1. Use, Purpose and Nonsense

Towards the end of chapter 6, we saw that Wittgenstein's discussion of the principles of the natural sciences sheds important light on his understanding of nonsense: the principles of the natural sciences are neither senseful nor senseless, since, being instruction-propositions (akin to imperative commands), they are not truth-assessable. In spite of this, they are not nonsensical either, in that they serve a genuine purpose: the purpose of *stipulating* optional, instrumentally valuable, systems. From this emerges the idea that, for Wittgenstein, a proposition that is neither senseful nor senseless is not, for this reason, automatically nonsensical; instead, *a proposition is nonsensical when the sign expressing it is used in a purposeless manner*. Philosophy is characterised by a particular kind of such nonsense: the nonsense that arises from using signs in a self-stultifying manner.[cclviii] We have come across this notion of a self-stultifying use of signs repeatedly in this book. In chapters 2 and 6, we saw that metaphysical and ethical propositions involve using signs in manners that subvert themselves. This idea also emerged in chapter 5, in our discussion of the causal system that allows for action at a distance (AD) and the causal system that does not allow for action at a distance (NAD). Let us briefly revisit the example we considered as part of that discussion. We saw then that sentence '*i*' ('O causes the green ball to remain in r at t_{+1} even though it has been struck by the red ball at t') is used in (AD) to express a senseful proposition *i*, in which 'O' is understood as a magnet. In (AD), *i* is logically analysable into the conjunctive proposition *h* expressed by 'O is located at s at times t and t_{+1} and the red ball strikes the green ball located at r at t and the green ball remains at r at t_{+1}'. In contrast, in

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(NAD), *i* is not a senseful proposition and does not therefore have a logical analysis at all. There is no purpose to using '*i*' in (NAD) in the way that it is used in (AD); there is no purpose to treating it as logically analysable into *h*. Note that there is no problem *per se* with using '*i*' in this way – there is no problem with the *symbols* in question. Indeed, since both (NAD) and (AD) are *optional* systems, we could decide, on the basis of an instrumental judgement, to move from (NAD) to (AD), thereby ruling in this use of '*i*' by stipulation. It is just that the unified set of instructions (or principles) that characterise (NAD) *excludes* the instruction to treat '*i*' in this way: that, after all, is the entire point of (NAD). Hence, if you do attempt to follow this instruction whilst following other instructions from (NAD), you end up operating in a non-unified, self-stultifying (AD-NAD) manner – one that serves no purpose. This, to my mind, is part of the message behind the following entry:[cclix]

> Logic must take care of itself.
>
> A *possible* sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted. ("Socrates is identical" means nothing because there is no property which is called "identical". The proposition is senseless because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol is in itself unpermissible.)
>
> In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic. (*TLP* 5.473)

Sign '*i*' cannot be used in (NAD) to express a proposition that is analysable into *h*, not because there is anything problematic about this use of '*i*' *per se* – about this *symbol* – but because (NAD) does not incorporate this 'arbitrary determination' or stipulation; (AD), in contrast, does.

For Wittgenstein, the crux to the notion of *proposition* is that a proposition is a *sign – a sentence – used for a particular purpose*. Philosophical nonsensical propositions *purport* to serve

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a particular purpose, but in fact do not do so, since their purported purpose subverts itself and dissolves upon examination. Insofar as they *purport* to serve a purpose, however, it is helpful to call them 'propositions', as Wittgenstein does throughout the *Tractatus*. In contrast, senseful propositions, the instruction-propositions that express optional principles in the natural sciences and the instruction-propositions that express the accidental conventions of natural languages all involve sentences used purposefully.[cclx] The purposes that these sentences serve differ greatly from each other, of course.

There is no doubt that much of Wittgenstein's attention, in the *Tractatus*, is on the notion of the *syntactic* use of signs expressing senseful propositions. I do not wish to deny the significance of this particular notion of use in the *Tractatus*: it is, no doubt, an important aspect of the book – one that has, for good reason, been a major focus of the secondary literature.[cclxi] My aim here is simply to draw attention to a different, broader notion of use – the notion of a *purposeful combination of signs* – which is also present in the *Tractatus*, and which is pivotal to understanding Wittgenstein's distinction between nonsensical propositions and those that are not nonsensical. [cclxii] This is a broader notion of use in that, as we have just seen, it covers not just the syntactical use of signs expressing senseful propositions, but also the use of signs in instruction-propositions (e.g. the principles of the natural sciences).[cclxiii] It is with this broader notion of use in mind, I suggest, that Wittgenstein notes, in the midst of his discussion on the natural sciences and mathematics:

(In philosophy the question "Why do we really use ['gebrauchen'] that word, that proposition?" constantly leads to valuable results.) (*TLP* 6.211)[cclxiv]

2. The Method of the *Tractatus*

For Wittgenstein, our ability to judge how and to what purposes signs are used is not dependent on our being presented with a theory of language, thought or representation – and, indeed, the *Tractatus* does not aim to present such a theory. On the contrary, insofar as we already have mastery of everyday language and thought, we already have the ability to make such judgements, even when we are not aware of the internal, logical structure of language.

> Man possesses the capacity of constructing languages, in which every sense can be expressed, without having an idea how and what each word means—just as one speaks without knowing how the single sounds are produced. (*TLP* 4.002)

> All propositions of our [everyday] language are actually, just as they are, logically completely in order. That simple thing which we ought to give here is not a model of the truth but the complete truth itself.
> (Our problems are not abstract but perhaps the most concrete that there are.) (*TLP* 5.5563)

'Our problems are not abstract' in that they are not problems to be resolved by getting to grips with an abstract theory. For our problems do not stem from the lack of such a theory. Instead, they result from the fact that, although we already have the know-how to use signs with a purpose and to recognise the purposeful use of signs (insofar as we already have mastery of everyday language and thought), our disposition to act on this know-how is at times eroded by our distorting philosophical practices.[cclxv]

Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but senseless. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their senselessness. 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. (*TLP* 4.003)

Our failure to 'understand the logic of our language' is not the kind of failure that would result from the lack of an abstract theory of language; instead, it is a failure in our *practical understanding*, a failure in our disposition to use signs. It is our disposition to *act* – to *use* signs in particular ways – that needs to be corrected. And, for Wittgenstein, only an *activity* could help correct such a floundering disposition to act. In his view, philosophy – properly understood – is to be regarded precisely as such an *activity*:

The object [purpose – 'Zweck' in the original] 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

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were, opaque and blurred. (*TLP* 4.112)

The aim of this activity is to enable us to fine-tune our thinking and linguistic abilities, to orient our disposition to use signs away from the production of nonsense and towards the production of senseful pictures. Ideally, this philosophical task would be performed in an face-to-face, interpersonal, dialectical manner, so that our individual dispositions to produce nonsense (the concrete dispositions each of us – as philosophers – have to produce nonsense in particular ways) could be worked on as soon as they broke surface:[cclxvi]

> 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. This method
> would be unsatisfying to the other—he would not have the feeling that we were teaching
> him philosophy—but it would be the only strictly correct method. (*TLP* 6.53)

Since such a direct approach is not always possible, however, Wittgenstein produces a book – the *Tractatus* – that aims to achieve a similar result. The method of this book is intended to be similarly interactive: it involves engaging the reader in an internal dialogue, similar to that which would take place in the more direct approach. [cclxvii] Implicit here is the idea that it is only by personally engaging in such a dialectic struggle that the required transformation – the transformation in our disposition to use signs – can be achieved.

In order to effect this transformation in us – that is, with this *purpose* in mind – Wittgenstein presents us with a careful arrangement of sentences in the form of the

Tractatus.[cclxviii] I suggest that Wittgenstein uses the sentences of the *Tractatus* in at least two different ways. Some of these sentences he uses in a relatively direct manner as instructions (akin to imperative commands) that aim to provide us with psychological reminders of the know-how already implicit in our everyday use of linguistic and mental signs. One such an example would be: 'A picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false.' (*TLP* 2.21). This is the kind of reminder that may prove of help when we find ourselves captivated by, for instance, the metaphysical notion of an object-like-non-object-like self (the thinking subject), as in the solipsism discussion. In other cases, Wittgenstein uses sentences in an intentionally ambiguous manner, to produce puzzles, with the deliberate purpose of getting us to exercise our everyday thinking and linguistic abilities on them.[cclxix] As we saw in previous chapters, these intentionally ambiguous propositions include:

'The world is *my* world' (*TLP* 5.62)

The exploration of logic means the exploration of *everything that is subject to law*. (*TLP* [PM] 6.3)

[…] only connexions that are *subject to principle* [or law – *gesetzmäßige*] are *thinkable*. (*TLP* [PM] 6.361)

So too at death the world […] comes to an end. (*TLP* [PM] 6.431)

Interestingly, both Engelmann and Ramsey, who were amongst the first to read the *Tractatus* and to discuss it with Wittgenstein, mention that he deliberately includes ambiguous sentences in this

book, as part of his philosophical method. In his *Memoir*, Engelmann makes the following remark concerning Wittgenstein's use of brackets in '(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)' in *TLP* 6.421:

> But the statement [in *TLP* 6.421] is put in parentheses, said by the way, as something not really meant to be uttered, yet something that should not be passed over in silence at that point. And this is done as a form of a reminder recalling to the understanding reader an insight which he is assumed to possess in any case. (Engelmann *Letters and Memoir* (1967) p. 124.)[cclxx]

Similarly, in a letter to his mother dated 20th September 1923, Ramsey writes:

> His [Wittgenstein's] idea of his book is not that anyone by reading it will understand his ideas, but that some day someone will think then out again for himself, and will derive great pleasure from finding in this book their exact expressions. […] Some of [Wittgenstein's] sentences are intentionally ambiguous having an ordinary meaning and a more difficult meaning which he also believes.[cclxxi]

In the light of this, we would, I suggest, do well to revisit the following entries, in which Wittgenstein discusses 'the propositions of logic':

> The propositions of logic demonstrate the logical properties of propositions, by combining them into propositions which say nothing.
> This method could be called a zero-method. In a logical proposition propositions are

brought into equilibrium with one another, and the state of equilibrium then shows how these propositions must be logically constructed. (*TLP* 6.121)

Whence it follows that we can get on without logical propositions, for we can recognize in an adequate notation the formal properties of the propositions by mere inspection. (*TLP* 6.122)

The context in which these remarks are presented suggests that Wittgenstein uses the phrase 'propositions of logic', at least in part, to indicate the logical postulates discussed by Russell and others (cf. *TLP* 6.1223). At the same time, his remark to the effect that 'we can actually do without logical propositions', together with the knowledge that it is part of his method to use sentences ambiguously for different interrelated purposes in the *Tractatus*, suggests that he could – in addition – be using this phrase ('propositions of logic') to pick out the tautological expressions that he himself he presents as puzzles in the *Tractatus* – expressions such as 'the world is my world'. The process that leads us to see propositions such as these as altogether senseless and unsubstantive (e.g. the process discussed in chapters 2 and 3, in connection to solipsism), certainly leaves us with the eerie sense of having been involved in a zero-sum game (cf. *TLP* 6.121) – a game that ultimately does away with whatever substantive insights we seemed to be initially gaining.

In the light of this, the following remarks by Paul Engelmann strike a particularly strong chord:

Yet we do not understand Wittgenstein unless we realize that it was philosophy that mattered to him and not logic, which merely happened to be the only suitable tool for

elaborating his world picture.

This the *Tractatus* accomplishes in sovereign fashion, ending up with implacable consistency by nullifying the result, so that the communication of its basic thoughts, or rather of its basic tendency — which, according to its own findings, cannot on principle be effected by direct methods — is yet achieved indirectly. He nullifies his own world picture, together with the 'houses of cards' of philosophy (which at that time at least he thought he had made collapse), so as to show '*how little is achieved when these problems are solved*'. What he wants to demonstrate is that such endeavours of human thought to 'utter the unutterable' are a hopeless attempt to satisfy man's eternal metaphysical urge.[cclxxii]

Wittgenstein uses the sentences of the *Tractatus* with a particular purpose. This purpose is the clarification of propositions and thoughts, that is, the re-orientation of our disposition to use signs away from nonsense. The propositions of the *Tractatus* have a purpose to serve for as long as we continue to be drawn towards metaphysics and towards a confused approach to logic, representation and ethics. Once we overcome this pull, however, the propositions of the *Tractatus* no longer have a function: they become redundant, that is, *purposeless*. I suggest that it is at *this* point that they become nonsensical. Hence, the point at which the *Tractatus* fully achieves its own purpose of clarification is precisely the point at which we come to recognise that it is time to let go of the sentences of the book, just as we might let go of a ladder once we have used it for the purpose of climbing to the top:

'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me, eventually [that is, 'at the end' – 'am Ende' in the original] recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw

away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright.' (*TLP* [PM] 6.54)

Whilst they are used as steps for a genuine, albeit psychological, purpose (i.e. that of acting as reminders), philosophical and logical propositions are not nonsensical. As soon as they have served their purpose, however, it becomes nonsensical to continue entertaining these sentences as they are used in the *Tractatus* – just as it would be nonsensical to continue going up and down the ladder once we have achieved our aim of getting to the top. In the more direct, face-to-face method, this would have been the point at which the interlocutor would have ended the discussion – that is, would have opted for silence. Hence, Wittgenstein's decision to follow on from *TLP* 6.54 with the final entry of the *Tractatus*:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence (*TLP* [PM] 7)

The process of clarification in which the *Tractatus* engages us therefore culminates in our coming to recognise that there is no longer any purpose to be served by the propositions in the book: it involves coming to recognise them, at the end ('am Ende' – *TLP* 6.54), as nonsensical and therefore opting for silence with respect to them.[cclxxiii]

3. The Continuity in Wittgenstein's Philosophy

I would like to use this final section of the Conclusion to make some remarks concerning the way in which my reading of the *Tractatus* helps to shed light on the question of the continuity in

Wittgenstein's thinking.[cclxxiv] Consider first the question of his approach to philosophy itself. Having undergone a markedly metaphysical period in the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein has, by the time he writes the *Tractatus*, become persuaded of the need to resist any approach that presents philosophy as yielding substantive insights. Philosophy, properly understood, offers no substantive (i.e. no new or genuinely informative) theses of any kind. In the *Tractatus*, becoming clear in our use of signs involves coming to recognise (and to treat) any supposedly substantive philosophical insights as falling a part in our hands. This applies in a similar manner to purportedly substantive insights from metaphysics (as in restrictive solipsism), the philosophy of science (as in the Causal Necessity View), philosophical logic (as in Russell's use of axioms) or ethics (e.g. Schopenhauer's ethical propositions). Philosophy should be regarded, not so much as a subject, but as a dialectical activity of clarification: an activity aimed at fine-tuning our practical linguistic understanding and doing so by way of a combination of reminders and puzzles. Wittgenstein's suspicion of any approaches to philosophy that present it as yielding substantive theses and his commitment to philosophy understood as the interactive, clarificatory activity of bringing us back to the know-how we already possess would remain with him into his later philosophical period. So does his implicit trust in the idea that everyday – as opposed to traditional philosophical – language is basically in order.

> Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. […]
>
>   It leaves everything as it is. (*PI*: 124)

> Philosophy just puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view, there is nothing to explain. For whatever may be hidden

is of no interest to us.

The name 'philosophy' might also be given to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions. (*PI*: 126)

The work of the philosopher consists in marshalling recollections [Erinnerungen] for a particular purpose [Zweck]. (*PI*: 127)[cclxxv]

In the *Tractatus*, the philosophical process of clarification aims at fine-tuning our disposition to use signs in senseful propositions, understood in a highly particular way.[cclxxvi] Although the notion of use remains central to Wittgenstein's thinking, his understanding of this notion undergoes important transformations in his later period. By the time he writes the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein has come to regard his former approach to use and to representation as unduly *essentialistic*. Consider the following series of consecutive entries:

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (4.5): 'The general form of the proposition is: This is how things are.' (*PI* 114)

A *picture* held us captive. (*PI* 115)

When philosophers use a word – 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition/sentence', 'name' – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? – What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (*PI* 116)

The *Tractatus* suggests that there is an *essence* to the linguistic use of signs: using signs to

express senseful propositions involves, *in essence*, using them in a manner that reflects that propositions are bivalent, bipolar and ultimately analysable into logically independent arrangements of names with simple meanings. In the *Tractatus*, the practice of using signs sensefully is therefore logically demarcated: a use of signs that does not reflect bivalence, for instance, simply does not express sense. In his later philosophical period, Wittgenstein abandons this essentialist approach to use and to the notion of a linguistic practice. His discussions of language-games and of family resemblance are intended to mark precisely this shift from logical essentialism to inessentialism:

Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations. – For someone might object against me: 'You make things easy for yourself! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and therefore of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very part of the investigation that once gave you the most headache, the part about the *general form of the proposition* and of language.'

And this is true. – Instead of pointing out something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common in virtue of which we use the same word for all – but there are many different kinds of *affinity* between them. And on account of this affinity, or these affinities, we call them all 'languages'. (*PI* 65)[cclxxvii]

I can think of no better expression to characterise these similarities than 'family resemblances'. (*PI* 67)

The shift from the earlier to the later approaches to language is sometimes portrayed in the literature as a shift from the so-called Picture Theory to the notion of use.[cclxxviii] I suggest that this is misleading. In my view, the shift is better captured by speaking of a move from an essentialist, logical notion of use to a different notion of use characterised by non-essentialism and family resemblances. Since the essentialism of the *Tractatus* is an essentialism in our *practical understanding*, this shift can also be portrayed as a shift in Wittgenstein's understanding of a *practice*: the shift from the notion of a practice characterised by truth-functionally determinate (ones is tempted to say binary) moves to the notion of language-games involving resemblance-based moves.

A similar discontinuity can be found in Wittgenstein's treatment of the relation between language and thought. Tractarian essentialism results in an overly cerebral treatment of representation, whereby using a sentence to express a senseful proposition automatically involves expressing a thought – so that language is always accompanied by thinking, as if thoughts were the *shadows* of propositions. This is an idea that Wittgenstein later comes to criticise, notably in the *Blue and Brown Books*:

> The shadow, as we think of it, is some sort of a picture; in fact, something very much like an image which comes before our mind's eye; and this again is something not unlike a painted representation in the ordinary sense [...] But it is absolutely essential for the picture which we imagine the shadow to be that it is what I shall call a 'picture by similarity'. I don't mean by this that it is a picture similar to what it is intended to represent, but that it is a picture which is correct only when it is similar to what it represents. One might use for this kind of picture the word 'copy'. (*BB*: 36 – 37)

If we keep in mind the possibility of a picture which, though correct, has no similarity with its object, the interpolation of a shadow between the sentence and reality loses all point. For now the sentence itself can serve as such a shadow. (*BB*: 37)

In the *Tractatus*, the practice of using signs to express senseful propositions and thoughts has a clearly demarcated essence that implies logically precise moves. These moves (encapsulated in the notion of essential logical form) are understood to permeate everyday language and the language of the natural sciences, insofar as these naturalistic systems are also logical ones. In his later philosophical period, this emphasis on an essential set of moves is abandoned: the shift to the notions of language-game and family resemblance is precisely a shift away from this idea of a logically demarcated practice. At the same time, it is striking to find, at the heart of the Tractarian distinction between logical and naturalistic forms, the precursor to this very idea of a language-game. For, in the *Tractatus*, naturalistic forms (i.e. the accidental representational forms of natural languages and the optional forms of the natural sciences) capture *non-essential*, accidental linguistic systems. Naturalistic forms produce unified linguistic *systems*, governed by different rules and principles – systems that are, in these respects, not unlike language-games. The parallels between Tractarian naturalistic systems and language-games become all the more striking when one considers that the *Tractatus* remarks on natural science systems (notably, *TLP* 6.341 – 6.343) first emerge in the *Notebooks* as early as in December 1914. What is more, in the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein comments in the midst of these remarks: 'This I have felt for a *long* time' (*NB* 6.12.14).[cclxxix] Since central aspects of Wittgenstein's treatment of the natural sciences survive into his middle and later periods (notably in the idea explored in chapter 4, section 1.2, that scientific causal systems obscure possibilities) we might do well to conclude that it is Wittgenstein's treatment of the natural sciences that displays the strongest elements of continuity in his philosophy.