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What is Philosophy for? Reading Wittgenstein After Cavell

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What is Philosophy for?
Reading Wittgenstein After Cavell

By

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A literature review submitted to the
Pomona College Philosophy Department
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Bachelor of the Arts
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Introduction

Despite the two having a somewhat fraught relationship, Ludwig Wittgenstein was the favorite pupil of Bertrand Russell, a seminal figure in early analytic philosophy. Russell believed that most of philosophy's problems were "ill-formed" and the result of "the misunderstanding of the logic of our language."¹ It was his dream, then, to found a mathematical school of philosophers whose precise and meticulous use of language would render these old problems obsolete, and formulate better ones. He believed that Wittgenstein, young and obstinate, would be the one to realize this philosophical goal; Wittgenstein did not. Instead, he rejected Russell's philosophy (of which he derogatorily referred to as "the old logic") and worked away at his first book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), which attempted to "draw a limit" to the expression of thought by analyzing the logical forms of language.² By the end of the book, though, Wittgenstein abandons the idea that the limit of language could ever be expressed in language. Instead, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes: "There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical."³

Russell, after reading the *Tractatus*, wrote in a letter to his then-lover, "I had felt in his book a flavour of mysticism...but was astonished when I found he has become a complete mystic."⁴ Then later, in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, Russell again wrote with some disdain: "What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said..."⁵ And though Wittgenstein, in reply, complained that there was "so much of" Russell's introduction that he disagreed with, "both where you're critical of me and also

¹ Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 17.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, rev. ed., ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978), V §24.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1922), §6.522.

⁴ Bertrand Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 20 December 1919, in *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, ed. G.H. von Wright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 82.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, "Introduction," in Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, xxiii.

where you're simply trying to elucidate my point of view," Russell's comment nonetheless touches upon a tension in the *Tractatus* which continues to undergird debates about Wittgenstein today.⁶ It is not clear what Wittgenstein means by the inexpressible "showing" itself. Nor is it clear how Wittgenstein has written so much about the inexpressible if he ultimately thinks it is inexpressible. Is the *Tractatus* a failed attempt to express the inexpressible? How can inexpressible things instead be "shown"?

Unfortunately for Russell, Wittgenstein did not feel compelled to address his former mentor's concerns; he thought such questions misunderstood the nature of the book itself. Hence, after finishing the *Tractatus*, and with the belief that he had solved all of philosophy's problems, Wittgenstein left philosophy behind and took up the life of a rural, lonely, and generally disgruntled schoolteacher.⁷ It was not until the late 1920s, nearly a decade later, that he returned to university, bringing with him the newfound conviction that his earlier project contained some "grave mistakes."⁸ Thus Wittgenstein's return marked a break between his early and later thought and, in his transitional essay, "Some Remarks on Logical Form" (1929), he explicitly acknowledges that a central assumption of his *Tractatus* — that atomic propositions are strictly independent of one another — cannot be maintained. He comes to recognize that some atomic propositions exclude each other, and that this relation cannot be captured within the logical framework he previously took to be exhaustive.

This seemingly technical point wielded devastating implications for the Tractarian project, primarily due to the immense conceptual work that atomic propositions performed within it. Wittgenstein, following Russell, took atomic propositions to be "the kernels of every

⁶ Monk, 33.

⁷ He would abuse the slow children. A sick boy named Josef Haidbauer collapsed after being struck several times in the head by Wittgenstein. Another girl named Hermine Piribauer was struck so hard that she bled behind her ears.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), viii. Unless otherwise noted, I am using the Anscombe translation.

proposition, *they* contain the material, and all the rest is only a development of this material."⁹

The atomic proposition is the "ultimate connection" between words, the very substance of meaning, so to speak.¹⁰ It is the propositional form which itself cannot be "composed of simpler propositional forms."¹¹ Thus it follows that, if two atomic propositions cannot be strictly independent of one another, then the basic substance of meaning is itself muddled, there is no longer anything within meaning which could be expressed into a logical form, and the very idea of the logical form of a proposition collapses. That is to say, the strict independence of atomic propositions was a crucial premise for the *Tractatus* because it was on this basis that Wittgenstein understood there to be a possibility of understanding the logical forms of language.

The distinctive site of the break between the early and later Wittgenstein may therefore be found in his somewhat dense revelation that "atomic propositions, although they cannot contradict, may exclude one another."¹² Following this revelation, Wittgenstein moves away from the nature of propositions and towards how language is used in everyday life. His notes that followed, eventually published as the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), abandoned the precise propositions of the *Tractatus* and instead took on the form of obscure remarks and analogies. While still retaining the Tractarian premise that our everyday language is full of linguistic deception (for it often "uses one term in an infinity of different meanings"), the *Investigations* is less concerned with finding a way *out* of these deceptions and more concerned with finding a way to *return* to them with deeper understanding.¹³ This is the line of ordinary language philosophy in Wittgenstein, which would eventually come to define his later work.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Some Remarks on Logical Form," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes 9 (1929): 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 163.

The reception of Wittgenstein's work was, above all, polarizing. Indeed he was so polarizing that his two major works were not of interest to the same philosophical circles. Particularly prominent were the logical positivists (Carnap, Ayer) and the Oxford ordinary language philosophers (Ryle, Austin). These groups tended to read Wittgenstein's early and later work as separate and discontinuous endeavors. They felt a somewhat strange, somewhat unintelligible shift in which the *Investigations* fundamentally renounces the earlier project of the *Tractatus*. Logical positivists praised the *Tractatus* for its logical rigor, but deemed the *Investigations* unclear and methodologically suspect. On the other hand, many ordinary language philosophers didn't have any real interest in the hyper-logical *Tractatus*, but found the *Investigations* to be a rich method for clarifying conceptual confusions about language.

Still — although these early readings disagreed very much on what they thought Wittgenstein understood language to be, both the logical positivists and ordinary language philosophers certainly took Wittgenstein to be positing *some* kind of theory of language; that is, they both took him to be offering a general account of how meaning functions. Logical positivists read the *Tractatus* as a continuation of Russell's project to develop a perfectly clear philosophical language, while ordinary language philosophers read the *Investigations* as a search for the conditions that make speech meaningful in everyday (as opposed to purely logical or philosophical) language. It was likely because these early readings of Wittgenstein understood him to be developing a theory of language that they deemed his two books to be incompatible. After all, the books fixate on very different conceptions of language (the *Tractatus* on the logical, and the *Investigations* on the everyday), so if the aim of the book is to provide a theory of language, it follows that the two books must be offering very different theories.

Reading Wittgenstein's two books as separate projects, however, leaves much to be explained, as Wittgenstein himself had repeatedly expressed that the *Investigations* was meant to be read alongside the *Tractatus*; it was in fact his wish to have published the two together.¹⁴ It therefore seems that these early readings miss a certain continuity between the two books which Wittgenstein himself intended. Then, in the 1960s, Stanley Cavell offers a highly novel re-reading of Wittgenstein's larger philosophical aims which would eventually open up the idea of a serious continuity between Wittgenstein's later and earlier thought. Cavell's reading, later dubbed the "therapeutic" reading of Wittgenstein, understands Wittgenstein's philosophical project not to be working toward a theory of language, but to function as an *activity* within language. This activity is a therapy (hence the name), and the target of its therapy is the very desire to find a theory of language. More specifically, Cavell reads Wittgenstein to be addressing the linguistic alienation which causes one to seek such a theory in the first place. Cavell's therapeutic reading gave rise to two distinct but related camps regarding Wittgenstein.

The first Cavellian camp was born from Wittgenstein's legacy of ordinary language philosophy; accordingly, this camp centered around the *Investigations* and was concerned with concepts such as "forms of life," "language-games," and "meaning as use." J. L. Austin, perhaps Wittgenstein's most systematic inheritor, would develop Wittgenstein's line of ordinary language philosophy into his speech act theory, which attempted to classify the different ways language functions in ordinary contexts. Several years later, Jacques Derrida, in "Signature Event Context" (1971), would argue that Austin's attempt to determine the conditions of successful speech acts fails because no context is ever fully determinable. While Derrida never wrote directly on Wittgenstein, his critique of Austin raised important questions for the project of ordinary language philosophy, and consequently several debates between Wittgenstein and Derrida have

¹⁴ Monk, 63.

been staged within this camp. The central concern of this Wittgenstein-Derrida debate is, in contrast to most Wittgensteinian discourse, not exegetical but evaluative in nature; it concerns the philosophical stakes of Wittgenstein's later work in comparison to Derrida's deconstructive critique. While both Wittgenstein and Derrida critique metaphysical conceptions of language, the debate concerns whose project 'succeeds' in combatting the metaphysical desires that have traditionally characterized philosophy's discussion of language.

The second Cavellian camp came roughly a decade later, when Cavell's therapeutic reading — which at first primarily drew from the *Investigations* — led to more radical re-readings of Wittgenstein's earlier *Tractatus*. This second camp is concerned with what Wittgenstein means when he, in the *Tractatus*, calls his own propositions nonsense. Cavell's therapeutic reading gave rise to the resolute or *austere view of nonsense* which holds that, when the *Tractatus* refers to its own propositions as nonsense, it is not to be taken as the expression of higher, ineffable truths, but as plain nonsense. The austere view opposes the traditional reading of the *Tractatus*, also known as the *substantial view of nonsense*, which takes the *Tractatus* to be asserting that its own sentences are a special kind of nonsense which gestures at truths about the structure of language and reality. This debate about nonsense is, in contrast to the Wittgenstein-Derrida debate, far more exegetical in nature; it concerns what Wittgenstein actually meant when he wrote the *Tractatus* in 1921.

What is striking about these later readings of Wittgenstein is that, despite both camps emerging from Cavell's therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein, they have largely remained separate conversations. Austere readers focus on the *Tractatus*, debating whether Wittgenstein held the austere or substantial view of nonsense, while ordinary language philosophers focus on the *Investigations*, debating whether Wittgenstein's later philosophy is compatible with or vulnerable

to Derrida's deconstructive critique. While the two camps reference each other in passing and, given their shared Cavellian lineage, maintain friendly terms, they do not bring their respective debates into sustained dialogue. The austere readers rarely engage with questions about Derrida's critique, and the ordinary language philosophers rarely engage with the Tractarian concern of nonsense. Accordingly, the aim of this literature review is to survey these two Cavellian lines of scholarship, and to identify the ways in which their debates might illuminate their respective discourses. At stake in these debates about Wittgenstein are the following broader conceptual questions: What can language express? What is meaning? What is philosophy — as a necessarily linguistic endeavor — for?

While I do not take a position on the exegetical or evaluative questions at stake in these debates, I do write this paper on the premise that the literature would benefit from a more sustained conversation between the two camps. To be clear, this is not to discount the differences between the camps. It is simply to suggest that, in taking seriously the idea of a significant continuity between the early and later Wittgenstein, there is insight to be drawn by examining both conversations together by means other than a mere congenial, faraway nod to Wittgenstein's therapeutic gesture. This literature review, then, will be organized as follows. In section 1, I will examine what Cavell's therapeutic reading takes Wittgenstein's philosophical aim to be. In section 2, I will examine the nonsense debate staged by the second Cavellian camp. In section 3, I will examine the Wittgenstein-Derrida debate staged by the first Cavellian camp. Finally, in section 4, I will compare the core stakes of both Cavellian camps and consider the ways in which the specificity of their respective debates may shed light on each other.

1. Why Philosophers Need Therapy

First, I should admit — to begin by calling Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein "therapeutic" is slightly anachronistic. Cavell's intervention was first and foremost situated in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy, which was concerned with Wittgenstein's later work, *Philosophical Investigations*. It did not obtain its more explicit and popularized status as the "therapeutic reading" until years later, when Cavell's influence on ordinary language philosophy led to re-readings of the earlier *Tractatus*. However, because this literature review intends to emphasize that the stakes of Wittgenstein's early and late work are deeply imbricated, I will — in anticipation of the later Cavellian readings — refer to Cavell's reading simply as the "therapeutic reading." In this section I will, following Cavell, establish the continuous target of Wittgenstein's therapy as the philosophical fantasy of a general account of language. I will not draw particular attention to the differences between Wittgenstein's early and later work until sections 2 and 3.

The premise of the therapeutic reading is that Wittgenstein's philosophical aim is not to offer us a theory of language, but to guide us to the understanding that the search for a theory of language is itself impossible and mistaken. To be sure, a thinker as sensitive as Wittgenstein recognizes that an endeavor shown to be impossible is not therefore also recognized as mistaken — indeed, the impossibility of an endeavor may make it appear all the more seductive. Thus, while much of his work aims to demonstrate this search is impossible, his more original aim is to lead us to recognize the search as mistaken (Wittgenstein admits that he "seems only to destroy everything... great and important").¹⁵ Similarly, Cora Diamond writes that she aims to, following Wittgenstein, "show how the laying down of metaphysical requirements is connected with our thinking that what we want lies somewhere, while it in fact lies somewhere else."¹⁶

¹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §118.

¹⁶ Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 24.

1a. The Fantasy of a Private Language

As I have earlier mentioned, the philosopher's fantasy takes its most intelligible form as the desire to provide a general theory of language. The philosopher, keenly a skeptic, finds something dissatisfying or inadequate in everyday language, and thus begins to seek out a deeper meaning which would satisfy her more demanding metaphysical need. Cavell's reading is predicated on the premise that the skeptic's fantasy for some 'deeper' or universalizable meaning is first and foremost the fantasy of a private language, and this fantasy is a response to the perceived inadequacy of the public, everyday language we share. In Wittgenstein's work, the passages on the fantasy of a private language take form when discussing pain. Pain is, to borrow Hannah Arendt's phrase, "the most intense feeling we know of, intense to the point of blotting out all other experiences" and "at the same time the most private and least communicable of all."¹⁷ It is an experience so private that it strains ordinary language, rendering its inadequacy pressing and visible. In such moments in Wittgenstein's work, the intensity of the skeptic's inner experience makes the expression of the pain at once necessary and impossible.

Wittgenstein frequently assumes the skeptic's voice to articulate this sense of inadequacy:

In what sense are my sensations *private*?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it... It cannot be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain... Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations *only* from my behaviour,—for *I* cannot be said to learn of them. I *have* them.¹⁸

The skeptic fixates on the asymmetry between her relation to her pain and others' relation to it.

This asymmetry is taken to reveal a fundamental inadequacy in language itself. "For how,"

laments the skeptic, "can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its

expression?"¹⁹ For Wittgenstein's skeptic, language appears necessarily insufficient to capture

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50–51.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §246

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §245.

what is most intimate and private precisely because everyday language is publicly shared and available. The fantasy of a private language is therefore the fantasy of a language accessible only to its speaker, untouched by convention and thereby adequate to the pure interiority of experience. A private language is necessary, and ordinary language will simply not do, because "surely another person can't have THIS pain!"²⁰

Cavell claims, novelly and tenderly, that the fantasy of a private language comes from the fear of being known and the fear of not being known:

So the fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out, so far, to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control...²¹

A private language would render my inner life is necessarily inexpressible, therefore relieving me of "the responsibility for making myself known to others," for "expressing myself would mean perpetually betraying my experience, incessantly giving myself away."²² A private language relieves these fears of being known and of not being known because "the fact that others cannot know my (inner) life means that I cannot fail to."²³ The skeptic, existential at heart, thereby pursues the self-defeating fantasy of a private language: "In the case of my knowing myself, such self-defeat would be doubly exquisite: I must disappear in order that the search for myself be successful."²⁴

The fears of being known and of not being known thus make the fantasy of a private language a sort of existential fantasy that takes hold of the subject through a dissatisfaction with, or alienation from, everyday language. Ben Ware connects the skeptic's fantasy to the modernist,

²⁰ Ibid., §253.

²¹ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 351.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 352.

solipsistic conviction that "language cannot express what is most real... which remains forever private in the depths of the person's subjectivity."²⁵ Descartes laments similarly: "words impede me, and I am nearly deceived by the terms of ordinary language."²⁶ Thus the fantasy of a private language emerges from the skeptic's sense that there is an "unbridgeable gulf" between her pain and its outward expression. This fantasy is what asserts that there is an inner reality behind language which language cannot adequately reach, and that the task of philosophy is to theorize, and perhaps explain, that gulf.

Against the fantasy of a private language, Wittgenstein argues for the publicness of language. He claims that a truly private language could not function as a language at all because an entirely private notation for pain would carry no meaning, because it could mean anything at all.²⁷ The speaker could not distinguish between the language from a series of marks that mean nothing because nothing could count as using them wrongly. Wittgenstein does not deny the privacy of sensation, nor does he reduce inner life to outward behavior. His point is rather that the meaning of "pain" is established by the shared practices and responses within which the word does its work. If we did not agree, at a basic level, the judgments or implications latent in the meaning of words, then we would not even be able to disagree, to understand each other, at all. It is because you recognize the meaning of my words that you can disagree with what I say. In Wittgenstein's terms, although we do not agree in opinions, we agree in forms of life: "it is in their language that human beings agree."²⁸ The skeptic's error is to isolate language from the shared and public life from which it becomes meaningful.

²⁵ Ben Ware, *Dialectic of the Ladder* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 102.

²⁶ Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline," in *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 33.

²⁷ See Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §580.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §241.

The narrator in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, though not explicitly committed to the idea of a private language,²⁹ arrives at a very similar conclusion about language (that one should search it for general forms) in response to very similar problems (existential pain):

It is true, then, that we are obliged to relive our private suffering with all the courage of a doctor who continues to give himself a dangerous course of injections. At the same time, though, we have to think about it in its general form, which enables us to some extent to escape its grasp, makes everybody sharers in our pain, and may even offer a kind of joy. Where life walls us in, the intellect cuts a way out, for although there may be no cure for love that is not reciprocated, the investigation of one's suffering does provide a way out...³⁰

It is perhaps because generalization offers 'a way out' of suffering that the alienated subject is drawn to it. After all, suffering may be manageable only on the condition that it is entirely formalized, with its shape and limits in view. But the link between the skeptic's alienation from ordinary language and her fantasy of meaning as a general essence requires further clarification. I will do this through an examination of Wittgenstein's remarks on an impossibility proof.

1b. The Trisection of an Angle

Wittgenstein, both early and late, demonstrated a particular interest in impossibility proofs. One of his favorites was geometry's search for the trisection of any given angle, with only straightedge and compass. For centuries, mathematicians sought such a method. It was not until 1837 that Pierre Wantzel proved this trisection to be mathematically impossible.³¹ Wantzel proved that there is no such thing as trisecting an arbitrary angle with straightedge and compass alone; there can be no proof which demonstrates each trisect to be equivalent. As Juliet Floyd

²⁹ Though interestingly, the narrator appears, at times, to be committed to the idea of a perfectly public and universal expression, which seems to me to be an inclination that takes on the same form as the fantasy of a private language.

³⁰ Marcel Proust, *Finding Time Again*, trans. Ian Patterson (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 234.

³¹ Proved by Wantzel in "Recherches sur les moyens de reconnaître si un Problème de géométrie peut se résoudre avec la règle et le compas," *Journal de Mathématiques Pures et Appliquées*, 1837, vol. 2, pp. 366–72.

writes, "there can be no picture which leads, step by step, by Euclidean means, to such a construction."³² In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes of the trisection case:

Various kinds of thing [sic] may persuade us to give up one expression and to adopt another in its place. To understand this, it is useful to consider the relation in which the solutions of mathematical problems stand to the context and origin of their formulation. The concept 'trisection of the angle with ruler and compass', when people are trying to do it, and, on the other, when it has been proved that there is no such thing.³³

In this passage, Wittgenstein describes mathematicians as 'persuaded' in 'adopting' one mathematical truth for another. At first, the mathematical 'truth' that mathematicians sought was a Euclidean trisection method. Once Wantzel shows that the method is impossible, mathematicians cease pursuing a trisection method as the mathematical 'truth' and replace it with the impossibility proof, which now stands as the new expression of that 'truth.'

This interpretive move is, for Wittgenstein, misguided. To be clear, Wittgenstein does not take Wantzel's impossibility proof itself to be trivial or confused, and indeed Wantzel proves something non-obvious about the workings of Euclidean geometry. But it is, for Wittgenstein, mistaken to interpret the impossibility proof as a discovery about independent mathematical 'truth' because what counts as a constraint and what counts as the construction are internally related. The impossibility proof and the given rules are defined in terms of each other within the same system. It is precisely the philosopher's mistake to point to the constraints of the rules as a truth that exists independently and then blocks the construction. For instance, and to use the rules of chess as an analogy for the rules of language (or math): imagine that someone is playing chess.³⁴ They discover and prove that it is impossible to checkmate with only a king and a knight against a lone king — this is, by all accounts, a meaningful and non-trivial thing to prove.

³² Juliet Floyd, "Wittgenstein, Mathematics, and Philosophy," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 235.

³³ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §334.

³⁴ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §108.

But suppose someone believes that this discovery touches upon a metaphysical truth about the nature of chess. Wittgenstein would say that such a person is treating this impossibility as if it describes something universalizable that the rules point to, when in fact the impossibility just *is* the rules, expressed differently. It is impossible to checkmate with king and knight alone because that is what the movement rules of those pieces amount to; to prove it is to make explicit what was already implicit in how we defined the game. Similarly, with Wantzel's proof — yes, it is difficult and non-obvious to prove the impossibility of trisecting an angle with compass and straightedge. But the proof does not point to a limitation that exists beyond or prior to the geometric system itself. The impossibility is merely an implication of what "compass and straightedge construction" means, and treating the impossibility as a discovery independent of the system obscures the fact that the proof is just expressing what the rules already were.

Thus, Wittgenstein takes Wantzel's proof to not be expressing something about a general mathematical 'truth' but rather something about the particular mathematical rules of Euclidean geometry. Floyd writes that it is "the *decision* to require that solutions be given within a particular setting, and that solutions take a particular form and be generally applicable which generates the unsolvable... problem."³⁵ The impossibility of angle trisection arises from the specific constraints that define what counts as an acceptable solution (i.e. that the construction uses only straightedge and compass, proceeds through a finite number of steps, and works for any arbitrary angle). These are the rules of the Euclidean game, and it is the rules which generate the impossibility. If one changes the rules (e.g. if one permits certain algebraic operations) the trisection becomes possible again. Wantzel's impossibility proof expresses something about these Euclidean rules, not about 'truth' itself. What the mathematician takes to be an independent object of inquiry is only an effect of the framework within which the inquiry is conducted.

³⁵ Floyd, 247.

Wittgenstein would say that the mistake that these mathematicians have made is that, in becoming alienated from the ordinary and everyday nature of their mathematical rules, they develop the fantasy of a mathematical essence underlying, and prior to, such rules. As a result, they misinterpret Wantzel's impossibility proof as an expression of a higher truth. And importantly, for Cavell, the mathematician's drive for essence is deeply connected with the skeptic's existential worries. Certain existential fears are addressed and sublimated into the fantasy of a universal account of language, essence, truth, or meaning.

What I know, when I've *seen* or *heard* something is, one may wish to say, not a matter of *merely* knowing it. But what more is it?... What would *express* this knowledge? It is not that my knowledge will be real, or more than *mere* knowledge, when I acquire a particular feeling, or come to see something. For the issue can also be said to be: What would express the acquisition of that feeling, or show that you have seen the thing?³⁶

In this quote, the voice of the skeptic is dissatisfied with ordinary expression. There seems to be no language or meaning which could touch deeply enough, immediately enough, 'the thing'. The skeptic becomes distraught with proving to others this self-knowledge and, in turn, with knowing how to recognize it in others.

This is where the alienation from ordinary language begins to take form into the fantasy of language as containing some essence. For if, following Cavell, meaning were to have a universalizable essence which could be unproblematically expressed and recognized in others, there would be no possibility of failure, of misrecognition, of uncertainty in expression or knowledge. Wittgenstein's point, in targeting this fantasy of essence, is that the skeptic's sense of what counts and does not count as an adequate expression is already predicated on a certain recognition which gets its meaning from the shared forms of life. Even to be suspicious of others, of oneself, to recognize what one has said and deem it 'insufficient' is to — at the simplest level

³⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 192.

— understand it. Hence: "it is in their language that human beings agree."³⁷ In the same way, the mathematician's idea of what counts and does not count as an acceptable solution for a proof are already predicated on the shared rules of Euclidean geometry. Interpreting movements within the rules as proof of some external, universal truth is a mistake and a fantasy that comes from the alienation from the rules.

This is not to say that our relation to these shared meanings or rules are immune to failure. But they are stable enough to communicate and to discover non-trivial things about the world and about others, without appealing to the fantasy of essence. Wittgenstein's aim, then, as put by Toril Moi, "is to make us *stop* believing that *the* problem of language is to figure out how words get connected to objects, to make us *give up* the picture that posits a gap between a word and its meaning, a gap that we will then rush to fill in with... 'essences,' or 'universals'."³⁸ Now that we have identified the target of Wittgenstein's therapy, I shall turn to the two Cavellian camps that discuss Wittgenstein's therapeutic methods. For Cavellian readers of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's therapy operates through a strategic deployment of nonsense. For Cavellian readers of the *Investigations*, the therapy operates through the return to words in their ordinary use, "looking philosophically as it were beneath our feet rather than over our heads..."³⁹

³⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §241.

³⁸ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 13.

³⁹ Cavell, "Declining Decline," 34.

2. Nonsense as Therapy

The early Wittgenstein is characterized by his first book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which he purportedly aims to dissolve every problem in philosophy by clarifying what language is and what it can do. The *Tractatus*'s engagement with language is deeply shaped by Russell as well as Gottlob Frege, both of whom thought that many philosophical errors arise from what Frege called "logically illegitimately constructed proposition[s], or sentences that look meaningful because they are grammatically well-formed, but which violate the rules of logical syntax."⁴⁰ In *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884), Frege aims to lay out the foundations of a "well-constructed" formal language, which he calls *Begriffsschrift*, where such confusions would not occur. For the most part, Frege's *Begriffsschrift* works to clarify and dissolve philosophical problems. But there are moments when Frege acknowledges that some logical truths which cannot be *said* within the formal language and can only be *shown* through elucidation; that is, they must be gestured at through propositions that violate the very standards his *Begriffsschrift* is meant to uphold. Wittgenstein appears to inherit Frege's tension and press it to a more radical conclusion. Whereas Frege continues constructing his formal language in spite of these unsayable truths, Wittgenstein appears to claim that the existence of such truths undermines the entire project of constructing a proper formal language. And in the penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus* — after spending the entire book attempting to express higher truths about language, logic, and reality — Wittgenstein declares that those very propositions are nonsense.

The premise of the *Tractatus* is that the space of meaningful language is delimited by logical possibility, and philosophical problems arise only from attempts to speak beyond these

⁴⁰ James Conant, "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 176.

limits (which is exactly what the *Tractatus* attempts to do). The nonsense debate thus turns on how we understand the sixth proposition of the *Tractatus*:

My propositions serve as elucidations in this way: anyone who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up it.)⁴¹

Wittgenstein, after constructing an elaborate account of language and propositions, appears to be effacing every claim that came before. What is crucial is how seriously we take his declaration that his propositions are "nonsensical." Does he mean that his propositions are a kind of nonsense that gestures at ineffable truths? Or does he mean that they are plain nonsense, no different from gibberish?

Two opposed readings have emerged: the *substantial view* and the *austere view* of nonsense. The substantial view holds that the *Tractatus* offers "illuminating nonsense" which are technically nonsensical propositions that nevertheless gesture toward truths about language — their meaning cannot be said, but is instead shown. On this reading, the reader throws away the Tractarian ladder after having grasped ineffable truths about the structure of reality. On the other hand, the austere view holds that nonsense is simply nonsense, and the reader throws away the ladder after realizing that the entire attempt to climb above language rests on confusion — this is the view that largely emerged from Cavell's therapeutic reading.⁴² The debate leads to quite dramatically different readings of Wittgenstein — either he is, on the substantial view, positing a theory of language; or he is, on the austere view, denouncing such an endeavor at all.

⁴¹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §6.54.

⁴² Cora Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 153.

2a. The Substantial View of Nonsense

The substantial view holds that the *Tractatus* offers propositions that are technically nonsensical by the *Tractatus*'s own logical standards but that nevertheless gesture toward real truths about the structure of language and reality. On this reading, the reader who throws away the ladder has not discarded everything because she retains ineffable insights about language that the ladder made it possible to reach, even though those insights cannot be stated in any sensical proposition. The *Tractatus* thus functions, on the substantial view, as a kind of philosophical *via negativa*: it approaches truths that lie at the limit of language by producing propositions that strain against that limit, and the reader grasps those truths in the very act of recognizing that the propositions cannot coherently express them.

P. M. S. Hacker, a prominent defender of the substantial view, grounds his reading in the *Tractatus*'s own distinction between saying and showing. To understand this distinction, it helps to see that the *Tractatus* arranges propositions into a hierarchy. At the base are genuine empirical propositions, which picture facts and are either true or false — "it is raining" says something definite about the world and can be checked against it.⁴³ At the limit of this category sit tautologies and contradictions: "either it is raining or it is not raining" says nothing about the world, because it is true regardless of how the world is, but it is not meaningless — it shows something about the logical structure of language itself, the form that any proposition must take. So far, so good: both empirical propositions and tautologies are, in their different ways, legitimate. Then there are nonsensical "pseudo-propositions," which violate the rules of logical syntax altogether and fail to say or show anything at all.⁴⁴ These are the philosophical sentences the *Tractatus* is meant to expose as confused.

⁴³ P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The problem is that the *Tractatus*'s own propositions about logical form, the relationship between language and the world, and the conditions of representation do not fit into any of these categories. They are not empirical, not tautologies, and yet Hacker resists calling them mere gibberish or plain nonsense. He claims that they occupy a fourth, special category: they are propositions that deliberately violate logical syntax because they are attempting to state, from the outside, what language itself presupposes. These are things that cannot be said within language but that show themselves through it — as Hacker writes, "there are things that cannot be put into words, but which make themselves manifest."⁴⁵ Past philosophy's error, on this reading, lies in its failure to grasp the principles of logical syntax, which ordinary grammar obscures, and this failure "engenders the illusion that one can say things which can only be shown."⁴⁶

The *Tractatus*, in contrast, produces its nonsense deliberately and knowingly, as a way of enacting precisely what it cannot state. Hacker writes that Wittgenstein's correspondence at the time of writing the *Tractatus* clearly supports the claim that Wittgenstein *did* really think that there were ineffable truths to be shown through nonsense. Shortly after completing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote to Russell:

The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[osition]s – i.e. by language – (and, which comes to the same, what can be *thought*) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.⁴⁷

And Paul Engelmann, a friend, wrote of Wittgenstein's correspondence:

It seems to me indeed that his discovery of what a proposition cannot make explicit because it is manifest in it – in my view the essential core of the *Tractatus* although only adumbrated in the book – has found a lasting expression in this letter.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein to Bertrand Russell, Cassino, 19 August 1919, in *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, ed. von Wright, 71.

⁴⁸ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir*, trans. L. Furtmüller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 85.

Furthermore, Hacker claims that the *Tractatus*'s own propositions make this structure visible:

"Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it — the logical form."⁴⁹ Wittgenstein claims that any proposition capable of representing reality must already share a logical form with it. But this logical form is not itself a fact in the world that a proposition can picture, it is the precondition of any picturing at all. You would have to step outside language entirely, occupying a position from which you could survey both language and the world simultaneously and describe what they have in common; that position does not exist. Hence such a form cannot be said, but only shown: "What can be shown cannot be said."⁵⁰

2b. The Austere View of Nonsense

The austere view of nonsense, developed principally by Cora Diamond and James Conant, offers a diametrically opposed answer. The austere view argues that the *Tractatus* employs plain nonsense as a deliberate therapeutic device. The book leads its reader to take its propositions as meaningfully gesturing toward higher truths, and then — in declaring those propositions to be nonsense — transforms the reader's understanding of what she thought she was doing when she sought such truths in the first place. The ladder is thrown away, leaving none of the propositions intact, because the reader comes to see that there was nowhere to climb to. To argue for a self-effacing reading is, as one can imagine, difficult. Simply reading the text is no longer enough, for the debate calls into question not only the meaning of the propositions but the form of the *Tractatus* itself. Scholars begin seeking out the specific development of Wittgenstein's thought, and the discourse therefore turns historical. Diamond and Conant turn to

⁴⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §4.12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, §4.1212.

Frege and Russell, whose views on nonsense they take to constitute the substantial tradition that Wittgenstein is working against.

Diamond and Conant argue that both Frege and Russell are committed, despite themselves, to the substantial view, and that Wittgenstein's achievement is to resolve the tensions in their thought in favor of the austere view. For instance, Frege's commitment to what he called the "context principle" — "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition" — should, according to Conant, lead him to an austere view of nonsense.⁵¹ If one strictly adheres to this principle, then any proposition that fails to form a coherent logical whole should be plainly meaningless, and not 'profoundly' nonsensical, because its parts wouldn't acquire any sort of meaning outside such a whole. However, Frege does not follow through on this implication. Instead, he claims that certain propositions, while logically nonsensical, can "hint" at unstatable truths through elucidation, relying on the reader's "co-operative understanding."⁵²

This tension appears in Frege's famous exchange with Benno Kerry, where Frege attempts to describe the difference between a concept and an object — a distinction, according to him, that can only be shown and not said:

FREGE: Concepts can not be objects and objects cannot be concepts.

KERRY: "The concept *horse* is a concept easily attained."

FREGE: "The concept horse is not a concept."⁵³

Frege's reply to Kerry is, by his own logical standards, nonsensical. The phrase "the concept horse" functions grammatically as a proper name (referring to an object), not as a concept-expression. Frege acknowledges this, writing that "the word 'concept' itself is, taken strictly, already defective," but insists that such "imprecise expressions" can convey genuine

⁵¹ James Conant, "Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 180.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 179, 185.

insight through hints.⁵⁴ Frege is thus committed to the substantial view because he believes certain propositions, while failing to satisfy logical requirements, nevertheless succeed in communicating something meaningful. That is to say, Frege thus holds that some nonsensical propositions do not rely on their context for meaning, because they point toward "logically primitive categories" which are independent of context: "Their meaning must be presupposed from the outset."⁵⁵

Conant claims that this is an unresolved tension in Frege's thought. Frege cannot maintain both that meaning is always contextual and that some 'primitive' propositions are context-independent. And yet Frege decidedly (and contradictorily) holds both. Without the context principle, Frege cannot account for when a logical category "occurs in the wrong place."⁵⁶ Thus Frege maintains that meaning is contextual when he claims that a word can shift its logical function in sentences such as "Trieste is no Vienna," where "Vienna" functions not as a proper name but as a concept-expression, meaning something like "a great imperial capital."⁵⁷ The fact that the same "sign" (the physical word) can have different "symbols" (logical roles) in different propositional contexts (e.g., "Vienna" as a proper name vs. "Vienna" as a concept-expression) means that propositions depend on context for meaning.⁵⁸ But, on the other hand, Frege still asserts that some propositions are context-independent; these are the propositions which, through elucidation, can only be shown and not said. Frege cannot risk losing such propositions, because the entire project of his *Begriffsschrift* relies on the existence of some universal propositions which delineate the space of logical meaning. Frege's ultimate

⁵⁴ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 190, 199.

yielding to these higher, context-independent propositions leads him to mistakenly turn to a substantial view of nonsense.

Conant argues that Wittgenstein should be read as resolving these tensions in Frege's view. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein commits to the context principle when he claims that the "same sign symbolizes in different ways."⁵⁹ Indeed, the *Tractatus* develops Frege's context principle more consistently: the *Tractatus* claims that, to identify the "symbol in the sign," one must "consider the context of significant use."⁶⁰ If a sign cannot be recognized as a symbol within a coherent propositional structure, then it simply fails to symbolize. There are no "working parts" in nonsensical propositions, nor ineffable truths being gestured at.⁶¹ Thus Wittgenstein — in virtue of remaining faithful to Frege's own context principle — holds the austere view. He devastates Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, but only in order to resolve the inconsistencies that the *Begriffsschrift* relied on to retain the semblance of coherence.

Diamond argues that Russell exhibits similar substantial commitments in his theory of descriptions. Russell distinguishes between the "real form" and the "logical form" of a sentence.⁶² Russell claims that the "real form" of sentences can still be truth-valued even if the description is empty. For example, the sentence "The present king of France is bald" does not have a coherent logical form: the "is" does not properly refer to a real value, because there is no king of France, so there is no logical truth value.⁶³ But the *real form* of the sentence retains its truth-value (false) regardless if there is a king of France. Thus Russell claims that the logical form of a sentence is separate from its functional expression, and one can grasp this expression "abstracted from the use of a term for it" — *this* commits Russell to the substantial view.⁶⁴ The

⁵⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §3.321.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, §3.326.

⁶¹ Conant, 194.

⁶² Cora Diamond, "Throwing Away the Ladder," *Philosophy* 63, no. 243 (1988): 13.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

distinction between real and logical form allows for sentences whose truth-value is logically incoherent and yet semantically retained. This is analogous to the ineffable but still real nonsense of the substantial view.

Diamond claims that, while Wittgenstein retains from Russell the idea that a sentence keeps its truth-valuedness independently of its actual truth or falsity (e.g. even if there is no king of France), for Wittgenstein, this is because a sentence *always* has a truth-value. That is what it means for something to be a sentence. Diamond claims that Wittgenstein is against Russell's distinction between real and logical form because there is for Wittgenstein *no real form of a sentence other than its logical form*. Instead, "the functional character of a sentence is grasped at the same time as it is seen how it maintains truth-valuedness."⁶⁵ There is no "preliminary grasp" of a sentence's function or expression because "the whole of logic is internal to any referring expression."⁶⁶ A sentence is defined by its internal ability to always have a truth value.

The austere view holds that, when philosophical propositions attempt to speak about these "internal" features as if they were external or ineffable, they are under the influence of a linguistic illusion which produces plain nonsense.⁶⁷ The *Tractatus* deliberately produces nonsense as its method of therapy. The book leads its reader through a sustained philosophical illusion that it is possible to stand outside language and theorize about the conditions of its possibility, and then dismantles that illusion from within. The therapeutic work consists in leading the reader to recognize that the attempt to posit a metaphysical theory of language was misguided from the start. The Tractarian "ladder" must be thrown away because its propositions provisionally and necessarily cater to the linguistic illusion of gesturing at ineffable truths, not because they have successfully finished expressing or "showing" it. The method of the *Tractatus*,

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 17, 27.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7.

on the austere view, is not to posit a view of language but to engage the reader in an activity which "fully enter[s]" one's philosophical illusions and "explore[s] them from the inside."⁶⁸ The elucidation has served its purpose when "the illusion of sense is exploded from within."⁶⁹

Against Diamond and Conant, Hacker has replied in defense of the substantial view. On his reading, the *Tractatus* does aim to convey "ineffable truths about reality," truths which the reader retains after throwing away the ladder.⁷⁰ Hacker argues that Diamond and Conant place disproportionate emphasis on §6.54 while ignoring the rest of the book. Moreover, much of Wittgenstein's personal correspondence and conversations indicates that he consciously holds various philosophical doctrines in the *Tractatus*, which is in line with the substantial reading.⁷¹ A key theme throughout the *Tractatus*, Hacker claims, is that "there are things that cannot be put into words, but which make themselves manifest."⁷² For Hacker, sentences like "1 is a number" or "A is an object" are not mere gibberish. They misuse legitimate terms and fail to meet logical requirements (e.g. the bipolarity condition that a proposition must allow for both truth and falsity), but they are nevertheless "illuminating nonsense."⁷³ Such propositions gesture toward necessary structures that show themselves through symbolism. The *Tractatus* is therefore committed to a substantial conception of nonsense.

Hacker's central objection to the austere view is that it "saws off the branch upon which it sits."⁷⁴ According to Hacker, Diamond argues that the *Tractatus*'s propositions are plain nonsense because they illegitimately employ formal concepts like "object," "number," or "proposition" — but Diamond's own argument necessarily deploys those same formal concepts. Wittgenstein

⁶⁸ Conant, 197.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁰ P. M. S. Hacker, "Was He Trying to Whistle It?" in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 357.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 353.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 365.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 361.

nowhere exempts these passages from the fate of the rest of the book, and thus Diamond surreptitiously reinstates a distinction between more and less significant nonsense, which is the very distinction she officially denies. By the standards of the *Tractatus*, then, the claim that its sentences are plain nonsense is itself nonsense, meaning that the reasoning used to sustain the austere reading, and Diamond employs an inconsistent method which actually "reinstates the distinction she implores."⁷⁵

Diamond is unlikely to be troubled by this objection, and would likely even claim that Hacker's objection is her point. She concedes that the language she uses in articulating Wittgenstein's austere commitments is seemingly "incompatible" with those commitments, and she does not deny that her own propositions are, strictly speaking, nonsensical.⁷⁶ What she insists on is a distinction not between kinds of nonsense but between nonsense and the *activity* of engaging with nonsense. Nonsensicality is a feature of propositions; the imaginative activity of trying to understand an utterer of nonsense — that is, of "let[ting]" oneself "be taken in by the appearance of sense that some nonsense presents to us" — is something else entirely, and the heart of Wittgenstein's therapeutic work.⁷⁷ The *Tractatus* provides a "frame" for this activity: it structures the reader's imaginative engagement with philosophical illusion in a way that enables her, eventually, to recognize the illusion as her own.⁷⁸ The book's ethical intention, Diamond writes, "includes the intention of the book not to be interpreted" — its aim is not to be understood but to transform the reader's relationship to the desire for understanding.⁷⁹

We are now in a position to see how the austere view of nonsense connects to the therapeutic reading established in section 1. On the austere view, the *Tractatus*'s nonsense also

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," 153.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 165.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

targets the philosophical fantasy of some logical structure, an ineffable truth, an inner reality behind language, which language strains toward but cannot reach. The *Tractatus*'s therapeutic move comes from recognizing that the appeal of the ineffable rested on a misunderstanding of what language is. Through this recognition, "there is nothing on the far side of language that [one] want[s] to, but cannot, say."⁸⁰ The insight that the *Tractatus* imparts is, Conant writes, about the reader herself: that she is "prone to such illusions," and that the dissolution of the illusion requires not a better theory but a transformation of desire.⁸¹ The *Tractatus* subverts the promise of a 'beyond' by confronting, from within, the desire (and, for Cavell, the fears) that made such a fantastic gesture seem necessary. What remains, once the ladder is thrown away, is a changed relationship to what the reader wanted language to be.

3. The Ordinary as Therapy

The major work of the later Wittgenstein is his *Philosophical Investigations*, in which he claims: "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."⁸² This led to the later Wittgenstein's slogan that 'meaning is use'. This understanding of language specifically combats the Augustinian view of language, which Wittgenstein opens by citing:

When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out. This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of the eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes. (Augustine, *Confessions*, I.8).⁸³

⁸⁰ Ware, 115.

⁸¹ Conant, 197.

⁸² Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §116.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, §1.

For Wittgenstein, Augustine conceives of language as the filling of a pre-existing form:

"Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one."⁸⁴ In his view, Augustine mistakenly understands language in the following way:

"Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands."⁸⁵ Someone learning a language merely needs to know which word is assigned to which thing. This is, for Wittgenstein, misguided. Wittgenstein views the "Augustinian picture of language" as an example of yielding to the philosophical temptation toward essence, toward "the idea that if we just can understand how names or naming works, then we will have captured the essence of language."⁸⁶

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein leads us out of this temptation through his language-games. These are invented scenarios, often quite simple or even primitive, that isolate particular aspects of how we use language. As Ray Monk explains, a language game highlights "one particular aspect of our ordinary language" by removing it from "the complicated contexts in which it is usually embedded," allowing us to "see the connection" between the simplified case and our actual use of language.⁸⁷ The first of these, following immediately after the Augustine quote, describes a narrator who sends a boy shopping:

I give him a slip of paper marked "five red apples." He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked "apples"; then he looks up the word "red" in a chart and finds a colour sample next to it; then he says the series of elementary number-words... up to the word "five," and for each number-word he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid., §32.

⁸⁵ Ibid., §1.

⁸⁶ Moi, 26.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁸⁸ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §1.

There is obviously something strange about the shopkeeper. Why should he need a color chart? Does he not know what red is? Moi writes that the strategy of this language-game is to make us think about, and recognize Augustine's view of language as incorrect: "Augustine shows us a child who learns to express his wishes simply by naming things; Wittgenstein responds by drawing our attention to a man who expresses his simple wish for five red apples," which ends up only provoking "a barrage of puzzled questions... for what he wants to know is how words like 'red' and 'five' can have meaning... outside any specific context of use."⁸⁹ Wittgenstein's shopkeeper shows us what Augustine's view of language would look like in practice, and the strangeness makes us realize that this is not how language works. There is no gap between word and world that simply requires bridging, "there is no meaning 'behind' the use (for if there were, what kind of thing would it be? A mental [psychological] entity? A real thing in the real world?...), there is only meaning as use."⁹⁰ The 'therapy' returns us to the ordinary use of words.

J. L. Austin develops Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy in a more systematic direction. His *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) attempts to lay out the conditions for utterances to be meaningful in ordinary contexts; in that sense, for Austin, meaning is determined by context. Derrida objects to Austin by claiming that context is never stable, or complete, and thus context alone cannot secure meaning. Scholars remain divided on how to situate Wittgenstein in relation to Derrida's critique of ordinary language philosophy. Some read Wittgenstein as Derridean, some read him as falling vulnerable to Derrida's critique, and some argue that Derrida gives into the "craving for generality" that Wittgenstein warns against.⁹¹ The Wittgenstein-Derrida debate is of particular interest because the two thinkers agree on so much

⁸⁹ Moi, 28.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 14.

— they are both suspicious of philosophy's attempt to provide a comprehensive account of how meaning works — yet they seem to argue for incompatible things. Derrida argues that meaning is always unstable, while Wittgenstein argues that meaning is in our everyday use of language. In this section I will examine Wittgenstein's and Austin's respective relations to ordinary language philosophy, Derrida's critique of Austin, as well as the literature that stages a debate between Derrida's deconstruction with Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy.

3a. Wittgenstein, Austin, and the Ordinary

We have said that Wittgenstein claims that the "meaning of a word is its use in the language."⁹² What does this mean? "When we learn to speak," writes Moi, "we do not simply learn names, we are initiated into practices of every kind, into a form of life."⁹³ Words and world are intertwined. "To find out what a word means is," Moi writes, "to discover something about the world. Learning the word is learning to see. Learning to see is learning the word."⁹⁴ When we learn to speak, we learn "not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is... not merely what the word for 'love' is, but what love is."⁹⁵ Cavell goes on:

"That (what you do) will be love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought that will be sought... Of course the person, growing, will learn other things about these concepts and 'objects' also. They will grow gradually as the child's world grows. But all he or she knows about them is what he or she has learned, and all they have learned will be part of what they are. And what will the day be like when the person 'realizes' what he 'believed' about what love and trust and authority are? And how will he stop believing it?"⁹⁶

⁹² Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §43.

⁹³ Moi, 33.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, II, 223. See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 177.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Cavell and Moi's point is that the meaning of a word is not tied to any 'essence'. There is no essence. To learn the meaning of a word is to engage in a "form of life," to have used the word with others, to have lived with others, to have grown to understand them, and they us. The objection that 'use' is too subjective to be the site of meaning does not hold, for 'use' is not at all a matter of individual whim. We cannot simply stop believing the meaning of a word, nor all of the associations it has for us. "What we learn is not just what we have studied," writes Cavell, "and what we have been taught is not just what we were intended to learn."⁹⁷

It is my sense that this point is particularly difficult to illustrate because it predicated upon a certain poetic sensitivity. But it may help to consider — as Cavell, citing Wittgenstein, prompts us to — the difference between one's relation to one's mother tongue and a language that one becomes fluent in: "when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions... even give a mastery of the country's language... We do not *understand* the people."⁹⁸ One has different levels of access to meaning because one has different access to forms of life. Even if someone is fluent in grammar and vocabulary, it does not mean they pick up on the subtle shades of implication: "It is such shades of sense, intimations of meaning, which allow certain kinds of subtlety or delicacy of communication."⁹⁹ And, indeed, if one is initiated into deeper forms of life, one acquires a deeper understanding of meaning: "One might think of poetry as the second inheritance of language."¹⁰⁰

Returning to ordinary language is to return to this subtler, felt understanding of meaning which is, far from auxiliary to language, the very substance that enables us to understand each other, to speak, to have used the 'right' word: "How do I find the 'right' word? How do I choose

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 67.

⁹⁹ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 189.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

among words? Without doubt it is sometimes as if I were comparing them by fine differences of smell: *That* is too....., *that* is too, —*this* is the right one."¹⁰¹ But note: while ordinary meaning is subtle and tender, it is not by no means unstable, or purely subjective. For Cavell, a concept has a stable meaning if "new and the most various instances can be recognized as falling under or failing to fall under that concept."¹⁰² Appealing to generality in pursuit of stability is a mistake; stability is a rather ordinary thing. It is Wittgenstein's point that meaning is, of course, variable but *not for that reason arbitrary*: "language is not only an acquirement but a bequest... we are stingy in what we attempt to inherit."¹⁰³

Austin's theory of speech acts can be understood as a systematization of Wittgenstein's return to ordinary language. In response to the logical positivists, Austin shifts attention from the truth-conditions of statements to the conditions under which utterances function successfully in practice. This marks a decisive break from the assumptions of logical positivism, which held that meaningful sentences must either be empirically verifiable or analytically true, and are therefore assessable as true or false. Austin instead distinguishes between constative and performative utterances.¹⁰⁴ Constatives describe states of affairs and are evaluated in terms of truth or falsity. Performatives do not merely report but enact, thereby bringing about a new state of affairs in virtue of being uttered. Their success, unlike constatives, depends not on their direct correspondence with reality but on "felicity conditions."¹⁰⁵ These conditions include that the utterance is in the right context, uttered by the right authority, and having the proper uptake.

Austin uses the example of the utterance "I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)."¹⁰⁶ This utterance is a performative; the meaning of the utterance is not separate from the

¹⁰¹ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, II, xi.

¹⁰² Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 185.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

actual act of marrying the couple, if the right conditions are met. These conditions include that the speaker is authorized, context is correct, intention is genuine. The utterance is infelicitous and does not actually marry two people if the conditions are not met (i.e. the speaker isn't authorized, or the context is wrong, or the intention isn't genuine). However, there is a category of utterances which do not obviously fit into conditions of either felicity or infelicity. Austin calls these "parasitic" utterances, which are cases where an utterance takes place in a theatrical performance, as a quotation, or with irony. Austin excludes these cases from "serious" language use on the grounds that they imitate real utterances; the meaning of parasitic utterances is inexorably different than if one were to utter them directly, and not as, for example, a quotation.

Both Austin and Wittgenstein were fundamentally driven by the shared motive, Cavell writes, "to put the human animal back into language and therewith back into philosophy."¹⁰⁷ By shifting the philosophical focus away from idealized logical structures and returning to particular human contexts, Austin builds upon Wittgenstein's insight that words are spoken by human beings to other human beings in definite, shared contexts. For both thinkers, this return to the "ordinary" or "everyday" functions as a crucial antidote to philosophical illusion. Cavell writes that the "ordinariness sought in the ordinary language methods of Wittgenstein and of Austin" relies on a humility that tracks the everyday uses of words.¹⁰⁸ Rather than looking "over our heads" for meaning, both look philosophically "beneath our feet" at "what we ordinarily say."¹⁰⁹

However, and as I have implied in the introduction of this paper, there are distinctions to be made between Austin's and Wittgenstein's involvements with ordinary language philosophy. Wittgenstein is, for Cavell, deeply focused on "diagnosis."¹¹⁰ He seeks to trace the reasons why

¹⁰⁷ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 207.

¹⁰⁸ Cavell, "Declining Decline," 34.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 207.

philosophers attempt to speak 'outside language games' in order to reject their human limitations. Austin lacks this diagnostic drive, making him what Cavell calls "a more Enlightenment, or anyway English, figure."¹¹¹ Austin was suspicious of the "spiritual fervor" that characterized Wittgenstein's constant struggles with skepticism.¹¹² He complained of philosophers who insist there are "countless" uses of language and who "defer getting down to the business of counting them."¹¹³ The idea that 'uses of language' can be 'counted' perhaps reflects Austin's tendency to systematize. Austin treats knowledge as the "identification or recognition of things," whereas Wittgenstein asks: "What makes our knowledge of a world of objects at all?"¹¹⁴

3b. Derrida versus the Ordinary

For Austin, the meaning of a performative utterance depends on its context. For Derrida, context cannot secure the meaning of any utterance because context is always indeterminate, and all instances of meaning exceed their 'original' context. Derrida often uses epistolary examples to illustrate this. Consider the act of sending a letter. The original context of this exchange is between sender and addressee. So, if Austin were right that meaning is secured by the context of a given communication, then the meaning of the letter would not be retained if this 'original' context of the communication were to dissolve, or be dismantled. And yet the meaning of this letter is retained even in "the absence of the addressee."¹¹⁵ We can and do read dead letters; they retain their meaning even despite the absence of their 'original' context, even despite the "death" of the receiver, or the sender, or both.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Cavell, "Declining Decline," 67.

¹¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹¹⁴ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 224, 225.

¹¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 5, 7.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 5, 7.

This means that writing writes to an always absent, always deferred addressee, and the context of any given communication can never be stable. Derrida claims that a letter is meaningful for the very same reason that its meaning can never be fully secured. That is to say, a letter can only be meaningful if it is meaningful in the absence of its 'original context'; it must be readable even after the death of the sender, or addressee. Even further, Derrida claims that a letter is dead before it reaches its addressee:

[V]ery banal today... the idea that one is killing by burning a letter or a sign... Murder is everywhere... We are the worst criminals in history... Understand me, when I write, right here, on these innumerable post cards, I annihilate not only what I am saying but also the unique addressee that I constitute, and therefore every possible addressee, and every destination... To do so it suffices only that I be legible... I write for dead addressees, not dead in the future but already dead at the moment when I get to the end of a sentence... The addressees are dead, the destination is death... And you are, my love... the living proof precisely, that a letter can always not arrive at its destination, and that therefore it never arrives.¹¹⁷

Here Derrida writes a letter to his love; he laments that such an act is an act of 'murder', and the object of his murder is the original context of his meaning. In what sense is it a murder? The act of sending a letter ostensibly captures and communicates the meanings at the time of being written — that is the point of a letter — but these meanings can and do change, they pass by mutely, and by the time the letter ought to have 'reached' its addressee, its original contents (that is, its fidelity to the original, precise, whole context, meanings, feelings) are effectively killed.

In other words, because a letter (or word) can be detached and repeated by anyone, and because it is on the very condition that the context is detachable that the letter is meaningful, the destination of the letter is "open and radically unintelligible," beyond any fixed context, "quite alive outside of me."¹¹⁸ Derrida thus writes: "a letter can always—and therefore must—never arrive at its destination."¹¹⁹ The letter 'never arrives' in the sense that the original context from the

¹¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79, 29.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

sender can never be fully given or offered to the addressee; such an offering would necessarily render the letter unintelligible and meaningless. It can only arrive if it is already 'dead' and, even then, such an arrival is never complete, for the content of the letter is meaningful only on the condition that it can always be repeated.

Derrida claims that, similarly, speech cannot be bound to context, and therefore the meaning of speech cannot be determined by its context. The communicative context of Austin's performatives is, for Derrida, constituted by the "conscious presence of speakers or receivers... in the totality of the operation."¹²⁰ In Austin's example, the meaning of the performative "I do" (during a marriage ceremony) depends on the context of the utterance (that the utterer is the right person, that it is spoken in between two people getting married, on their wedding day, with the appropriate intention, that the people understand, etc.). If any of these contextual conditions are not met for Austin, then the meaning of the utterance is not performed. But for Derrida, the things that constitute these conditions are, again, never complete, never stable, and never determinable. To use Austin's own example — if someone quotes someone else's utterance, or speaks ironically, then the meaning of this new utterance is not determined by its proper context, it instead feeds its meaning off some other context and the proper 'meaning' of this new utterance cannot be properly or fully situated within either context.

The fact that the utterance is repeated in a new moment makes it different from that first utterance, but the fact that it references an earlier utterance makes the meaning not quite captured in its actual, present context. Austin calls these cases "parasitic" uses of language because they feed on the context and meaning of "serious" speech acts without themselves counting as proper ones. Derrida objects to Austin by claiming that the meaningfulness of "serious" speech depends on the very same conditions that make "parasitic" destabilizing for meaning — namely, that all

¹²⁰ Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 14.

utterances, or words, can be repeated across contexts (and still understood as the same 'word'). Moreover, since every utterance can be repeated, the “parasitic” cases simply make visible what is implicit in all cases.¹²¹ Austin's "parasitic" cases become, for Derrida, examples of how meaning works; its vitality depends on its capacity to exceed any given occasion or intention.¹²²

Against Austin, Derrida posits that both speech and writing are characterized not by their relation to context, but by their relation to *iterability*. He defines iterability as "the capacity of any sign to be repeated across different contexts, while remaining recognizable as the “same.”¹²³ Any given instance of a sign, of speech, writing, or a word, carries meaning despite — *and because* — the original communicative context is never complete, always open. Derrida uses the example of listening to someone speak: this involves encountering "empirical variations of tone, voice, etc." and yet even so, "we must be able to recognize the identity... of a signifying form."¹²⁴ I can recognize the word "cat" even if two different people, with two different voices and accents, utter it, for what makes speech meaningful is its ability to be repeated and recognized as the same sign despite variations in particularity. It is necessarily separable from the original context. Derrida's conclusion is that, because “a context is never absolutely determinable” and “can never be entirely certain or saturated,” meaning cannot be grounded in context at all.¹²⁵ The very possibility of meaning depends on structures that destabilize context. Austin's appeal to context presupposes a stable presence that language in fact always exceeds.

Some scholars think that Derrida's critique of Austin has implications for Wittgenstein. The most common complaint concerns Wittgenstein's slogan that the "meaning of a word is its use in the language.”¹²⁶ Wittgenstein's 'use' seems conceptually similar to Austin's 'context',

¹²¹ Ibid., 12.

¹²² Ibid., 17.

¹²³ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁶ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §43.

which Derrida does not think is stable enough to secure meaning. But Moi would likely argue that this charge misunderstands what 'use' means. Wittgenstein — unlike Austin — does not rely on 'use' to posit a general condition of meaning, for he posits no general conditions at all. His point is to show us that, when one searches for generality or essence in meaning, one is tempted by two extremes: either the concept is incoherent or meaning is radically unstable. He instead suggests that meaning is far more stable than skeptics suggest. Moi writes: "Use is not a ground. Use is a practice grounded on nothing. Use is simply what we do."¹²⁷ Wittgenstein is actually against positing any general condition. The question of stability only emerges when one is already searching for a general condition of meaning. Wittgenstein redirects our attention to ordinary use as a kind of unity and stability which doesn't depend on essence.

As a related but distinct concern, Simon Glendinning voices the skeptic's complaint that Wittgenstein's account of 'meaning as use' is "not a full explanation of meaning."¹²⁸ After all, "there must be some limit to the irregularity allowable for conceptual distinction, and hence for language to be possible. There must be *some* boundary of distinction between concepts or there is no language at all."¹²⁹ In reply, Glendinning claims that the objection misses Wittgenstein's point — there is no 'full explanation of meaning', and this is not a problem. It only becomes a problem for the skeptic who assumes that the absence of such an explanation marks the absence of "an [essence which] is absolutely necessary for me to mean or understand something at all."¹³⁰ The skeptic imagines that understanding requires grasping what all instances have in common but Wittgenstein claims that "[a]ny definition, any explanation of meaning, however tightly drawn, can be misunderstood or misapplied."¹³¹ It therefore makes no sense to compare any

¹²⁷ Moi, 29.

¹²⁸ Simon Glendinning, *On Being with Others: Heidegger–Derrida–Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 1998), 98.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

explanation of meaning to an essence. When we examine what we "*actually* call 'explanations of meaning... we do not find definite rules but, for the most part, explanations by examples of the use of words in particular cases,' for in actual language, "[n]o boundary will ever entirely coincide with the actual usage, 'as this usage has no sharp boundary'."¹³²

Interestingly, Glendinning claims that this view is one which Wittgenstein and Derrida share. Whereas some scholars see Wittgenstein's understanding of usage in ordinary language as fundamentally opposed to Derrida's conception of meaning (after all, one wishes to stabilize our understanding of meaning and the other wishes to, by every account, destabilize it), Glendinning claims that both Wittgenstein and Derrida are committed to the idea that meaning can always misfire, and they in turn commonly refute philosophy's "thesis of ideal conceptual exactness," which believes that words really do correspond to determinate, self-identical meanings which can be mastered in the form of rules.¹³³ Glendinning does, however, show some awareness of the differences between the two thinkers. He claims that Wittgenstein "rejects the idea that ordinary explanations of meaning are in some way 'less than full'; we know that this is in contrast to Derrida's emphasis on the necessarily incomplete, deferred nature of meaning."¹³⁴ But their larger projects are, for Glendinning, deeply aligned, because both thinkers affirm the inexact and inessential ways of language.

Funnily enough, Henry Staten in *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (1984) also claims that Wittgenstein has striking similarities to Derrida, but for what appears to be reasons opposite to Glendinning. Staten claims that Wittgenstein's method harbors a "deconstructive impulse" in the sense that he uses language against language: "language is what bewitches but language is what

¹³² Ibid., 97.

¹³³ Ibid., 77.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 100.

we must remain within in order to cure the bewitchment."¹³⁵ According to Staten, Wittgenstein does this because he views the "excessive wealth" and "accidence" of language as resources for new meaning. Wittgenstein's "remedy" is very Derridean in the sense that it is not to escape language, but to engage in an "endless transit" through its "material medium," constantly exploring its "new analogies, new possibilities of syntax."¹³⁶ The "homeland of language" is never reached, as meaning is always in flux and always deferred.¹³⁷ By defamiliarizing language and treating it as a "rebus with an indefinite potential for an indefinite number of kinds of signifying sequences" Wittgenstein aims to fracture the appearance of stable unities and brings the necessary "accidence, errancy, contingency" of language and meaning to come to the fore.¹³⁸

It is my sense that, between the two, Glendinning is more faithful to Wittgenstein's point than Staten is. Far from wandering about a perpetually absent 'homeland', Wittgenstein's return to the ordinary appears to be the recognition of a sufficiently stable locus of meaning and understanding. In any case, and against both Glendinning and Staten, Martin Stone argues that Derrida's deconstructive project falls prey to the very metaphysical impulses that Wittgenstein warns against. According to Stone, deconstruction seeks "to ponder the consequences arising from the fact that a possibility...is always possible."¹³⁹ In other words, deconstruction emerges from the assumption that language's vulnerability to failure is a necessary condition requiring philosophical articulation. Derrida employs his discourse "strategically" with "self-critique, in order to end up with a philosophy that 'think[s] unheard of thought' by thinking the old signs...in radically new ways."¹⁴⁰ Derrida tries to express the concepts which are "presently inexpressible,"

¹³⁵ Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 65, 91.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³⁹ Martin Stone, "Wittgenstein on Deconstruction," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 90.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

whose full articulation must be deferred yet whose eventual expression is still imagined. This maintains the structure of philosophical explanation while claiming to transcend it.

Furthermore, the necessity of deconstruction, according to Stone, "arises only because we have not sufficiently disabused ourselves of a longing for the platonistic ideal."¹⁴¹ Wittgenstein's project helps us recognize that even without stable facts about meaning, there remains "a story about our membership of mutual correction and accreditation."¹⁴² This renounces the fantasy of metaphysical meaning and, with it, the compensatory discourse of absence, lack, or deferral. Moi similarly argues that Derrida's commitment to "rigorous and scientific" concepts betrays a lingering attachment to the metaphysical impulses he seeks to combat. Even when Derrida demonstrates that a general theory is impossible, he "*assert[s] the absence*" of such a theory rather than abandoning the theoretical framework altogether.¹⁴³ When Derrida insists on concepts like "iterability" to explain meaning from the highest level of abstraction, he exemplifies what Wittgenstein calls the "craving for generality," or the "attachment to the traditional philosophical impulse to theorize an ideal generality."¹⁴⁴ In contrast, Wittgenstein renounces the quest for theoretical generality as incoherent: "the ordinary language philosopher is convinced that there can be no such thing as the 'structural conditions of meaning as such.'"¹⁴⁵

In sum, though both Wittgenstein and Derrida both reject the idea that any given set of conditions can fully account for meaning, their philosophical moves diverge significantly in their response to this perceived impossibility. I find that their works share a common negative thesis — that meaning is not composed of essences — but diverge in their positive theses. Wittgenstein affirms meaning as use, while Derrida affirms, in a strange way, a general linguistic condition.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Moi, 80.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

While Derrida doesn't posit any condition directly responsible for meaning, he does articulate iterability as the condition for *the possibility* of meaning; in that sense Derrida still appeals to a general account of language, even if only in order to destabilize the very attempt of generalization. Scholars like Glendinning and Staten perhaps see similarities between Wittgenstein and Derrida because they emphasize their shared negative thesis, while scholars like Moi and Stone argue that their projects are very different because they emphasize their opposing positive theses.

4. Reading Wittgenstein After Cavell

Up to this point, I have surveyed the two Cavellian debates staged within the therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein, which map onto his early and later work respectively. In this section I will more explicitly draw parallels between sections and evaluate productive avenues for the discourse going forward, since it is the premise of this literature review that important insights are missed by reading these two Cavellian camps as separate debates. For instance, Hacker describes the austere view of nonsense as a “post-modernist” reading of Wittgenstein (perhaps because of the view's self-effacing nature), but, as is made clear in our discussion of the relevant literature, most readers of Wittgenstein with austere commitments fiercely defend and differentiate Wittgenstein from the likes of Derrida, who is steeped in the post-modernist tradition (the *Tractatus* is, on the austere view, self-effacing for reasons quite opposed to those of deconstruction).¹⁴⁶ It is evidently worth tracking the corresponding concepts between the respective discourses that compose the two Cavellian camps.

¹⁴⁶ Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?,” 356.

4a. Beyond Alienation

Generally, the austere view of nonsense maintains commitments aligned with the view that charges Derrida of giving into metaphysical impulses. This view is also the one most closely aligned with Cavell's therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein. Accordingly, this view emphasizes what I have referred to as Wittgenstein's 'positive thesis', and is more sensitive to the existential stakes of Wittgenstein's philosophy. While Glendinning, on the one hand, sees Wittgenstein and Derrida as both committed to targeting metaphysical conceptions of meaning, the therapeutic reading sees these similarities as superficial in comparison to the differences in their methods; it is Wittgenstein's sensitivity to fantasy and alienation that distinguishes the originality and full philosophical force of his therapy. "Wittgenstein's originality," Cavell writes, lies in refusing to abolish the craving for generality and in instead "finding ways to prevent it from defeating itself so easily, ways to make it methodical"¹⁴⁷ In other words, Wittgenstein's therapy is meant to make us "dissatisfied with the idea of universals as explanations of language" and to show that universals do not meet "our real need."¹⁴⁸ Once we see that our usage of words does not require essences to be meaningful and understood, and once we see that concepts "do not usually have, and do not need, rigid limits," the appeal of universals loses its force.¹⁴⁹

Derrida and Wittgenstein thus diverge not in their philosophical target, but in their treatments of alienation. Both respond to the craving for essence in language and the alienation associated with this craving. But Wittgenstein appears uniquely concerned with alienation at the level of the subject: his philosophical aim is to guide the subject back to inhabit language again. The problem of alienation is, in that sense, located more so in the subject than in any possible external 'structure' of language; for there is no such structure, for meaning is possible only

¹⁴⁷ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 175–176.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 187–188.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

through the subject's relation to it. In contrast, Derrida appears concerned with alienation at the structural level: his philosophical aim is to lead the subject to the recognition that no meaning will ever fully or sufficiently account for her. Thus the problem of alienation, for Derrida, concerns not as much the subject as it does the very structure for the possibility of meaning (i.e. iterability, amongst Derrida's many other terms). There is little existential recourse for the subject who finds herself in an alienation predicated upon external structures.

In that sense — yes, Derrida posits a kind of structure for meaning (or at least for meaning's possibility), whereas Wittgenstein refuses to posit any kind of conception or possibility of meaning as outside of the subject and her forms of life. Derrida's deconstruction, too, appears to map onto commitments aligned with the substantial view of nonsense.¹⁵⁰ On the substantial view, the Tractarian nonsense is nonsensical not because the reader misunderstands something in her relation to language, but because there is something essentially insufficient about the structure of language, or logic, itself; the *Tractatus* must therefore call its own propositions nonsense because the structure of language prevents it from being properly expressed. This is quite in line with Derrida's preoccupation with alienation at the structural level. This alienation is not, as the austere or therapeutic view holds, a matter which the subject could remedy. In that sense, Derrida does not conceive of a way out of, or beyond alienation

Another point that brings out the stakes between Derrida and the therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein is Derrida's preoccupation with 'context'. Derrida complains that the original context of a communicative exchange can never be fully offered to an addressee — this has deep similarities to Wittgenstein's skeptic that fantasizes about a private language. And, upon closer examination, what Derrida means by 'context' seems to be something ultimately very private:

¹⁵⁰Another parallel worth noting is that Derrida and Frege are similarly weary of meaning's dependence on context.

I would like to write you so simply, so simply, so simply. Without having anything ever catch the eye, excepting yours alone, and what is more while erasing all the traits, even the most inapparent ones, the ones that mark the tone, or the belonging to a genre (the letter for example, or the post card), so that above all the language remains self-evidently secret, as if it were being invented at every step, and as if it were burning immediately, as soon as any third party would set eyes on it...¹⁵¹

Here we must note the striking similarities between this passage and Wittgenstein's private language argument. Yes, Wittgenstein's skeptic is more preoccupied with the irreducibility of one's particular bodily pain, and the inability to faithfully express this to another. But Derrida's preoccupations with the privacy and turmoil of his romantic love take on a very similar trajectory to Wittgenstein's skeptic. Both lead to the fantasy of a perfectly private, perfectly secret language, which could be understood by no one else, and therefore untouched by 'genre' or convention which may potentially render it banal and, more pressingly, no longer *the thing itself*.

But if, against Derrida and toward Wittgenstein, one's understanding of context is taken to be less private, if it is marked not by the irreducibility of our inner experience but instead by our shared forms of life and use — then indeed, a letter is not readable when it is detached from its context; or at least not indiscriminately so. If context is to be more public matter, then the context of a letter would be the linguistic norms that make up the meaning of the letter (e.g. its exigency, certain phrases, shades of implication). Someone like myself would rightly have difficulty understanding the meaning of a letter written from the 17th century, just as someone from an older generation would have a difficult time deciphering the meaning or tone of the text messages that I, a Gen Z-er, send to my friends. Shades of meaning are lost, because meaning is not really separable from context, if context is taken to be our forms of life. My point here is that Derrida's formulation of meaning as necessarily iterable — and therefore detachable from

¹⁵¹ Derrida, *The Post Card*, 11.

context — may perhaps not be universally and evenly applicable, and this unevenness is precisely what gives Wittgenstein's therapy its sensitivity to life, and its philosophical force.

4b. Considering Time

Now, if we take Wittgenstein to be uniquely focused on the existential stakes of alienation, then it makes sense for us to direct our focus to the discussion of the reader's experience through Wittgenstein's therapeutic methods. Let us take a moment to consider the relation between the *Tractatus's* therapeutic nonsense and the *Investigations's* return to the ordinary. If the ordinary is, as Cavell writes, always under threat and needs to be overcome again and again, then it has a relationship with time that problematizes the substantial/austere distinction. Here it is key to note: the beginning of the book (or rather, before it begins) mutely presumes that the reader is committed to a view which the book takes to be false. After all, the book is only compelling or intelligible to a reader on the condition that they already harbor an illusory fantasy of how language works. If an individual did not hold such a view of language, they would likely find the *Tractatus's* opening remarks mistaken and perhaps ridiculous. They likely would not read so far as to the penultimate proposition, where the book declares its own propositions nonsense.

Thus, in some sense, for the 'therapy' to have any meaningful hold, one must come into the *Tractatus* with a substantial view. That is to say, the austere view is a coherent position only to the extent that the substantial view is (albeit at an earlier and entirely provisional moment) one, too. I therefore suspect the key therapeutic gesture of the austere view — the method of the *Tractatus* as leading us out of metaphysical cravings — could be retained without keeping the hard distinction between substantial and austere nonsense. For it seems that the two views of

nonsense are characterized more by their relation to time than by the inherent structure of their commitments.

What may be the source of the discourse's attachment to this distinction is the anxiety that the reader's achievement or progression through reading the *Tractatus* is flattened with the sixth proposition. The substantial reading tries to save the reader from this fate by locating the "proof" or achievement in the new possession of the ineffable truth concerning the limits of language. The substantial view's complaint is that the austere view risks slipping into pure relativism. There must be some difference between someone who has and has not read the *Tractatus* — but how does one tell? The austere reading, on the other hand, posits that the desire to locate the proof of achievement is naive, and that the real achievement is in the abdication of imagining language as something which harbors inexpressible truths. But in fact both views are necessary for the *Tractatus* to perform some kind of therapeutic work. This returns us to the idea of a temporal account: there is a "before" and "after" reading the *Tractatus*.

To this point, let us recall that Wittgenstein's call to arrange "what we have always known" is a matter of "looking into the workings of our language," and recognizing how those workings constitute our concepts and problems. In overcoming the alienation from the ordinary, many issues once taken to be unsolvable show themselves to be confused in what they took to be a problem, and what to be a solution.

[These] philosophical problems... are solved... by looking into the workings of our language... in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §109.

Cavell emphasizes that the ordinary must be sought out repeatedly: "Wittgenstein's form of a philosophical problem does not speak of a middle of a journey, but of many journeys, many middles, of repeated losses and recoveries of oneself."¹⁵³

It is perhaps meaning's vulnerability to failure that makes such metaphysical impulses recurrent. Both Wittgenstein and Derrida see meaning as vulnerable to failure, but for Wittgenstein, this vulnerability doesn't really threaten the stability of meaning, while, for Derrida, this vulnerability points to a structural paradox that both makes meaning possible and sabotages it.¹⁵⁴ That is to say, Wittgenstein's therapy must be repeated because meaning is always vulnerable to failure — this is the source of the subject's existential anxiety, and her consequent alienation. Wittgenstein's point is for us to not let such vulnerabilities stop us from being brave and soft with language, from inhabiting meaning, from being in the world with others. Thus the return to the ordinary is not simply a recovery of an earlier, more naive, or innocent state, but rather a relation to meaning that we return to when the apparent inadequacy of ordinary language becomes, on gentler attention — and with time — enough.

What the ordinary language discourse may reveal about the nonsense debate is that the austere and substantial views are not competing interpretations of the same therapeutic method but rather different depths of philosophical attachment. The substantial view has not fully released the grip of the ineffable and the austere view has not fully released the grip of a theoretical need for a consistent account of nonsense. The truly therapeutic reading would be one that uses the nonsense distinction instrumentally, for the therapy is never completely finished. The temporality of a structure of repeated movement between illusion and clarity complicates any simple opposition between those who see the *Tractatus* as gesturing toward ineffable truths

¹⁵³ Cavell, "Declining Decline," 37.

¹⁵⁴ To this point, one may rightfully ponder what Derrida's call to action is, or how he accounts for moments of deep human connection and understanding (through language!).

and those who see it as plain nonsense. For the nonsense debate, this implies that the substantial and austere views might not be mutually exclusive interpretive positions but successive moments in a therapeutic process that readers must repeat. Perhaps both experiences are genuine moments in the reader's therapeutic journey, phases which must be repeatedly traversed. "In the end," writes Derrida, "it is a strategy without finality."¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

Reading Wittgenstein philosophically is inseparable from reading him historically. His philosophical work is a narrative. The Wittgensteinian discourse concerns not just ideas but the trajectory of his thoughts, of his life, and the relation between his early attempt to draw logical limits to language to his later return to everyday use. Trying to pin his ideas down into rigid premises seems in vain, as his philosophical project aims to function not as a theory about language, but as an activity within language. The philosophical gesture Wittgenstein offers is broad; accordingly, the debates that follow should be getting more clear on their scholarly aims with Wittgenstein. There appears to be an unclarity between exegetical and evaluative aims in the literature.

At times, the debate concerning Tractarian nonsense seems to border on psychoanalyzing Wittgenstein — this is, I think, a rich and worthwhile endeavor, but also one whose scope should be clearly distinct from exegetical arguments. For instance, the letter correspondence of Wittgenstein which Hacker cites is fairly indisputable evidence that Wittgenstein — at some point — held substantial views of nonsense in the *Tractatus*; at the very least he certainly was committed to many of the claims he made about the nature of propositions. Whether these

¹⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 282.

commitments changed, or at what point they changed, or whether these commitments constitute the strongest, most philosophically rich reading of Wittgenstein are all separate questions. By vaguely framing the debate as a matter of 'how we should read the *Tractatus*', the varying scopes and implications of these questions become blurred, and, as a result, what Hacker objects to is not quite what Diamond or Conant posit, and what Diamond and Conant defend is not quite what Hacker charges them with.

The muddling between exegetical and evaluative aims muddles the ordinary language philosophy discourse as well. The ordinary language philosophers and deconstructionists can, despite themselves, agree on quite a lot — namely that both philosophers claim to target philosophy's ideal of essence — but this agreement is of little use if they don't sufficiently orient the relation between their agreements. It seems that the disagreement between Moi and Glendinning is a disagreement about whether to emphasize the negative and positive theses of Derrida and Wittgenstein. This matter of emphasis is not really a disagreement of what Derrida or Wittgenstein exegetically think (and that the other side is wrong on the grounds of misinterpretation) — though it is often taken up that way. It is rather a disagreement of which thesis becomes relevant, and when. What Wittgenstein is concerned with, after all, is less an argument and more an activity, a movement. Understanding how to navigate the movement is what is most at stake. It is because the discourse largely turns on this movement that I think looking at the connections between the two Cavellian camps is insightful; looking at both functions as a kind of calibration technique, between two planes instead of one.

The brings me back to Wittgenstein's remark that "atomic propositions, although they cannot contradict, may exclude one another."¹⁵⁶ In some sense, the difference between the early and later Wittgenstein is a difference between contradiction and exclusion. I think this difference

¹⁵⁶ Wittgenstein, "Some Remarks on Logical Form," 168.

may help us conceive of what Wittgenstein takes alienation to be, and therefore what his therapy targets. Contradiction is different from exclusion in the sense that contradiction is governed by complete presence, by total simultaneity; it operates on one plane. While exclusion, governed by relevance, opens up the possibility of other moments, other planes, and other encounters.

Evidently these debates about Wittgenstein are not solely about how language works, or what philosophy is for (though yes, the latter is most certainly the title, and these questions are most explicitly at the heart of the debates). These debates are also questions about how to overcome problems of metaphysical dualisms and, in particular, problems of solipsism. That is to say, these questions are about how to know and be known by others. They are therefore also questions about how to live, and how to love.

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