

‘Meaning is Use’ in the *Tractatus*

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Frege ridiculed the formalist conception of mathematics by saying that the formalists confused the unimportant thing, the sign, with the important, the meaning. Surely, one wishes to say, mathematics does not treat of dashes on a bit of paper. Frege’s idea could be expressed thus: the propositions of mathematics, if they were just complexes of dashes, would be dead and utterly uninteresting, whereas they obviously have a kind of life. And the same, of course, could be said of any proposition: Without a sense, or without the thought, a proposition would be an utterly dead and trivial thing. And further it seems clear that no adding of inorganic signs can make the proposition live. And the conclusion which one draws from this is that what must be added to the dead signs in order to make a live proposition is something immaterial, with properties different from all mere signs. But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*. (*Blue Book*, p. 4)

It has long been standard to attribute to the later Wittgenstein a “use theory” of meaning, a theory which is supposed to have replaced the “metaphysically realist” meaning-theory of the *Tractatus*. Having become skeptical of the *Tractatus* account of meaning as mirroring between language and the world, so the standard story goes, Wittgenstein replaced it, in the *Investigations*, with a pragmatic description of intersubjective communicative practice, a description he partially developed through the suggestive but puzzling concepts of “language games” and “forms of life.” I shall argue that this interpretation of Wittgenstein is profoundly mistaken, and that we misunderstand both his philosophical development and his role in the history of the analytic tradition if we accept it. For the early Wittgenstein was actually more closely an adherent of the doctrine expressed by the slogan “meaning is use” than was the later Wittgenstein; and an understanding of the central role of this doctrine in the theory of the *Tractatus* is essential to understanding Wittgenstein’s philosophical method, early and late. The central notion of the Tractarian theory

of *meaning*, the notion of “logical form” shared between meaningful propositions and the states of affairs they describe, itself depends on the *Tractatus*’ theory of the *meaningfulness* of signs as arising from their syntactical application according to logical rules of use. And this Tractarian account of meaningfulness, though commentators have seldom appreciated or understood it, forges an essential link between the picture theory of meaning and the early Wittgenstein’s doctrine of philosophical practice. Understanding it helps us to appreciate his conception of the proper aims, methods, and results of philosophical criticism, as well as to see that this conception is much more deeply continuous with the method of the later Wittgenstein than has generally been thought.

By clarifying the Tractarian program of analysis, we can begin to see the role of the *Tractatus* in the history of the analytic tradition in a new light. For understanding the Tractarian use-doctrine of the meaningfulness of signs allows us to see that, already in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein envisioned a method of philosophical analysis or criticism that propounds no theory or criterion of meaning beyond those already shown in ordinary, intersubjective practices of meaning-clarification. And once we understand the character of this suggested method, we can see the *Tractatus* as having anticipated or inaugurated some of the most significant projects in the history of analytic philosophy, including some, like holism, semantic inferentialism, and conceptual-role semantics, that have generally been thought to run directly contrary to its spirit.

In section I, I explore the *Tractatus* theory of the meaningfulness of signs, arguing that the key notion of logical form, in virtue of which propositions represent or mirror reality, is incomprehensible except against the backdrop of that theory. In section II, I argue that the use-doctrine of the meaningfulness of signs is also at the basis of the Tractarian program of analysis, and consider an important example of the kind of clarification that program is intended to provide by reviewing Wittgenstein’s criticism of Russell’s theory of types. The program of analysis that Wittgenstein envisions in the *Tractatus*, I argue in section III, does not begin with a pre-existing *theory* of meaning, but simply with the judgments of meaningfulness that are already evident in ordinary intersubjective discourse. The role of philosophical criticism is just to summarize and systematize these judgments, showing how to segment propositions into their logically significant simple parts. To show this, I examine Schlick’s under-

standing of the same program of analysis, in remarks written under Wittgenstein's influence in 1932, and consider one important difference between Schlick's understanding of the program and Wittgenstein's. In section IV, I argue that Wittgenstein's program of analysis anticipates or inaugurates a variety of projects characteristic of the "post-positivist" phase of analytic philosophy. And in the Tractarian program of analysis thus clarified, I argue in section V, we can see the thematic seeds of the later Wittgenstein's critical investigations of rule-following and private language, as well as the method of clarifying meaning by clarifying use that he continues to apply in the *Investigations*.

I

The quotation that serves as an epigraph for this paper was written, in the opening pages of the *Blue Book*, in 1933, but it could just as well serve as an epitome for one of the central concerns of the *Tractatus*. For although the early Wittgenstein was deeply concerned with an articulation of the semantic and metaphysical preconditions of meaning, he was just as deeply interested in giving an account of the *meaningfulness* of signs, an account of the possibility that otherwise inert written or spoken signs have meaning at all. He provided this account by appealing to the concept of the *use* – or, as he put it in the *Tractatus*, the "logico-syntactical employment" – of a sign in accordance with logical rules. Analysis of ordinary-language propositions would terminate, according to the *Tractatus*, in the elucidation of a pure "logical syntax," a corpus of logical rules at the basis of all meaningful employment of signs. By the 1930s, Wittgenstein had begun to grow skeptical of the possibility of giving a univocal description of these logical rules of use; but the central heuristic thought that an integral part of the clarification of the *meaning* of a proposition is the clarification of its *use* remained integral to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy throughout his life. By examining the set of remarks in section 3 of the *Tractatus* in which Wittgenstein articulates the first version of the "meaning is use" doctrine, we can understand the relationship of this central strand in Wittgenstein's philosophical method to the metaphysical investigation of meaning from which it arose, and thereby begin to under-

stand its decisive relationship to some of the most important critical and interpretive practices of analytic philosophy.

It is well known that the *Tractatus* articulates a “picture” theory of meaning, according to which a proposition has the meaning that it does in virtue of sharing an abstract structure or form with a possible state of affairs.¹ Just as a visual picture, in order to depict a situation, must share its *spatial* form, any proposition whatsoever, in order to depict, must share with the possible or actual state of affairs for which it stands its “logico-pictorial” or “logical” form.² A proposition is said to share the logical form of a state of affairs when there is an isomorphism between the relational structure of the proposition and the relational structure of the state of affairs; the *fact* that the elements of the proposition are related in a particular way represents the *fact* that things are related, in the state of affairs, in the same way.³ Wittgenstein emphasized that the logical structure of a proposition can be shown clearly in the arrangement of its constituent signs; we can imagine using physical objects, rather than written signs, in various spatial arrangements to depict possible situations.⁴ But propositions as they are written in ordinary language do not always show clearly the relational structure of their logically simple elements.⁵ One task of philosophical criticism or analysis, accordingly, is to articulate these elements by rewriting ordinary-language propositions in a perspicuous notation that *shows* through its symbolism the logical relations that propositions express.⁶

Many commentaries on the *Tractatus* are content to leave matters here, with the Tractarian picture theory of meaning explained as a

1. *TLP* 2.18, 2.2ff.

2. *TLP* 2.18–2.182.

3. *TLP* 2.15. This also explains the somewhat enigmatic 3.1432: “Instead of, ‘The complex sign “aRb” says that a stands to b in the relation R’, we ought to put, ‘That “a” stands to “b” in a certain relation says that aRb.’ Only a fact – never simply a sign – can stand for a fact; if they are to stand for facts, propositions must also *be* facts with an articulated combinatorial structure that is mirrored in the facts they stand for. See also *TLP* 3.14ff.

4. *TLP* 3.1431.

5. *TLP* 3.143.

6. This is the usual way, in any case, of reading *TLP* 3.325; we shall see, however, that the idea of clarifying the meaning of ordinary-language expressions by expressing them in a logically perspicuous notation is only one part of Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophical analysis. Famously, Russell, in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, misunderstood even this idea, thinking that Wittgenstein’s remarks aimed at showing the preconditions for an *ideal* or logically perfect language rather than the clarification of *ordinary* language.

metaphysical theory of the meaning of propositions in terms of their articulation as relational structures of signs.⁷ In so doing, although they often appeal to the analogy that Wittgenstein suggests between the spatial form of an ordinary picture and the logical form of a proposition, they typically leave the metaphysical underpinnings of the central notion of logical form somewhat obscure. A proposition's meaning is said to consist in an "abstract" or "formal" correspondence between the relational structure of signs in a proposition (once these are logically articulated by analysis) and the relational structure of simple objects in a state of affairs. But it is not said what this correspondence amounts to, or how to recognize when a proposition has been articulated, through analysis, enough to make it perspicuous.

It is in this connection that Wittgenstein's theory of the *meaningfulness of signs*, generally missed by standard interpretations, proves to be an especially important part of the *Tractatus* theory of meaning. The theory unfolds in a series of remarks at the thematic center of the *Tractatus*, in the immediate context of the development of the picture theory and the introduction of the idea of a perspicuous notation capable of clarifying the logical structure of ordinary propositions. It begins with a distinction that Wittgenstein draws between signs – mere perceptible spoken sounds or (token) written marks⁸ – and *symbols*, which are signs *taken together with the ways* in which they signify:

3.32 A sign is what can be perceived of a symbol.

3.321 So one and the same sign (written or spoken, etc.) can be common to two different symbols – in which case they will signify in different ways.

3.322 Our use of the same sign to signify two different objects can never indicate a common characteristic of the two, if we use it with two different modes of signification. For the sign, of course,

7. Insofar as standard commentaries express a view about the logically prior conditions for the meaningfulness of simple signs, they typically make some version of the claim that simple signs get their meaning in virtue of an ostensive connection between them and simple objects. We shall see that Wittgenstein never so much as suggests this account of the meaning of simple signs, and that its interpretive ascription to him is deeply misleading.

8. Wittgenstein does not generally draw type/token distinctions explicitly. But since, as we shall see, the logically relevant parts of a sentence are defined by sameness of use rather than sameness of orthographic sign, we can take it that signs in a sentence, prior to such definition, are just to be understood as tokens; orthographic sign-types may, then, crosscut symbol-types defined by uses.

is arbitrary. So we could choose two different signs instead, and then what would be left in common on the signifying side?

In these remarks, Wittgenstein characterizes symbols as signs together with their “modes of signification,” their “use[s] with a sense,” or their “logico-syntactical employment.”⁹ Prior to an understanding of their logico-syntactical employment, signs themselves are inert, incapable of defining by themselves a logical form in virtue of which they could correspond to possible states of affairs. For it is, of course, arbitrary that a particular orthographic or audible sign should be chosen for a particular expressive purpose within a particular language; what makes arbitrary signs capable of signifying the states of affairs that they do – what gives them meaning – are the logical possibilities of their significant use:

3.326 In order to recognize a symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense.

3.327 A sign does not determine a logical form unless it is taken together with its logico-syntactical employment.

3.328 If a sign is useless, it is meaningless. That is the point of Occam’s maxim.

(If everything behaves as if a sign had meaning, then it does have meaning).

We cannot understand the logical form of a symbol without understanding the ways in which the signs that comprise it are significantly used. Wittgenstein goes so far as to suggest that these possibilities of significant use define the *essence* of a symbol.¹⁰ At the same time, the possibility of understanding the uses of symbols in a proposition, what Wittgenstein calls “recognizing the symbol in the sign,” is also one of the metaphysical preconditions for the possibility of meaning; for it is only by having significant uses that sequences of signs mean anything at all. Wittgenstein’s theory of meaningfulness – his theory of the conditions under which signs have meaning at all – therefore plays an essential role in his more general theory of meaning. It is only insofar as signs *have* significant uses that they have logical forms at all; and it is, of course, only in virtue of their logical forms that they can embody meanings.

9. *TLP* 3.32, 3.322, 3.323, 3.326, 3.327. For interesting discussions (which I partially follow here) of the sign/symbol distinction in the broader context of Wittgenstein’s views about meaning and use, see Conant (1998) and Conant (2000).

10. *TLP* 3.341.

The centrally important notion of logical form, then, cannot be understood except in the context of the distinction between signs and symbols and the use-doctrine of the meaningfulness of signs. The sense of a sentence is defined not simply by the way in which its simple signs are combined, but by the relational structure of its signs *against the backdrop of their possible uses in the language*. If a sentence has a sense, it is because its constituent signs have significant uses that allow their combination to express that particular sense; we do not understand the sentence unless we grasp these possibilities of use. The correspondence at the basis of the meaning-making isomorphism between propositions and states of affairs is not a correspondence between *signs* and objects, but between *symbols* and objects. It is essential to grasping the logical form of a sentence – to understanding its meaning – that its simple signs be understood, not only in their combinatorial structure, but together with their possibilities of significant use or application. If there is a question about the *sense* of a sentence – if its logical form is not understood, even though all of the verbal or written signs are given – clarification of sense can only amount to clarification of the *ways* in which those signs are being used, in the context of the sentence, to signify.

Understanding the connection between the conditions for the meaningfulness of signs and the logical form of sentences enables us to see the notion of logical form (perhaps surprisingly) as essentially a *pragmatic* concept. Since the identification of the logical form of a sentence consists in the elucidation of the ways in which its simple signs are being used in combination, there is no application of the concept of logical form that completely abstracts from the practice of clarifying meaning by clarifying the combinatorial possibilities of significantly using simple signs. We understand a proposition's logical form only by seeing how it can be segmented into simple signs; but identifying the logically simple signs means understanding the rules of use that determine the possibilities of their significant application in propositions. There is, accordingly, no analysis of a proposition that does not advert, at least implicitly, to the range of other propositions in which its logical constituents can significantly appear. And for the correctness of the analysis of a particular proposition, there can be no other evidence than that provided by determinations of the ways in which its simple signs signify. If the resulting program of analysis were converted into a theory of meaning, it would be the essentially pragmatic one that commentators have often found in the *Investiga-*

tions: the meaning of a sign is its use in significant propositions, and no difference in the meaning of two propositions is possible which does not imply a difference in the uses of their logically simple signs.¹¹

II

The central Tractarian concept of logical form, then, cannot be understood except in conjunction with Wittgenstein's use-doctrine of the meaningfulness of signs. But this doctrine of meaningfulness as use also immediately suggests a process of semantic clarification whereby confusions common in ordinary language are exposed and remedied through the development of a logically purified notation:

3.323 In everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification – and so belongs to different symbols – or that two words that have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way.

Thus the word 'is' figures as the copula, as a sign for identity, and as an expression for existence; 'exist' figures as an intransitive verb like 'go', and 'identical' as an adjective; we speak of something, but also something's happening.

(In the proposition 'Green is green' – where the first word is the proper name of a person and the last an adjective – these words do not merely have different meanings: they are different symbols.)

3.324 In this way the most fundamental confusions are easily produced (the whole of philosophy is full of them).

3.325 In order to avoid such errors we must make use of a sign-language that excludes them by not using the same sign for different symbols and by not using in a superficially similar way signs that have different modes of signification: that is to say, a sign-language that is governed by logical grammar – by logical syntax.

(The conceptual notation of Frege and Russell is such a language, though, it is true, it fails to exclude all mistakes.)

Philosophical and ordinary confusions typically arise, Wittgenstein thinks, from the unrecognized use of a single sign to signify in two or more different ways; accordingly, analysis proceeds by recognizing

11. But as we shall see, in both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* the slogan "meaning is use" does not so much express a theory as summarize a method.

distinctions in use that are not clear at the level of everyday language and expressing them in an improved symbolic notation. In the logically perspicuous notation that Wittgenstein envisions as the end-point of analysis, identity of use is represented by identity of sign.¹² Each sign has exactly one use, and this use is shown, in each case, in the combinatorial rules that govern the sign's possibilities of significant combination with other signs in the perspicuous notation. Wittgenstein calls the complete set of such rules "logical syntax" or "logical grammar;" their role in analysis is to exhibit the patterns of usage that are implicit in ordinary language, making them explicit as combinatorial rules for the significant appearance of signs. The logical notation, therefore, not only renders philosophical confusions impossible, but exhibits the patterns of use that are the implicit foundation of ordinary-language meaning.

Though he is not completely explicit about the scope and character of logical syntax, Wittgenstein proceeds to work out an instructive example of how the elucidation of its rules can dissipate one important philosophical error, Russell's mistake of supposing it necessary to augment the logical theory of propositional signs with a theory of ordered types. A perspicuous notation that exposes the logical structure of language, Wittgenstein argues, will by itself show that there is no need for the theory of types; for it will show that Russell's paradox, to which it answered, cannot arise. Wittgenstein makes the point by considering how a case of the paradox might be symbolized:

3.333 The reason why a function cannot be its own argument is that the sign for a function already contains the prototype of its argument, and it cannot contain itself.

For let us suppose that the function $F(\hat{f}x)$ could be its own argument: in that case there would be a proposition ' $F(F(\hat{f}x))$ ', in which the outer function F and the inner function F must have different meanings, since the inner one has the form $\phi(\hat{f}x)$ and the outer one has the form $\chi(\phi(\hat{f}x))$. Only the letter ' F ' is common to the two functions, but the letter by itself signifies nothing.

This immediately becomes clear if instead of ' $F(Fu)$ ' we write ' $(\exists \phi): F(\phi u). \phi u = Fu$ '.

That disposes of Russell's paradox.

This argument against Russell's theory follows directly from the use-theory of the meaningfulness of signs that we explored in the last section. Significantly, Wittgenstein calls this logically perspicuous notation, following Frege, "concept-writing" or *Begriffsschrift*.

section. It operates by showing that the attempt to express the paradox results in a series of signs which have not yet been given a tolerably clear sense. Our attempt to formulate the paradox necessarily uses the same sign two different ways; if we disambiguate them, giving each sign a univocal sense, the (appearance of) paradox dissolves. It is important to note that it is no part of Wittgenstein's argument to *prohibit* (conventionally or stipulatively) the embedding of a propositional sign within itself; the perspicuous notation simply *shows*, when we try to express such an embedding in it, that we cannot unambiguously do so. When we write $F(F(fx))$, the notation shows clearly that the two occurrences of F have *different* forms; they are being used in different ways and according to different rules. Once we see this, we see that there is nothing in common to the two occurrences except that they use the same letter. As often happens in ordinary language, we have used the same sign in two different ways; the difference is simply that the logical notation, unlike ordinary languages, immediately shows the difference in form through its expressive syntax. The thought that a proposition can make a statement about itself, the thought that led to Russell's paradox, is exposed as arising from a notational confusion: it is only because we use the same orthographic sign for what are in fact two different symbols that we are led to think the paradox possible. But once we are clear that the symbol expressed by a sign is determined by its possibilities of significant use, we can see that the attempt to state the paradox is doomed from the outset.

This criticism of Russell exemplifies the philosophical method that, Wittgenstein thought, could disarm philosophical and ordinary confusions by exposing their roots in our temptation to use the same orthographic sign in a variety of different ways. On the method, reflection about the various uses of an ordinary sign suggests its replacement with one or more distinct signs; ultimately, we develop a notation in which each sign is used in exactly one way. The form of this perspicuous symbolism then shows the logical rules that govern meaningful linguistic use. Wittgenstein insisted that these rules of logical syntax must treat only of signs themselves, and never involve reference to their meanings.¹³ In other words, there ought never, in the process of analysis, be any occasion to *stipulate* the

13. *TLP* 3.33; Wittgenstein reaffirms this, in the context of a describing the rules governing inference, at *TLP* 6.126.

possible uses of signs by referring to the meanings that we want them to have; Wittgenstein objected that Russell had done just this in his theory of types, and that this alone showed the invalidity of the theory.¹⁴ Instead, reflection on the uses that signs *already have* in ordinary language must suffice to develop all the distinctions expressed in the structure of the logically perspicuous symbolism. The introduction of a new sign can, accordingly, only be justified by the recognition of a previously unrecognized use; the new use will then naturally be codified in combinatorial, syntactical rules governing the possible appearances of the new sign. In this way, the logical analysis of language proceeds from ordinary observations about significant use to the notational expression of these observations, culminating in a perspicuous notation that matches each particular ordinary-language rule of use with a particular syntactical rule for the combinations of signs.

III

Thus understood, Wittgenstein's theory of the meaningfulness of language seems to suggest an exceedingly ambitious program of meaning-analysis or clarification that would terminate in the elimination of all philosophical confusions by way of the elimination of all confusions about the use of signs. It may be clear enough how this kind of grammatical clarification can clear up and prevent philosophical errors in the straightforward examples of ambiguity that Wittgenstein gives ("Green is green" and the various uses of the words "is," "exist," and "identical"), but we might legitimately wonder how general Wittgenstein actually intended the program to be. How widely applicable is the method of clarifying the meaning of propositions by identifying and elucidating the uses of their simple signs? Clearly, the answer to this question depends on specifying just how we should understand the "use" of a sign, how we should identify which features of our practices of issuing and consuming signs we should consider relevant to the philosophical practice of clarifying meaning.

My suggestion will be that the program is *completely* general; for its foundation is not any specific theoretical conception of meaning,

14. *TLP* 3.331.

but rather the general theory of the meaningfulness of signs that we have examined. The general theory of the meaningfulness of signs does not obviously imply or suggest any particular conception of the *kinds* of use that matter to meaning; it says only that a meaningful sign is one that has some kind of use, some possibility of significant employment in propositions. If there is, indeed, no such restriction in the *Tractatus*, then the “logico-syntactical employment” of a sign consists in, quite simply, *all* of the ways it can be used in significant propositions. It follows that the program of analysis that the *Tractatus* suggests does not presuppose or require any particular theory-based distinction between meaningful and meaningless sentences. Instead, its theory of meaning allows that *any* genuine clarification of the contribution of a sign to the meaning of a proposition counts as a clarification of its use. In the process of analysis, the distinctions in the use of signs that matter to the process of clarifying meaning are just those that can be cited, in ordinary interlocution, in response to clarificatory questions like “What do you mean?” or, even more suggestively, “How are you using that term?”; there is no criterion for meaningfulness, and no source of evidence for the success of an analysis, that does not depend on the patterns of usage shown in the ordinary responses to these ordinary questions.

It is usual to see the *Tractatus* as proposing a substantial metaphysical theory of meaning, and then expounding a program of analysis based upon its constraints. But if the present suggestion is correct, this usual interpretation inverts the *Tractatus*' actual order of explanation. Its actual center is not the metaphysical theory of meaning but the logical program of meaning-analysis; and its metaphysical-seeming claims about the nature of meaning arise as conditions and consequences of the program, rather than vice-versa. The usual interpretation would be right, if it were the aim of the practice of logical analysis to *formulate* or *stipulate* specific logical criteria or rules to distinguish meaningful from meaningless sequences of signs. But as we have already seen in connection with Wittgenstein's criticism of Russell, this is not its aim; Wittgenstein's conception of the project of analysis leaves no room for the establishment of syntactical rules that are not based on distinctions already implicitly present in ordinary linguistic practice. The point of the clarificatory process of analysis is not to formulate a criterion of meaningfulness, but rather to *show* explicitly the criteria of meaningfulness that are already implicit in ordinary use by formalizing and codifying them

in the syntactical rules of a logically perspicuous language. It works not from a particular conception of the structure of meaning to a meaning-clarifying practice, but the other way around, from ordinary discursive meaning-clarifying practices to a conception of the logical foundations of these practices.

In the *Tractatus*, it is true, Wittgenstein is not completely specific about the way in which he is using terms like “logical syntax” and “logico-syntactic employment,” and about the nature of the program of analysis they suggest. But we can see the possibility, consistent with everything the *Tractatus* says, of an interpretation like the one I’ve suggested, by considering Schlick’s parallel description of logical analysis, written very much under the influence of Wittgenstein in 1932. In the long article “Form and Content” Schlick articulates a conception of philosophical insight and discovery that derives directly from the *Tractatus* picture of analysis and meaning. He begins his discussion of meaning, in Wittgensteinian fashion, by considering the application of the question “What do you mean by it?” to produce semantic clarification. A proposition, Schlick observes, already suffices (assuming that it is indeed a proposition) to indicate a fact; the indication of facts is, after all, the essential and definitive task of propositions. Provided that he has not misheard individual words, then, the question “What do you mean by it?” can only indicate that the hearer has not understood *which* fact is being expressed by the sequence of words he has heard. In other words, he has not understood *which* proposition (which symbol, in Wittgenstein’s terminology) that form of words (signs) embodies. As Wittgenstein had suggested, accordingly, clarification of meaning must consist in identifying the symbol embodied in the sign; and the way to do this is to specify the ways in which the individual signs are being used:

We can ask for a meaning only as long as we have not understood a statement. And as long as we have not understood a sentence it is actually nothing but a series of words; it would be misleading to call it a proposition at all. A series of words (or other signs) should be regarded as a proposition only when it is understood, when its meaning is comprehended. If we agree to use our terms in this way there will be no sense in asking for the meaning of a proposition, but we may very well inquire (and that was our actual problem) after the meaning of a sentence or any complex of signs which we suppose to express something.

Now there is not the slightest mystery about the process by which a sentence is given meaning or turned into a proposition: it consists in defining the use of the symbols which occur in the sentence. And this is always done by indicating the exact circumstances in which the words, according to the rules of the particular language, should be used. (p. 310)

Like Wittgenstein, Schlick begins with the thought that written or spoken signs by themselves are, in a sense, inert; they are meaningful only insofar as they are used or applied, and their meaning can be understood only insofar as the use or application is understood. The only way to understand the *sense* of a spoken or written sentence is to understand how its constituent symbols are being used to make a true or false claim about states of affairs in the world.¹⁵ Since the only way to understand a sentence as a proposition is to understand the uses of its constituent signs, the kinds of clarification that we count as showing how to understand a proposition must also be counted as clarifications of the uses of signs. Specification of the use of symbols in a sentence clarifies the sense of that sentence, ultimately distinguishing the states of affairs that make it true from those that make it false. In this way, the diagnostic question "What do you mean by it?" proceeds by way of the definition of the use of the symbols constituting a sentence to articulate the particular sense that these particular symbols, in that particular combination, pick out.

Schlick goes on to hold that the determination of the sense of a sentence consists in the delimitation, by way of clarification of the use of its constituent symbols, of the range of states of affairs that make it true:

It must be clear by this time that there is only one way of giving meaning to a sentence, of making it a proposition: we must indicate the rules for how it shall be used, in other words: we must describe the facts which will make the proposition 'true', and we must be able to distinguish them from the facts which will make it 'false'. In still other words: The Meaning of a Proposition is the Method of its Verification. The question: 'What does this sentence mean?' is identical with (has the same answer as) the question: 'How is this proposition verified?' (pp. 310–11)

It is, of course, highly significant in the context of the history of analytic philosophy that one of Schlick's characteristic expressions

15. Assuming, of course (as Schlick and the early Wittgenstein both do) that meaning is essentially *propositional* meaning, and so that the basic case of meaning is the use of a proposition to say how things are.

of the famous logical positivist “verification” doctrine of meaning should take just this form. As Schlick expresses it here, the doctrine appears to demand only that an explanation of the meaning of a sentence distinguish the possible facts that would make it true from those that would make it false. This demand was already expressed in Wittgenstein’s requirement in the *Tractatus* that a genuine proposition must “restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no.”¹⁶ Since the sense of a proposition must distinguish the possible facts that make it true from those that make it false, understanding a proposition (for Wittgenstein as for Schlick) simply means being able to distinguish these two sets of facts. Elucidation of the rules of logical syntax reveals the implicit or explicit patterns of significant use by virtue of which the constituent signs of a proposition signify. But these patterns must themselves match the metaphysical possibilities of combination for objects into facts, so to understand their combinatorial structure in a proposition is at the same time to understand which possible facts – which configurations of objects – make it true.

It is important to the plausibility of this program of analysis, though, that the possibility of clarifying meaning in this way does not rely upon the application of any pre-existing logical resources or insights beyond those that already figure in our everyday practices of explanation and clarification. As Schlick suggests, the elucidation of the use of the symbols that comprise a proposition can only operate as a response to the ordinary question “What do you mean?”; the only distinctions of use that are available to the clarificatory process are those that would be recognized as possible responses to this question. For the distinctions of meaning that the

16. *TLP* 4.023. Importantly, though, it is clearly *no* part of the doctrine thus expressed, and *no* implication of the program of analysis thus defined, that the meaning of a sentence must be specified by referring to the *experiential* or *empirical* states of affairs that would “verify” it in the epistemological sense. Indeed, it is possible to attribute the program articulated by Schlick’s remarks to Wittgenstein, without concluding that Wittgenstein had any interest in epistemological concerns whatsoever. If this is right, then the real source of the supposed “verification theory of meaning” is not foundationalist epistemology, but rather the pragmatic doctrine of meaningfulness that we have explored. Failure to understand the origins of the principle of verification has sometimes led philosophers to misunderstand its historical significance. For instance, Schlick’s formulation of the principle is just about the direct opposite of what Dummett (1973) makes of “verificationism.” Dummett interprets it as a form of anti-realism involving the denial of bivalence; but quite to the contrary, Schlick’s expression of the principle of verification is evidently grounded in his *acceptance* of bivalence.

elucidation of logical syntax reveals must already be present in ordinary language, since their structure already accounts for sentences in ordinary language having the meanings that they do. On this method, beginning with ordinary language, we point out the cases in which the same written or spoken sign in fact does signify in two or more different ways, and in this way working toward a notation that expresses each use with exactly one sign. The rules of logical syntax, then, emerge naturally from the explicitation of ordinarily implicit patterns of use; it is only because they can emerge in this way from ordinary language, presumably, that they can claim to be “the” rules of logical syntax at all.

Commentators have often underestimated the comprehensiveness and generality of the program of analysis that Wittgenstein suggests in the *Tractatus*. For insofar as they have discussed the concept of logical syntax at all, they have generally supposed that the rules of logical syntax, to be shown through the practice of meaning-analysis, are intended to be in some way limited or restricted with respect to the totality of rules of use that determine meanings in ordinary language. Anscombe, for instance, interprets the phrase “logico-syntactic employment” as meaning “the kind of difference between the syntactical roles of words which concerns a logician” rather than gesturing toward “‘role in life,’ ‘use,’ [or] ‘practice of the use’ in the sense of *Philosophical Investigations*.”¹⁷ But actually there is no reason to think that Wittgenstein intended the scope of the rules of logical syntax shown by logical reflection on the use of symbolism in ordinary language to be any smaller than the total range of possible meanings in ordinary language. Wherever, in ordinary language, there are distinctions of meaning, there is presumably the possibility of a notation that shows those distinctions; if this is right, then logical clarification, in Wittgenstein’s sense, can proceed according to the clarificatory question “what does that mean?” *regardless* of the subject matter of the proposition or claim in question. Since the time of the *Tractatus*, we have become accustomed to thinking of logical relations as defining, at best, a narrow subset of the conceptual relationships among terms in a language that determine their meaning. But throughout the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein’s claims for “logic” suggest that he understands it in a much broader sense; the

17. Anscombe (1959), p. 91.

process of elucidating “logical syntax” – equivalent to what Wittgenstein would later call “logical grammar” – does not stop short of clarifying the meaning of *any* meaningful term in the language.¹⁸

With Schlick’s more complete elucidation of Wittgenstein’s programmatic remarks in place, then, we can understand the *Tractatus* as suggesting a general and comprehensive program of analysis whose aim is not to defend a specific theory of meaning, but rather to make explicit the patterns of use that support the meaning of propositions in ordinary discourse. But there is nevertheless an important and revealing difference, evident in Schlick’s remarks, between his understanding of the program and Wittgenstein’s. We have seen that for both philosophers, the requirement that the sense of a sentence be made explicit amounted to the requirement that it be articulated by an explanation of the uses of its constituent signs; and we have seen that, for both philosophers, this explicitation results in a delimitation of the range of states of affairs that make a sentence true from those that make it false, what Schlick calls (perhaps misleadingly) the revelation of its “Method of Verification.” Schlick, however, additionally holds that the clarification of the use of simple signs must ultimately depend on ostensive *acts* which set up the correlation between those signs and the world:

These rules [viz., the rules of linguistic use for a particular language] must be taught by actually applying them in definite situations, that is to say, the circumstances to which they fit must actually be shown. It is of course possible to give a verbal description of any situation, but it is impossible to understand the description unless some kind of connection between the words and the rest of the world has been established beforehand. And this can be done only by certain acts, as for instance gestures, by which our words and expressions are correlated to certain experiences. (p. 310)

Schlick appears to hold, therefore, that the clarification of the use of simple signs in response to the question “What do you mean?” must culminate in the direct ostensive indication of the connection between a word and an object. Only in this way, Schlick might have

18. It is probably true, however, that at the time of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein had only *propositional* utterances in mind as objects for philosophical criticism; there is no evidence that the *Tractatus* account is supposed to apply to the interjections, commands, questions, and other forms of language that he would describe in the *Investigations*.

reasoned, could a singular term (defined, at least in the first instance, by its relations with other terms) gain a contentful, non-relational definition of its own. The notion of a direct, ostensibly forged link between language and the world (or between language and experience, or language and the facts) would later play a decisive role in Schlick's doctrine of protocol sentences as epistemologically foundational reports. And commentators have sometimes ascribed something like this picture of ultimate ostensive connection to the early Wittgenstein as well, citing his requirement that simple signs in a logically clarified language "correspond" to simple objects in the world.

Nevertheless, even given this requirement, there is no good reason to believe that Wittgenstein thought that the significance of simple signs must ultimately trace to an ostensive connection with the world. He emphasizes that simple signs have meaning only in the context of a proposition; the determination of their meaning, then, does not proceed from sign to sentence but from sentence to sign, by way of an understanding of the sentence's use.¹⁹ Indeed, he says at 5.526, the world can be described completely "by means of fully generalized propositions, i.e., without first correlating any name with any particular object." General propositions, containing bound variables but no particular names, suffice to describe the world in virtue of the logical relationships of their signs. Given the entire logically articulated web of such propositions, we can arrive at our "customary mode of expression" simply by assigning a name for each uniquely quantified variable; there is never any need to correlate names to objects by way of ostension.²⁰ Wittgenstein saw, unlike Schlick, that the content of a proposition could be understood as its place in the total, rationally articulated web of meaningful contents, a web whose overall structure is determined by the rule-governed possibilities for the meaningful combination of simple signs. Accordingly, there is no reason to think that Wittgenstein thought of meaning-analysis as involving, at any stage, an ostensive, experiential, or empirical establishment of the meaning of signs. The process of analysis he suggests can be understood as purely linguistic in character, trading exclusively in such propositional clarifications, grounded in ordinary usage, as can be answers to the question "What does that mean?" There is no requirement that this linguistic or

19. *TLP* 3.3.

20. *TLP* 5.526.

dialectical process ever break out of language to establish contact with an “extra-linguistic” reality, as Schlick had supposed.

The way in which Schlick and Wittgenstein differed on this point shows even more clearly that it is no part of the aim of the *Tractatus* to ground the suggested practice of analysis in any particular or substantial theoretical description of use or meaning. Though committed, in general, to the thought that the practice of analysis can only explicate judgments of meaningfulness that appear in ordinary discursive practice, Schlick insisted that at least some of the kinds of use that matter to these judgments trace ultimately to concrete acts of ostensive demonstration. Presumably, Schlick thought the specification necessary because he considered an account of the basic language-world relation to be an essential part of his account of analysis; the notion of ostension was then supposed to account for the basic link between meaningful propositions and their real-world referents. Wittgenstein’s refusal to specify the nature of use even in the “basic” case of immediate experiential reports, by contrast, reflects his thoroughgoing application of the principle that philosophical clarification can only operate *intra-linguistically*, by codifying ordinary linguistic responses to questions about meaning; if there is ever a need, in response to a question about meaning, to gesturally indicate a state of affairs, then the gesture itself figures as a fully linguistic and semantically articulated response, comprehensible only against the already prepared background of other kinds of significant language use.²¹ The theoretical demand to which Schlick’s discussion of ostension answers – the demand of giving a metaphysical-level clarification of the relationship between language and world – simply does not figure among the clarificatory goals that Wittgenstein’s program of analysis aims to satisfy.

IV

With the nature and scope of Wittgenstein’s Tractarian program of analysis clarified in its connection with his use-doctrine of meaning, we can begin to see that program not only as a much more direct antecedent of the *Philosophical Investigations* conception of grammar, but also of a variety of significant subsequent innovations in the

21. This, anyway, is certainly the position Wittgenstein would explicitly take on ostension a few years later; see, e.g., *PR* I.6.

history of analytic philosophy. Of course, Wittgenstein's vision of philosophical analysis as the elucidation of rules of use that ultimately treat only of syntactical combinations of signs famously inspired the logical positivists in their projects of reconstructive epistemology and meaning analysis, perhaps finding its most direct expression in Carnap's project of "logical syntax," developed in 1934 in *The Logical Syntax of Language*. But even beyond its implications for the claims and projects of logical positivism, seeing the significance of the *Tractatus*' use-doctrine of meaning allows us to see its project of analysis as anticipating innovations in post-positivist analytic philosophy that are usually associated with the repudiation, rather than the legacy, of the *Tractatus*. These significant continuities of method themselves show the limitations of the usual interpretation of the *Tractatus* project as a reductionist logical atomism shown to be untenable by the midcentury critiques of Quine, Sellars, and Wittgenstein himself. With them in mind, we can begin to replace this usual interpretation with one that perceives the subterranean but pervasive influence that the methodological doctrine of the *Tractatus* has exerted on the methods of analytic philosophy, and continues to exert today.

First, the *Tractatus*' use-doctrine of meaningfulness means that its project of analysis is *holistic*. There is no way to clarify the meaning of a sign without clarifying its use; but the use of a sign is identified with *all* of its possibilities of significant appearance in propositions of the language. It follows that there is no complete analysis of the meaning of a sign that does not specify all of these possibilities. The clarification of the meaning of a sign must take into account all of the contexts in which it can appear significantly, and the combinatorial rules of logical syntax thereby revealed will govern, for each sign, the possibilities of its appearance in conjunction with *each* of the other potentially significant signs of the language. It follows that there is, in an important sense, no such thing as the analysis of a *single* term in isolation; the only way to give a *complete* analysis of any term is to give an analysis of the whole language. In this sense, the project of the *Tractatus* already expresses the claim, usually associated with the later Wittgenstein, that "understanding a sentence means understanding a language."²² The holistic semantic dependence of one term upon all of the other terms in the language is

22. Wittgenstein puts it this way in the *Blue Book*, p. 5.

bound to be implicit in ordinary discourse, but analysis makes it explicit in its progress toward a logically perspicuous notation.

Additionally, there is a second, perhaps deeper way in which the Tractatus program of analysis anticipates the semantic holism of Quine and Sellars. Because it begins with ordinary judgments of the meaning of propositions, and proceeds from identifying the semantic relations of *propositions* to identifying their logically distinct terms by their uses, the program of the Tractatus embodies what might today be called an *inferentialist* program of analysis.²³ Wittgenstein emphasizes, just before stating the use-doctrine of meaningfulness, that only propositions have sense; a name has meaning only in the nexus of a particular proposition.²⁴ Judgments of meaning must begin as judgments of the meaning of propositions; it is only on the basis of the judgment that a *proposition* is meaningful – and has the meaning that it does – that we can begin to understand the meanings (uses) of its constituent symbols. To identify the logically simple parts of a proposition (parts that, of course, may not be shown perspicuously by the symbolism of ordinary language), we begin by considering a *class* of propositions, all of which have *something* in common that is essential to their sense.²⁵ The class of propositions that have some component of their sense in common, then, share a “propositional variable;” by stipulating values for the variable, we can recover the original class of propositions.²⁶ If a sentence’s significant terms are *all* replaced by propositional variables, its logical form is shown.²⁷ In this way, beginning with logical relations of semantic similarity among *propositions*, the analysis works toward the segmentation of those propositions into their logically simple parts. There is no way to access these parts, however, other than by first comprehending the semantic and inferential relationships among propositions as a whole. The logical or inferential relationships of sense

23. As developed, e.g., in Brandom (1994). In the *Tractatus*, it is true, Wittgenstein did not distinguish between what were subsequently called, following Carnap, *formation rules* and *transformation rules*; nor did he distinguish between *definitional* logical relations among propositions and *inferential* logical relations. For he thought that there is no need for ‘laws of inference’ to justify inferential relations (5.132); what we should call inferential relations among propositions are expressed by these propositions themselves, provided they are written in a symbolism that shows their form (5.13–5.1311).

24. TLP 3.3.

25. TLP 3.31.

26. TLP 3.317.

27. TLP 3.315.

among propositions themselves define their logically simple parts; so there is no alternative, in the analytic process of articulating a proposition into its logically simple parts, to beginning with its semantic relations to a large variety of other propositions.

The inferentialist program of analysis thereby defined has long exerted a subcutaneous and sometimes overt influence on analytic philosophers' understanding of their own methods. It had perhaps first been suggested by Frege's doctrine of the primacy of judgment, according to which analysis must begin with whole judgments and work towards the identification of their constituent concepts.²⁸ But it was Ryle who first articulated the program sufficiently clearly to gain it a broader philosophical recognition. In the 1938 article "Categories," he argued that the logical analysis of propositions to show their categorical structure – to identify and analyze the simple concepts that comprise them – must begin with the identification of logical relationships of identity and difference of sense among whole propositions. Like Wittgenstein, Ryle held that a proposition's logical relations with other propositions determine its logical form; and it is only by determining these relations that its simple terms can be isolated. Ryle followed Wittgenstein, as well, in identifying the simple terms thereby shown with symbols defined by their logical possibilities of significant use in propositions.²⁹ The resulting

28. Frege had written: "We ought always to keep before our eyes a complete proposition. Only in a proposition have the words really a meaning. It may be that mental pictures float before us all the while; but these need not correspond to the logical elements in the judgment. It is enough if the proposition taken as a whole has a sense; it is this that confers on the parts also their content." (Frege (1980), p. 71).

29. Ryle wrote: "It has long been known that what a proposition implies, it implies in virtue of its form. The same is true of what it is compatible and incompatible with. Let us give the label 'liaisons' to all the logical relations of a proposition, namely what it implies, what it is implied by, what it is compatible with and what it is incompatible with. Now, any respect in which two propositions differ in form will be reflected in differences in their liaisons. So two propositions which are formally similar in all respects save that one factor in one is different in type from a partially corresponding factor in the other, will have liaisons which are correspondingly dissimilar. Indeed the liaisons of a proposition do not merely *reflect* the formal properties of the proposition and, what this involves, those of all of its factors. In a certain sense, they are the same thing. To know all about its liaisons is to know all about the formal structure of the proposition, and vice versa – though I can obviously entertain or believe a proposition without having yet noticed all its liaisons. Indeed I must grasp it before I can consider them, otherwise I could not be the victim of antinomies.

The operation of extracting the type of a factor cannot exclude the operation of revealing the liaisons of propositions embodying it. In essence they are one opera-

segmentation of propositions into their constituent concepts would yield a categorial grammar for the language, a structure or system of categories whose possibilities of significant combination are the direct image of the logical relations of significant propositions. Violation of this categorial grammar issues in, and can be identified by, what Ryle called “category mistakes,” or the failures to use terms according to their underlying logical rules of use that issue in absurdities, whether of an ordinary or philosophical variety.

Ryle’s holistic inferentialism was further developed by Sellars, who emphasized, in his program of *conceptual-role semantics*, that the meaning of a term must be determined holistically by the inferential place (the conceptual role) in the language of the propositions in which it can significantly figure.³⁰ Sellars emphasized that the inferential relations among propositions that determine their contents must include the relations defined by what he called “material” as well as “formal” inference rules; not only the kinds of inference that follow the deductive rules of Fregean logic, but also probabilistic rules and rules dependent on the content of the propositions they govern contribute to defining propositional content.³¹ But we have seen that, although Wittgenstein described his program as one of elucidating “logical form,” there is no reason to think that the rules of use that he thought could be shown by logical syntax stop short of capturing *any* aspect of propositional content that plays a role in ordinary judgments of meaning. Most recently, the Fregean and Sellarsian program of inferentialism has been taken up again, in the context of Brandom’s comprehensive pragmatic program of normative semantics.³² But although Brandom repeatedly cites the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* as one source of his pragmatic picture of meaning and the correspondent program of analysis as explication of patterns of use implicit in ordinary practice, he stops short of recognizing the substantial presence of this program already in the *Tractatus*.

tion. Of course, with the familiar sorts of propositions upon which logicians have worked for centuries or decades, we short-circuit the enquiry, by subsuming them direct under the appropriate formulae. But to be told that a proposition is of the form ‘S a P’ or of the form ‘Ex. ϕ x. $\sim \chi$ x’ is to be told nothing unless we are able to work with the code-symbols according to the rules of their use, which means unless we know how to read off the liaisons, the patterns of which are what these symbols prescribe.” (Ryle (1938), p. 183).

30. Sellars (1953), (1956).

31. Sellars (1948), (1953).

32. Brandom (1994).

In suggesting that the *Tractatus* contains significant anticipations of programs usually associated much more closely with the late Wittgenstein than with the early one, I do not mean to deny that much of the explicit metaphysical and semantic *theory* of the *Tractatus* often suggests (as the usual interpretations conclude) semantic reductionism and logical atomism rather than holism and conceptual-role semantics. But the *Tractatus*' use-doctrine of meaning, like many parts of the work, can be seen as a component of an innovation description of philosophical *method* as well as a piece of a substantial metaphysical theory; and when it is read on this level of method, the *Tractatus* theory of meaning emerges as having a rather different shape and significance than has usually been supposed. If, as I have suggested, the use-doctrine of meaning is essential to defining the kind of practice in which Wittgenstein thought philosophy consisted, then it is possible to read the reductionist and atomist claims of the *Tractatus* as pragmatic contributions to the articulation of this practice rather than components of a self-standing metaphysical doctrine. On this interpretation, for instance, the simple signs of a logically perspicuous notation, with which analysis is supposed to terminate, are more ideal limits invoked to articulate a practice than substantial posits whose existence the *Tractatus* intends to defend. Of course, Wittgenstein certainly thought that the perspicuous notation he spoke of, purged of ambiguities of use and revealing the underlying form of meaning, was at least an ideal possibility; we shall see how he would come to abandon this idealized hope in the years that followed. But returning Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical practice to the center of our interpretation of the *Tractatus* has the effect of correcting years of interpretation that have taken its meaning to be exhausted by its metaphysical and semantic theory. The result is a *Tractatus* that practices the elucidatory method that it preaches, articulating a philosophical practice that ultimately exposes as nonsensical the very metaphysical doctrines that had seemed to support it.

V

In the years following his return to philosophy in 1929, some of Wittgenstein's most important doctrines about meaning and language would begin to change in ways that can be directly traced to

changes in his understanding of the program of analysis suggested by the *Tractatus*. At the same time, much of the program's original conception of philosophical clarification as the perspicuous representation of ordinary practices of meaning-clarification would remain in place, continuing to characterize Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophical practice even in the *Investigations*. What changed over the transitional years was simply his conception of the form that the practice of philosophical clarification would take. He grew increasingly skeptical of the *Tractatus*' suggestion that the ordinary patterns of use that underlie meaning could be captured by a single, univocal set of syntactical rules; and this growing skepticism led him to consider more deeply than he had in the *Tractatus* the interrelationships among the concepts of meaning, use, and rule.³³ He became suspicious of the idea, *perhaps* implicit in the *Tractatus*, that the use of a word can be a kind of item present to the mind, captured in a rule which would determine all of its instances all by itself. In this skepticism, it is easy to see the germ of the *Investigations*' considerations of rule-following and private language. But the methodological backdrop of these critiques of a traditional understanding of meaning remained a philosophical practice of logical or grammatical clarification grounded the meaning-clarifying resources of ordinary intersubjective discourse.

Wittgenstein's transitional works show clearly how the Tractarian picture of logical syntax began to cede to a more pluralistic and nuanced conception of the grammatical foundations of meaning. In the *Philosophical Remarks*, Wittgenstein considered in detail the possibility of clarifying the grammatical structure of ordinary language in virtue of which it allows for various perceptual and experiential possibilities; he called this project "phenomenological." The *Remarks* explicitly retained the *Tractatus* conception of philosophical criticism as the critique of failures to give signs a univocal sense; but Wittgenstein was now less certain that the truth-functional notation that he had suggested in the *Tractatus* would be adequate to the clarificatory task.³⁴ Propositions concerning colors and quantities, for instance,

33. In the *Investigations*, for instance, he cites as one of the main errors of the *Tractatus* the thought that "if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules." (PI 81).

34. See, e.g., *PR* s. 1, para. 9: "Asked whether philosophers have hitherto spoken nonsense, you could reply: no, they have only failed to notice that they are using a word in quite different senses. In this sense, if we say it's nonsense to say that one thing is as identical as another, this needs qualification, since if anyone says this with

proved recalcitrant to the symbolization in terms of simple propositions that the *Tractatus* had suggested. The incompatibility between red and green must be expressible, Wittgenstein reasoned, in a logically perspicuous symbolism that captures the grammatical form of our language, even though our ordinary language does not show this form explicitly:

77. How is it possible for $f(a)$ and $f(b)$ to contradict one another, as certainly seems to be the case? For instance, if I say 'There is red here now' and 'There is green here now'? . . .

78. If $f(r)$ and $f(g)$ contradict one another, it is because r and g completely occupy the f and cannot both be in it. But that doesn't show itself in our signs. But it must show itself if we look, not at the sign, but at the symbol. For since this includes the form of the objects, then the impossibility of ' $f(r).f(g)$ ' must show itself there, in this form.

It must be possible for the contradiction to show itself entirely in the symbolism, for if I say of a patch that it is red and green, it is certainly at most only one of these two, and the contradiction must be contained in the sense of the two propositions.

That two colours won't fit at the same time in the same place must be contained in their form and the form of space.

As in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein distinguishes between sign and symbol; ordinary language fails to show the structure of exclusion that characterizes the sense of propositions about colours and that a perspicuous symbolism could reveal. But the fact that this structure is non-truth-functional – two of its simple propositions can be mutually contradictory without being negations of one another – led Wittgenstein to conclude that the connection between the possibilities expressed in its symbolism and the possibilities for the combination of objects in the world must be more complicated than the *Tractatus* had held.

On the new conception, the correspondence that makes a proposition true is not simply a correspondence between that proposition and the world, but a correspondence between *the entire system of propositions in which it figures* and the world.³⁵ The propositions "the surface is red" and "the surface are green" are only contradictory because they designate different positions in the whole *system* of

conviction, then at that moment he means something by the word 'identical' (perhaps 'large'), but isn't aware that he is using the word with a different meaning from that in $2 + 2 = 4$."

35. *PR*, section 8, para. 82, 84, 85.

propositions expressing colours, and a perspicuous notation would have to express this whole system, capturing the exclusivity of different positions within it. The exclusive relationship between red and green is a feature of an entire articulated system; and it is the relationship between this whole system and the states of affairs in the world that makes a single proposition about colour true. Translating into the language of the *Tractatus*, we can put this recognition as the discovery that recognizing the symbol in a sign, by means of a clarification of the use of terms in a proposition, requires the elucidation of the whole logical system in which that proposition figures. Accordingly, it becomes harder to imagine that such recognition could culminate in anything like a single, unique analysis of any sentence. Any process of analyzing a proposition will yield a symbolism that will show each of the various logical structures within which a particular proposition fits. This leads to a more holistic, less reductive picture of logical analysis, a picture according to which there is no clarification of the logical structure of a single proposition that is not simultaneously the clarification of many other propositions as well. We have seen that this holistic picture was already implicit in the *Tractatus*, implied by the claim that a perspicuous symbolism must express show the possibilities of significant combination for all terms of the language. But because of his consideration of the more complicated structure of propositions about colors and quantities, Wittgenstein now recognized this consequence explicitly, realizing that the symbolic requirements of a perspicuous notation would go far beyond those satisfied by the usual notation of Fregean logic.

At about the same time, and partially as a result of the discovery of the non-truth-functional nature of certain kinds of logical form, Wittgenstein began to consider more deeply the question of the relationship of the use of a sign to its meaning. Philosophers can easily be tempted, Wittgenstein thought, by a kind of “mythology of symbolism,” a notion that the meaning of a sign is a kind of shadowy, mysterious accompaniment to it, a mental process or state that endows the otherwise inert and meaningless sign with a sense.³⁶ Even if we recognize that clarification of the meaning of a sign means clarification of its significant uses, we can be tempted, under the influence of this mythology, to think that the use is something

36. See *PR* III.26. The critique of the philosophical temptation toward this mythology is also the immediate context, in the *Blue Book*, of the mildly critical remark about Frege that I have used as an epigraph.

somehow present, all at once, alongside or behind each significant employment of the sign. Rudiments of this mythology of meaning can, perhaps, be found in the *Tractatus*; insofar as the *Tractatus* suggests any doctrine of the psychology of meaning at all (which is not very far), it might be read as suggesting that using a sign meaningfully means using it as the expression or instance of a “rule of use” which would presumably have to be present, in some sense, in the mind of the user. It is clear, though, that Wittgenstein did not, at least initially, consider the *Tractatus* the main target of his criticism of the “mythology of meaning.” In his exposition of the line of critique in the *Remarks*, his target is primarily Russell’s theory of judgment, according to which the correctness of a judgment consists not only in the relationship between the judgment and a fact, but also in a subjective experience of correctness; and he cites the *Tractatus* in an approving light, as avoiding the error of Russell’s assumption that the connection between language and the world must be mediated by some *third* item, for instance a feeling of satisfaction or fulfillment.³⁷

From this transitional critique of the “mythology of meaning” that interposes a psychological item or process between language and the world would grow, of course, Wittgenstein’s much farther-reaching consideration of rules and rule-following in the *Philosophical Investigations*. But in the course of this consideration and the related consideration of the possibility of a private language, Wittgenstein suggested and employed a method of philosophical criticism that directly inherits the *Tractatus*’ method of clarifying meaning by clarifying use. The aim of the new method, like the old one, is to produce a “perspicuous representation” or “overview” of the uses of our words, so as to remedy and prevent philosophical confusions stemming from confusion about them.³⁸ But instead of picturing the content of this overview as a single “logical syntax” of fixed and necessary rules, Wittgenstein now envisioned it as the outcome of a diverse and heterogeneous set of practices of meaning-clarification.³⁹

37. For the criticism of Russell, see *PR* III.21–26; Wittgenstein contrasts it unfavorably with the *Tractatus* picture theory in III.21, III.25, and III.26.

38. *PI* 122.

39. See, e.g., *PI* 90: “Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language. – Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this

As I have suggested was already the case in the *Tractatus*, the basis of these practices can be nothing other than ordinary judgments of meaningfulness, among which are, of course, judgments about the way in which a particular term is being used in a particular proposition or utterance. The philosopher's task, then, can only be to apply and extend these judgments, particularly to some of the pieces of grammatical misunderstanding that have been called "philosophy" in the past.

This program of clarification is presumably what Wittgenstein has in mind when, in the course of discussing the multiplicity of language-games, he issues in section 43 the statement that has usually been taken to commit him to a "use-theory of meaning." And throughout the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein enacts, often through the dialectical "discussion" with interlocutory voices, forms of criticism that take as one of their guidelines the thought that identification of use is clarification of meaning.⁴⁰ But if the *Investigations* indeed includes a "theory of meaning" at all, it is even less a "use-theory" than the Tractarian doctrine is. For as we have seen, Wittgenstein had become deeply suspicious, by this point, of the philosophical temptation to concretize the use of a word, making it something mysteriously present with each occasion of the word's utterance. If it is right to see the *Investigations* program of analysis as a natural descendent of the Tractarian one, then it can be no part of the program to theorize use as a particular kind of item (even a rule, as the *Tractatus* had perhaps suggested) or a set of practices. The concepts of family resemblance, language games, and 'forms of life' that Wittgenstein introduces are not, then, components of a substantial theory of meaning or use, but rather heuristic devices, ways of thinking about the results of a form of philosophical linguistic criticism that is essentially heterogeneous and pluralistic owing to the diversity of meanings and patterns of use it discovers. As is shown by the prominence, throughout the book, of the interlocutory dialogue that enacts it, this method of philosophical criticism, continuous with ordinary practices of inquiry and meaning-clarification but applied to the

may be called an 'analysis' of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart." In the following sections, Wittgenstein develops his critique of the Tractarian idea that there is anything like a *single* completely analyzed form of each proposition.

40. The "private language argument," for instance, depends centrally on the thought that a supposed private diarist would not have succeeded in giving his supposed sign for a private sensation any *use* in the language. See, e.g., *PI* 258–64 and *PI* 270.

traditional concepts and problems of philosophy, remains the central teaching of the *Investigations*.

In recent years, several commentators have advanced a radical and suggestive new interpretation of the *Tractatus* that centers on Wittgenstein's remarks about his own philosophical method in the work.⁴¹ At the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts that his philosophical claims in the book ought to be understood as nonsense:

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

The new interpretation suggests that this remark ought to be taken completely seriously. There are not, as previous interpretations have supposed, two kinds of nonsense – one type that it is the point of the *Tractatus* theory of meaning to expose, and another type that that theory itself embodies. Rather, the substantial philosophical claims of the *Tractatus* are as much, and as completely, nonsensical as is the nonsense that they are supposed to expose. The new interpretation therefore sees the aim of the *Tractatus* as “therapeutic” in the sense that its goal is not to give us a substantial metaphysical theory of meaning or of the world, but to cause the reader to feel the temptations that lead us to such a theory, and then to show the emptiness of these temptations. On the “no-nonsense” interpretation, both early and late Wittgenstein share this therapeutic aim; what is radical about the interpretation is not so much its ascription to the method of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but its suggestion that it is already present in the *Tractatus*.

It is a consequence of the “no-nonsense” interpretation of the *Tractatus* that it can be no part of the goal of philosophical analysis to distinguish, among meaningful propositions making contentful claims, between those that are allowed and those that are disallowed by the rules of logical syntax. The relevant distinction must, instead, be between sense and nonsense, between meaningful propositions and sequences of signs that are not even propositions. Otherwise, there would be two types of nonsense, the (supposedly) meaningful

41. For the interpretation, see, e.g., Diamond (1991) and (2000), Conant (1989) and (2000), and Ricketts (1996).

nonsense of the Tractarian theory and the mere nonsense of sign-sequences that do not even amount to propositions. But the *Tractatus* gives us no warrant to think that the field of nonsense can be divided in this way, and no clear sense of the possibility of “significant nonsense” that such a division would presuppose.

In this way, the “no-nonsense” view derives a radical reading of the structure of the *Tractatus* from its own elliptical remarks about its method. But that its reinterpretation of the *Tractatus* is correct can be seen in another way, given an appreciation of the role of criticism of use in its doctrine of philosophical practice. We have seen that the *Tractatus* theory of the meaningfulness of signs itself requires that the question of *what* a sign means can only be answered by an elucidation of the *way* in which it is meaningful, an accounting for its possibilities of significant use in propositions. The rules of logical syntax show these possibilities, but they ultimately treat only of signs, governing their possible significant combinations in a logically perspicuous notation. They do not and cannot, therefore, distinguish between two types of *contents*, the sensical and the nonsensical; the distinction they draw must be among (not symbols but) signs, between meaningless combinations of signs and those which are meaningful and so have a content and a sense. This consequence follows immediately, then, once we accept the use-doctrine of meaningfulness, and realize that the rules of logical syntax are in no sense stipulative or dependent upon a pre-existing theory of meaning.

By appreciating the role of the use-doctrine of meaning in the *Tractatus*, we can develop a conception of its teaching that augments the “no-nonsense” interpretation with a fuller picture of the kind of philosophical method Wittgenstein meant to impart. On the fuller picture, there cannot be two kinds of nonsense, because the point of analysis is to show how to recognize the symbol in the sign. Understanding *what* signs mean is inseparable from understanding *how* they mean – not by grasping some abstract metaphysical theory of meaning, but by understanding the various kinds of concrete significative work they do in various propositions and utterances. Learning a language means understanding the kinds of work its terms can do, and being able to go on to use them significantly in new situations. The only possible effect of philosophical criticism is to remind us of the ordinary uses of terms, concepts, and propositions, revealing cases in which written or spoken signs or sentences are being

used in more than one way, or have not been given any clear use. The typical form of philosophical confusion is the illusion produced by deploying an ordinary sign in an extraordinary context in which, or for which, it has not been given a tolerably clear use; and the only way to dispel the illusion is to ask after the sign's use in that particular context. The effect of philosophical criticism is "therapeutic" in its ability to dispel philosophical and nonphilosophical confusions of various types, but there is no reason to expect there to be any *one* theory or form of meaning that it reveals or serves.

I have argued that this method of philosophical criticism – a program composed of as many distinct meaning-clarifying practices as there are contexts of significant language-use – should be seen as the long-concealed center of the teaching of the *Tractatus*, as well as that of the *Investigations*. Characteristically, it works not by confronting language with a theory-based distinction between sense and nonsense, but by allowing the distinction to show itself in dialectical processes of meaning-clarification that *concern* the traditional problems of philosophy but *presuppose* no standard or theory of meaningfulness other than that already embodied in ordinary linguistic practice. Wittgenstein's consistent application of the method reflects his understanding of the implications of the fact that the philosophical critic is, herself, always a user of language, capable of defining the use and applications of terms but as much subject as anyone else to their implications, once defined. In the forms of criticism Wittgenstein teaches us, language comes to a kind of understanding of itself from the only perspective available to it, namely its own. It is a matter of both philosophical and historical importance that these forms of criticism are still misunderstood, despite decades of Wittgenstein scholarship; indeed, one might think of the application of partial, limited, and mangled forms of them as having characterized the development of the analytic tradition over the twentieth century. If this is right, then the new understanding of Wittgenstein's characteristic methods of philosophical criticism that we can derive from a rereading of the *Tractatus* might at last bring the tradition of analytic philosophy to a fundamental awareness of its own deepest methodological presuppositions, preparing the way for the kind of decisive self-recognition of its own specific unity that could signal the moment of its historical closure, or summarize its legacy for a new philosophical era.

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