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Metaphysical Readings of the *Tractatus*¹

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Warren Goldfarb

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²As all its readers know, the basic puzzle of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is that it makes many metaphysical pronouncements, while at the same time it declares metaphysics to be impossible. Or so it appears. To what extent those appearances can be reconciled has been a continuing theme in the interpretation of the book since its appearance, starting with Russell’s rebuke in his Introduction (“after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the skeptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole”), and with Ramsey’s overly repeated quip.

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³For at least the last forty years, the dominant view of the *Tractatus* has been that Wittgenstein does not take metaphysics to be impossible. The doctrines of the book have the consequence that metaphysics is *nonsense*, but that is not at all the same thing. Metaphysical theses cannot be said—on that Wittgenstein is clear—but Wittgenstein does speak of what can be shown, rather than said. It is this status that the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* has, on this view. Many commentators have taken this line, but its fullest and most self-conscious expression lies in the writings of Peter Hacker and David Pears. Here’s Hacker: “The author of the *Tractatus* was explicitly committed to a host of claims about logic, language, thought and the logical structure of the world, which cannot be stated in well-formed sentences of language, but are shown by them.” And thus Pears: “The opening ontology is not something that we are supposed to discount because it is an attempt to say things that can only be shown. On the contrary, here, as elsewhere in the *Tractatus*, the strict impossibility of formulating a thesis in factual language is, if anything, a sign of its importance.” On this view, there are important claims, theses, that can be shown, but not said. We have then two types of communication that language can effect. The ordinary way of communicating is to say things; but there is another track: that of showing; and there are things not amenable to being said that can be communicated by being shown.

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Das Überwinden 7

If Wittgenstein is communicating a metaphysics, what kind of metaphysics it is seems patent: it is emphatically realist. As Pears puts it, “the *Tractatus* is basically realistic in the following sense: language enjoys certain options on the surface, but deeper down it is founded on the intrinsic nature of objects, which is not our creation but is set over against us in mysterious independence.”⁵ Whatever they may turn out to be, Wittgenstein’s objects are “out there,” given independently of us and prior to language. Language is responsible to these objects. Their logical behavior inflicts a structure on language, since the structure of language must mirror that of the objects. Indeed, often Wittgenstein is taken to be sketching a transcendental argument of some sort: if representation of the world by language is to be possible, then there must be objects that are simple, invariable, eternal, have fixed repertoires of possibilities of combinations with other objects, and lack intrinsic material properties. The intelligibility of language rests on these objects. That propositions have sense is thus based on metaphysical features of the world. In this way, as Pears puts it, Wittgenstein is giving an “explanation of the miracle of propositional sense.”

About realism too there seems no question about textual support. The opening of the *Tractatus* unabashedly presents (or so it seems) a realist metaphysics, and the introduction of language only after facts and objects suggests that the ontology is prior. Of course those remarks are nonsense, by the lights of the book, but somehow we can understand what they are getting at. ⁶My topic in this paper is dissent from this view: denying that the *Tractatus* is propounding realism, and denying that Wittgenstein is communicating a metaphysics. This is “the new Wittgenstein,” but it goes back farther than some recent literature indicates; the new Wittgenstein has roots over thirty years old. Realism was the focus of this kind of dissent at first, starting with a 1969 paper of Hidé Ishiguro, and continuing with two papers of Brian McGuinness published in the early 1980s, with an unpublished but circulated manuscript of my own from 1979, and with a paper of Peter Winch published in 1987.⁷ Cora Diamond’s paper “Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*,” published in 1988, sharpened the issue by starting with the *status* of Wittgenstein’s seemingly metaphysical remarks, rather than their content. Diamond urged an understanding of those remarks as pure nonsense,

Wittgenstein's objects as the bedrock of a realism would be swept away with this. My aim here is to survey the earlier dissent, to see what the lacunae in it were that Diamond addressed; and then to see what Diamond's interpretive stance involves, how it redirected the issues, and where it now is.

I

Frege's context principle "only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning" occurs in the *Tractatus* at 3.3. In her 1969 paper, Ishiguro drew from the principle the plausible inference that one cannot look for the referents of

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1 2 Wittgensteinian names independently of their use in propositions. On this
3 4 understanding, there cannot be anything prior to the use of names in
5 6 propositions that fixes the referents of the names—no ostensive acts or other
7 8 baptisms. Rather, it is the use of propositions containing a name that fixes its
referent.

9 0 A second point supports this line of thought: the objects of the *Tractatus* are
11 unlike any kind of object we ordinarily encounter. The features Wittgenstein
12 ascribes to objects, particularly the independence of elementary propositions
13 from each other and the role of objects in constituting any conceivable world as
14 well as the actual one, make the objects peculiar, as Ishiguro put it, “not like
15 things (however simple) in the empirical world which can be individuated
16 extensionally.” Thus the only grasp we have on identity criteria for such objects
17 comes via the propositions that contain names for them, not from something
18 intrinsic to the objects. Simple names, Ishiguro concluded, are “dummy names,”
19 like the “a” in “let a be the center of a circle.” This, of course, is not at all like
20 any realist picture of objects.

21 McGuinness took up this invocation of Frege’s context principle, and
22 elaborated how it should be viewed as yielding a non-realist position. For
23 Wittgenstein’s objects are simply whatever is demanded by propositions: “the
24 semantic role of the supposedly possible simple . . . name is that of being
25 combined with other simple . . . names to produce a proposition having a
26 truth-value.” Wittgenstein is not a realist, McGuinness says, in respect of the
27 objects his theory of language demands, because those objects are “not
28 concrete objects which may sensibly be said to exist or not.” Again, there can
29 be no pre-propositional “grasp” of objects; there is no operation other than
30 grasping or expressing propositions.

31
32 §Our acquaintance with objects . . . is not an experience of knowledge of
33 something over against which we stand. . . . Objects are . . . beyond being,
34 and it is therefore misleading to regard Wittgenstein as a realist in respect
35 of them.

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37 ¶A different argument, not invoking the context principle but with parallels to
38 Ishiguro’s and McGuinness’s concerns, is explored in my 1979 manuscript.
39 There I argued that the question of realism can be approached by way of the
40 question of how simple names go proxy for simple objects. If one has the
41 picture of the independently existing realm of simple objects on one side and
42 language on the other, the question arises as to what bridges the gap. The
43 standard answer is this: the connection between simple name and simple object
is made by a mental act: some sort of intentional act whose upshot is a dubbing.

Ha s the view thus: “a mechanism of a psychological nature is generated to project
cke lines of projection onto the world”; it is “the view that essential symbolic
r phenomena occur in the soul by means of psychological processes.”
ex This position can be seen at once to be inconsonant with a central theme of the
pre *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein seeks to put a limit to thought by putting a limit to
sse language. He writes to Russell in August, 1919:

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¹⁰The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by propositions—i.e. by language—(and, what comes to the same, what can be thought).

For Wittgenstein, thought is a language itself, so that the account of language is meant at the same time to be an account of thought. Thus Hacker's statement is backwards: it's not that symbolic phenomena occur by means of psychological processes; rather psychological processes occur by means of symbolic phenomena. The order of explanation is from Tractarian theory of meaning to the nature of mental life. If unanalyzed mental processes play a basic role in the account of language, then Wittgenstein's taking a proper account of language as solving all philosophical questions is completely undermined.

¹¹McGuinness summarized my point in a humorous simile. To claim that the elements of propositions "acquire meaning and [the propositions] acquire truthvalue in virtue of an act of meaning or intending you will have done nothing. It would be like the peasants to whom the working of the steam-locomotive was carefully explained, who then asked, 'But where does the horse go?'"

¹²Wittgenstein says that a thought is a logical picture (3); and a picture is a fact (2.141). Thus thoughts are sorts of facts. Since a thought is simply a fact, a relation of "psychical constituents," and sits squarely in one symbolic realm, it seems clear that thoughts cannot forge the link between a symbolic realm and the world—they rely on that link. For example, my thought "This is *a*" contains a constituent corresponding to the object *a*. But then this thought presupposes whatever it is that makes this constituent so correspond. One constituent must already refer to *a*; the thought cannot create the reference relation. A particular thought has the content it does by dint of the workings of language.

Consequently, if mental acts are to produce reference, those mental acts cannot be thoughts. Further confirmation of the point that Wittgenstein's account of language is meant to provide an account of mental phenomena and not the other way around comes from the remark "Theory of knowledge is the philosophy of psychology" (4.1121). Since philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts (4.112), what we do in philosophy of psychology is lay out further analyzed forms of the propositions of psychology. This will tell us the nature of mind.

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ple names? We have seen that if there is to be an act of dubbing to link names with objects, it must be prior to thoughts, beliefs, and intentions. Any such dubbing act would thus be unlike the mental acts with which we are familiar. There is some process, otherwise indescribable, that links the simple names with simple objects. This is a curious position: on the metaphysical reading, that propositions have sense is *explained* via an invocation of the ontological realm. On the view we here come to, that dubbings are unexplained and out-of-the-world, there is no possibility of clarifying *how* the objects fulfill this task. This is what I call a “mystery-act” view.

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1 Indeed, in the second edition of *Insight and Illusion*, Hacker comes to just such
2 a view. He discards the formulations involving “psychological mechanisms,”
3 and says:

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5 13 That such configurations, in thought or language, actually represent . . .
6 is a function of the will, of the metaphysical self. . . . It is a mental act
7 (albeit of a transcendental self, not of the self that is studied by
8 psychology) that injects meaning or significance into signs.
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13 Mental acts of a transcendental self not amenable to psychological scrutiny
14 certainly do strike me as mysterious.

15 14 My point, of course, was not that we should embrace mystery acts, but rather
16 that there is no need in the *Tractatus* for dubbings at all. And no dubbings
17 mean that we have no external view of the objects. As I put it, the account rests
18 content in language. All that we should want to say about a name’s going proxy
19 for an object is exhausted by logical form, that is, the possibilities of combining
20 with other names into propositions.
21

22 15 To the objection that this will not determine *which* object of the given logical
23 form the name designates, I would reply that there is no real question here. Like
24 Ishiguro and McGuinness, I take it that the peculiarities of Wittgensteinian
25 objects make inapplicable anything like criteria of identity. Towards this end, I
26 used an argument that also appeared in McGuinness. He put it thus: “if I
27 suppose two objects of the same logical form and call them ‘*a*’ and ‘*b*’, and if I
28 suppose that ‘*a*’ has one set of material properties and ‘*b*’ another, there is
29 really no sense to the question whether perhaps in reality ‘*b*’ has the set of
30 properties I have assigned to ‘*a*’ and conversely.” That is, if I have two names
31 with the same logical form, the notion that there is some ambiguity—that one
32 name could designate this object and the other that object, as opposed to vice
33 versa—is empty, because it doesn’t make any difference, as far as the world
34 being described goes, which names which.

35 We have wanted to ask, given a description of the syntax of the simple name,
36 which object having that logical form is the one the name represents. But there
37 can be no answer to that question: there is nothing but logical form to give, for
38 objects have nothing else. In 2.01231 Wittgenstein says “if I am to know an
39 object, though I need not know its external properties I must know all its
40 internal properties.” Thus knowing which object a simple name
41 represents—knowing the meaning of a sign—amounts only to a knowledge of
42 the object’s internal properties. All there is to be known is given by the logical
43 form of the sign.

However, this interchangeability argument is dangerous and misleading. It

lo : it gives expression to the idea that Tractarian objects, since they lack any
o intrinsic material properties, are too thin to support a realist conception. But
ks the point we want to get to is, roughly, this: that there is no conception of
ni objects, and of situations, hence of the world, independently of language.
ce These notions

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are given only via our operating in language. The interchangeability argument requires a perspective from which this is denied. It claims that there is no difference between the world in which *a* has these material properties and *b* has those, and the world in which *a* has those and *b* has these. If we take it that our conception of situations, and hence difference of situations, is given via our understanding of language, that is, the understanding of propositions that represent situations, then of course there is a difference between those worlds: in one, *a* has these and *b* those, in another *a* has those and *b* these—and that is all that difference in situation amounts to.

The argument thus *itself* takes an external stance towards the ontology. This is much the common stance: one talks about the system from outside, describing its ontological and logical features as if we can make perfectly good sense of them; adding, however, that according to the *Tractatus* we are inside the system, and to those inside such talk does not make sense. It is just the use of this stance that underwrites the dominant interpretation; the external stance gives rise to the idea that Wittgenstein is presenting features of reality which, once we are inside, become unsayable.

Thus I find it problematic to adopt the external stance when the goal is to undercut the ascription of realism. To attempt such undercutting while occupying that stance almost demands that we give an alternative, anti-realist, account of objects. But the point should be that there is no more a perspective from which such a “linguistic” (or “linguistic-idealist”) account can be given than there is from which a realist account can be given. The external stance is one to which, on Tractarian grounds, we ought not have access at all.

¹⁶The question of stance is key to arriving at a more profound sense of what the alternative to the metaphysical interpretation could be. Otherwise, the issues are stalled. Matters will turn on deciding whether a weaker reading of the context principle is possible, and whether the ontological is prior to the linguistic or vice versa. These questions are not readily adjudicable given the text and the common ways of reading it.

McGuinness and I tried to suggest some other way of reading. For we saw that our denial that the *Tractatus* espouses realism could be sustained only if the apparently realist nature of the opening of the text could be taken differently. In a suggestive remark, McGuinness called the opening of the

he wants to give us to show us the nature of language. As is well-known, one of the chief results of the view of language so attained is the rejection of all such myths.” In his later paper, he wrote:

¹⁷Wittgenstein’s method . . . allows itself to use or feign to use a whole metaphysics in the task of getting rid of metaphysics. This sort of *Abschreckungsmethode*, a deterrence by example, is perhaps legitimate. But when we end up having strictly thought through everything then . . .we see that realism coincides with idealism.

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1 The thought here is that the seemingly metaphysical remarks of the *Tractatus*
2 are doing different work from that of suggesting an unsayable metaphysics. We
3 4 are meant to come to see that they are myths. It is not that we are to “discount”
5 6 the opening ontology because it turns out to be unsayable (as Pears takes
7 8 McGuinness to be saying), but rather we are to think through the remarks, to
9 0 see that what they present is not coherent.

11 A similar thought occurred to me: as I put it,

12 18the basic structure [of the *Tractatus*] is . . . dialectic. First, to be sure, is
13 a step to objects, objects of a certain character; this step is perhaps
14 grounded in naively realist intuitions about language and representation.
15 Then, however, relying on the character of the objects and the nature of
16 language, the text goes on to undermine the idea that objects can be
17 construed as a transcendental category, a category conceivable apart from
18 language. Hence we have here an undermining of the notion of ontology
19 at all. . . . We are to kick the ladder away not by ignoring how we arrived
20 at the altitude of remark 7, but by retracing the earlier remarks armed
21 with the recognition of correct method in philosophy that we have gained.
22

23 The idea of reading the *Tractatus* in this dialectical way was essential to the
24 development of a non-metaphysical interpretation. McGuinness wrote me at
25 the time, “Whether all this lends itself to further development, and if so in
26 what direction, I am not yet clear.” Nor was I. We were working in the wrong
27 direction: from the denial of realism to how the seemingly realist remarks had
28 to be read. That they had to be read in some sort of transformational manner
29 was, to be sure, correct. But it was the manner of reading that had to be put
30 first, and clarified independently of the issue of realism, in order to make
31 progress.
32

33 II

34 On the dominant reading, the metaphysical sentences of the *Tractatus* work
35 by somehow suggesting ineffable features of reality (even though these
36 sentences are nonsense), which features, it turns out, are shown by sentences
37 with sense and sentences of logic. Thus, those metaphysical pronouncements
38 may be nonsensical, but they too communicate; they are helpful, informative
39 nonsense. (Thus, in fact, on this view there are *three* tracks for
40 communicating: saying, showing, and what I’ve just called “suggesting.”)
41 Diamond’s approach to the *Tractatus* starts by criticizing this idea. Drawing
42 on Wittgenstein’s remark that a “proposition is nonsensical because we have
43 failed to make an arbitrary determination” (5.473), Diamond contrasts a view

of ense that, she asserts, is presupposed by the dominant reading, and a view of
n nonsense that she takes to be Wittgenstein's. On the latter view, a sentence is
o nonsense because the words haven't been given meanings that yield
ns sense—end of story. The former view is something like this:

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19that sentences can “try to say something,” but if, in so doing, they violate principles of logical syntax, they turn out to be nonsense. In this, as Diamond puts it, there is a “conception of *something* you cannot do,” like putting together concepts that don’t stick to each other, or using a formal concept as though it were a real concept. On her favored view, no such something is suggested. In this, Diamond is making a powerful new use of the context principle. We

can see expressions as referring only in particular propositions. To take an expression to be referring to a thing or a concept in a sentence requires that we make sense of the sentence, that is, we grasp a proposition it expresses. But if the sentence is nonsense, that is precisely what we cannot do. As Diamond puts it, to take the expression to be referring is to see the expression as a “working part” of a proposition, as something that can contribute to the way in which the sentence expresses something.

On Diamond’s view, then, one cannot take Wittgenstein’s metaphysical pronouncements to be striving to express ineffable truths; if they are nonsense, they are simply nonsense. There is no manner in which they communicate, nothing they “futilely try to state.” And so there are no ineffable truths, no unsayable “features of reality,” no *theses* that cannot be formulated in factual language.

20Thus Diamond would want to understand a sentence like “there exist (necessarily) simple objects, eternal and unchanging, common to our world and all conceivable worlds, and having only formal properties intrinsically” not as a sentence that strives to express something that is in some unsayable way true, but as simply not, in the end, saying anything. It is just nonsense, simply incoherent. Obviously, in that case there can be no question of realism in the *Tractatus*.

Metaphysical sentences of the *Tractatus*, such as those which seem to be talking of simple objects, Diamond calls “transitional language.” We think we have some understanding of such sentences, perhaps by dint of psychological associations we have with them or mental images they call to mind, abetted by the sentences’ having apparent logical form parallel to unproblematic sentences. We are, however, meant to *interrogate* that understanding, particularly as we read on in the text and learn more of the procedures that

me point when we carry the interrogation far enough, the incoherence of the original sentences will become manifest. At that point, we are not left with “ineffable features of reality” but with plain nonsense, recognized as nonsense through the dissolution of concepts we thought we had.

²¹Diamond calls interpretations of the *Tractatus* that take its remarks to suggest ineffable theses “chickening out.” I prefer the terminology, due to Thomas Ricketts, of “irresolute” interpretation, with its connotation of “a kind of dithering, which reflects not being clear what one really wants, a desire to make inconsistent demands.” As a result of Diamond’s work, the central problem for those who wish to dissent from the dominant reading of the *Tractatus* has become that of seeing what a resolute interpretation could come to and how it might be

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1 2 carried through. The starting point has shifted, from the question of realism to
3 4 the very notion of the *Tractatus* as presenting a metaphysics.

5 6 There are many good reasons for seeking as resolute an understanding of the
7 8 *Tractatus* as we can muster. Let me give three.

9 0 (1) In calling something nonsense, surely Wittgenstein is committing
11 himself to the idea that it makes no sense. But if showing is in any way a sort of
12 communicating, that commitment is taken back. So understood, inconsistency
13 is avoided only at the cost of renegeing on the commitment. The central critical
14 word of the *Tractatus*, “nonsense” becomes just an epithet applied to some
15 communications and not others. We have no genuine ruling out of metaphysics,
16 or anything else: only a relabeling.

17 (2) The picture theory purports to tell us what truth is, namely, accurate
18 picturing. On an irresolute reading, the *Tractatus* adopts this theory. To think
19 there are “ineffable truths” is to contradict this theory. It seems to say that there
20 is a type of truth that is not “agreement with reality,” as Wittgenstein lays out
21 that notion.

22 (3) The *Tractatus* claims to solve the problem of the *a priori* of logic by
23 showing how logic has no content. Irresolute interpretations make this
24 impossible to sustain. That is, it is certainly the case that logical truths, being
25 tautologies, have no sayable content. But if showing is a type of
26 communication, then it seems there is some sort of showable content (ineffable,
27 showable content); and logical truths are not empty of that sort of content. (See
28 6.12–6.1201.) If this is a sort of content, it appears that the problem of the *a*
29 *priori* has been “solved” only by a relabeling.

30 ²³Of course, here I am assuming that we should like to understand the *Tractatus*
31 in a way that renders it as coherent as possible; these three reasons recommend
32 a resolute interpretation in order to do so. This may not be a universally shared
33 assumption. Hacker, in his recent criticism of Diamond’s line of thought,
34 speaking of his (totally irresolute) way of taking the *Tractatus*, says “That this
35 doctrine is inconsistent, that this position cannot be upheld, is undeniable, as its
36 author later realized.” I find this astonishing, as a guide to interpretive practice.
37 Reading the *Tractatus* resolutely promises also to provide a subtler and more
38 convincing picture of the relation between early Wittgenstein and late. Early
39 and late, on this view, Wittgenstein sought to undermine metaphysics by
40 showing the incoherence of the language in which one attempted to express it:
41 what changed were the tools he brought to bear, indeed, what it was to show
42 incoherence. There are more specific points of contact as well. On the resolute
43 reading, Wittgenstein is trying to teach us that metaphysics is simple nonsense
that appears to make sense only if we think we can rise above the standpoint of
our operation in language. It is surely not inapt to juxtapose this aim with his

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Investigations, “philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” (§38). Critics of reading the *Tractatus* resolutely contend that any such reading must wind up denying that the book can provide insight. Marie McGinn calls such reading “paradoxical” because “The work is at the same time held to provide the

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²⁴insights necessary for its own self-destruction and to provide no genuine insight that is not ultimately obliterated in the final act of self-annihilation.”

That a resolute reading precludes obtaining insight from the *Tractatus* seems to me mistaken. It is true, there is no philosophical theory that yields the ineffability of what otherwise would be insights, and hence become insights *faute de mieux*. The model is different. Insight is brought by our thinking the philosophical sentences through, and by our coming to see that they say nothing (and suggest nothing). Consider, as an analogy, the example from the *Philosophical Investigations* of the sentence “It’s five o’clock on the sun” (§350). We might start off thinking this made sense, imagining sun-denzens looking at their watches, commenting that it was time for cocktails, etc. Clearly, though, a short course of analysis will get us to see that it makes no sense at all. Through that analysis we gain insight; but the sentence “It’s five o’clock on the sun” does not gesture at or in any other way express the insight. The later Wittgenstein would like us to treat philosophical theses the way we treat this sentence. Resolute readers maintain that the early Wittgenstein wishes us to treat his own seeming philosophical theses the same way.

The criticism that a resolute reading leaves no room for insights is probably based on the misapprehension that Diamond and her elaborators have presented an interpretation of the *Tractatus*. She, and we, have not. She has argued that the dominant interpretation relies on an incorrect and un-Wittgensteinian notion of nonsense, and fails to carry through the commitments Wittgenstein intends when he calls something nonsense. She has thereby articulated a program for interpreting the text. That is not yet to interpret the text. An actual resolute interpretation of the text will involve the working-out of *how* the interrogation of its pronouncements goes, of what processes—what demands placed on the notions—lead us to the recognition that those pronouncements are nonsense. It must be done case by case. In short, the idea of a resolute reading is programmatic, and our understanding of its results depends entirely on the execution of the program.

²⁵Little of this has in fact been done. One instance is Ricketts’s treatment of possibility.²⁶Ricketts notes that in the 2.0s we are given to believe that there is a range of *possibilia*: the possible states of affairs, of which some, the factual ones, subsist. But we are also told that, when objects combine, it is into an

tein later explained to Ogden, when he writes in 2.03, “In states of affairs
objects stand in a determinate relation to one another” he meant “*that there
isn’t anything third* that connects the links but that the links *themselves* make
connexion with one another.”²⁷If there were the “combinations of objects” that
would amount to a possible state of affairs, then the state of affairs would be
factual when it has some further property or because the links are connected in
some further way: there would be something third. In short, the initial
suggestion of the text that there are possible states of affairs is meant to be
discarded, as we start seeing that we are putting inconsistent demands on such
things.

If the text may be intentionally destabilizing the notions which it uses, then clearly new
ways of reading it are in order. Traditionally, one tried to find readings

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1 2 of notions like “logical space,” “pictorial form,” and the like that were
3 4 consistent with all the remarks and played a reasonable role in the overall
5 6 doctrine; and one tried to figure out how, consonant with all the texts,
7 8 Wittgenstein came out on whether there were negative facts or not, and so on.
9 0 On the resolute reading, these may be chimerical aims, since Wittgenstein’s
11 purpose is to get us to see that the concepts involved are not coherent, however
alluring they may be.

12 ²⁸Hacker derides this style of reading as “deconstruction,” and
13 “postmodernism.” These epithets are silly. The rubric that more accurately
14 applies is *esotericism*: the notion that the apparent claims of the author mask a
15 deeper authorial purpose, which, once understood, changes or even reverses the
16 point of those claims; and that only a class of *cognoscenti* will come to see this
17 deeper purpose. True enough, I suppose, on a resolute reading; and it does make
18 me a little uncomfortable. The discomfort is assuaged by various remarks in
19 Wittgenstein’s “Preface” and, of course, the closing remarks of the book,
20 particularly that about the correct method in philosophy: for these remarks are
21 meant to get us to see just the deeper authorial purpose. (However, I do think
22 that the emphasis some commentators put on what has been called “the frame”
23 is misleading, since there are plenty of signals in the body of the text, e.g., in the
24 4s.)

25 ²⁹Further progress in understanding the prospects of a resolute reading requires
26 treatments from this perspective of other central Tractarian notions. About the
27 question of realism, the most critical notion is that of object. Here, I think, we
28 need to think through two sorts of considerations. First is the full force of
29 Wittgenstein’s remark “Wherever the word ‘object’ is correctly used, it is
30 expressed in conceptual notation by a variable name.” If I say, “there’s an object
31 on the table”, I am saying “($\exists x$) (x is on the table)”; no predicate “object”
32 figures in it. (If I were to frame this statement as “($\exists x$)(x is an object & x is on
33 the table)” —parallel, that is, to how one might frame “There is a matchbook on
34 the table”—I should have to be brought to see that the phrase “x is an object”
35 does no logical work—it doesn’t contribute to any inferential connections, and
36 so on—and hence is useless.) Thus the entire content of the notion of object is
37 exhausted by the variable. The seemingly metaphysical sentences that use the
38 word “object” need to have the word draw on its content as a variable, but at the
39 same time use the word with the surface grammar of a property word. We
40 should come to see that there is no property being ascribed; and hence these
41 sentences are simple nonsense.

42 A second consideration here has more general application. Wittgenstein’s
43 characterization of “object” as a formal concept is often taken this way: we
see that a sentence like “x is an object” tries to state something that cannot be

fa nce every proposition with sense must present a contrast, between what would
ls make it true and what would make it false, we conclude that the sentence is
e; nonsense, and “object” is a formal concept, something shown by notation.
b Clearly this line of thought courts—indeed, demands—irresolution: there is
ut *something* we are prevented from saying, by the contrastive constraint on
si saying.

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The question then is whether we can come to a more resolute understanding of this constraint. Here the text of the *Tractatus* does not provide help, for it seems to suggest an ontological grounding of the constraint: as presented in the *Tractatus*, that propositions with sense must present a contrast *results* from their being pictures of facts, and from facts being contingent: a fact can be the case or not be the case. (This is also at the core of how the Vienna positivists took the *Tractatus*. They identified meaning with the configurations of experiences that verify the sentence. Since configurations of experiences are all contingent, it follows that meaningful sentences are too.) Wittgenstein's pre-Tractarian writings may furnish some clues to an alternative. Remarks from *Notes on Logic* like "The sense of a proposition is determined by the two poles *true* and *false*. The form of a proposition is like a straight line, which divides all points of a plane into right and left" (p. 102) and many others suggest that the contrastive constraint is intrinsic to Wittgenstein's very notion of making sense, of communication, of thinking, and so on. That suggests that there ought to be a way of showing that "is an object" collapses, as an attempt to communicate something, that does not suggest a something that it is *trying* to say. That no contrast is presented should make us see that there is simply nothing being said, by showing how we do not get as far as communicating anything coherent. I do not yet see how to articulate such a line; clearly it is essential to do so, if the prospects of a resolute interpretation are to be reasonable. (I would also urge that, in any case, a better understanding of the grounds of the contrastive constraint is central to any progress in understanding the early Wittgenstein's thought.)

It strikes me, too, that the irresolute understanding of the contrastive constraint—that it is grounded in features of the ontology—may be a key ingredient in McGinn's thinking that one must preserve the "nonsensical" insights in order to underwrite the Tractarian critical machinery. She may be asking: if the 2.0s are plain nonsense, how is the contrastive view of sense, an insight necessary for the *Tractatus*'s self-destruction, to be supported?

The question presupposes that there must be some theoretical insight, some view, that underlies the progression towards dissolution. This seems to me to be mistaken. But to carry my line through, it must be admitted that "nonsense" cannot really be a general term of criticism. If it were a general term of

by a theory of language, and Wittgenstein is insistent that there is no such
thing (“Logic must take care of itself”). If it is something shown but not said,
we are in real danger of its being a “what” that is shown, depending on the
features of reality that we cannot talk about but only exhibit. The way out of
this morass has already been canvassed. Wittgenstein’s talk of nonsense is just
shorthand for a process of coming to see how the words fall apart when worked
out from the inside. What Wittgenstein is urging is a case-by-case approach. The
general rubric is nothing but synoptic for what emerges in each case. Here the
commonality with his later thought is unmistakable.

So again we are forced to recognize how far from any settling of the question we are
without developing the actual readings, the tracings of how the notions

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invoked in Wittgenstein's sentences implode. Talking in the abstract about what the status of judgments of nonsense could be, and about other such topics, is incapable of clarifying. The resolute view must take it that clarification, and its resultant renunciations, is possible without a theory to undergird it. Whether this is plausible or not cannot be settled by arguing about this possibility as a thesis, but only by looking at putative clarifications, with their renunciations.

In that there is also a prospect of addressing another line of criticism, which I take to be the strongest one Hacker adduces. In writings after the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein does say things like "I used to believe *p*" for various philosophical sentences *p*, for example, "there is a connection of world and language." Hacker claims that Wittgenstein is clearly referring to the *Tractatus*, and so this contradicts the resolute readers' claim that talk of a world-thing connection is just plain nonsense. My suspicion (and my hope) is that laying out the actual dissolutionary analyses will reveal that expressions of world-thing connections, simple objects, and so on are essential in driving the analytic process forward (it is indeed a dialectical process). If so, Wittgenstein's later remarks like "I used to believe there was a connection of world and language" are no longer proofs of irresolution. They are certainly autobiographical, but it is autobiography that Wittgenstein wishes to preserve precisely because the illusion of understanding such a remark (that there is a connection of a certain kind between world and language) is what can drive one (and did drive him) to the realization that philosophical theories generally, including this one in particular, were nonsensical, relying on parts that turn out upon interrogation not to have meaning. Let me repeat, however, that this is programmatic, and not to be settled by abstract talk.

In coming out from the project, we will encounter again the question of what a resolute reading could leave the reader with. As I suggested above, the reader is left with the insight gained from the process of working through the remarks: insight, for example, that it is illusory to think there is a standpoint from which to talk generally of the structure of facts, the structure of language, and their relation. Now, I think there is some force in McGinn's demand that the reader should be left with something that in retrospect validates the process of "working through." But this need not be some ineffable truth, some metaphysical suggestion, some theory of things that *underlies* how analysis proceeds. I would hope that the resolute reader will be left with—as the nonmetaphysical precipitate of the selfundermining metaphysical myth—the requirement of clarity, and an appreciation of the content of such a requirement. (Perhaps: the practical command of a *Begriffsschrift*.)

Now, it has been suggested (by Juliet Floyd) that the absence of any concrete or specific canons of analysis in the *Tractatus* shows Wittgenstein to

ha more radical aim: an undermining, as being just as much an illusory overly
ve general stance, of the general idea of analysis, of a uniform *Begriffsschrift*,
an and hence of the content of the requirement of clarity. I do not think such an
ev interpretation “paradoxical,” as McGinn would; it has, after all, a form
en analogous to a *reductio ad*

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absurdum. But, as an interpretation of Wittgenstein's intentions, it is far too radical for me. I would hope that the working out of a resolute reading, insofar as it can be done, would enable us to avoid such an all-pervasive undermining. As I've emphasized, we cannot know this until more work is done in carrying a resolute reading forward. But at this point, in advance of such work, I'm sure the supporters of the *ancien regime*, like Hacker, Pears, and McGinn, would be happy to remind me of the fate of those who subvert the stability of that regime, but want to stick at a reasonable *Girondisme*.

Note on the Title

"*Das Überwinden*" is a reference to the second paragraph of 6.54, the penultimate section of the *Tractatus*: "*Er muß diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig.*" Pears–McGuinness translate the first clause as "He must transcend these propositions" (i.e., the propositions of the *Tractatus*). I would translate the clause as "He must overcome these propositions." That difference of preferred translation is a rather nice reflection of the debate between irresolute and resolute interpretations. (The Ogden–Ramsey translation has "He must surmount . . .")

By the way, the contested verb "*überwinden*" is the one that figures in the title of Carnap's well-known 1932 paper "*Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache* ." (This is the paper in which Carnap discusses Heidegger's sentence "*Das Nicht nichtet.*") "Transcend" is obviously wrong as a translation of "*Überwindung*" in Carnap's title. In the standard translation due to Arthur Pap, the clause becomes "The Elimination of Metaphysics." I would prefer, just as in translating *Tractatus* 6.54, "The Overcoming of Metaphysics."

Notes

1 This paper was originally drafted in 2000 for a conference on the *Tractatus* at the University of Utrecht; it was a response to and an appreciation of the then-recently published book, A. Crary and R. Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein*, London, Routledge,

conference of the Austrian Wittgenstein Society in
Kirchberg-am-Wechsel, and subsequently at colloquia
in several American and Canadian universities. I am
grateful to many in the audiences at those occasions
for helpful questions and discussion. My thanks also
to Cora Diamond, Alexander George, and Thomas
Ricketts for insightful comments.

2 “What we can’t say we can’t say, and we can’t whistle it either.” F.P. Ramsey, *The
Foundations of Mathematics*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1931, p. 238. Actually, it
was not in the context of speaking about the *Tractatus* that Ramsey said this. Nonetheless, it
has long been cited as a criticism of Wittgenstein.

3 P.M.S. Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” in *The New
Wittgenstein*, p. 383; David Pears, *The False Prison*, vol. 1, Oxford,
Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 112. The rhetoric here is typical.
“Cannot be stated in well-formed sentences” and “strict
impossibility of formulating a thesis” suggest that perhaps some
things can be stated in ill-formed sentences, and that we may be able
to formulate the thesis if we were more lenient. Cp. G.E.M.
Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, South
Bend, Ind., St. Augustine’s Press, 1959, p. 162: “But an important
part is played in the *Tractatus*

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b yet 'shewn' or 'displayed'. That is to say: it would be right to call them 'true' if, *per*
 y *impossibile*, they could be said; in fact they cannot be called true, since they cannot be
 t said, but 'can be shewn', or 'are exhibited', in the propositions saying the various things
 h that can be said."
 e 4 *The False Prison*, p. 8. 5 *Ibid.*, p.
 t 110. 6 Hidé Ishiguro, "Use and
 h Reference of Names," in Peter Winch,
 i ed., *Studies in the*
 n *Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, London, Routledge, 1969, pp. 20–50. (The same book
 g contains Rush Rhees's essay "'Ontology' and Identity in the *Tractatus* à propos of
 w Black's Companion," which also dissents, in arguing that the *Tractatus* was not
 h concerned with ontology.) Brian McGuinness, "The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*,"
 i in Irving Block, ed., *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Cambridge, Mass.,
 c MIT Press, 1981, pp. 60–73, and "Language and Reality in the *Tractatus*," *Teoria*, 1985,
 h vol. 5, pp. 135–144. Warren Goldfarb, "Names, Objects, and Realism in the *Tractatus*,"
 , ms. 1979. Peter Winch, "Language, Thought and World in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,"
 t chapter 2 of his *Trying to Make Sense*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1987.
 h 7 First published in *Philosophy*, 1988, vol. 63. Reprinted in Cora Diamond, *The Realistic*
 , *Spirit*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991, pp. 179–204. Page references in the text are to
 t the latter.
 h 8 "The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*," pp. 72–73. 9 *Insight and Illusion: Wittgenstein*
 o *on Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Experience*, Oxford,
 u Oxford University Press 1972, p. 51 and p. 55. 10 *Cambridge Letters*, ed. B. McGuinness
 g and G.H. von Wright, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995,
 h p. 124. 11 "Language and Reality in the *Tractatus*," p. 137. 12 The notion of experience, I
 t would think, is to receive similar treatment. It cannot be
 h taken as a primitive notion: what experience comes to at all will be given via the analyzed
 e forms of our (empirical) sentences in which the notion figures. This is why experience,
 y perception, and related notions play so little a role in the *Tractatus*. It is not an oversight
 c on Wittgenstein's part (as Hacker alleged— *Insight and Illusion*, chapter 2) that
 a epistemological considerations are absent from the text. Epistemology can play no
 n foundational role because it presupposes the foundations. Facts about experience,
 o perceptions, and so on, are just facts, internal to the world; experiential statements will be
 t given sense in terms of the structures by which we depict facts.
 b 13 *Insight and Illusion*, revised edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 75. The
 e textual basis for Hacker's calling in the transcendental self is, need I say, thin. Ostension still
 ' seems to play some role still for Hacker, since he identifies the elucidations of 3.263 with
 s propositions of the form "This is A." "It is, as one might say, an ostensive definition . . .
 a misconstrued as a bipolar proposition" (p. 77). Textual basis for this is also lacking.
 i 14 Winch, "Language, Thought and World," gives several arguments for this point. Further
 d support can perhaps be found in the remarks starting in 3.31 about expressions and how they
 ' are presented, particularly 3.317.
 , 15 "The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*," p. 71. 16 See Pears's criticism of Ishiguro and
 a McGuinness in chapter 5 of *The False Prison*. 17 "The So-Called Realism of the *Tractatus*,"
 r p. 63, and "Language and Reality in the
 e *Tractatus*," p. 143. 18 "Names, Objects, and Realism in the *Tractatus*," p. 14. 19
 "Throwing Away the Ladder," p. 195. An account of Diamond's treatment of nonsense
 is given in my "Metaphysics and Nonsense: On Cora Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit*,"
Journal of Philosophical Research, 1997, vol. 22, pp. 57–73.
 20 Diamond's suggestion, that it is a mistaken conception of nonsense that underwrites an
 incorrect way of reading the *Tractatus*, was elaborated and substantiated in several papers

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of James Conant, including “The Method of the *Tractatus*,” in E. Reck, ed., *From Frege to Wittgenstein*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 374–462, and “Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein,” in *The New Wittgenstein*, pp. 174–217.

21 The characterization of the connotation is Diamond’s, in “Realism and Resolution: Reply to Warren Goldfarb and Sabina Lovibond,” *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 1997, vol. 22, p. 78.

22 This criticism is an adaptation of one which Gödel leveled against the positivists’ view of logic and mathematics. “Mathematical sentences have no content only if the term ‘content’ is taken from the beginning in a sense acceptable only to empiricists and not well founded even from the empirical standpoint.” That way of thinking of “content” was adventitious, Gödel charged, since logical and mathematical truths had conceptual content; and the positivists gave no argument to rule out this type of content. See Kurt Gödel, *Collected Works*, vol. III, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 337.

23 “Was He Trying to Whistle It,” p. 383. 24 Marie McGinn, “Between Metaphysics and Nonsense: Elucidation in Wittgenstein’s

Tractatus,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1999, vol. 49, p. 496. 25 Thomas Ricketts, “Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense,” in H. Sluga and D. Stern, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996, section V.

26 *Letters to C.K. Ogden, with Comments on the English Translation of the Tractatus LogicoPhilosophicus*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1973, p. 23.

27 Ricketts also notes that, if there were this range of possible states of affairs, it would be common to our world and any other conceivable world, and would thus usurp the role assigned to objects in the 2.02s. That Wittgenstein did not wish to recognize reified possible facts (a prominent feature of Russell’s pre-1910 metaphysics), is signaled early on in his remark “Positive and negative facts there are, but not true facts and false facts,” *Notes on Logic*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 97. Hacker criticizes Ricketts’s reading in footnote 24 of “Was He Trying to Whistle It?” He notes, for example, that there are no properties of possible states of affairs, since they are not objects, and only objects have properties. Hence there is no property of a possible state of affairs that is its actuality. This is a canonical case of irresolution. Truth acts exactly like a property of possible states of affairs; its not being so is ruled out by the special features of Wittgenstein’s notion of property. But there is *something* that marks out, among the possible states of affairs, those that are true from those that are not.

28 “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” p. 359 and p. 360. 29 Importantly including the notion of showing itself. Clearly, a resolute reading has to deal with passages that explicitly invoke “showing,” and the remark near the end (6.522):

sich.” (The Pears–McGuinness translation here, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words” is unjustifiably irresolute. “Things”?) Such remarks would have to be shown to be transitional language, and their unraveling traced. Some efforts in this direction have been made recently by Michael Kremer in “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” *Noûs*, 2001, vol. 35:1, pp. 39–73.

30 “Number and Ascriptions of Number in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*,” in J. Floyd and S. Shieh, eds., *Future Pasts*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 145–191.

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