

The New Wittgenstein: a Critique

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In recent years, a novel approach to the interpretation of Wittgenstein's Tractatus has caught the imagination of a growing number of philosophers.¹ Advocates of this approach, while they differ on details, are broadly agreed on the following key points: Early and late Wittgenstein subscribed to a 'deflationary' conception of philosophy, according to which it asks no questions and advances no theses (see, for example, Diamond 1991: 202–3; Conant 1992: 156; Goldfarb 1997: 58.). In keeping with this conception, the Tractatus itself contains no philosophical theses or doctrines (Conant 1992: 156; 1993: 216; 1995, 270; Floyd 1998: 87; cf. Diamond 1991: 182). Rather, except for certain 'framing remarks,'² which provide instructions for reading the book, the Tractatus contains only strings of plain nonsense—'plain' because it is not deep or illuminating nonsense that is imagined somehow to 'gesture at' something that cannot be put into words³ (Diamond 1991: 181; Conant 1989b: 344–5; Floyd 1998: 98.). In reading the Tractatus one is supposed to 'work through'⁴ its nonsense sentences—to struggle to make sense of them—but only in order to experience them 'dissolv[ing] from inside,' or 'crumbling in upon themselves' in the attempt (Goldfarb 1997: 66; Conant 1989b: 339; cf. Conant 1989a: 274, fn. 16). By means of this process, which some have described as a 'dialectic' (e.g., Floyd 1998: 82), the reader is supposed to unmask the disguised nonsense that constitutes the 'body' of the Tractatus (Conant 1989b: 346; 1992: 159; 1993: 218.). Importantly, the nonsense of the Tractatus is not designed, as many 'standard' readers suppose, to alert us in some indirect way to the capacity of language to show something that cannot be said (cf. Conant 2000: 196). Instead, even Wittgenstein's remarks about 'showing' are in the end to be abandoned for nonsense (Conant 1989b: 340–1; 2000: 196; Diamond 1991: 181–2; Ricketts 1996: 93; Putnam 1998: 110; Kremer 2001: 55–6).⁵ Tractarian nonsense nonetheless possesses enough psychological suggestiveness to generate the illusion of sense and, for some advocates of this view, to count as 'ironically self-destructive' (e.g., Diamond 1991: 198). The value of the

Tractatus lies in its capacity to facilitate self-understanding (cf. Diamond 2000: 161), and to afford relief from philosophical perplexity (Conant 1989b: 354)—but in nothing else. As Conant puts it: ‘The only insight that Tractarian elucidation imparts, in the end, is one about the reader himself: that he is prone to [certain particular] illusions of thought’ (Conant 2000: 197, cf. Conant 1992: 157).

Because it is not difficult to find a similar conception of philosophy in the free-wheeling dialogues of the Philosophical Investigations, advocates of this approach are apt to claim for the two works a near coincidence of method and spirit. (see Conant 1989a: 246–7, 1989b: 346; 1993: 224, fn. 87.). Accordingly, they tend to be sceptical of the traditional or ‘standard’ view that the later Wittgenstein came to regard a number of central Tractarian doctrines as seriously mistaken (See, e.g., Conant 1989a: 281 fn. 44, 1993: 224, fn. 87; 1995: 330, fn. 126). They question this view because they have to. If the Tractatus contains no substantive philosophical doctrines, there can be nothing of substance for Wittgenstein to have later repudiated.

In what follows I will submit this interpretation to critical scrutiny. My reservations about the ‘New Reading’—as I shall term it⁶—stem from two sources. First, the arguments in favour of the reading strike me as less persuasive than they are often taken to be; secondly, the reading conflicts with Wittgenstein’s own later characterizations of the Tractatus as a book containing various substantive philosophical doctrines, and, indeed, with his later repudiation of certain of these doctrines. This second point may be made with reference to a range of issues, but for my purposes it will be convenient to narrow the focus: I will argue that one topic on which Wittgenstein expresses his own substantive philosophical views in the Tractatus is the nature and purpose of ‘logical analysis.’⁷

I take issue with the New Reading because it poses an important challenge to the approach to Wittgenstein’s early philosophy that I am inclined to favour. If the New Reading is correct, there can be no room for an interpretation that involves attributing any substantive philosophical position to the Tractatus. Since I believe that, on the contrary, there is much that is philosophically illuminating in what is said in the Tractatus, I aim in this essay to defend the value of work that engages with this content. Since I shall focus in the course of my argument on Wittgenstein’s numerous retractions of philosophical

positions, one might get the impression that I regard the Tractatus as containing only false substantive positions. This, however, would be a mistake. I focus on positions that Wittgenstein later identified as incorrect, or otherwise problematic, simply because these moments have a special value as evidence that Wittgenstein held substantive philosophical views at all. If I am successful in making this case, there will remain much important work to be done in demonstrating the correctness or at least philosophical interest of the many Tractarian positions that Wittgenstein did not later repudiate. But that is work for another occasion.

I should issue two further disclaimers before I begin. First, in contending that the Tractatus propounds some substantive philosophical doctrines, I do not mean to foreclose the possibility that certain other of its ‘propositions’ may turn out to be mere pseudo-propositions. In fact, it seems to me likely that the Tractatus contains both pseudo-propositions and genuine propositions in its so-called ‘body’. Secondly, although my purposes are critical, they are not exclusively so. In what follows I hope to bring to light what I take to be one of the most important developments in Wittgenstein’s philosophy between the Tractatus and the Philosophical Investigations, namely: his abandonment of a tacitly held, and to some degree inchoate, conception of logical analysis as a process that brings to light something hidden in a proposition.

1. Preliminary Evaluation of the New Reading

Let me begin by examining the grounds that have been offered for the New Reading. These, so far as I know, are the following: First, the New Reading has the virtue of allowing us to take ‘fully seriously’ Wittgenstein’s remark in the Tractatus that someone ‘who understands [him] eventually recognizes [his propositions] as nonsensical (6.54).’⁸ Secondly, it charitably portrays Wittgenstein’s philosophical career as involving no major reversals of position. Thirdly, it turns to its advantage the apparently paradoxical nature of Wittgenstein’s remarks about ‘showing’. The trouble is that too often, Wittgenstein goes ahead and says things that he claims ‘cannot be said but only shown.’ If we regard these moments as ‘ironically self-destructive,’ rather than pragmatically inconsistent, we can avoid saddling Wittgenstein with an unworthy blunder.⁹ Lastly, the New Reading

takes seriously the idea that, as Conant puts it, ‘philosophy as exemplified in the Tractatus’ comprises ‘not a body of doctrine but an activity’ (Conant 1993: 217). I shall take these points in reverse order.

In arguing that the Tractatus does not present a body of doctrine, Conant rests a lot of weight on the opening sentences of its Preface. Wittgenstein says: ‘This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have already thought the thoughts that are expressed in it—or similar thoughts. It is therefore not a textbook [Lehrbuch].’ It ought to be plain, however, that far from supporting Conant’s reading, these words actually undermine it. What is said to distinguish the Tractatus from a textbook is not its failure to express thoughts, but rather the possibility that the book will be understood only by those who have already thought the thoughts it does express (or similar thoughts). It is not a textbook because, in contrast to any textbook worth its salt, it may turn out to be news to none of its readers. This otherwise obvious point is obscured by Conant’s questionable rendering of ‘Lehrbuch’ as ‘work of doctrine’,¹⁰ and by his omission of the crucial word ‘therefore’ from his translations of this remark (see, e.g., Conant 1989b: 345; 1993: 217.).

Conant combines his interpretation of the Preface with an appeal to Wittgenstein’s remark that philosophy is not a theory but an activity (4.112). He assumes that the activity in question is philosophy as exemplified in the Tractatus, but, for all he shows, it may rather be the activity of someone who follows ‘the only strictly correct method’ of philosophy described at 6.53—a method which, as Conant himself acknowledges, is not the method of the Tractatus.¹¹ Since Wittgenstein was later to describe the ‘main point’ of the Tractatus, as ‘the theory of what can be expressed by propositions...and what can not be expressed by propositions, but only shown’ (my emphasis),¹² there is in fact some reason to doubt that 4.112 could be intended to refer to philosophy as embodied in the Tractatus.

In any case, the ‘activity’ said to be constitutive of philosophy at 4.112 is not, as Conant implies, the unmasking of disguised nonsense (1989b: 344–6), but rather the ‘clarification of thoughts’ (4.112, my emphasis). Wittgenstein says that ‘Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which are, as it were, opaque and blurred’ (4.112). So the result of philosophical activity is not, as Conant would have it, nonsense unmasked, but rather clarified thought.

Could the activity of making thoughts clear be part of the ‘only strictly correct method’ of philosophy envisaged at 6.53, a method which involves: ‘[demonstrating to one who wishes to say something metaphysical] that he has given no meaning to certain signs’ (6.53.)? I see no reason why not. Consider, for example, Wittgenstein’s form-clarifying analysis of ‘A believes that p’ as “‘p” says p’ (5.542). One might appeal to this analysis in trying to convince someone who wished to say something metaphysical about ‘the soul’ that he had attached no meaning to this phrase. For, by replacing the apparent singular term ‘A’, which might be taken to refer to a person by a (still apparent) term for a fact¹³ we remove one source of the idea that the ‘the soul’ has been given meaning as a singular term (cf. 5.542–5.5421). It is perfectly possible, then, that 4.112 is forward-looking, and that the activity to which it alludes is that of the future philosopher envisaged at 6.53.

I turn now to the subject of ‘showing’. We need to ask whether this notion is as obviously incoherent as New Readers suppose. To me this seems doubtful. I grant that it is absurd to imagine that a string of nonsense should be capable of ‘showing’ something that cannot be put into words but which this nonsense would say if it made sense—and I think it is a major contribution of the New Reading to have made this point clear. But, while some commentators may have interpreted the showing doctrine in this way, doing so is by no means an essential feature of standard readings—and with good reason. As Peter Hacker has emphasized,¹⁴ the vehicle of showing is usually said to be either (features of) senseful language (cf. 4.1211) or sinnlos tautologies and contradictions (cf. 4.461). And while it is, of course, pragmatically self-defeating to say: ‘that p is not sayable, but is shown by the fact that q’,¹⁵ the Tractatus contains other formulations of the showing idea that seem designed to avoid this rather obvious difficulty. In connection with Russell’s axiom of infinity, for example, Wittgenstein says: ‘What the axiom of infinity is meant to say would be expressed in language by the fact that there is an infinite number of names with different meanings’ (5.535). With these words Wittgenstein purports to refer to the object of an inexpressible insight, but not to express it. Wittgenstein’s letter to Russell of 19 August, 1919 contains another of these more careful formulations: ‘[w]hat you want to say by the apparent prop[osition] ‘there are 2 things’ is shown by there being two names which have different meanings’ (CL: 126).

Wittgenstein's apparently self-defeating remarks may, therefore, just be incautious formulations of a coherent—or, at any rate not obviously incoherent—view. When Wittgenstein says something of the form 'that p cannot be said, but is shown by the fact that q,' we may charitably understand him to mean: 'What "p" is meant to say is shown by the fact that q', or better still: 'What speakers attempt to put into words by producing the nonsense string "p" is shown by the fact that q'.¹⁶

The most plausible defences of the showing doctrine will, I believe, construe 'what is shown' not as an ineffable truth, but rather as something like: an internal relation between the forms of propositions (4.1211), a logical form (4.121), or a feature of a state of affairs (4.1221; cf. 4.112)—for example, how things stand if a proposition is true (4.022). New Readers have yet to show that there is anything incoherent in this idea.¹⁷ But my aim here is not to defend any particular version of the showing doctrine; I am concerned merely to refute the implication of some New Readers that by taking Wittgenstein's remarks about 'showing' seriously we convict him of a kind of 'philosophical blindness'.¹⁸ Having assimilated these points, New Readers may still wish to take issue with the above formulations on the grounds that they contain the phrase 'the fact that q', which invites construal as a singular term purporting to designate a fact. Such phrases may seem problematic for two reasons. First, they appear to violate the Tractarian tenet that facts cannot be named (cf. 3.144); secondly, in 'the fact that q', 'q' will typically contain problematic semantic vocabulary (e.g., 'name', 'meaning'). These last points are well taken, but they constitute a wholly separate—and certainly not decisive—objection. They simply raise the question how much 'fact'-talk and semantic talk the early Wittgenstein would have taken to make sense. Since Wittgenstein at one stage regarded much talk of this kind as eliminable by means of paraphrastic analysis,¹⁹ the answer may well be 'rather a lot'.

The other advantages claimed for the New Reading are also debatable. A continuity hypothesis, after all, is an empirical hypothesis about a philosopher's intellectual development. Some philosophers undergo many changes of mind, others relatively few. Since interpretive charity has to be tempered with humanity, there is no a priori reason to regard a continuity assumption as the best methodological principle for understanding Wittgenstein. Indeed, because—as we shall see—Wittgenstein himself

describes his views as having undergone important changes, there is, in fact, a prima facie presumption against continuity.

New Readers seem to be operating with the general methodological principle that if we can take a remark such as 6.54 seriously/straightforwardly/at face value, then we ought to do so. For what it is worth, I agree. It is certainly a virtue of the New Reading that it provides one way—not, I think, the only one²⁰—of taking 6.54 seriously, but, as Peter Hacker has emphasized, in taking 6.54 in the particular way it does, the New Reading fails to take equally seriously other remarks that fall within the book's 'frame': In addition to saying that the Tractatus 'will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts that are expressed in it—or similar thoughts' (emphases mine), Wittgenstein says that part of the value of the work consists in the fact that 'in it thoughts are expressed' (emphasis mine), and that the 'truth' of these thoughts is 'unassailable and definitive' (emphasis Wittgenstein's).

New Readers are prone to argue for some non-straightforward construal of these 'instructions for reading the book'. Michael Kremer has claimed, for example, that the notion of 'truth' invoked in the Preface should be understood as the 'Biblical' notion of 'a way to be followed, a "path" for life' (Kremer 2001: 61). For her part, Juliet Floyd has suggested that the Preface may be 'ironic,' and that we have to see Wittgenstein as 'seducing us into reading [metaphysical accounts of thought] into his remarks,' for the purpose of 'shocking us into a reassessment of the indefiniteness of our own thinking' (Floyd 1998: 87). But even setting aside their ad hoc character, such selective discernings of non-standard usage and irony seem out of keeping with the New Reading's insistence on the importance of reading other parts of the frame straightforwardly.

A line more consistent with the spirit of the New Reading is to suppose that here Wittgenstein is applying an ordinary notion of truth, and using it without irony, but intending it to apply (rather self-reflexively) only to remarks within the frame.²¹ Even this suggestion, however, goes against the tone of a series of remarks in the Preface. Wittgenstein says that the book will have greater value 'the better the thoughts [expressed in it] are expressed. The more the nail has been hit on the head.' And he adds that '[In this respect] he is conscious that [he] has fallen far short of what is possible. Simply because [his] powers are insufficient to cope with the task. May others come and do it

better.’ Such remarks would be perversely grandiloquent if intended to relate only to a handful of relatively prosaic instructions for reading the book but, of course, such matters of interpretive ‘feel’ are always contestable. What is clear is that this suggestion renders urgent the need for a precise specification of the propositions that make up the ‘frame’, for only then will we know which propositions are to be taken as expressing genuine thoughts and which are merely intended to implode.

Early presentations of the New Reading were relatively explicit on this point. In his 1992, for example, Conant claims that: ‘The Preface and the concluding sections of the Tractatus form the frame of the text. It is there that Wittgenstein provides us with instructions for how to read what we find in the body of the text’ (Conant 1992: 159, 1995: 285; cf. Diamond 1991: 19.). More recently, however, Conant has moved away from such a straightforward characterization of the frame. He now warns that: ‘The distinction between what is part of the frame and what is part of the body of the work is not, as some commentators have thought, simply a function of where in the work a remark occurs (say, near the beginning or end of the book). Rather, it is a function of how it occurs’ (Conant 2000: 216, fn. 102).²² Anticipating the question where the fragments of the now scattered frame are to be found, he adds: ‘The Tractatus teaches that [whether or not a string of signs is Unsinn] depends on us: on our managing or failing to perceive [erkennen] a symbol in the sign. There can be no fixed answer to the question what kind of work a given remark within the text accomplishes. It will depend on the kind of sense a reader of the text will be (tempted to) make of it.’ (ibid.). This seems to imply that there is no fact of the matter, independent of a reader’s psychological makeup, about whether a given proposition is part of the frame. But if that is so, then, since the frame is supposed to contain the instructions for reading the book, one would have supposed that there can be no answer independent of a particular reader’s psychology to the question: ‘how ought we to read the book?’. But then it is hard to see how there can be any determinate, reader-independent, content to the New Reading.

That said, one can understand why Conant has backed away from his and Diamond’s earlier, comparatively transparent, conception of the frame; for that conception never seemed likely to carry conviction. In Conant’s view any remark not in the frame— that is to say, any remark in the ‘body’ of the text— is merely ‘mock

doctrine' to be thrown away (Conant 1995: 286). It follows that 'the entire body of the Tractatus forms a continuous train of nonsense' (Conant 1993: 223). But such a view is unpersuasive, to say the least. Consider, for example, Tractatus 4.442 which runs:

Frege's judgement stroke 'Ä' is logically altogether meaningless; in Frege (and Russell) it only shows that these authors hold as true the propositions marked in this way.

(4.442)

It would be bizarre if this remark, which is plainly intended to convey a critical philosophical insight,²³ were designed to 'crumble from within' as we thought it through, and yet it is no more plausibly construed as an instruction for reading the Tractatus. The same, of course, could be said for many of the Tractatus's other criticisms of Frege and Russell,²⁴ and also for many of its apparently unobjectionable observations on language. I have in mind such remarks as the following: 'The proposition is not a mixture of words (just as the musical theme is not a mixture of tones) (3.141); ' "A" is the same sign as "A" ' (3.203); '[In the language of everyday life] the word "is" appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence' (3.323); 'The silent adjustments involved in understanding everyday language are enormously complicated' (my translation, 4.002)'. Each of these remarks obviously defies location in the frame/body scheme alleged by Diamond and (pre-2000) Conant. Finally, as Peter Hacker has emphasized, the Tractatus contains a number of remarks to whose truth Conant seems to appeal. In his 1989b, for example, Conant quotes approvingly from 5.473, 5.4733 and 5.4732 (1989b: 342), and he attributes to Wittgenstein the views apparently expressed in these (partial) quotations. It is obvious, however, that such remarks belong neither to the Preface nor to the 'concluding sections' of the Tractatus.

It may be in belated recognition of some of these points that Conant has recently remarked that:

Many of the sections of the Tractatus to which [Conant 2000 devotes] most attention—e.g., the Preface, §§ 3.32–3.326, 4–4.003, 4.111–4.112, 6.53–6.54—belong to the frame of the work and are only able to impart their instructions

concerning the nature of the elucidatory aim and method of the work if recognized as sinnvoll. (Conant 2000: 216, fn. 102)

Two comments about this new position are in order. First, a point of detail: Tractatus 3.32, which Conant now sees as belonging to the frame, reads: ‘A sign is what can be perceived of a symbol’ (Pears’s and McGuinness’s translation). This remark and those that follow it center upon Wittgenstein’s philosophically rich distinction between sign and symbol. It is obviously strained to suppose that these remarks ‘[impart] instructions concerning the nature of the elucidatory aim and method of the work’. Secondly, a more general point is long overdue. It is hard to know how to evaluate a view as prone to unacknowledged²⁵ change as Conant’s. In his 1989a Conant is explicit that ‘the propositions of the entire work are to be thrown away as nonsense (Conant 1989a: 274, fn. 16.). In his 1989b he speaks of ‘Wittgenstein’s claim in the Tractatus that all of its remarks are nonsensical’ (1989b: 350),²⁶ and he insists, somewhat paradoxically, that even the idea that we are left with nothing after throwing away the ladder is itself to be thrown away (1989b: 337). In his 1992, however, Conant backs away from these claims and now follows Cora Diamond in explicitly identifying the frame with the Preface and concluding sections of the book (1992: 159)²⁷. In his 1993 he softens this position by including 4.112 within the frame (1993: 223, fn. 84). In 1995, however, he returns to his 1992 view that Preface and concluding sections ‘form’ the frame of the Tractatus (1995: 285). Finally, in his 2000 he adopts the view that there is ‘no fixed answer’ to the question which propositions constitute the frame, but then goes on to claim that (relative to his psychology?) the propositions cited in the passage just quoted are included in it. Since none of these changes of position is accompanied by any acknowledgement that the position has changed, it is difficult to know how Conant sees his current position as relating to its forerunners, and, correspondingly, difficult to know which elements of his earlier positions he would still endorse.

But let us return to the main thread. The chief point that emerges from this discussion of the ‘frame’ and ‘body’ is the following: Remarks in each of the categories just mentioned cannot plausibly be read as ‘dissolving from within’ and so must be excluded from the scope of ‘my propositions’ at 6.54. That being so, it is natural to

wonder whether the Tractatus might contain other remarks that are similarly excluded, but which nonetheless advance substantive philosophical theses. The distinction between sign and symbol introduced at Tractatus 3.32 presents one example of this kind. In what follows I shall argue that on Wittgenstein's own telling the propositions about the nature and purpose of logical analysis comprise another.

2. A textual challenge

This brings us to the main business of this essay, namely: a detailed investigation of Wittgenstein's apparently self-critical remarks. I have often heard it claimed by New Readers that Wittgenstein's later self-criticisms are directed not against the Tractatus, but only against certain ideas he fleetingly espoused after returning to philosophy in 1929. One New Reader has even gone so far as to suggest that Wittgenstein's later criticisms of 'the author of the Tractatus' may be read as directed at pre-Tractarian positions that are also rejected in the Tractatus (Kremer 1997: 109). But such speculations do not survive scrutiny. In what follows, I shall assemble a host of texts, both published and unpublished, that indicate that Wittgenstein did indeed direct his later self-criticisms at positions he had espoused in the Tractatus. I shall argue that in view of these texts there is a serious case to be answered that Wittgenstein took himself to have advanced substantive philosophical doctrines in the Tractatus. In making this case, I will offer my own account of the significance of Wittgenstein's self-criticisms. I do not rule out that New Readers may have a rival story to tell; but I hope that this essay will at least make evident the need for them to tell it.

3. Wittgenstein's published reflections

Wittgenstein's published reflections on his early work provide some of the best evidence that the Tractatus contains some substantive philosophical doctrines. One of the most telling of these remarks occurs in part A of Appendix 4 to the first part of the

Philosophical Grammar.²⁸ In a passage which the editors conjecturally date to 1932²⁹ Wittgenstein says:

The idea of constructing elementary propositions (as e.g. Carnap has tried to do) rests on a false notion of logical analysis. It is not the task of that analysis to discover a theory of elementary propositions, like discovering principles of mechanics. My notion in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus was wrong: 1) because I wasn't clear about the sense of the words 'a logical product is hidden in a sentence' (and such like), 2) because I too thought that logical analysis had to bring to light what was hidden (as chemical and physical analysis does).

(PG: 210)

Here Wittgenstein is plainly attributing to the Tractatus a positive conception of the nature and task of logical analysis, and he is presenting it as something he—not some shadowy alter ego—believed. Equally plainly, he is judging the view to have been misconceived—and, indeed, of questionable coherence. As we shall see, this conception of logical analysis, as a process that brings to light what is hidden, went along with what Wittgenstein was later to recognize as an erroneous conception of an elementary proposition, namely, as what one obtains as the end result of an analysis that has yet to be made.³⁰ In a passage from a later manuscript book, conjecturally dated 1936, Wittgenstein makes another telling remark. He asks:

What gives us the idea that there is a kind of agreement between thought and reality?—Instead of 'agreement' here one might say with a clear conscience 'pictorial character'.

But is this pictorial character an agreement? In the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus I said something like: it is an agreement of form. But that is an error [ein Irrtum].

(PG: 212.)

Notice that Wittgenstein once more lays claim to the earlier Tractarian opinion as his own. He accuses his younger self of having placed the wrong interpretation on a (relatively) innocent remark. Rather than settle for the suggestive platitude that a proposition has a ‘pictorial character’, Wittgenstein had attempted to specify in what this pictorial character consists. The ‘erroneous’ answer he had hit upon—an agreement of form—is stated explicitly at Tractatus 2.16–2.17.

In the Preface to the Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein famously says: ‘Since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago, I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in my first book.’³¹ (PI: viii) Wittgenstein appears to allude to one of these ‘mistakes’ when he says:

It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of words and propositions, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus). (PI, § 23, my translation).

In view of Kremer’s suggestion that in referring to the ‘author of the Tractatus’ Wittgenstein may not be referring to what he wrote in the Tractatus, but only to positions he held prior to the Tractatus, it is worth quoting a forerunner of this remark that occurs in a German manuscript that overlaps with the Brown Book. In this manuscript, having drawn attention to the multiplicity of ways in which words function, Wittgenstein remarks:

Such reflections can give us a sense of the tremendous variety of resources that exist in our language; and it is interesting to compare what becomes apparent here with what logicians have said about the structure of all propositions. (This holds also of what I wrote in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.)

(EPB: 124, my emphasis and translation)

The criticism implied here is closely related to an observation Wittgenstein makes in a typescript based on manuscripts from 1946–47:

The basic flaw [Grundübel] of Russell's logic as also of mine in the Tractatus, is that what a proposition is is illustrated by means of a few commonplace examples, and then is presupposed as understood in full generality.

(RPP, vol. 1, § 38, my translation).

In light of these observations it seems natural to read the following remark from the Philosophical Investigations as a criticism of the Tractatus:

We see that what we call 'proposition' and 'language' has not the formal unity that I imagined, but is the family of structures more or less related to one another.

(PI, 108)

Given the setting of this remark in the Investigations it seems safe to assume that the 'formal unity' Wittgenstein had imagined, which he contrasts here with the idea of a family of structures, would be the idea of something common to all propositions in virtue of which they are propositions (cf. PI 65–66). It is hard to know what Wittgenstein could have in mind if not the Tractatus's notion of the general form of the proposition (4.5, 5.47–5.4711, cf. 6–6.001). And it is not surprising, therefore, that the Philosophical Investigations contains a series of remarks that are, on the face of it, critical of this notion:

"But this is how it is——" I say to myself over and over again. I feel as though, if only I could fix my gaze absolutely sharply on this fact, get it in focus, I must grasp the essence of the matter.

(PI: 113)

(Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 4.5): "The general form of propositions is: This is how things are." ——That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we

look at it.

(PI: 114)

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably (PI: 115)

Taken together, these remarks would seem to confirm that at least some of the ‘grave mistakes’ mentioned in the Investigations’s Preface are indeed mistakes in what Wittgenstein wrote in the Tractatus, not how he wrote it.

Speaking of the errors in the Preface Wittgenstein continues: ‘I was helped to realize these mistakes—to a degree which I myself am hardly able to estimate—by the criticism which my ideas encountered from Frank Ramsey, with whom I discussed them in innumerable conversations during the last two years of his life.’ Ramsey died on the 19th of January, 1930; so Wittgenstein would seem to speaking in the Preface of the years 1928–1930. G. E. Moore suggests that he is in fact magnifying the relevant period. He calls attention to a letter dated 14 June, 1929,³² in which Ramsey reports that he had been in close touch with Wittgenstein’s work ‘during the last two terms,’ that is, during the Lent and Easter terms of 1929. Moore takes Ramsey’s remark to imply that he had not been in close touch with Wittgenstein’s work in 1928. Whatever the truth in this matter, it seems likely that Ramsey’s criticisms alerted Wittgenstein to ‘grave mistakes’ in the Tractatus during (and possibly before) the spring and early summer of 1929. This was the period of composition of Wittgenstein’s self-critical article: ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’, which contains much evidence that Wittgenstein came to see the Tractatus as doctrinally mistaken. In particular, it presents the mutual exclusion of unanalysable statements of degree as a problem for the Tractatus’s commitment to the independence of elementary propositions (5.134, cf. 6.3751), and, therefore as a problem for the view that all necessity is logical necessity (6.375). That being so, I do not propose to rest a lot of weight on this article. Wittgenstein decided against presenting it as a talk, and he later came to speak of it in disparaging terms. Although I am confident that he did not mean to disparage his criticisms of the Tractatus, but merely his first responses to them—along with his continued adherence to certain Tractarian commitments—I do not have space to

establish these points here.³³ I will therefore content myself with a single quotation: ‘The mutual exclusion of unanalysable statements of degree contradicts an opinion which was published by me several years ago and which necessitated that atomic propositions could not exclude one another.’ (PO: 33). I shall leave it to the reader to decide whether or not Wittgenstein could have intended this remark as a serious criticism of Tractatus 6.375–6.3751.

In the Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, in a passage composed during the spring of 1944, Wittgenstein indicates an important change in his very conception of nonsense:

Even though ‘the class of lions is not a lion’ seems like nonsense, to which one can only ascribe a sense out of politeness; still I do not want to take it like that, but as a proper sentence, if only it is taken right. (And so not as in the Tractatus). Thus my conception is a different one here. Now this means that I am saying: there is a language-game with this sentence too.

(RFM, Part VII, §36: 403)

Here Wittgenstein tells us that something that in the Tractatus he would have taken for nonsense will, after all, make sense—so long as it is located in the right language-game.

This concludes our examination of Wittgenstein’s retractions of Tractarian views in his published writings, but there is a substantial body of further evidence that, while admittedly ‘softer’ than these published statements, also merits consideration.

4. Conversations with Waismann

I begin with conversations Wittgenstein had with Friedrich Waismann in Neuwaldegg during the winter of 1931. At the time Waismann had been intending to present the results of the Tractatus in a more comprehensible form, in his work Theses.³⁴

Wittgenstein strongly objected to the idea, and in the course warning Waismann off the project made a number of criticisms of the Tractatus. On the 9th of December, he says:

One fault you can find with a dogmatic account is, first, that it is, as it were, arrogant. But that is not the worst thing about it. There is another mistake, which is much more dangerous and also pervades my whole book, and that is the conception that there are questions the answers to which will be found at a later date. It is held that, although a result is not known, there is a way of finding it. Thus I used to believe, for example, that it is the task of logical analysis to discover the elementary propositions. I wrote, ‘We are unable to specify the form of elementary propositions,’³⁵ and that was quite correct too. It was clear to me that here at any rate there are no hypotheses and that regarding these questions we cannot proceed by assuming from the very beginning, as Carnap does, that the elementary propositions consist of two-place relations, etc. Yet I did think that the elementary propositions could be specified at a later date. Only in recent years have I broken away from that mistake. At the time I wrote in a manuscript of my book (this is not printed in the Tractatus),³⁶ ‘The answers to philosophical questions must never be surprising. In philosophy you cannot discover anything.’³⁷ I myself, however, had not clearly enough understood this and offended against it.

(WVC: 182, my emphases)

Wittgenstein had supposed that the structure of elementary propositions could not be foreseen, but had, instead, to emerge as the result of analysis. His mistake, he now tells Waismann, was to suppose that he could hold this view without thereby subscribing to the misguided notion that we can learn the forms elementary propositions by means of a philosophical discovery. As we shall see, in his 1932 Cambridge Lectures Wittgenstein presents instances of the ‘mistake’ referred to here of supposing that ‘there are questions the answers to which would be found at a later date’ as errors he had committed in the Tractatus,³⁸ so we can be confident that ‘my book’ here refers to that work.³⁹

Wittgenstein’s view is clear: the Tractatus is pervaded by the dangerous and dogmatic assumption that certain as yet unanswered questions would receive answers ‘at a later date.’ As we have seen, one such question concerns the specification of the form of the elementary propositions. This dogmatic attitude, Wittgenstein now realizes, sinned

against his already formulated⁴⁰ better thought that philosophy is not involved with discovery.

The remarks to Waismann continue in a confessional tone:

In my book I still proceeded dogmatically. Such a procedure is legitimate only if it is a matter of capturing the features of the physiognomy, as it were, of what is only just discernible—and that is my excuse. I saw something from far away and in a very indefinite manner, and I wanted to elicit from it as much as possible. But a rehash of such theses is no longer justified.

(WVC:184)

Wittgenstein means that the rehash of the Tractatus's theses, in the form of Waismann's proposed work, Theses, is no longer justified. If the New Reading is correct, this criticism must be wildly inaccurate: Wittgenstein is accusing himself of dogmatism, and offering excuses for having propounded theses in the Tractatus.

In a conversation of 1 July, 1932 he alludes to what would seem to be one of these 'dogmatic' Tractarian positions: 'In the Tractatus logical analysis and ostensive definition were unclear to me. At the time I thought that there was 'a connexion between language and reality.' (WVC: 209–210). Finally, it is worth mentioning a passage from the conversations with Waismann which, although not explicitly flagged as directed against the Tractatus, is very plausibly taken that way. On the 2nd of January, 1930, Wittgenstein tells Schlick and Waismann:

I used to have two conceptions of an elementary proposition, one of which seems correct to me, while I was completely wrong in holding the other. My first assumption was this: that in analysing propositions we must eventually reach propositions that are immediate connections of objects⁴¹ without any help from logical constants...And still I adhere to that.⁴² Secondly, I had the idea that elementary propositions must be independent of one another⁴³.... In holding this I was wrong.

(WVC: 73–74)

An earlier remark to Schlick supports the hypothesis that Wittgenstein is referring here to the Tractatus.⁴⁴ On the 30th of December, 1929, he had said:

...[W]hen I was writing my work...I thought that all inference was based on tautological form. At the time I had not yet seen that an inference can also have the form: This man is 2m tall, therefore he is not 3m tall. This is connected with the fact that I believed that elementary propositions must be independent of one another, that you could not infer the non-existence of one state of affairs from the existence of another.

(WVC: 64)⁴⁵

Notice that at this stage Wittgenstein is still adhering to the conception of an elementary proposition that he was later to reject in the Philosophical Grammar, namely as a proposition whose ‘complete logical analysis’⁴⁶ shows that it is not built out of other propositions by truth-functions’ (cf. PG: 211).⁴⁷

Records of conversations are, of course, relatively soft data, so by themselves Waismann’s reports do not carry a lot of weight. However, as we shall see, many of the details reported by Waismann are corroborated by other sources, which, I think, carry more weight. One such source is G. E. Moore’s record of Wittgenstein’s Cambridge lectures of 1930–33. Moore explains that he took ‘very full notes’⁴⁸ and that he ‘tried to get down ... the actual words [Wittgenstein] used.’ Since Moore was a famously careful philosopher, and was taking verbatim notes while Wittgenstein spoke, it seems reasonable to give these reports more weight than Waismann’s notes of his conversations. That being so, the main lessons I wish to draw from this material—namely, that Wittgenstein held substantive philosophical views in the Tractatus, and that he later came to repudiate some of these views—rely only on relatively crude features of these notes.

5. Moore’s Notes of Wittgenstein’s Cambridge Lectures, 1930–33

The points of dissatisfaction recorded by Moore agree closely with those Wittgenstein mentions in the Philosophical Grammar. First, Moore attests to Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction with the picture-theory: 'In connexion with the Tractatus [']s statement that propositions, in the 'narrower' sense with which we are now concerned, are 'pictures', he said he had not at that time noticed that the word 'picture' was vague.' (PO: 57). Then, regarding analysis, Moore says.

In the case of Logic, there were two most important matters with regard to which he said that the views he had held when he wrote the Tractatus were definitely wrong.

(I)⁴⁹ The first of these concerned what Russell called 'atomic' propositions and he himself in the Tractatus had called 'Elementarsätze'. He said in (II) that it was with regard to 'elementary' propositions and their connexion with truth-functions or 'molecular' propositions that he had had to change his opinions most; and that this subject was connected with the use of the words 'thing' and 'name'. In (III) he began by pointing out that neither Russell nor he himself had produced any examples of 'atomic' propositions; and said that there was something wrong indicated by this fact, though it was difficult to say exactly what. He said that both he and Russell had the idea that non-atomic propositions could be 'analysed' into atomic ones, but that we did not yet know what the analysis was: that, e.g. such a proposition as 'It is raining' might, if we knew its analysis turn out to be molecular, consisting, e.g. of a conjunction of 'atomic' propositions. He said that in the Tractatus he had objected to Russell's assumption that there certainly were atomic propositions which asserted two-termed relations—that he had refused to prophesy as to what would be the result of an analysis, if one were made, and that it might turn out that no atomic propositions asserted less than e.g. a four-termed relation, so that we could not even talk of a two-termed relation.⁵⁰ His present view was that it was senseless to talk of a 'final' analysis.

(PO: 87–8)⁵¹

So the first important logical mistake was to maintain that each proposition has a ‘final’ analysis into truth-functions of elementary propositions. Moore continues:

The second important logical mistake which he thought he had made at the time when he wrote the Tractatus was introduced by him in (III) in connexion with the subject of ‘following’ (by which he meant, as usual, deductive following or ‘entailment’—a word which I think he actually used in discussion) from a ‘general’ proposition to a particular instance and from a particular instance to a ‘general’ proposition. Using the notation of Principia Mathematica, he asked us to consider the two propositions ‘ $(\underline{x}) \cdot \underline{fx}$ entails $\underline{fa}$ ’ and ‘ $\underline{fa}$ entails $(\exists \underline{x}) \cdot \underline{fx}$ ’. He said that there was a temptation, to which he had yielded in the Tractatus, to say that $(\underline{x}) \cdot \underline{fx}$ is identical with the logical product ‘ $\underline{fa} \cdot \underline{fb} \cdot \underline{fc} \dots$ ’, and $(\exists \underline{x}) \cdot \underline{fx}$ identical with the logical sum ‘ $\underline{fa} \vee \underline{fb} \vee \underline{fc} \dots$ ’; but that this was in both cases a mistake.

(PO: 89)

So the second important logical mistake was Wittgenstein’s truth-functional analysis of generality (cf. 5.501 and 6–6.001). After providing further details of this error, Moore continues:

He went on to say that one great mistake he made in the Tractatus was that of supposing that in the case of all classes ‘defined by grammar,’ general propositions were identical either with logical products or with logical sums (meaning by this logical products or sums of the propositions which are values of $\underline{fx}$) as, according to him, they really are in the case of the class ‘primary colours’. He said that, when he wrote the Tractatus he had supposed that all such general propositions were ‘truth-functions’; but he said now that in supposing this he was committing a fallacy, which is common in the case of Mathematics e.g. the fallacy of supposing that $1 + 1 + 1 \dots$ is a sum, whereas it is only a limit, and that dx/dy is a quotient, whereas it is only a limit.⁵²

(PO: 89).

The report would seem to confirm the Tractatus as Wittgenstein's intended target in the section of the appendix to the Philosophical Grammar entitled: 'Criticism of my former view of generality.' There Wittgenstein says:

My view about general propositions was that $(\exists x) \cdot \phi x$ is a logical sum and that though its terms aren't enumerated here, they are capable of being enumerated (from the dictionary and the grammar of language)....Of course the explanation of $(\exists x) \cdot \phi x$ as a logical sum and of $(x) \cdot \phi x$ as a logical product is indefensible. It went with an incorrect notion of logical analysis in that I thought that some day the logical product for a particular $(x) \cdot \phi x$ would be found.

(PG, Part II, § 8: 268)

Note that Wittgenstein saw his earlier view of generality as bound up with his optimistic attitude toward what logical analysis would one day discover.

Finally, Moore reports that: '[Wittgenstein] said that, when he wrote the Tractatus, he would have defended the mistaken view which he then took by asking the question: How can $(\underline{x}) \cdot \underline{fx}$ possibly entail $\underline{fa}$ if $(\underline{x}) \cdot \underline{fx}$ is not a logical product?' (PO: 90.).' Once again, the implication is that at the time of writing the Tractatus Wittgenstein really did hold positions he was prepared to defend as true, and that he later came to view his former opinions as mistaken.

Moore concedes that he failed to understand many of the things Wittgenstein said, so one might reasonably have doubts about the degree to which Moore's later précis accurately reconstructs the 'actual words' he says he took down. Fortunately, however, there is no need for speculation on this point since Moore's original lecture notes have been preserved. I want to spend a section examining this still unpublished material. As we shall see, it both confirms the reports of Moore and Waismann, and makes clear that the target of Wittgenstein's criticisms is indeed the Tractatus.

6. Moore's unpublished notes of Wittgenstein's Cambridge Lectures: 1930–33

In Moore's notes from Wittgenstein's lectures of Michaelmas term 1932,⁵³ we find:

Now there is a temptation, to which I yielded in [the] *Tractatus*, to say that

$(x) fx = \text{logical product (of all prop[ositions] of the form } fx)^{54} fa \cdot fb \cdot bc \dots$

$(\exists x) \cdot fx = [\text{logical}] \text{ sum, } fa \vee fb \vee fc \dots$

This is wrong, but not as absurd as it looks.

(25 November, 1932, ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 34)

Wittgenstein's explanation of why this view is not palpably absurd runs as follows:

Suppose we say that: Everybody in this room has a hat = Udall has a hat, Richards has a hat etc. This obviously has to be false, because you have to add ' & a, b, c, ... are the only people in the room.' This I knew and said in [the] *Tractatus*.⁵⁵ But now, suppose we talk of 'individuals' in R[ussell]'s sense, e.g. atoms or colours; and give them names, then there would be no prop[osition] analogous to 'And a, b, c are the only people in the room.'

(25 November, 1932, *ibid.*: 35).

Clearly, in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein was not making the simple mistake of forgetting that 'Every F is G' can not be analysed as 'Ga & Gb & Gc...' even when a, b, and c are in fact the only Fs, since one needs to add explicitly that this is so. The analysis was being offered for the special case in which a, b, c, etc., are Russell's individuals, and Wittgenstein had supposed that in this case there is no proposition to express the clause that is necessary in other cases, hence no need for a supplementary clause. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein does not explain why there should be no such proposition, but we can make a guess. It seems likely that what we are assumed to be analysing is actually 'Everything is G', and that in this case any allegedly necessary completing clause—for example, 'a, b, c, etc., are the only things'—would be the misfired attempt to put into words something that is shown by the fact that when analysis bottoms out it yields as names only such as figure in the logical product 'Ga & Gb & Gc...'. What would indicate that analysis had bottomed out, is, of course, a further question.⁵⁶

A more sophisticated objection is discussed three pages later:

There is a most important mistake in [the] Tract[atus]....I pretended that [a] Proposition was a logical product; but it isn't, because '...' don't give you a logical product. It is [the] fallacy of thinking

$1 + 1 + 1 \dots$ is a sum

It is muddling up a sum with the limit of a sum

dx/dy is not a quotient, but the limit of a quotient

it doesn't obey all rules that x^2/x obeys

(25 November, 1932, *ibid.*: 37)

Wittgenstein had confused dots of infinitude with dots of laziness (and thus had, unwittingly, made an unfounded bet on the existence of finitely many individuals).⁵⁷ Two pages later he resumes the theme:

In my book I supposed that [in] $(\exists x) . fx = fa \vee fb \vee fc \vee \underline{\& \text{ so on}}$ [the ' & so on'] was [the ' & so on'] of laziness, when it wasn't.

There was a deeper mistake—confusing logical analysis with chemical analysis.

I thought ' $(\exists x) . \underline{fx}$ is a definite logical sum, only I can't at the moment tell you which.'

(25 November, 1932, *ibid.*: 39)

Again, this last erroneous 'thought' is not presented not as an illusory position the reader is invited to 'think through' in order to see it 'dissolve from within', but rather as a straightforwardly mistaken opinion. It is the mistake of thinking that there must be a definite logical sum corresponding to ' $(\exists x) . \underline{fx}$ ' even if one cannot at present specify its terms. The mistake would seem to be a symptom of precisely the dogmatism Wittgenstein had confessed to Waismann less than a year before. A page later he continues:

In [the] Tract[atus] I said $(\underline{x}) . \underline{fx}$ and $(\exists x) . \underline{fx}$ were truth-functions—[the] first a logical product, [the] second a logical sum. My mistake was to think the product,

though {I couldn't}⁵⁸ find it now, was contained in it. My good point was that I did {make} one calculus

(28 November, 1932, *ibid.*: 40)

The next academic term Wittgenstein resumes his criticism of the Tractatus. After summarizing a discussion of what is meant by 'hidden logical constant', he says;

If you look at Russell and at [the] Tractatus, you may notice something very queer —i.e. a lack of examples. They talk of 'individuals' and 'atomic propositions', but give no examples. Both of us in different ways, pushed [the] question of examples {to} one side. Now there's something wrong here: but it is very difficult to say why. I thought at first I'd solved this problem. Russell and I⁵⁹ went wrong in different ways

(6 February, 1933, *ibid.*: 84).

Later in the same lecture Wittgenstein explains where he went wrong:

I say in [the] Tract[atus] that you can't say anything about [the] structure of atomic prop[ositions]: my idea being the wrong one, that logical analysis would {reveal} what it would {reveal}.

(6 February, 1933, *ibid.*: 88)

A page later he elaborates the point:

Suppose English grammar=grammar in which none could write except a person who had completely analysed our language. And then ask: will this grammar contain [a] 2-termed relation? The answer must be: wait till analysis is complete. (This is what I said). R[ussell] and I argued in writing for analysis; but I said we can't tell what analysis will yield; but R[ussell] said it must yield this or that. I was right in one way; R[ussell] in another. I was right in thinking you can't prepare for a word to have meaning.

(6 February, 1933, *ibid.*: 89)

He continues:

I was right in thinking there can't be hypotheses in logic: you can't say 'If a word had meaning' (when it hasn't)...I thought R[ussell] had no right to say that the result of analysis would be 2-term, 3-term relations etc. It's quite right to say 'Socrates is a man' is subject-pred[icate], 'Socrates loved Plato' is 2-term and so on.⁶⁰ I was wrong in supposing that it had any sense to talk of the result of final analysis. Whereas I did say: we don't know what the result of it will be.

(6 February, 1933, *ibid.*: 90)

Notice that Wittgenstein says he was wrong in supposing that talk of the result of a final analysis made sense. It seems highly unlikely, then, that he could have been concerned in the Tractatus to exhibit the incoherence of the idea, expressed at 3.25 and 5, that every proposition has a unique complete analysis into a truth-function of elementary propositions. Note also that Wittgenstein represents himself as having argued in writing for analysis, which also seems to go against the suggestion that the Tractatus's 'propositions' are designed to exhibit the incoherence of the analytical project.

These remarks correspond closely to those recorded by Ambrose and MacDonald. A passage from their notes of Wittgenstein's lectures from the academic year 1932–33 runs:

Russell and I both expected to find the first elements, or 'individuals', and thus the possible atomic propositions, by logical analysis. Russell thought that subject-predicate propositions, and 2-term relations, for example, would be the result of a final analysis. This exhibits a wrong idea of logical analysis: logical analysis is taken as being like chemical analysis. And we were at fault for giving no examples of atomic propositions or of individuals. We both in different ways pushed the question of examples aside. We should not have said 'We can't give them because analysis has not gone far enough, but we'll get there in time.'

(Wittgenstein 1989, *ibid.*: 11).

The close match between this passage and Moore's notes from 6 February, 1933 suggests that both sets of notes were based on a single lecture. If so, the criticisms in this passage must be directed against the Tractatus. Obviously, both sources strongly support a view of the early Wittgenstein as a logical atomist—a construal of him that one New Reader has recently described as 'one of the great myths of twentieth-century philosophy' (Floyd 1998: 85).

Two pages later in Moore's notes, in a lecture dated 'Feb[ruary] 10', Wittgenstein begins by summarizing the main point from the previous lecture:

[The] main point about 'atomic prop[ositions]' is that they are not [the] result of some analysis which has yet to be made: we use them, if at all, to mean propositions which don't, on their face, contain 'and' 'or' etc,... One mistake I made was this: [I thought] that you could enumerate entities in the world, and therefore all possible atomic propositions...I thought you could; though I couldn't.

(10 February, 1933, ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 92)

This mistake includes the one reported to Waismann (WVC p. 182, quoted in section 4 above) of assuming that 'the elementary propositions could be specified at a later date'. A recollection of Norman Malcolm sheds light on why Wittgenstein thought questions of this kind could (and should) be deferred. Malcolm recalls that: '[He] asked Wittgenstein whether, when he wrote the Tractatus, he had ever decided upon anything as an example of a "simple object". His reply was that at the time his thought had been that he was a logician; and that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely empirical matter! It was clear that he regarded his former opinion as absurd' (Malcolm 1989: 70; cf. p. 58).

The idea that it was the task of analysis to discover the simple things is one Wittgenstein criticised in the German manuscript mentioned earlier. Wittgenstein says:

Think of Russell's notion of an 'individual' or mine of 'objects' and their 'names' (Tractatus Log.-Phil.); these objects were supposed to be the fundamental constituents of reality; something that could not be said to exist or not to exist. (Theaetetus) What these elements of reality are it seemed difficult to say. I thought it was the job of further logical analysis to discover them. [Just now,] on the contrary, we have introduced proper names for things, objects, in the ordinary sense of the word.

(my translation, EPB: 121)

This passage strongly suggests that the slightly different criticism Wittgenstein makes of the Theaetetus's view of 'primary elements' at PI: 46 ff is indeed—as it in fact advertises itself as being—an indirect criticism of Russell and the Tractatus.

This concludes our survey of Wittgenstein's criticisms of the Tractatus. We have observed Wittgenstein harping on a small cluster of themes, any one of which might be regarded as a symptom of the 'dogmatism' he had confessed to Waismann: Wittgenstein had thought one could enumerate the simple basic elements in the world, though he could not do it; that analysis would bottom out in truth-functions of elementary propositions, though he could not discover these propositions at the moment; that the final analysis would one day display the composition (or 'forms') of elementary propositions, but it had not reached that point yet; that $(\exists x) . Fx$ was some logical sum, though he could not as yet say which.

New Readers face the challenge of explaining why these points of relative detail should have so preoccupied Wittgenstein in the late 20s and early 30s. Ideally, they will have to demonstrate the superiority of their explanation to the one Moore reports as having been Wittgenstein's own, namely: that these points were 'definitely wrong' and that Wittgenstein had since had to change his 'opinions' about them (cf. PO: 87–88).

7. Some (actual and possible) responses:

Although New Readers have said relatively little about the texts surveyed here, some of them have offered brief comments that seem designed to anticipate some of the criticisms I have been making. I want to conclude with a discussion of these remarks.

In her 1998 Juliet Floyd denies that for the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus ‘logical syntax’ can be made fully explicit, but she concedes in a footnote that: ‘[I]n several later retrospective remarks, [Wittgenstein] appears to claim that at the time of writing the Tractatus he held the goal of a complete analysis of propositions to be achievable and desirable.’⁶¹ Floyd’s cautious words — ‘Wittgenstein appears to claim etc.’ — seem to imply that we should not take Wittgenstein’s description of his early view at face value. But what she goes on to say does nothing to justify her reluctance to allow that here Wittgenstein means what he says. After citing several of the remarks that suggest he did indeed take the idea of complete analysis seriously, Floyd continues: ‘However, these remarks make clear that Wittgenstein always rejected as nonsensical the idea that logical analysis could specify the forms of the elementary propositions either a priori or in general (cf. Tractatus 5.55 ff).’⁶²

As we have seen, although Wittgenstein did indeed always reject (as false) the idea common to Russell (ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 89–90) and Wittgenstein’s Carnap (cf. WVC: 182) that we could foresee the forms of elementary propositions— that is, specify them prior to analysis (cf. Tractatus 5.55)—he did not always reject as nonsensical—or even as false—the idea that a final analysis would reveal the forms of elementary propositions. On the contrary, his retrospective criticisms make clear that at the time of writing the Tractatus he regarded this idea as both coherent and correct (WVC: 182, cf. the remark already quoted from ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 88). They also make plain that it was only years later⁶³ that he came to question the coherence of the idea of a ‘final analysis’, recognizing this as one of the points on which the Tractatus had been mistaken.⁶⁴

Why did Wittgenstein come to see this notion as incoherent? Three reasons suggest themselves. First, Wittgenstein never did get clear about the details of the process of analysis. He had envisaged a ‘calculus’ in which a ‘definitive dissection of propositions’ would be possible (PG p. 211), but his working out of this idea seems not to have progressed far beyond his analysis of (some cases of) generality and the tentative proposal of the Notebooks that ‘F[aRb]’, in which ‘[aRb]’ might perhaps be read as ‘the

complex consisting of a's standing in R to b', should be analysed as: 'Fa . Fb . aRb' (NB: 4; cf. 2.0201). In particular, he offered no systematic account of how apparent singular terms would get analysed as descriptions of the form 'the complex consisting of ...'. Secondly, he felt that his position in the Tractatus had remained too close to Russell's, since it still assumed from the outset that elementary propositions would have one or other of the forms apparently met with in the (not overtly logically complex) propositions of everyday language. That is to say, Wittgenstein had assumed they would be concatenations of names and n-adic predicates (PO: 31–2;⁶⁵). Lastly, the first problem on our list undermines Wittgenstein's hope that he could avoid portraying the discovery of the forms of elementary propositions as a 'philosophical discovery' (WVC p. 182)—a commitment that brings with it what Wittgenstein took to be an incoherent conception of philosophy as a branch of empirical inquiry (4.111). His original hope had been that he could steer a course between two mistakes. He would avoid Russell's mistake of prejudging the issue of the forms of elementary propositions (WVC: 182, cf. 5.553–5) by making the nature of these forms something that only emerges as the result of analysis. At the same time he would avoid portraying the forms as the objects of a philosophical discovery (WVC: 182, cf. 5.551), because, since the forms are discovered by applying a methodical procedure, we are justified in thinking we are merely unveiling something we have already encountered, rather than encountering something new (cf. WVC: 174).⁶⁶ However, because he had not fully specified the process of analysis, he could not after all suppose himself to have found such a methodical procedure for analysing propositions; and as Wittgenstein later realized, this meant he could not, after all, treat the results of analysis as already present but hidden in what was being analysed (cf. WVC: 174). Consequently, he could not in the end avoid the incoherence implicit in the idea of analysis as a process yielding 'philosophical surprises'.

That Wittgenstein came to question not just the truth, but the very coherence of ideas he had appealed to in the Tractatus is important, for it undermines another strategy that might be used to defuse the force of his apparent self-criticisms. New Readers might try to suggest that in his apparently critical retrospective remarks Wittgenstein is merely focusing on certain nonsensical pseudo-positions, which in the Tractatus he had regarded as having the appearance of truth, and now pointing to certain flaws that rob them of this

appearance, thus rendering them unworthy objects of Tractarian dialectic. This suggestion would, it seems to me, lack any independent textual motivation, and it certainly jars with the quite straightforward tone of many of Wittgenstein's characterizations of his former opinions. Wittgenstein says, for example, that both he and Russell had expected to find the first elements (individuals) by logical analysis, not that Russell had, and that he had explored the (apparent) consequences of imagining one might.⁶⁷ But, even aside from these points, the proposal has an obvious flaw: It simply fails to address those occasions on which Wittgenstein criticizes himself for having once incorrectly supposed certain terms to make sense (see, for example; PO: 87–88, ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 90, and, arguably,⁶⁸ PI, 114–115). In these places Wittgenstein is admonishing himself for having participated in the illusion of attaching a determinate sense to his words, not for having misidentified this illusion's most seductive aspects. And it should be emphasized, he really is criticising his Tractarian self, and not merely rehearsing some earlier nonsense-exhibiting dialectic.

Conant appears to register the force of some of the texts we have been considering in his 1995, for while suggesting—as on his reading he must do—that Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction with the Tractatus lies mainly with its manner of presentation, which he says 'cultivates the impression that things are being dogmatically asserted' (Conant 1995: 297), he adds in an unelaborated footnote: 'This is not to deny that Wittgenstein does also eventually come to think that quite a bit of surreptitious substantive doctrine was smuggled into the Tractatus after all' (Conant 1995, fn. 125: 330). If he means that Wittgenstein was right to think he had after all smuggled substantive doctrine into the Tractatus, Conant will need to qualify his claim that 'the entire body of the Tractatus forms a continuous train of nonsense' (Conant 1993: 223). He will have to say, instead, that although Wittgenstein had a general intention to author a doctrine-free work, in practice he nonetheless committed himself to 'quite a bit' of substantive doctrine.

I do not want to rule out that Wittgenstein might have unwittingly subscribed to certain doctrinal commitments in the course of attempting to dissolve philosophical problems, but it seems unlikely that these commitments could include Wittgenstein's view of analysis as a process that reveals the underlying forms of propositions, and reveals all propositions to be uniquely analysable as truth functions of elementary

propositions and so forth (see 3.24–5 ff., 4.002, 4.221–4.2211, 5, cf. 6.001). For, if this view is a doctrinal commitment, it is one too obviously propounded in the Tractatus to qualify as surreptitiously smuggled in. Conant’s concession cannot therefore diffuse the difficulties created for the New Reading by the texts I have been examining. But there is a more general problem: Conant’s concession would seem to deprive his recommendations about how to read the Tractatus of much of their initial appeal. When Conant remarked in an early paper: ‘I would urge that the propositions of the entire work are to be thrown away as nonsense’ (Conant 1989a: 274, fn. 16, emphasis in the original), his view at least seemed refreshingly principled and tidy. But if there is, in addition to the frame, after all, quite a bit of substantive doctrine smuggled into the book, the view loses this refreshing quality. Worse, one now begins to wonder why we should not, after all, follow ‘standard’ readers in trying to ferret out this substantive doctrine. If it is there all right, it is hard to imagine what reason there could be for not identifying it and assessing its philosophical merit. Finally, it should not escape our notice that by taking this new line Conant renders urgent the need for an account of precisely which propositions are supposed to have been taken on as ‘surreptitious’ substantive commitments, and which are still merely primed to implode. In the absence such an account Conant will not have provided a reading of the Tractatus, but at most the barest sketch of how one might approach certain as yet unspecified parts of the book.⁶⁹

These are the only responses I know to the problem I have tried to make sharp in this essay. I have not argued that this textual challenge cannot be met—although I am doubtful that it can. I have argued that it needs to be taken seriously. Because many of Wittgenstein’s later self-criticisms cannot be read as directed against material extraneous to the Tractatus, they must be faced and accommodated. Until this challenge is answered—and answered convincingly—the historical credibility of the New Reading will remain in doubt.⁷⁰

Notes

¹ This is rapidly becoming the dominant approach to Tractatus interpretation in the United States. A sign of its influence is the appearance of Crary and Read 2000, a large part of which is devoted to the work of scholars sympathetic to this line. The approach was first conceived by Cora Diamond in her 1988, and is further elaborated in Diamond 2000. James Conant presents a closely parallel view in a series of papers: Conant 1989a, 1989b, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2000. Further treatments in a similar vein include: Ricketts 1996 (especially, part 5), Kremer 1997 and 2001, and Floyd 1998. Endorsements of the approach can be found in Winch 1992 and Putnam 1992 & 1998. Warren Goldfarb offers some trenchant internal criticisms of the view in Goldfarb 1997, but he appears to believe that something like it presents the only likely prospect for what he calls a properly ‘resolute’ reading of the Tractatus. These are the only published defences of this line known to me, but I gather that there are several further articles currently in preparation by philosophers sympathetic to this view, some of which may be in print before this essay appears.

² On the role of the ‘frame’ see: Diamond 2000: 149 and 151; Conant 1992: 159; 1993: 216. and p. 223 fns. 84 and 85; 2000: 216, fn. 102.

³ ‘Plain’ nonsense is sometimes characterized as ‘gibberish’ (see e.g. Conant 1989a: 253; Ricketts 1996: 93–4), but this is potentially misleading. The babbling of a child might be gibberish, but the Jabberwocky sentences standardly cited as models for Tractarian nonsense would not usually be so regarded; for they at least appear to obey the rules of English phonetics, morphology, and syntax. Wittgenstein himself makes a related point in the Philosophical Investigations: ‘Even a nonsense-poem is not nonsense in the same way as say the babbling of a child.’ (PI, § 282).

⁴ I doubt that this notion of ‘working through’ nonsense has yet been adequately explicated. Goldfarb illustrates the idea with reference to the example of reified possibilities. He claims that in ‘following out the implications of the existence of reified possibilities, we land quickly in incoherence.’ (Goldfarb 1997: 66). But since nonsense, strictly speaking, has no implications, this needs further unpacking.

⁵ Although many things Diamond says portray her as a paradigm New Reader, she sometimes seems to draw back from this approach. In her 1991, she says: ‘[The Tractatus] is metaphysical in holding that the logical relations of our thoughts to each

other can be shown, completely shown, in an analysis of our propositions.’ (Diamond 1991: 18). This makes it seem as though Diamond is concerned to exclude from the Tractatus not metaphysics as such, but only a metaphysics of extra-linguistic reality. However, it is far from clear how to reconcile this statement with her claims elsewhere that the early Wittgenstein does not propound any philosophical doctrines (Diamond 1991: 182), and that talk of ‘what shows itself’ has in the end ‘to be let go of and honestly taken to be real nonsense’ (ibid: 181–2).

⁶ I avoid Ricketts’s and Goldfarb’s label ‘the resolute reading,’ because I reject its implication that every alternative to this line of interpretation commits one to what Goldfarb has called an ‘irresolute view of Tractarian nonsense’.

⁷ I am greatly indebted to Peter Hacker for inaugurating debate on the historical plausibility of the New Reading (See Hacker 2000). While I am broadly in sympathy with the general morals, as well as and many of the details, of Hacker’s insightful paper, I differ from him on points of emphasis: I focus on analysis, rather than the say/show distinction, and I concentrate on Wittgenstein’s later retractions of Tractarian positions, rather than his apparent continued adherence to some of them. Inevitably, our discussions draw on the same passages at several points.

⁸ Wittgenstein 1981. I begin with the Ogden-Ramsey translation, despite its many problems, because, since Wittgenstein had a hand in it, it has something of the character of a primary text.

⁹ Michael Kremer made this suggestion in his 2001. See especially: 64–5.

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Conant prefers to gloss ‘Lehrbuch’ as ‘catechism’ or ‘doctrinal text’ (see Conant 1992: 155). I am grateful to Jamie Tappenden for drawing these points to my attention.

¹¹ Warren Goldfarb suggests that this might actually be the method of the Tractatus (Goldfarb 1997: 70), but Wittgenstein’s use of the subjunctive mood (‘wäre’) at 6.53, together with the qualification ‘strictly,’ and the reference to saying what can be said—i.e. the propositions of natural science—suggest otherwise. (For Conant’s and Diamond’s agreement with me on this point see Diamond 2000: 155, Conant 1989a: 273, fn. 10).

¹² Letter to Russell of 18 August 1919. He goes on to describe this theory as ‘the cardinal problem of philosophy’ (CL, 124).

¹³ Propositions, recall, are facts (3.12 and 3.14), and facts cannot be named (3.144).

¹⁴ See Hacker 2000: 356.

¹⁵ Diamond has drawn attention to a closely related form of nonsense claim, namely: ‘that p is true, all right, but not sayable; it is rather shown by the fact that q’. To commit oneself to claims of this form is to be guilty of what Diamond has termed ‘chickening out.’ (See Diamond 1991: 181 & 194).

¹⁶ This last formulation is closely related to Adrian Moore’s suggestion that ‘A is shown that p’ should be analysed as ‘A has ineffable knowledge, and when an attempt is made to put what A knows into words, the result is: p’. See Moore 1997: 156–7.

¹⁷ I am indebted to conversations with Peter Sullivan on this point.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Kremer 2001: 64.

¹⁹ See, e.g., MN: 112, NB: 113, and CL: 47–51.

²⁰ One can take the view that certain of the Tractatus’s propositions are intended somehow to exhibit their own incoherence without maintaining that all the propositions in what New Readers recognize as the ‘body’ of the work function in this way. So one can take 6.54 at face value without subscribing to the New Reading: one only has to interpret the scope of ‘my propositions’ at 6.54 more narrowly than New Readers do. It is important to realize that since New Readers exclude the ‘frame’ from what is supposed to be nonsense, all sides agree that the scope of ‘my propositions’ at 6.54 must be restricted in some way.

²¹ Kremer acknowledges the availability of this move for the New Reading (Kremer 2001: 61), but himself prefers to discern a ‘deeper sense’ in which the Tractatus is concerned to communicate a truth.

²² I am grateful to Jamie Tappenden for alerting me to Conant’s change of position.

²³ For an account of the broader philosophical significance of this criticism see Proops 1997.

²⁴ Hacker points out that Diamond herself accepts a number of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Frege and Russell as correct. See Hacker 2000: 361.

²⁵ Conant, for example, does not indicate that he himself falls within the scope of his own criticism when he says ‘The distinction between what is part of the frame and what is part of the body of the work is not, as some commentators have thought, simply a function of

where in the work a remark occurs' (Conant 2000: 216, fn. 102).

²⁶ Thus Conant again falls within the scope of his own criticism when he says that 'Commentators fail to notice that what Wittgenstein says at 6.54 is not 'all of my sentences are nonsensical' (Conant 2000: 216, fn. 102). But, again, there is no acknowledgement of this fact.

²⁷ In her 1991: 19, and 2000.

²⁸ The passage is not mentioned by Hacker.

²⁹ As a rough dating this seems reasonable. A similar criticism is alluded to by Ambrose and MacDonald in notes of a lecture which, as we shall see in section 6, can be dated to February 1933 (Wittgenstein 1989: 11).

³⁰ See the excerpt from Moore's notes of Wittgenstein's lectures from 10 February, 1933, quoted in section 6 below.

³¹ The context fixes the Tractatus as Wittgenstein's intended referent.

³² G. E. Moore 'Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930–33' collected in PO: 46–114. Moore makes these remarks in his footnote on page 47.

³³ Moore mentions that '[Wittgenstein had described 'Some Remarks' as 'weak' in 1933] and since 1945 [had] spoken of [it] to [him] in a still more disparaging manner, saying something to the effect that, when he wrote it, he was getting new ideas about which he was still confused, and that he did not think it deserved any attention.' (Moore is referring accurately to Wittgenstein's letter to the editor of Mind, 27 May, 1933, PO: 156–7). This suggests that Wittgenstein may have decided not to deliver the paper simply because his ideas were at the time still in flux.

³⁴ Theses is published as Appendix B in WVC. For a discussion of Waismann's plans for this work, see Brian McGuinness's editorial preface to WVC: 22.

³⁵ McGuinness's suggestion of 5.55 as the source of this remark seems plausible, since part of it runs: 'Since we cannot give the number of names with different meanings, we cannot give the composition of the elementary proposition'.

³⁶ Wittgenstein may be referring to a lost predecessor of the Prototractatus—the one 'written in pencil on loose sheets of paper', mentioned in his letter to Russell of 22 October, 1915.

³⁷ Cf. Tractatus 5.551.

³⁸ See the passages from ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 39 & 40, quoted in section 6 below. See also PG II, § 8: 268, quoted in section 5, which, as I argue there, refers to the Tractatus.

³⁹ Since Wittgenstein says he broke away from his mistaken view ‘only in recent years,’ he must have first subscribed to it quite some time before. But if so, it is overwhelmingly likely the book ‘pervaded’ by the mistake in question is the Tractatus, rather than the Philosophical Remarks, which Wittgenstein began in 1929 but did not publish in his lifetime.

⁴⁰ See the parenthetical remark at Tractatus 5.551.

⁴¹ Since in order to be semantically simple a name does not have to be simple simpliciter (cf. MN: 110), I take it this should read ‘names’.

⁴² This remark provides some unambiguous support for Peter Hacker’s claim that Wittgenstein continued to adhere to many of the Tractatus’s positions in the years immediately following its publication. See Hacker 2000, passim.

⁴³ Cf. 5. 134.

⁴⁴ Wittgenstein introduces this remark two paragraphs after quoting from Tractatus 2.1512–2.15121.

⁴⁵ Cf. 1.21, 5.1314–5.135, 6.3751.

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein must mean that an elementary proposition is one that is shown in the final analysis to contain no logical constants.

⁴⁷ Incidentally, Wittgenstein’s continued adherence in 1930 to a conception of elementary propositions as the ultimate products of analysis is one thing that may explain his later dissatisfaction with ‘Some Remarks’.

⁴⁸ PO: 50.

⁴⁹ The Roman numerals refer to the various groups of Moore’s notes. For details see PO: 50

⁵⁰ Cf. 5.553–5.5541.

⁵¹ For further corroboration see Wittgenstein 1989: 11, where similar points are recorded.

⁵² Cf. NB: 49.

⁵³ Cambridge University, G. E. Moore Archive, catalogue reference: ADD 8875, 10/7/7. Written at the beginning of this manuscript book, in Moore’s hand, is: ‘Wittgenstein[:]
Mich[aelmas] Term 1932 from Nov[ember] and Lent [Term] (fr[om] 48) to Feb[ruary]

17, 1933’.

⁵⁴ The parenthetical remark is in slightly lighter pencil and may be Moore’s interpolation.

⁵⁵ The annotation ‘(4.52?)’ is added here in parentheses, apparently by Moore.

⁵⁶ For one suggestion see 3.24.

⁵⁷ Wittgenstein’s subsequent dissatisfaction seems to be connected with his rejection of actual infinities. See LK: 119.

⁵⁸ I place conjectural decipherings of Moore’s handwriting in braces.

⁵⁹ Here and in other places where Wittgenstein says ‘I and Russell’, I have supplied the needed emendation.

⁶⁰ I take it this is the point that Russell got right.

⁶¹ Floyd 1998: 106, fn. 9. (Floyd’s footnote is mis-numbered. It relates to the first sentence of page 87).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Note that Wittgenstein still takes the notion of a ‘final analysis’ to make sense as late as 1930. See the passage from WVC: 73–74 that I quote in the section on the Waismann notes.

⁶⁴ See PO: 87–88, and the passages from pp. 88 and 89–90 of ADD 8875, 10/7/7, quoted in section 6.

⁶⁵ For Wittgenstein’s early disquiet on this point see Notebooks, NB: 61.

⁶⁶ This is a thumbnail sketch of the reasoning behind Wittgenstein’s position. I intend to elaborate these points in a future paper.

⁶⁷ See the passages from ADD 8875, 10/7/7: 84 and 89–90, and the related passage from Wittgenstein 1989, quoted above.

⁶⁸ I take it that when in his later work Wittgenstein blames our inclination to make certain remarks on our being in the grip of a ‘picture’, he takes these remarks to be nonsense. Unfortunately, I do not have space to establish this point here.

⁶⁹ Conant is explicit that he thinks the picture theory is supposed to fall apart in the very attempt to formulate it (Conant 1989a: 274, fn. 16). As we have seen, however, this is one of the views that Wittgenstein later seems to treat as involving a substantive error (cf. PG: 212).

⁷⁰ I am grateful to Jim Joyce, Stephen Everson, John Koethe, Ian Rumfitt, Sadia Abbas, Adam Morton, Laura Schroeter, Peter Gibbard, Charles Goodman, Thomas Hofweber, Charles Travis and Michael Potter for comments, discussion and encouragement. Special thanks Jamie Tappenden and Peter Sullivan for reading numerous drafts and providing generous comments with each reading. The paper also benefited greatly from the comments of an anonymous referee. My thanks to Ms Kathleen Cann of the Cambridge University Library Manuscripts Department for assistance with Moore's notes. This work was supported by a University of Michigan Rackham Summer Fellowship and Grant.