in her “Throwing Away the Ladder” (186-7). However, her response to this question, while illuminating in important ways, presupposes a “standard” reading of 4.0031 and hence leaves dangling the next two questions. My own response to those questions is nonetheless deeply indebted to her work.

Structure is central to logical form and logical analysis. Wittgenstein held that “It was Russell who performed the service of showing that the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its real one” (TLP 4.0031). This overreaches. The notion is also found in Frege’s analysis of cardinal number and in the work of many others. Russell’s 1905 theory of descriptions simply offered a new tool for research. It was certainly an important tool. Ramsey aptly described the theory of definite descriptions as “a paradigm of philosophy.”

Landini here presupposes the “obvious” interpretation of “Russell’s merit” and points out, quite correctly, that on this interpretation Russell’s special contribution has been exaggerated.<sup>6</sup> Frege certainly had already made clear the point that sentences with similar grammatical form might have radically different logical forms. In §3 of his *Begriffsschrift*, Frege rejected the distinction between subject and predicate as irrelevant to logic (*Conceptual Notation*, 112):

A distinction between *subject* and *predicate* does not occur in my way of representing a judgment. ...here the only thing considered in a judgment is that which influences its *possible consequences*. Everything necessary for correct inference is fully expressed; but what is not necessary usually is not indicated; *nothing is left to guessing*. ... In my first draft of a formula language, I was misled by the example of language into forming judgments by combining subject and predicate. I soon became convinced, however, that this was an obstacle to my special goal and led only to useless prolixity.

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<sup>6</sup> An anonymous referee suggests that while Landini follows the “obvious” reading of 4.0031, nonetheless, Landini’s main argument, “that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* had taken up Russell’s methodology but pushed it farther than Russell himself had,” comports with my interpretation of 4.0031. However, there are important differences between my understanding of Russell’s influence on Wittgenstein and Landini’s, some of which are highlighted in Peter Sullivan’s recent review of Landini’s book. First, Landini tends to read everything in the *Tractatus* as reflecting Russell’s influence, even explaining Wittgenstein’s remarks on ethics and the mystical in this fashion. (*Wittgenstein’s Apprenticeship*, 94-100; Sullivan, 101). In contrast, I have written extensively elsewhere of Frege’s influence on the *Tractatus* (“Contextualism and Holism”) and have appealed to authors like Tolstoy and Angelus Silesius to elucidate Wittgenstein’s views on ethics and the mystical (“To What Extent is Solipsism a Truth?”). Second, Landini takes a negative view of the *Tractatus*’s ambition and accomplishment – as Sullivan puts it, “Wittgenstein’s ideas in the *Tractatus* can be divided into two kinds. The first are the ideas he took over from Russell. The second are the empty posturings of an ambitious but incompetent student.” (Sullivan, 101) In contrast, I have a more positive assessment of Wittgenstein’s early work, which is not to say that I hold it to be beyond criticism. Finally, Landini dismisses “therapeutic” readings of the *Tractatus* (*Wittgenstein’s Apprenticeship*, 1-3, 103-106), whereas I have defended such readings at length (“The Purpose of *Tractarian* Nonsense,” “The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy”), and in the present paper argue that Wittgenstein’s *therapeutic* method in the *Tractatus* builds on aspects of *Russell’s* philosophical achievement.

Frege rejected the idea that “Nuel Belnap is bald” and “Philosophers are bald” have, in any interesting sense, similar (subject-predicate) logical form. He showed (§12) how to represent “All  $X$ ’s are  $P$ ’s,” “No  $X$ ’s are  $P$ ’s,” and “Some  $X$ ’s are  $P$ ’s” as (in Russell’s notation) “ $(x)(Xx \supset Px)$ ,” “ $(x)(Xx \supset \sim Px)$ ,” and “ $\sim(x)(Xx \supset \sim Px)$ ” respectively. He insisted on distinguishing sharply between subsumption of an object under a concept, and subordination of one concept under another. Thus he would represent “Nuel Belnap is bald” as a case of subsumption,

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while representing “All philosophers are bald” as a case of subordination,

$(x)(Px \supset Bx)$ .

Frege provided exactly the same analyses of the “denoting phrases” “a man,” “some man,” “any man,” “every man,” “all men,” and “no men” as did Russell twenty-six years later in “On Denoting.” Frege also anticipated Russell’s doctrine of incomplete symbols, writing (§9 – *Conceptual Notation*, 128):

...“the number 20” and “every positive integer” are not concepts of the same rank. ... The expression “every positive integer” by itself, unlike “the number 20”, yields no independent idea; it acquires a sense only in the context of a sentence.

From this point of view, the only thing Russell added to Frege’s pioneering logical analyses was the specific move of treating definite descriptions in the same way Frege had already showed how to treat other denoting phrases.

Hence, on the “obvious” interpretation, Wittgenstein exaggerated “Russell’s merit” at the expense of the earlier claim of the “great works of Frege.” This provides a

first criterion for a better interpretation of 4.0031: we need to isolate a particular merit due to Russell, rather than any of his predecessors.

### **B. What is the connection to nonsense?**

A further difficulty with the “obvious” interpretation of Russell’s merit involves the placement of the key remark 4.0031 in the text. The “obvious” interpretation ties Russell’s merit to 4.002 and the project of uncovering the “true form” of the thought hidden under the “external form” of the “clothing” of language. However, according to the numbering system of the *Tractatus*, 4.0031 is a comment not on 4.002, but on the intervening remark 4.003:

Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical [*unsinnig*]. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their nonsensicality. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language.

(They are of the same kind as the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful.)

And so it is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really *no* problems.

Wittgenstein states here one of the fundamental themes of the *Tractatus*. In the Preface, he makes the claim to have “finally” solved the “problems of philosophy” “in essentials” by showing “that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language.” In 4.003 he reiterates this diagnosis of the problems of philosophy, and concludes that they are not really problems at all. (He also parenthetically provides a striking, not to say bizarre, example of such a problem, to which we shall return below.) However, on the “obvious” interpretation, it is completely unclear what Russell’s merit has to do with the nonsensicality of philosophical propositions. This provides a second criterion of adequacy on our interpretation of

“Russell’s merit” – the link to the discussion of philosophical nonsense in 4.003 must be made clear.

### C. Why “Critique of language”?

Finally, the “obvious” interpretation of Russell’s merit does not adequately explain the way in which the two parts of 4.0031 are connected. 4.0031 begins by proclaiming that “All philosophy is ‘Critique of language’” and then moves directly to the value of Russell’s having shown “that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form.” The obvious interpretation understands Russell as having contributed an important tool to be used in a project of clarification of the propositions that are expressed obscurely in ordinary language. However, such a project of clarification can only count as a “critique of language” in a fairly weak and uninteresting sense.

Wittgenstein’s appeal to the notion of “critique” has an obvious Kantian ring.<sup>7</sup> In the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says of his critical project that (A11/B25):

...its utility in regard to speculation would really be only negative, serving not for the amplification but only for the purification of our reason, and for keeping it free of errors, by which a great deal is already won.

Thus critique has both a clarificatory aim (the “purification” of reason), but also a more purely negative goal of preventing or eliminating errors. These two dimensions of the Kantian idea of critique are echoed in Wittgenstein’s summation of “the whole sense” of the *Tractatus*: “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Of course, the Kantian project is associated with the idea of

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<sup>7</sup> He mentions Mauthner’s idea of a “critique of language” only to distance his own critique from it. I will not discuss Mauthner in this paper.

setting limits to thought, a goal which Wittgenstein embraces in the Preface to the *Tractatus*, but only subject to a well-known caveat:

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 should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be said). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

Thus, the *Tractatus* does engage in a critical project of establishing the limits of language, but only by demonstrating that what lies beyond those limits is “simply nonsense.” In addition to the clarificatory role of “elucidations” in philosophy mentioned at 4.112, there is the critical role of “elucidations” which are to be recognized as nonsensical, specified in the notorious 6.54: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical...” These reflections provide us with a third criterion of adequacy on our interpretation of “Russell’s merit:” we must show how Russell contributes to this project of the “Critique of language” (which constitutes “all philosophy”), in both its clarificatory and its negative (or therapeutic) aspects.

### **III. Towards a correct interpretation: Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophical problems.**

In order to approach the goal of a more satisfying interpretation of “Russell’s merit,” I want to sketch what Wittgenstein means by “nonsense” in the *Tractatus*.<sup>8</sup> I will first briefly discuss two major sources of inspiration for Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophical nonsense: Hertz and Frege. In the following section, I will turn directly to

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<sup>8</sup> My understanding of Wittgenstein on nonsense has been deeply shaped by the work of Cora Diamond and James Conant. See for example “Throwing Away the Ladder” and “The Method of the *Tractatus*” respectively. More recently I have also found Oskari Kuusela, *The Struggle against Dogmatism*, to be extremely helpful.

the text of the *Tractatus*. This preliminary work will then inform my interpretation of “Russell’s merit” and its significance in the final three sections.

### A. Hertz

Hertz’s influence on Wittgenstein has been widely discussed, and what I say here makes no pretense to originality.<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein apparently read Hertz’s *Principles of Mechanics* as a teenager. He found inspiration in Hertz’s discussion of the concept of “force” in the Introduction to that work. Hertz begins by raising a problem concerning Newton’s three laws of motion (5-6):<sup>10</sup>

It is really wonderful how easy it is to attach to the fundamental laws considerations which are quite in accordance with the usual modes of expressions in mechanics, and which yet are an undoubted hindrance to clear thinking. ... We swing in a circle a stone tied to a string, and in so doing we are conscious of exerting a force upon the stone. ... the actual motion of the stone is always in accordance with Newton’s second law. But now the third law requires an opposing force to the force exerted by the hand upon the stone. ... the usual explanation is that the stone reacts upon the hand in consequence of centrifugal force ... Is what we call centrifugal force anything else than the inertia of the stone? Can we, without destroying the clearness of our conceptions, take the effect of inertia twice into account, – firstly as mass, secondly as force? In our laws of motion, force was a cause of motion, and was present *before* the motion. Can we, without confusing our ideas (*ohne unsere Begriffe zu verwirren*), suddenly begin to speak of forces which arise through motion, which are a consequence of motion? ... The only possible explanation is that, properly speaking, centrifugal force is not a force at all. ... But, what now becomes of the demands of the third law, which requires a force exerted by the inert stone upon the hand, and which can only be satisfied by an actual force, not a mere name? ... The force spoken of in the definition and in the first two laws acts upon a body in one definite direction. The sense of the third law is that forces always connect two bodies, and are directed from the first to the second as well as from the second to the first. It seems to me that the conception of force assumed and created in us by the third law on the one hand and the first two laws on the other hand, are slightly different.

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<sup>9</sup> See for example, McGuinness, *Wittgenstein: A Life*; Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of a Genius*; Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*; Hacker, *Insight and Illusion*, etc.

<sup>10</sup> I have been helped here by L. Susan Stebbing, “Language and Misleading Questions,” and J.J.C. Smart, “Heinrich Hertz and the Concept of Force.”

Hertz here argues that the term “force” as used in Newton’s laws does not have one fixed meaning, and is in fact used in different senses in the first and second laws, on the one hand, and the third law on the other. As a result of this kind of confusion, he says, “one hears with wearisome frequency, that the nature of force is still a mystery, that one of the chief problems of physics is the investigation of the nature of force, and so on.” (7) Hertz diagnoses these questions as the expression of a “confused wish.” (7-8)<sup>11</sup>

...why is it that people never in this way ask what is the nature of gold, or what is the nature of velocity? Is the nature of gold better known to us than that of force? Can we by our conceptions, by our words, completely represent the nature of any thing? Certainly not. I fancy the difference must lie in this. With the terms ‘velocity’ and ‘gold’ we connect a large number of relations to other terms; and between all these relations we find no contradictions which offend us. We are therefore satisfied and ask no further questions. But we have accumulated around the term[s] ‘force’ ... more relations than can be completely reconciled amongst themselves. We have an obscure feeling of this and want to have things cleared up. Our confused wish finds expression in the confused question as to the nature of force ... But the answer which we want is not really an answer to this question. It is not by finding out more and fresh relations and consequences that it can be answered; but by removing the contradictions existing between those already known, and thus perhaps reducing their number. When these painful contradictions are removed, the question as to essence will not have been answered; but our minds, no longer vexed, will cease to ask illegitimate questions.

When we ask after the *nature* of force, this is a confused (*unklaren*, unclear) question expressing a confused wish, generated by the fact that our term (*Zeichen*, sign) “force” is related to other terms in multiple and contradictory ways. The term “force” does not have one fixed sense. This results in “painful contradictions.” The solution is to remove the contradictions by reducing the number of relations in which the term “force” stands – in

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<sup>11</sup> I have emended the translation slightly.

effect by determining a single meaning for the term “force.” Once this is done, we will no more seek to know the nature of force than we do the nature of velocity or gold.<sup>12</sup>

Wittgenstein was profoundly influenced by Hertz’s diagnosis, and dissolution, of the problem of the “nature of force.” This influence shaped his conception of philosophy throughout his career. At one point he chose the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above as a motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*: “When these painful contradictions are removed, the question as to essence will not have been answered; but our minds, no longer vexed, will cease to ask illegitimate questions.”<sup>13</sup> Philosophical problems, for Wittgenstein, were such “illegitimate questions.” In the *Investigations*, he characterized them as “problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language.”<sup>14</sup> Such problems “have the character of depth. They are deep disquietudes (*tiefe Beunruhigungen*)...” which result when “a simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance, and this disquiets (*beunruhigt*) us.” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§111-112.) The term “disquietudes” (*Beunruhigungen*) was already one of Wittgenstein’s favorite expressions for philosophical problems and puzzlement by the early 1930’s – a fact that is obscured to English-language readers by the many different terms his translators have used for the one noun “*Beunruhigungen*” and the one verb “*beunruhigt*” (“worries,” “uneasiness,” “dissatisfaction,” “troubles,” etc.). In the *Big Typescript* (1933) Wittgenstein explicitly connects this conception to

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<sup>12</sup> Hertz implements this program by presenting a system of mechanics in which the only primitive notions are time, space and mass. He then introduces the term “force” through a nominal definition relatively late in the work.

<sup>13</sup> “Sind diese schmerzenden Widersprüche entfernt, so ist zwar nicht die Frage nach dem Wesen beantwortet, aber der nicht mehr gequälte Geist hört auf, die für ihn unberechtigte Frage zu stellen.” (*Kritisch-genetische Edition*, 565.)

<sup>14</sup> In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein still occasionally speaks, in the terms favored in the *Tractatus*, of “misunderstanding of the *logic* of our language” as the root of philosophical puzzlement. See §§93 and 345.

Hertz: “As I do philosophy, its entire task is to shape expression in such a way that certain worries (*Beunruhigungen*) disappear. ((Hertz.)).” (*The Big Typescript*, 310.) Similarly, in the *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein tells us that “philosophy isn't anything except philosophical problems, the particular individual worries (*Beunruhigungen*) that we call ‘philosophical problems’,” whose “characteristic feature ... is that a confusion (*Verwirrung*) is expressed in the form of a question that doesn't acknowledge the confusion, and that what *releases* the questioner from his problem is a particular alteration of his method of expression.” (*Philosophical Grammar*, §141.)

The disquietudes that constitute the problems of philosophy arise from “confusion,” which, according to Hertz, manifests itself in the form of apparent contradictions. These contradictions arise from the fact that we do not use our words in one fixed sense. At a meeting of the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club in 1939, Rush Rhees remarked that “puzzlement often occurs when there is a conflict of uses.” The minutes of the meeting continue (*Public and Private Occasions*, 379):

Dr. W: this is often called a contradiction. He cited a passage from Hertz's Principles of Mechanics, in which the latter said that people ask about the essence of matter, etc., because a lot of defining criteria have been heaped on these notions, & these criteria are in conflict. This irritates our mind, & makes us ask ‘what is the essence of so & so?’ The answer is not given by further criteria, but by giving less criteria. When these contradictions are avoided, the question is not answered, but the mind is no longer perplexed and ceases to ask it. Dr W said that he must confess that this passage seemed to him to sum up philosophy.

Here “philosophy” is summed up in both a negative and a positive way: negatively, philosophical problems are cases of puzzlement arising from confusion, and positively, philosophical work can lead to the avoidance of this puzzlement. This release from philosophical puzzlement comes from a modification of our form of expression, which

enables us to see the source of the apparent contradictions in the confused form of speaking fostered by our language.

### **B. An example: Augustine on time**

It will be helpful to provide an example of a philosophical problem and a Wittgensteinian diagnosis of that problem as a case of puzzlement arising from linguistic confusion. One such problem to which Wittgenstein returned repeatedly is Augustine's puzzlement about time in Book XI of the *Confessions*.<sup>15</sup> Augustine famously wrote: "What is time? ... If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know." (Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, chapter 17 (14), 232.) In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein provides one of his most extended discussions of Augustine's predicament, explicitly mentioning Hertz's *Principles of Mechanics* as a model for his account. (*The Blue Book*, 26ff.) He describes Augustine's question "What is time?", which appears to ask for a definition, as "an utterance of unclarity, of mental discomfort," which arises because "in fact it is the grammar of the word 'time' which puzzles us." This puzzlement "arises from what one might call apparent contradictions in the grammar." Augustine (*Confessions*, Book XI, chapters 18ff (15ff), 233ff) had argued in this vein:<sup>16</sup>

How is it possible that one should measure time? For the past can't be measured, as it is gone by; and the future can't be measured because it has not yet come. And the present can't be measured for it has no extension.

Wittgenstein diagnoses the apparent contradiction here as "a conflict between two different usages of a word, in this case the word 'measure':" we speak of "measuring a *length*" and of "measuring time." The use of the same word, "measure," leads us to think

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<sup>15</sup> Oskari Kuusela catalogs six separate occasions on which Wittgenstein discusses this problem in his manuscripts and notebooks. (*The Struggle against Dogmatism*, 294, fn 44.)

<sup>16</sup> The quotation is Wittgenstein's paraphrase of Augustine's argument.

of the latter as like the former. We then envisage the measurement of time as like the measurement of “the distance between two marks on a travelling band which passes us, and of which we can only see a tiny bit (the present) in front of us.” Given this picture, it becomes impossible to understand how it is possible to measure anything more than the present instant. This diagnosis of the problem also points to its solution:

Solving this puzzle will consist in comparing what we mean by “measurement” (the grammar of the word “measurement”) when applied to a distance on a travelling band with the grammar of that word when applied to time.

Wittgenstein concludes his discussion by remarking that the problem is in fact extremely difficult, in spite of the apparent ease with which it can be solved, “due to the fascination which the analogy between two similar structures in our language can exert on us.”

Augustine was a philosopher for whom Wittgenstein had the deepest respect, and in his final discussion of this problem, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein attributes to him an awareness of the proper route to its solution (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§89-90):<sup>17</sup>

Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to *remind* ourselves of. ... We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about the phenomena. Thus, Augustine recalls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration, past present or future, of events. ... Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. – Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called ‘analysis’ of our forms of expression, for the process is something like one of taking a thing apart.

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<sup>17</sup> See James Wetzel, “Time after Augustine,” for illuminating discussion.

The “analysis” that Wittgenstein promotes is a “taking apart” of our confusing and confused way of speaking through perspicuously representing and distinguishing the distinct concepts and relations that have become muddled in our discourse. Once this “analysis” is carried out, our “deep disquietudes” will vanish and we will be able to achieve philosophical peace.

### C. Frege<sup>18</sup>

At this point, however, my readers may already have become quite impatient with me. “All of these pages on Hertz and the sources of philosophical puzzlement may be quite interesting,” I hear them say. “But we began with a textual question about the *Tractatus*. Surely what you have just done is to summarize for us (a part of) the philosophical method of the *later* Wittgenstein. What does all this have to do with the *Tractatus*, and Russell?”

It is true that all of the passages from Wittgenstein above are drawn from his middle to late works. But Wittgenstein encountered Hertz’s ideas even before he became a student of Russell’s, and it is my contention that the conception of philosophical problems and their solution that he found in Hertz was crucial to his approach to philosophy from the beginning. However, the precise *form* that this conception took in the *Tractatus* was decisively shaped by “the great works of Frege and the writings of [Wittgenstein’s] friend Bertrand Russell.” This paper is primarily about “*Russell’s* merit,” and indeed I have set as a criterion of adequacy for my account that it allow us to separate

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<sup>18</sup> On Frege’s influence on Wittgenstein, see Conant, “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” Diamond, “What does a Concept-Script Do?,” Goldfarb, “Wittgenstein’s Understanding of Frege,” Jolley, *The Concept ‘Horse’ Paradox*; Reck, “Wittgenstein’s ‘Great Debt’ to Frege,” Ricketts, “Wittgenstein against Frege and Russell,” Weiner, “Theory and Elucidation,” and especially Diamond, “Inheriting from Frege.” Diamond, in the last-mentioned essay, points out the Fregean character of many of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Frege. In a similar vein, I argue in Section VI below that Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Russell are often to be understood as in some sense Russellian in character.

out a distinctively Russellian contribution to the *Tractatus*'s approach to philosophical nonsense. Nonetheless, we should not discount entirely Frege's contribution.

In the Preface to his *Begriffsschrift*, Frege indicates that he was motivated to construct his new "concept-script" in order to determine the epistemological status of arithmetic, by constructing as far as possible "gap-free" proofs in which any dependence on Kantian intuition would be either ruled out or made apparent. However, he also saw a more general use for his new logical language in philosophy (*Conceptual Notation and other Essays*, 106):

If it is a task of philosophy to break the power of the word over the human mind, uncovering illusions which through the use of language often almost unavoidably arise concerning the relations of concepts, freeing thought from that which only the nature of linguistic means of expression attaches to it, then my 'conceptual notation', further developed for these purposes, can become a useful tool for philosophers.

Frege was concerned in particular with confusions of logical category, such as confusion of *concept* and *object*. In an early essay "On the Scientific Justification of a Conceptual Notation," (1882), he explains (*Conceptual Notation and other Essays*, 84):

Language proves to be deficient, however, when it comes to protecting thought from error. It does not even meet the first requirement which we must place on it in this respect: namely, being unambiguous. The most dangerous cases are those in which the meanings of a word are only slightly different, the subtle and yet not unimportant variations. Of the many examples only one frequently recurring phenomenon may be mentioned here: the same word may serve to designate a concept and a single object which falls under that concept.

Frege provides an example: we may use the expression "the horse" both to designate a particular animal, and to designate the species to which it belongs.

While such an ambiguity may seem completely harmless, Frege set out as one of his three fundamental principles in his *Foundations of Arithmetic* "never to lose sight of

the distinction between concept and object,”(*Foundations*, x) and in that work he repeatedly criticized other philosophers for confusing these two fundamentally different logical functions. While “language makes use of proper names, for instance Moon, as concept words and vice-versa,” (*Foundations*, 64) we should not fall into the mistake of calling “a general concept word the name of a thing. That leads straight to the illusion that number is a property of a thing.” (*Foundations*, 63.) Such a view is supported by linguistic usage – “we speak of ‘the number of the bales’ just as we do of ‘the weight of the bales’” suggesting that number and weight are equally properties of the bales. But “this usage is confusing” (*verwirrend* – *Foundations*, 64) and, as Frege has argued earlier in the book, leads to apparent contradictions.

If I give someone a stone with the words: Find the weight of this, I have given him precisely the object he is to investigate. But if I place a pile of playing cards in his hands with the words: Find the Number of these, this does not tell him whether I wish to know the number of cards, or of complete packs of cards, or even say of points in the game of skat. To have given him the pile in his hands is not yet to have given him the object he is to investigate; I must add some further word – cards, or packs, or points.

Consequently, if we insist that number is a property of objects, we will have to hold that the same object can have distinct, incompatible number properties; but “an object to which I can ascribe different numbers with equal right is not really what has a number.” (*Foundations*, 28-29.)

Frege diagnoses a similar pattern – in which confusion of concept and object leads to contradictory claims and hence to philosophical puzzlement – in his critique of the view that a number is a set or plurality of “units” (*Einheiten*). At the root of this view is again misleading linguistic usage: “under the influence of the grammatical form, we are regarding ‘one’ as a word for a property and taking ‘one city’ in the same way as

‘wise man’.” Such a view again leads to contradictions: “Whereas we can combine ‘Solon was wise’ and ‘Thales was wise’ into ‘Solon and Thales were wise’, we cannot say ‘Solon and Thales were one’.” (*Foundations*, 39-40.) Such difficulties lead us back to considering “units” as objects, which are somehow combined to form a number. In doing so we end up confounding the concept-word “unit” (*Einheit*) and the proper name “one” (*Eins*). “When we speak of ‘the number one’ we indicate by means of the definite article a definite and unique object of scientific study. There are not divers numbers one, but only one. In 1 we have a proper name, which as such does not admit of a plural...” In contrast, “only concept words can form a plural. If, therefore, we speak of ‘units’, we must be using the word not as equivalent to the proper name ‘one’, but as a concept word.” (*Foundations*, 49-50.) So, “if confusion (*Verwirrung*) is not to become worse confounded, it is advisable to observe a strict distinction between unit and one.” (*Foundations*, 48-49.)

Nonetheless, there is a great temptation to allow the confusion of concept and object to influence our thinking (*Foundations*, 50-51):

We are faced ... with the following difficulty:

If we try to produce the number by putting together different distinct objects, the result is an agglomeration in which the objects contained remain still in possession of precisely those properties which serve to distinguish them from one another; and that is not the number. But if we try to do it in the other way, by putting together identicals, the result runs perpetually together into one and we never reach a plurality. ...

The word “unit” is admirably adapted to conceal this difficulty; and that is the real, though no doubt unconscious reason why we prefer it to the words “object” and “thing”. We start by calling the things to be numbered “units”, without detracting from their diversity; then subsequently the concept of putting together ... transforms itself into that of arithmetical addition, while the concept word “unit” (*Einheit*) changes unperceived into the proper name “one” (*Eins*). And there we have our identity. If I annex to the letter *a* first and *n* and then a *d*, anyone can easily see that that is not the number 3. If, however, I bring the letters *a*, *n*,

and  $d$  under the concept “unit,” and now, instead of “ $a$  and  $n$  and  $d$ ” say “a unit and a unit and a further unit” (*eine Einheit und eine Einheit und noch eine Einheit*) or “1 and 1 and 1”, we are quite prepared to believe that this does give us the number 3. The difficulty is so well hidden under the word “unit”, that those who have any suspicion of its existence must surely be few at most.

Here, indeed, is an artful manipulation of language worthy of Mill’s censure; for this is no outward manifestation of an inward process of thought, but only the illusion of one.

This “artful manipulation of language” is made possible by the ambiguity exhibited by the word “unit,” (*Einheit*), which is one of those “most dangerous cases ... in which the meanings of a word are only slightly different, the subtle and yet not unimportant variations.” Frege’s *Begriffsschrift* provides a notation in which such cases are ruled out by the structure of the language. In the *Begriffsschrift* there can be no word like “unit,” “admirably adapted to conceal difficulties,” which “changes unperceived” from a meaning as a concept-word to a meaning as a proper name. Frege repeatedly points out that the *Begriffsschrift*, by design, respects the distinction between concept (or function) and object. Comparing his notation to that of Boole, the early Frege writes (*Posthumous Writings*, 12):

...in the *Begriffsschrift* their designations [the designations of concepts] never occur on their own, but always in combinations which express judgeable contents. ... A sign for a property never appears without a thing to which it might belong at least indicated ... (1880/1)

Drawing a similar comparison to Peano’s logical notation, the mature Frege says

(*Collected Papers*, 248):

I distinguish function-letters from object-letters, using the former to indicate only functions and the latter to indicate only objects, in conformity with my sharp differentiation between functions and objects, with which Mr. Peano is unacquainted. (1897)

This idea of a *Begriffsschrift*, a “conceptual notation” in which the “dangerous cases” of ambiguity, the “subtle and yet not unimportant variations” could be ruled out *de jure*, was determinative for Wittgenstein’s reception of Hertz’s view of philosophical problems in the *Tractatus*, to which we now turn.

#### IV. The *Tractatus* on nonsense

Our task now is to develop an interpretation of the *Tractatus*'s critique of philosophical nonsense that will enable us to see why it was “*Russell*'s merit to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form.”

##### A. Sign and Symbol.

Both Hertz and Frege emphasized the way in which confusion and equivocation make possible philosophical puzzlement. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein employs a distinction between *sign* (*Zeichen*) and *symbol* to spell out this thought:

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

3.32 The sign is the part of the symbol perceptible by the senses.

As I understand this distinction, a sign is a mark, inscription, or noise that we put to use in language, in propositions that have sense; a symbol is the sign taken together with this use. I therefore take symbols to be essentially meaningful, and to have the meaning that they have essentially.<sup>19</sup> Equivocation then arises when we have one sign used in two symbols:

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<sup>19</sup> Colin Johnston has recently argued for a different interpretation of the sign/symbol distinction. (“Symbols in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.”) Johnston argues that “a Tractarian symbol, whilst essentially a syntactic entity to be distinguished from the mark or sound that is its sign, bears its semantic significance only inessentially.” According to Johnston, a symbol is a sign for which a determinate syntactic category has been specified, which can then bear a multiplicity of determinate meanings. Johnston cites textual evidence for this reading, including 3.323: “In the proposition ‘Green is green’ – where the first word is a proper name and the last an adjective – these words have not merely different meanings but they are *different symbols*.”

Johnston’s reading would rule out the interpretation that I develop of Wittgenstein’s conception of nonsense in the *Tractatus*. I hope to address Johnston’s reading in detail in future work. Suffice it to say here that I find neither his textual evidence nor his philosophical arguments convincing. Among other things, his reading conflicts with things Wittgenstein said on his return to philosophy about the sign/symbol distinction. For example, G.E. Moore reports Wittgenstein as flatly stating that “signs with different meanings must *be* different symbols.” (*Philosophical Occasions*, 56.) According to King and Lee’s notes, Wittgenstein said that “When we explain the meaning of a sign, we are describing the symbol, not transcending it, the meaning is part of the symbol.” (*Wittgenstein’s Lectures: 1930-32*, 28.) Furthermore, in “Some Remarks on Logical Form,” Wittgenstein provides a close paraphrase of *Tractatus* 3.323-5, but replacing the *Tractatus*'s talk of signs and symbols with talk of ambiguity and multiple meaning: “where

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

Wittgenstein remarks (3.323) that such equivocation is common “in the language of everyday life” in which

... it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways – and therefore belongs to two different symbols... Thus the word ‘is’ appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence... we speak of *something* but also of the fact of *something happening*.

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

This equivocation is responsible for philosophical confusion (3.324):

Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full).

Wittgenstein here focuses on the “dangerous cases” of equivocation, the “subtle and yet not unimportant variations” that Frege saw as leading to philosophical confusion – Wittgenstein’s last example (“Green is green”) involves precisely the concept/object equivocation against which Frege inveighed. But he adds a further form of equivocation to the catalog of sources of philosophical puzzlement. Not only do we frequently have one word being used in two symbols, we also have cases in which (3.323)

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ordinary language disguises logical structure, where it allows the formation of pseudopropositions, where it uses one term in an infinity of different meanings, we must replace it by a symbolism which gives a clear picture of the logical structure, excludes pseudopropositions, and uses its terms unambiguously.” (*Philosophical Occasions*, 29-30.) On Johnston’s interpretation, Wittgenstein in the late 20’s and early 30’s must have changed his mind about the sign/symbol distinction. This seems implausible.

Johnston’s use of direct textual evidence from the *Tractatus* is also selective and misleading. For example he cites 3.341 in support of his reading: “What is essential in a proposition is not what all propositions that express the same sense have in common—namely, its sense—but rather what all propositions that can express the same sense have in common—namely, the form of its sense. And generally, what is essential in a symbol is what all symbols have in common that can, and not do, serve the same purpose. For example, what is essential to a name is what all names that can stand for its referent have in common, and this is the form of that object. A name can stand for any object whose form it has: it contains the form, but not the content, of its referent.” But Johnston does not cite 3.3411 – “One could therefore say the real name is that which all symbols which signify an object, have in common.” – in which the word “can” is conspicuously absent.

two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition. ... Thus ... “to exist” [appears] as an intransitive verb like “to go”; “identical” as an adjective ...

In such cases two signs with the same apparent grammatical form signify in different ways, and so have different real or logical form. One could say that in such cases it is not so much the signs that are ambiguous as it is the grammatical forms of the language itself.<sup>20</sup>

Wittgenstein again follows Frege in recommending the adoption of a *Begriffsschrift* as a linguistic purgative, eliminating these dangerous confusions:

3.325 In order to avoid these errors, we must employ a symbolism which excludes them, by not applying the same sign in different symbols and by not applying signs in the same way which signify in different ways. A symbolism, that is to say, which obeys the rules of *logical* grammar – of logical syntax.

(The logical symbolism [*Begriffsschrift*] of Frege and Russell is such a language, which, however, does still not exclude all errors.)

In such a language, we will not be liable to succumb to tempting confusions that generate philosophical puzzlement, for the equivocations and misleading structures that make these confusions possible will simply not be present. In this way we will avoid the dangers of creating philosophical nonsense.

## **B. Nonsense and the lack of meaning**

There is another important strand in the *Tractatus*'s conception of nonsense which we must now confront, however, and which might seem to come into conflict with the argument as we have developed it so far. According to this strand, nonsense arises simply because we have used words that lack a meaning:

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that in the *Prototractatus* manuscript, the middle paragraph of what becomes *Tractatus* 3.323, and 3.324, are inserted between what becomes *Tractatus* 4.002 and 4.003. Thus the way in which “language disguises the thought” and the way in which philosophical questions and problems arise from the “misunderstanding of the logic of our language are explicitly linked through the sign/symbol distinction.

5.4733 Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts.

(Even if we believe that we have done so.)<sup>21</sup>

There is no other, deeper way in which nonsense can arise. Hence, Wittgenstein concludes that if one wants to show that someone is speaking nonsense, there is nothing for it but to show that she has failed to give a meaning to one of her signs:

6.53 The right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.

The conception of nonsense that I have expounded above, however, might seem to conflict with the present conception, according to which nonsense arises from a lack of meaning. For above I suggested that nonsense arises from confusion and equivocation – which seems to involve not a lack of meaning, but a surfeit. After all, equivocation and ambiguity require that a given sign have multiple meanings, not that it lack meaning altogether. Can these two apparently conflicting views of nonsense be reconciled?

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<sup>21</sup> I have left off the latter part of this remark, which is another piece of evidence for Colin Johnston's reading of the sign/symbol distinction: "Thus 'Socrates is identical' says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word 'identical' as *adjective*. For when it occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way – the symbolizing relation is another – therefore the symbol is in the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign in common with one another only by accident." This passage suggests that even without having been given a meaning, there is a *symbol*, 'identical'-as-adjective. This note is not the place for a complete analysis of this passage, but I will note two things here: (a) In the first paragraph of 5.4733, Johnston has to read "possible proposition" as simply "proposition;" I can equally read "symbol" when applied to 'identical'-as-adjective as "possible symbol." That is, I can read the last sentence of 5.4733 as follows: "When 'identical' occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way from the way in which it *would have to* symbolize *if* it occurred as an adjective. Therefore if 'identical' *had* a meaning as an adjective, the two symbols would be entirely different, having only the sign in common by accident. And therefore one should not think that one can recognize the symbol in the sign 'identical' (3.326) in the context 'Socrates is identical', simply because one knows the meaning of that sign in other contexts." It seems the text can't be read completely consistently without making *one* of these maneuvers. (b) On the other hand, it is curious that in 3.323 Wittgenstein remarks that in "in the language of everyday life," "'identical' [appears] as an adjective." It is somewhat difficult to understand what this can mean if not that "'identical'" appears with an adjectival meaning. At this point I might be tempted to throw up my hands. But see below on "*identisch*" as an adjective in philosophical German.

### C. Questions and Propositions of the Philosophers

To resolve this puzzle I want to return to the example of philosophical nonsense introduced in the passage on which the remark about “Russell’s merit” is a comment,

4.003:

Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical [*unsinnig*]. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their nonsensicality. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language.

(They are of the same kind as the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful.)

And so it is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really *no* problems.

Now what kind of a question *is* this: “whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful”? While it certainly *sounds* vaguely philosophical, would any philosopher actually ask such a question? It also *sounds* nonsensical – but how would one be led to pose it by misunderstanding the logic of our language?

Here is a kind of “just so” story about a possible genesis of this bizarre example. Consider Plato’s theory of Forms.<sup>22</sup> According to this theory, properties like beauty and goodness are realized in the transient occupants of the temporal realm through those objects *participating* in eternal Forms of the Beautiful and the Good. So, for each (or at least some) property *F*, there is a form of *F*-ness, and in general *x* is *F* holds just in case *x* participates in *F*-ness. But participation is a matter of degree: things can be more or less beautiful, more or less good, and in general ‘*x* is more *F* than *y*’ will mean that *x* participates to a higher degree in *F*-ness than does *y*. Now, the Forms themselves are thought of as the things that have *F*-ness to the highest possible degree: the Beautiful is

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<sup>22</sup> I make no claims to Plato scholarship here. I am working entirely from memory of things I was taught almost thirty years ago, in a graduate seminar on Ancient Philosophy with Alexander Nehamas.

beautiful, and maximally so, the Good is good, and maximally so, and so on. The forms can thus be predicated of themselves, and to the highest degree. Thus if  $x$  is more beautiful than  $y$ , this is because  $x$  approximates more closely to the goodness of the Good than does  $y$ ; and for any  $x$  other than the Good,  $x$  is less good than the Good.

However, in the *Parmenides*, this doctrine comes under a sustained critical and skeptical attack. Parmenides generates a host of *aporia* concerning the theory of Forms, and some of these have to do with two specific Forms introduced in the dialogue: the Same and the Different. It appears that everything participates in these Forms, since everything is the same (as itself) and different (from everything else). By the principle of self-predication, the Same is the same and the Different is the different, and in each case maximally so; nonetheless the Same is also different (from the Different) and the Different is the same (as itself), so the Same must participate in the Different, and the Different must participate in the Same. Presumably, however, the Same is less Different than the Different (else the Same would be the same as the Different) and the Different is less the same than the Same (for the same reasons).

Now my point here is not to provide an interpretation of the *Parmenides* or to try to resolve such *aporia* in the Theory of Forms. Rather, for present purposes the important point is that we here have a crude sketch of a philosophical framework in which the question whether the Good is more or less identical (the same) as the Beautiful can arise. Both the Good and the Beautiful are the same (as themselves) and so both participate in the Same; and the question is which of these two Forms, the Good and the Beautiful, participates to a higher degree in the third Form, the Same.

Thus it might appear that we have made some sense out of this strange-seeming question. Yet Wittgenstein presents it as a paradigmatic case of philosophical nonsense. How would he diagnose the error here? At 5.4733, Wittgenstein provides an example of nonsense that arises “because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts” – “even if we believe we have done so.” He writes:

Thus ‘Socrates is identical’ says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word ‘identical’ as *adjective*. For when it occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way – the symbolizing relation is another – therefore the symbol is in the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign in common with one another only by accident.

The fact that no meaning has been given to the word “identical” as an adjective shows that we should not treat “identical,” or “the same,” as if it were on a par with “beautiful” or “good” – as is required by the theory of Forms, according to the argument developed in the *Parmenides*. As an initial, simple, diagnosis, one might say that “beautiful” and “good” are one-place predicates, while “identical” is a two-place predicate (“the sign of equality”), and it is a mistake to try to squeeze them both into one logical category, as we do if we speak of Forms of both beauty and sameness (identity).

Yet matters are not quite so simple. We can begin by noting that in his discussion of forms of confusion in “everyday language” in 3.323, Wittgenstein mentions the appearance of “‘identical’ *as an adjective*.” Given that, according to 5.4733, “we have given *no* meaning to ‘identical’ as adjective,” this must be a case of our having failed to give a meaning “even though we believe we have done so.” But what could he be referring to here?

In my opinion, Wittgenstein has in mind a *philosophical* usage of the German word “*identisch*” (“identical”) as meaning “self-identical” – where this is taken to be a

peculiarly important yet universal property.<sup>23</sup> Now, if “identical” is a relational or two-place predicate, there should be no problem in defining such a usage of “identical” as adjective:

$x$  is (self-)identical = Def  $x$  is identical with  $x$ .

But of course, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein denies that “identical” is an ordinary two-place relation sign.

At 5.4733, Wittgenstein says that “when it (‘identical’) occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way.” I take this to mean that the sign of equality symbolizes in an entirely different way from the way in which the purported adjective “identical” is supposed to symbolize. But I do not think the difference here is captured by saying that the one symbolizes in the way that two-place predicates do and the other symbolizes (or would symbolize if it did at all) in the way that one-place predicates do. For the way in which “identical” symbolizes “when it occurs as the sign of equality” is shown by Wittgenstein through its elimination – through the description of a notation in which the sign of equality is dispensed with, “identity of the object” is expressed “by identity of the sign” (5.53) and propositions in which the sign of identity is used are transformed into propositions in which no such sign occurs. (5.53-5.5352) The “sign of equality” is thus revealed as a device for keeping track of relations between bound variables, a device which can be dispensed with in favor of an “exclusive” interpretation of distinct variables with overlapping scopes. Significantly for our

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<sup>23</sup> Evidence of this usage can be found in, for example, the entry for “*Identität*” in Rudolf Eisler’s *Wörterbuch der Philosophischen Begriffe* (1904), which begins: “*Dieselbigkeit; Einerleiheit, Sich-selbst-gleich-bleiben,*” and later adds “*Das Ich beurteilt etwas als ‘identisch’ heißt: es supponiert einem Bewußteinsinhalt das gleiche Object, es verlegt damit seine eigene Identität in das Wahrgenommene. Die Identität der Objecte is ein Reflex, eine (empirische fundierte) Projection der (unmittelbar erlebten, nicht beschreibbaren) Identität des Ich.*” (482)

purposes, given this convention “we see that apparent propositions like: ‘ $a = a$ ’, ... ‘ $(x)x = x$ ’, ... etc. cannot be written in a correct logical notation at all. So all problems disappear which are connected with such pseudo-propositions.” (5.534-5.535)

We are now in a position to diagnose more clearly the error involved in the puzzle about whether the Good is more or less identical (the Same) as the Beautiful. At least one source of this puzzle is the appearance that the word “identical” functions as a relational predicate, from which we could then define an adjective (*Eigenschaftswort*, property-word) “identical” (meaning “self-identical”), as one can define the predicate “suicide” from the relation “kills.” The misleading grammatical appearance here is one in which “two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition” – seeing that the word “identical” is applied grammatically in the same way as a relational word, we are led to believe that we can derive from it a one-place predicate, “(self)-identical.” But we have in fact given no meaning to this word “as an adjective,” for the only meaning we have given to “identical” as an (apparent) relational sign is one which gives no meaning to the *definiens* of the purported definition

$x$  is (self)-identical =  $x$  is identical with  $x$  Def.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein raises a question related to those posed by Parmenidean *aporia* about the Same and the Different. (*PI*, §§215-216.):

But isn't *the same* (*gleich*) at least the same (*gleich*)?

Wittgenstein continues:

We seem to have an infallible paradigm of identity (*Gleichheit*) in the identity of a thing with itself. I feel like saying: “Here at any rate there can't be a variety of interpretations. If you are seeing a thing you are seeing identity too.”

Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is? And how am I to apply what one thing shews me to the case of two things?

“A thing is identical (*identisch*) with itself.” There is no finer example of a useless proposition, which yet is connected with a certain play of the imagination. It is as if in imagination we put a thing into its own shape and saw that it fitted.

This discussion bears comparison to the example from 4.003, and I believe confirms my interpretation of that example. But there is not sufficient space to explore that here.

Now, let us return to the puzzle that led us to consider this peculiar example in detail. We seemed to have arrived at two competing accounts of the origins of philosophical nonsense: on the first account, nonsense arises from confusion and equivocation, while on the second account nonsense arises from a lack of meaning. These two seemed to be in conflict. Since equivocation and ambiguity require that a given sign have multiple meanings, according to the first account a sign would have a surfeit of meaning, not a lack of meaning. Our difficulty was to reconcile these opposing views.

Our analysis of the example from 4.003 can help us with this difficulty. For, in that analysis both the idea of equivocation and the idea of a lack of meaning played a role. In accordance with 5.4733, we concluded that no meaning has been given to “identical” as an adjective. But this is in spite of the fact that we might have thought we had done so. And the illusion that we had done so is fostered by the confusing form of our language, which leads us to treat “identical,” when functioning as the “sign of equality,” as if it were a relational predicate from which we could reflexively define a one-place predicate, or adjective.

This is a complex case of the kind of interaction that can take place between the “dangerous” forms of equivocation, the “subtle yet not unimportant” variations, and failure to determine meaning. But simpler cases exist as well. For example, if I use a word with two meanings, and those meanings are not unrelated (so that the variation between them is “subtle”), yet the two uses involve different logical functions (so that the variation is “not unimportant”), I am liable to fall into a form of confusion where I am under the illusion that I am using the word with both meanings at the same time. In such a case I might slide imperceptibly between the two uses of the word (as Frege claims his

predecessors moved smoothly from using “unit” as a concept-word to using “unit” as a proper name). But in such a case we should not say that I have used the word with one fixed meaning at all – in one sense I have used it with multiple meanings, but in another sense, it can be fairly said that I have failed to give a meaning to my word.

These reflections can shed light on Wittgenstein’s account of “the right method in philosophy” at 6.53. We should, he tells us, “say nothing except what can be said ... and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical ... demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” Now, one might wonder how one is to demonstrate to, say, F.H. Bradley, that “he has given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” It will certainly not do to just pound the desk and proclaim his words to be meaningless, or to assert that we do not understand him. He will simply reply that we should try harder. But we now see our way to a technique for showing to another that his words lack meaning: we must show to him how the illusion that his words to have a fixed meaning is fostered in him by confusions arising from “subtle yet not unimportant variations” in our language.

#### **V. “Russell’s merit:” Puzzles in “On Denoting”**

We have now taken a very long detour through Hertz, Frege, and the *Tractatus*, with an eye to understanding Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophical nonsense. The purpose of this detour was ultimately to help us resolve a textual puzzle: what did Wittgenstein mean when he asserted at 4.0031 that “Russell’s merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form”? Recall that we established three criteria for our answer to this question: (a) we need to isolate a particular merit due to Russell, rather than any of his predecessors; (b) the link to the

discussion of philosophical nonsense in 4.003 must be made clear; and (c) we must show how Russell contributes to the project of the “Critique of language” (which constitutes “all philosophy”), in both its clarificatory and its negative (or therapeutic) aspects. I now propose to make good on these demands.

I want to begin by pointing out a crucial feature of the argument Russell develops for his theory of descriptions in “On Denoting:” the theory is to be accepted because of its power in solving logical puzzles. Russell writes (“On Denoting,” 484-5):

A logical theory may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since they serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science. I shall therefore state three puzzles which a theory as to denoting ought to be able to solve; and I shall show that my theory solves them.

In a letter written just after he completed work on “On Denoting,” Russell wrote to Lucy Donnelly that “it is a great thing to find a puzzle; because so long as it is puzzling, one knows one has not got to the bottom of things.” (*Autobiography*, 183.) In “On Denoting,” Russell develops three puzzles, concerning the substitutivity of identicals, the law of the excluded middle, and denial of existence. He appeals to features of his logical notation to dissolve the puzzles. Moreover his solution of at least the first two of the puzzles turns on the recognition that the victim of puzzlement is involved in a kind of equivocation which is laid bare through a proper exhibition of logical form. In my opinion, this fact is the key to “Russell’s merit.” Where Hertz recognized the source of philosophical confusion in the misleading and equivocal nature of language, and Frege added the idea of constructing a *Begriffsschrift* in which such equivocation is not possible, it was Russell who fully developed the technique of employing such a *Begriffsschrift* as a tool for unmasking philosophical nonsense.

The case of the second puzzle is clearest, so I will focus on it here<sup>25</sup> (“On Denoting,” 485):

By the law of excluded middle, either “*A* is *B*” or “*A* is not *B*” must be true. Hence either “the present King of France is bald” or “the present king of France is not bald” must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list. Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig.

The puzzle turns on taking the proposition “the present King of France is bald” as having the form

*Bk*

and taking “the present King of France is not bald” as its negation

$\sim Bk$ .

Given these assumptions, it seems we must have either *Bk* or  $\sim Bk$  true. Yet at the same time, the truth of *Bk* would seem to require that among the bald things, we find the present king of France; as this is not the case we are led to conclude that  $\sim Bk$ ; but this equally seems to require that among the non-bald things we find the present king of France; as this is also not the case we are led back to the original hypothesis that *Bk*. We seem then, to be caught in a contradiction.

Russell’s solution to the puzzle of course involves his denial that “the present king of France” has the logical form of a subject-predicate sentence *Bk*. But this is not the whole of his solution. Rather, he diagnoses the puzzle as turning on a subtle form of equivocation, an ambiguity which he says “is hard to avoid in language.” This is the ambiguity between “primary” and “secondary” occurrences of a definite description, or between wide and narrow scope readings of the description. Russell informs us that while

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<sup>25</sup> Concerning the other two puzzles, see Section VI below.

this ambiguity “does no harm if we are on our guard against it,” “in symbolic logic it is of course easily avoided.” (“On Denoting,” 489.)<sup>26</sup>

The distinction arises whenever a denoting phrase such as a definite description occurs in combination with a sentential operator, such as negation. So, the distinction can be illustrated using simpler denoting phrases than definite descriptions. Consider for example the sentence

Everything that glitters is not gold.

containing the denoting phrase “everything that glitters.” This can be understood to mean either

Every glittering object is non-gold.

(in “symbolic logic:”  $(x)(Lx \supset \sim Gx)$ )

or

It is not the case that everything that glitters is gold.

(in “symbolic logic:”  $\sim(x)(Lx \supset Gx)$ ).

In the first case the denoting phrase has a primary occurrence (or wide scope) whereas in the latter the denoting phrase has a secondary occurrence (or narrow scope). Clearly these two readings of the original sentence are not equivalent. If some glittering objects are gold and others are not, then the first will be false, and the second true.

Russell develops the distinction between primary and secondary occurrences in connection with the first of his three puzzles, and then employs it in the solution of the second puzzle as well (“On Denoting,” 490):

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<sup>26</sup> Russell later writes that “confusion of primary and secondary occurrences is a ready source of fallacies where descriptions are concerned.” (*Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 179.)

The distinction of primary and secondary occurrences ... enables us to deal with the question whether the present King of France is bald or not bald ... “the King of France is not bald” is false if the occurrence of “the King of France” is *primary*, and true if it is *secondary*. Thus all propositions in which “the King of France” has a primary occurrence are false; the denials of such propositions are true, but in them “the King of France” has a secondary occurrence. Thus we escape the conclusion that the King of France has a wig.

If we present the argument of the puzzle and the proposed solution in English, we might get something like the following:

(A) Either the King of France is bald or the King of France is not bald.  
True (Law of Excluded Middle).

Therefore, either (B) or (C) is true:

(B) The King of France is bald

(C) The King of France is not bald.

But among the bald there is no king of France. So (B) is false. And among the non-bald there is no king of France either. So (C) is false.

Either way, a falsehood is true. Contradiction.

The solution then turns on distinguishing two readings of (C):

(C) is ambiguous between:

(C1) The King of France is (not bald). (primary occurrence)

(C2) It is not the case that (the King of France is bald).  
(secondary occurrence)

Under reading (C1), (C) is false, but is not the negation of (B), so we have no violation of the Law of Excluded Middle; under reading (C2), (C) is the negation of (B), and so is true, but this does not require that there be a king of France among the non-bald.

According to this solution, the puzzle arises because of an equivocation of a particularly important and subtle kind. For there is no single word in the sentence “the present king of France is not bald” which is equivocal in a way that is responsible for the ambiguity of the entire sentence. Rather, the sentence as a whole has a grammatical structure that is ambiguous in that it allows two distinct and conflicting logical forms.

This is clearest if we analyze the solution to the puzzle “in symbolic logic.” The

distinction between (C1) and (C2) is now represented as the distinction between their symbolic representations, (C1') and (C2'):

$$\begin{aligned} (C1') & (\exists x)((y)(Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet \sim Bx) \\ (C2') & \sim(\exists x)((y)(Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet Bx) \end{aligned}$$

Both of these build on the fundamental analysis of (B) as

$$(B') (\exists x)((y)(Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet Bx)$$

Given this analysis, the purported instance of the Law of the Excluded middle, (A), is itself ambiguous between:

$$(A1) (\exists x)(y)((Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet Bx) \vee (\exists x)((y)(Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet \sim Bx)$$

and

$$(A2) (\exists x)(y)((Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet Bx) \vee \sim(\exists x)((y)(Ky \equiv x=y) \bullet Bx)$$

(A1) is visibly *not* an instance of the Law of the Excluded Middle. It implies the existence of a King of France, and is therefore false. (A2), in contrast, *is* an instance of the Law of the Excluded Middle, and so is true, but does not imply existence of King of France.

Now the original sentence (C) permits two readings, represented in “symbolic logic” as (C1') and (C2'). And similarly, the purported instance of the Law of the Excluded Middle, (A), permits two readings, (A1) and (A2). But in neither (C) nor (A) is there a particular word that is responsible for the equivocation. It is rather in the interaction between the words that an ambiguous structure results, and the virtue of the symbolic representation is that it separates out the two readings so as to make clear in each case the way in which the denoting phrase “the present king of France” and the logical operator of negation are related.

From Wittgenstein's point of view, what Russell has pointed out is that in both (A) and (C) we have cases in which the same (propositional) sign belongs to two different symbols (different propositions). When properly analyzed, the two readings of (C) (and so of (A)) have different logical form. Russell suggests, in introducing the puzzle, that "Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he [the King of France] wears a wig." This conclusion is dispelled by logical analysis, which reveals the equivocation on which it turns. A philosopher (a Hegelian?) who wants to hold onto such a problem, to worry it and to allow it to worry him, must be intending (A), incoherently, as *both* (A1) and (A2), slipping between the two meanings at different stages of his argument, thereby failing to mean *anything* determinate by his words. Thus, (A), *when* seen as philosophically puzzling, is in fact not false, but nonsensical – it has no fixed sense.

Thus we have here a model of Wittgenstein's account of philosophical problems as nonsense arising from the "misunderstanding of the logic of our language." And in unmasking this nonsense, "symbolic logic" plays a leading role. In this way, Russell shows how Frege's promise, that the *Begriffsschrift* can become "a useful tool for philosophers," through "uncovering illusions which through the use of language often almost unavoidably arise concerning the relations of concepts." Of course, Russell's solution is not addressed to a genuine philosophical problem, but to a "logical puzzle" designed to test a theory. But in offering this solution, Russell has uncovered a possibility for the use of "symbolic logic" in philosophical therapy, in the curing of philosophical confusion. It is this that I believe Wittgenstein referred to when he spoke of "Russell's merit."

Russell's merit, Wittgenstein tells us, is to have "shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form." I would add to that: "even when the apparent logical form does not correspond to any real form" – because we unwittingly confuse distinct logical forms with one another. It is in such a case that "Russell's merit" can be to contribute to the philosophical resolution of philosophical puzzlement, by unmasking the confusions and equivocations that lie at the root of such puzzlement. This reading of "Russell's merit" succeeds where the obvious interpretation fails.

(a) Russell's particular merit was to show that forms of equivocation exist which can only be clearly unmasked and avoided through the application of something like a *Begriffsschrift*. This depends on the more general point that a *Begriffsschrift* can help to make perspicuous the underlying logical structure of a proposition, but goes beyond it significantly, especially in revealing forms of equivocation that occur in propositions taken as wholes but cannot be reduced to equivocation on any particular word occurring within the proposition. Whereas the latter form of equivocation might be addressed simply by introducing a new word, the form of equivocation identified by Russell seems to require a new symbolism to lay it bare.

(b) Russell's merit, so understood is directly tied to the discussion of philosophical nonsense in 4.003 through our analysis of the relationship between Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical nonsense and forms of confusion and equivocation. Thus 4.0031 finds its proper place as a comment on 4.003, not just 4.002.

(c) Finally, Russell contributes decisively to the project of a "Critique of language" by showing how the Fregean tool of the *Begriffsschrift* can have an indispensable role in the unmasking of philosophical illusion.

I believe that this moral is displayed in many of Wittgenstein's attempts at solutions of the problems of philosophy in the *Tractatus*, and that it guides his own remarks about devising "conceptual notations" in that work. While showing this in general is a larger project than can be accomplished in this paper, in the next (and final) section, we will see something of this sort in the case of Wittgenstein's treatment of identity.

## **VI. The other puzzles, and Wittgenstein's critique of Russell**

The above interpretation of "Russell's merit" turned especially on the second of Russell's three puzzles in "On Denoting." I will conclude with a discussion of the other two puzzles from "On Denoting." While acknowledging their similarities to the second puzzle, discussed above, I will argue that these other puzzles are nonetheless less appropriate as models for Wittgenstein's understanding of Russell's merit. I will first show how one might try to see the solution to each of these puzzles as turning on a similar confusion of logical forms, unmasked by the distinction between primary and secondary occurrences. I will argue that this idea cannot provide a stable solution to these puzzles (in contrast to the case of the second puzzle). I will then discuss the different attitudes of Russell and Wittgenstein to the remaining difficulties. For Russell, these difficulties lead to his acquaintance-based epistemology and semantics, and his doctrine that most apparent proper names are really descriptions in disguise. For Wittgenstein, Russell's solutions to these puzzles involve a further confusion, between formal and real concepts, internal and real relations – especially in the case of identity and existence – and this accounts for the further difficulties in which Russell eventually finds himself entangled. Wittgenstein's technique in criticizing Russell on identity is

modeled on Russell's own use of "symbolic logic" to solve logical puzzles involving denoting phrases. Just as Russell shows denoting phrases to be incomplete symbols by introducing a logical notation in which they are "paraphrased away," so Wittgenstein introduces a logical notation in which the sign for identity is paraphrased away, each sentence in which it occurs being translated into another sentence in which it does not occur. So there is an important sense in which Wittgenstein criticizes Russell by turning his own philosophical techniques against him.

The first puzzle concerns the apparently valid inference:

(1) George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*.

(2) Scott was (=) the author of *Waverley*.

Therefore

(3) George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott.

While this appears to be an application of the principle of the substitutability of identicals, it also seems that one should say that (1) and (2) are true and (3) is false – "an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe."<sup>27</sup> ("On Denoting," 485.)

It might seem adequate to solve the puzzle to point out that (2), when analyzed as

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<sup>27</sup> In the unpublished manuscript "On Fundamentals," Russell initially formulated the puzzle with (1) as "people were surprised that Scott was the author of *Waverley*" and (3) as "people were surprised that Scott was Scott." (Russell, *Foundations of Logic*, 370.) It helps to appreciate the humor in Russell's puzzle to recall some background that would have been well known to Russell's readers. Scott published the *Waverley* novels anonymously. The first novel, titled *Waverley*, appeared in 1814. Subsequent novels in the series claimed to be written by "the author of *Waverley*." Scott did not reveal his authorship of the *Waverley* novels until 1827. In a famous incident George IV tried to force Scott to reveal his authorship of the *Waverley* novels by making a toast to "the author of *Waverley*" in Scott's presence. (See the editor's discussion in *Foundations of Logic*, 650-651.) George IV was commonly known as "the first gentleman of Europe" because of his reputation as a vain and empty-headed dandy. Russell clearly did not think it impossible *in general* for someone to take an interest in the law of identity; rather, he saw this as impossible for so intellectually vacuous a man as George IV. In a letter of June 13, 1905, he wrote that for George IV to wonder whether Scott was Scott would imply "more interest in the Laws of Thought than was possible for the First Gentleman of Europe." (*Autobiography*, 183.)

$$(2') (\exists x)((y)(Ay \equiv x=y) \bullet s=x)$$

does not have the form of an identity sentence, so that there is no question of an application of the substitutability of identicals here. This would be hasty, however. For if we apply the theory of descriptions to (1) as well, we apparently get something like:

$$(1') (\exists x)((y)(Ay \equiv x=y) \bullet W(s=x)),$$

with “*W*...” representing “George IV wished to know whether...” And, Russell tells us, the inference from (1') and (2') to (3) is *valid* – since in general “the truth of the inferences resulting from making what is *verbally* the substitution of ‘Scott’ for ‘the author of *Waverley*’...” is unaffected, “so long as ‘the author of *Waverley*’ has what I call a *primary* occurrence in the proposition considered.” (“On Denoting,” 489.) It is in response to this problem that Russell first introduces the distinction between primary and secondary occurrences of denoting phrases. This distinction permits two readings of (1). The primary occurrence reading is (1'), while the secondary occurrence reading is:

$$(1'') W((\exists x)((y)(Ay \equiv x=y) \bullet s=x)).$$

Russell maintains that it is (1'') that we usually would intend by (1), and that (3) (or (3')), “*W(s=s)*” does not follow from (1'') and (2'). Thus the unfortunate inference is apparently avoided.

The third puzzle in “On Denoting” concerns denial of existence.<sup>28</sup> The sentence (4) is apparently true:

$$(4) \text{ The round square does not exist.}$$

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, the example that Russell uses to introduce the puzzle, “the difference between A and B” when “it is false that A and B differ,” raises a number of other thorny issues, having to do with the problem of false judgment. The issues here are too complex for detailed discussion in this paper. See Hochberg, “Descriptions, Situations and Russell’s Extensional Analysis of Intentionality” for some discussion of the relationship of this puzzle to these broader issues.

Yet (4) seems to have the form of the negation of a simple subject-predicate sentence:

(4')  $\sim Er$ .

It is difficult to see how this can be true unless the subject of the sentence exists in some sense. As Russell puts it, "How can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition? ... Hence, it would appear, it must always be self-contradictory to deny the being of anything..." ("On Denoting," 485.)

Russell's solution to this puzzle in "On Denoting" is not entirely clear. After solving the second puzzle (concerning the present king of France's baldness), he asserts that "we can now see how to deny that there is such an object as" the round square.<sup>29</sup> He tells us that "the whole realm of non-entities ... can now be satisfactorily dealt with," and that phrases that appear to denote such non-entities are "denoting phrases that do not denote anything." He reiterates the primary/secondary occurrence distinction, concluding that for any empty denoting phrase, "if [it] has a primary occurrence, the proposition containing the occurrence is false; but if the occurrence is secondary, the proposition may be true." ("On Denoting," 490-1.)<sup>30</sup>

In "On Denoting," however, Russell does *not* tell us explicitly how to deny that there is such an object as the round square. His reference to the primary/secondary occurrence distinction, however, suggests that he is intending to apply the apparatus of his theory of descriptions to (4) and its ilk. Here (4) might be conceived of as the application of the predicate "exists" to the denoting phrase "the round square." Since (4) also contains negation, we would have two readings:

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<sup>29</sup> He uses his example of the difference between A and B, which I am avoiding for the reasons mentioned in footnote 28 above.

<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in *Principia Mathematica*, the first example given to illustrate the thesis that "when  $(\iota x)(\phi x)$  has a secondary occurrence, a proposition in which it occurs may be true even when  $(\iota x)(\phi x)$  does not exist" is the proposition "There is no such person as the King of France." (69)

$$(4'') (\exists x)((y)((Ry \cdot Sy) \equiv x=y) \cdot \sim Ex)$$

$$(4''') \sim((\exists x)((y)((Ry \cdot Sy) \equiv x=y) \cdot Ex)).$$

(4''), the primary occurrence reading, would be false, because there is no non-existent round square; but (4'''), the secondary occurrence reading, would be true, because there is no existent round square.<sup>31</sup>

However, in later writings, Russell provided a special definition of existence as applied to definite descriptions, according to which “the *F* exists” is to be analyzed as “ $(\exists x)(y)(Fy \equiv x=y)$ .” This does not yield any general definition of “exists” as a predicate, which could be applied to terms that are not descriptions. However a few logical moves lead to the suggestion that “*x* exists” can, after all be defined as a predicate. First, note the equivalence of

$$(\exists x)(y)(Fy \equiv x=y)$$

and

$$(\exists x)((y)(Fy \equiv x=y) \cdot (\exists z)(x = z)).$$

Next, observe that while the first is the official Russellian analysis of “the *F* exists,” the second is the Russellian analysis (with primary occurrence of the description) of “ $(\exists z)(\text{the } F = z)$ .” We might then conclude that we can treat “*x* exists” as the predicate “ $(\exists z)(x = z)$ .”<sup>32</sup> This yields as our two readings of (4):

$$(4''''') (\exists x)((y)((Ry \cdot Sy) \equiv x=y) \cdot \sim(\exists z)(x = z))$$

$$(4''''') \sim((\exists x)((y)((Ry \cdot Sy) \equiv x=y) \cdot (\exists z)(x = z))).$$

<sup>31</sup> This approach to the solution of the puzzle is taken by, for example, Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 18-19. Perhaps because of its inclusion in this textbook, the same idea can be found reproduced in several sets of class handouts and lecture notes accessible on the internet.

<sup>32</sup> Again, see Lycan, *Philosophy of Language*, 19, for one example among many. Also, see *Principia Mathematica* (69), where “There is no such person as the King of France” is paraphrased, apparently interchangeably, as both “ $\sim\{E!(\iota x)(\phi x)\}$ ” and “ $\sim\{(\exists c).c = (\iota x)(\phi x)\}$ .”

Can we then assert that the first and third puzzles, like the second, arise from an equivocation, that each puzzle involves a confusion between primary and secondary occurrence readings (of (1) and (4) respectively), by analogy with our reading of the second puzzle? That is, can we say that anyone who is puzzled by George IV's epistemic state is suffering from an illusion of having given a determinate sense to (1), while actually wavering between (1') and (1''), and similarly, that anyone who is puzzled by the round square's non-existence is wavering between (4''') and (4''''), and so not giving any determinate sense to (4)?

In each case, there are difficulties in the way of embracing this move. In the case of the first puzzle, the problem is that the proposed solution accepts Russell's claim that the inference from (1') and (2') to (3) is valid. Russell further claims that (1') can itself be true, in a case such as the following: George IV sees a man from a distance, who is in fact the author of *Waverley*, Sir Walter Scott; and asks himself, "is that Scott?" ("On Denoting, 489.) In such a case, then, Russell is committed to the claim that we *can* validly infer that George IV also wishes to know whether *Scott* is Scott. But this may seem as objectionable as the inference that gave rise to the puzzle in the first place. For even in this case it would seem that "an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> This point is made by Scott Soames (*The Dawn of Analysis*, 123) and Saul Kripke. ("Russell's Notion of Scope," 1024.) Kripke remarks that the point had been ignored prior to Soames's discussion. But it is arguably present in Linsky, "Description and the Antinomy of the Name-Relation," 274.

An anonymous referee suggested that "the obvious Russellian way to block" this particular problem would be to take "Scott" to be a "disguised description." I do not explore this suggestion further because, as the referee notes, "the point remains" – this move seems to simply shift the problem to the level of "logically proper names," which cannot be taken as disguised descriptions. I discuss how Russell would avoid this problem for such names below.

In the case of the third puzzle, the difficulty is that in treating “exists” as a general predicate, the proposed solution flies in the face of Russell’s explicit statement in *Principia Mathematica* that “our definition give[s] no meaning to  $E!x$ ” for variable  $x$ . That is, he has only defined the entire *context* “the  $F$  exists,” with a description as subject. He has not defined an existence predicate. (175) Indeed, in *Principia*, Russell implies that in the case of a “proper name ... a name directly representing some object,” a sentence denying existence of that name is not false but *meaningless*,<sup>34</sup> whereas in the logic of *Principia Mathematica*, “ $\sim(\exists z)(a = z)$ ” is false, indeed *logically* false, when  $a$  is a proper name.

Russell’s eventual response to these difficulties, in the period when Wittgenstein worked closely with him, would involve many of the key elements of his later philosophical system. Both his acquaintance-based semantics and epistemology and his metaphysics of ordinary things and persons as logical constructions out of sense-data (the objects of acquaintance) would play a role. Since Russell maintains that the notion of existence defined for the case of descriptions cannot be extended to a general existence-predicate, he would have to dismiss the supposed primary occurrence reading (4'') of (4) as a mere illusion. This position seems unstable, however, since “ $(\exists z)(x = z)$ ” apparently provides a perfectly defensible definition of an existence predicate which can apply to both descriptions and true proper names, even if it yields only logical truths in the latter case. And indeed, it is not hard to find Russell saying things like “If I am acquainted with a things that exists, my acquaintance gives me the knowledge that it exists.” (*Problems of Philosophy*, 30) Yet according to the official doctrine of *Principia*, “it would seem that

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<sup>34</sup> “Whenever the grammatical subject of a proposition can be supposed not to exist without rendering the proposition meaningless, it is plain that the grammatical subject is not a proper name...” (*Principia*, 66.)

the word ‘existence’ cannot be applied to subjects immediately given” – though in this instance Russell is somewhat cagey in stating his position. (*Principia Mathematica*, 175.)

Russell’s response to the difficulties raised by the solution to the first puzzle would involve not only his semantics and epistemology, but also his metaphysics of logical constructions out of the primary elements, sense-data.<sup>35</sup> First, Russell maintains that for objects of acquaintance, statements of identity are tautologous when true. To grasp the meanings of two names of the same object of acquaintance is *ipso facto* to know that an identity proposition relating them is true. This means that in a case involving two logically proper names there can be no question of “wishing to know” about identity. To understand the identity claim is to know whether it is true. But this does not fully resolve the problem as initially stated, because there would still be the possibility of wishing to know *de re* about what is in fact a case of self-identity, when the object concerned is known only by description. It is here that the treatment of objects other than sense-data as logical constructions out of sense-data comes into play. Apparent identity predications involving objects other than sense-data are to be reduced to various claims about sense-data and their properties and relations (for example, an identity claim concerning classes of sense-data would be reduced to the claim, concerning two different properties of sense-data, that those properties applied to exactly the same sense-data).

From Wittgenstein’s point of view, however, all such maneuvering is largely beside the point, at least as far as these puzzles are concerned – for the difficulties generated here really stem from Russell’s treatment of identity as a real relation. This is, for Wittgenstein, an instance of one of the most basic forms of confusion, “the confusion between formal concepts and proper concepts which runs through the whole of the old

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<sup>35</sup> See Soames for some discussion of this in the case of the first puzzle. (*The Dawn of Analysis*, 123ff.)

logic” (4.126) or again “the confusion, very widespread among philosophers, between internal relations and proper (external) relations.” (4.122.) Identity is such an internal relation. Just as “the existence of an internal relation between possible states of affairs expresses itself in language by an internal relation between the propositions presenting them” (4.125) so “identity of the object” can be expressed “by identity of the sign and not by means of a sign of identity.” (5.53.) Russell’s notation has the defect of using an identity sign which behaves syntactically like any other relation sign. It is because of features like this that Wittgenstein writes that “the logical symbolism (*Begriffsschrift*) of Frege and Russell,” in spite of being “a symbolism ... which obeys the rules of logical grammar – of logical syntax,” “does still not exclude all errors.”<sup>36</sup> (3.325.)

Wittgenstein’s response to this problem is to suggest a revision of the logical symbolism of Frege and Russell, one in which the identity sign is dispensed with in favor of an exclusive reading of variables when one variable is within the scope of the other. Wittgenstein shows how sentences in the symbolism of *Principia Mathematica* can be paraphrased in this new logical notation, by presenting a number of examples (but without providing the kind of systematic contextual definition given in the theory of descriptions). A consistent application of what Wittgenstein takes to be the lessons of this substitution of one *Begriffsschrift* for another, however, will show that the solutions suggested above to the first and third puzzles themselves involve serious confusions.<sup>37</sup>

Let us take the puzzles in reverse order, beginning with the third.

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<sup>36</sup> Thus here even the *Begriffsschriften* of Frege and Russell reproduce the misleading grammar of identity as a relation which we discussed in ordinary language above.

<sup>37</sup> In “Inheriting from Frege,” Cora Diamond argues that many of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Frege rely on deeply Fregean modes of philosophical diagnosis and treatment. The present point concerning Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Russell runs parallel to hers.

First we note that Russell's definition of "the  $F$  exists" as " $(\exists x)(y)(Fy \equiv x=y)$ " can be rewritten in Wittgenstein's new notation as " $(\exists x)Fx \bullet \sim(\exists x)(\exists y)(Fx \bullet Fy)$ ." So here the use of the identity sign is eliminable – and so, innocent. The same holds true, therefore, in the equivalent but more complicated sentence " $(\exists x)((y)(Fy \equiv x=y) \bullet (\exists z)(x = z))$ ." This sentence is perfectly alright as it stands. The only difficulty with it is that it makes it *appear* as if " $(\exists z)(x = z)$ " is a real predicate, expressing a property of  $x$ . But only replace " $x$ " with a name, to yield " $(\exists z)(a = z)$ ," and you obtain what Wittgenstein considers to be a merely "apparent proposition" which "cannot be written in a correct logical notation at all." (5.534.)<sup>38</sup> Hence we have no ground to view Russell's analysis of "the  $F$  exists" as vindicating an existence *predicate* which could then be appealed to in constructing a "primary occurrence" reading of "the  $F$  does not exist."

If we then turn to the various formulas involved in the discussion of the first puzzle, we again find a number of uses of the identity sign, some of which can be innocently eliminated, whereas others are ineliminable. This ineliminability is, from Wittgenstein's point of view, a symptom of a deeper disease: we have here instances of a fundamental confusion. To use such seeming propositions is to confuse the real logical function of the identity sign as a device for cross-referencing variables, and its apparent grammatical function as a relation sign. Or, perhaps better, it is to confuse the logical function of the identity sign with the logical function of other symbols which work in grammatically the same way according to the rules of the notation of *Principia*.

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<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein lists " $(\exists x)x = a$ " as one of these pseudo-propositions, along with " $a = a$ " and other examples. In " $(\exists x)x = a$ " it is not possible to see "=" as a device for managing variable (or even name) cross-referencing. This is in contrast with " $(\exists x)(x = a \bullet Fx)$ " which is perfectly in order, and can be rewritten simply as " $Fa$ ." Note that careful consideration of this and similar examples should reveal that, from Wittgenstein's point of view, signs like " $\bullet$ " and " $\supset$ " are also functioning equivocally in contexts involving the identity sign. These signs can't be taken as genuine truth-functional operations in such contexts without taking identity as a proper relation.

Thus, it is easy to rewrite “Scott is the author of Waverley,” symbolized as

$$(2') (\exists x)((y)(Ay \equiv x=y) \bullet s=x)$$

in Wittgenstein’s new notation as

$$(2'*) As \bullet \sim(\exists x)(\exists y)(Ax \bullet Ay).$$

Similarly we can rewrite the “secondary occurrence” interpretation of (1),

$$(1'') \mathbf{W}((\exists x)((y)(Ay \equiv x=y) \bullet s=x))$$

as

$$(1''*) \mathbf{W}(As \bullet \sim(\exists x)(\exists y)(Ax \bullet Ay)).^{39}$$

On the other hand, the crucial “primary occurrence reading” of (1)

$$(1') (\exists x)((y)(Ay \equiv x=y) \bullet \mathbf{W}(s=x))$$

contains an ineliminable use of the identity sign in the *de re* context “ $\mathbf{W}(s=x)$ .” To see this as a legitimate propositional constituent, one has to see “ $s=x$ ” as expressing a property of  $x$ , the property of Scott’s being identical with  $x$ . And this is to confuse an internal relation (identity) with a real relation, a formal concept (that of “being Scott”) with a real concept. Only in this way can one see “ $s=x$ ” as expressing something that could be the object of George IV’s desire for knowledge. The same confusion, of course, shows up again in the putative troubling conclusion (3), “ $\mathbf{W}(s=s)$ .” And again, this confusion is made possible by the fact that in the notation of *Principia Mathematica*, we have a case of one of those most subtle forms of equivocation in which “two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition.” (3.323.) In this way, the possibility of confusion that Wittgenstein originally discerned in “the language of everyday life” (3.323) is reproduced in the

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<sup>39</sup> There are further issues concerning Wittgenstein’s view of propositional attitude operators like “ $\mathbf{W}$ ,” especially in the light of 5.541-5.5422. However, there is not time to explore them here.

“logical symbolism of Frege and Russell,” which, while designed to avoid such problems “does not exclude all errors.” (3.325.) But an approach to these difficulties was nonetheless indicated in their work, and especially in Russell’s way of tackling puzzles in “On Denoting.” If in fact he had not quite “got to the bottom of things” there, nonetheless, from the point of view of the author of the *Tractatus*, he had made an essential contribution to exhibiting the way to get there.

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