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For Cora
early = Tractatus). It is worth noting in this connection that the predecessor version of §133 in The Big Typescript (p. 316) is missing the last sentence (about there not being a philosophical method, but rather different methods). Yet most of §133 is in The Big Typescript, and is clearly concerned with drawing contrasts between the author (i.e., Middle Wittgenstein) and Early Wittgenstein. This nicely brings out one aspect of the way in which the break with the Tractatus was a graduated one. Here we see two crucial steps coming one after the other. Middle Wittgenstein (who still thought there was one method) thought that Early Wittgenstein had been confused (in thinking that it was possible to solve all the problems at once by solving them in essentials). Yet Later Wittgenstein (who thinks there can only be methods) thinks Middle Wittgenstein is still confused in his criticisms of Early (i.e., he has unwittingly preserved an essential feature of the metaphysics of the Tractatus). This shows how, as a matter of historical fact, the process of purging himself of the unwitting commitments is one that unfolded for Wittgenstein, over the course of his own philosophical development, piecemeal. A proper treatment of this topic would require another essay at least as long as this one.

137. This essay is indebted to several decades of lengthy and lively long-distance telephone conversations with Cora Diamond (including some very helpful recent ones), to several years of less lengthy but equally lively short-distance conversations with Michael Kremer, and to several of Peter Sullivan’s recent writings and several short but stimulating conversations with him about them. It is indebted to Martin Gustafsson and to Martin Stone for comments on a previous draft, to Alois Pichler for several corrections, to Judy Feldmann at MIT Press, and to Alice Crary for enormous forbearance and assistance in her capacity as editor. Finally, It would not exist but for the encouragement and patience of my wife, Lisa Van Alstyne, who had to live in uncomfortably close proximity to the conditions of its gestation and birth.

2 The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy

Michael Kremer

One of Cora Diamond’s most significant and lasting achievements is a reorientation of the study of Wittgenstein. In particular, her seminal paper, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” has done much both to revive interest in Wittgenstein’s early work and to reshape our way of reading and thinking about that work. Sparked in large measure by Diamond’s writings, a scholarly debate has arisen over the proper interpretation of the Tractatus. This essay makes a small contribution to that ongoing debate—entering on the side of Diamond, as is, perhaps, appropriate in a Festschrift.1

Prior to the publication of “Throwing Away the Ladder,” the dominant interpretation of the Tractatus was some variant of what is sometimes called the “ineffability” reading. This reading is enshrined in numerous textbooks, encyclopedia articles, and other secondary sources. 2 For example, in the Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, we are told that the Tractatus “presents a logical atomist picture of language and reality.” It teaches “deep truths about [the] nature of reality and representation.” But, these truths “cannot properly be said but can only be shown. Indeed Wittgenstein claimed that pointing to this distinction was central to his book. And he embraced the paradoxical conclusion that most of the Tractatus itself is, strictly, nonsense. He also held that other important things can also be shown but not said, for example, about there being a certain truth in solipsism and about the nature of value.”3

Diamond rejects this picture, and especially the use made in it of the idea of inef fable truths, which cannot be expressed in language, but can be “shown,” and which the Tractatus in some way conveys. This view, she says, is “chickening out.” It refuses to take at face value Wittgenstein’s claim that “philosophy is not a theory but an activity” and that “the result of philosophy is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions,’ but to make propositions clear.” It does not take seriously Wittgenstein’s demand that we recognize his propositions as nonsense, and so throw them away, as a ladder that we have climbed up and no longer need. The view itself “dissolves into incoherence
when pushed slightly, since to say such things as “that language and reality share a common logical form, cannot be said but can only be shown” is to say the very thing that one claims to be unsayable.

For Diamond: “What counts as not chickening out is then this, roughly: to throw the ladder away is, among other things, to throw away in the end the attempt to take seriously the language of ‘features of reality.’ To read Wittgenstein himself as not chickening out is to say that it is not, not really, his view that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but show themselves.”7 As Diamond’s philosophical ally James Conant puts it: “the idea that nonsensical sentences can embody a content comes apart on us. And it is meant to. The doctrine of ineffable content represents one of the rungs of the ladder the reader of the Tractatus must ascend and surmount—and (along with the rest of the ladder of which it forms an integral part), in the end, throw away, . . . to genuinely throw away the whole of the ladder means completely relinquishing the idea of an ‘it’ that cannot be put into words but can still show itself. This idea also turns out to be nonsense.”8

Conant and Diamond have developed an alternative approach to reading the Tractatus, one which avoids “chickening out” and throws away “the whole of the ladder.” This reading emphasizes Wittgenstein’s adherence to the context principle, that words have meaning only in the context of a sentence, and the corresponding idea of non-sense as arising only because some words have not been given a meaning in the context in which they occur.9 On this reading, the propositions of the Tractatus are recognized as nonsense. But this is not the result of the application of some theory or criterion of meaningfulness presented in the book to the book itself—a paradoxical view that seems to require that the theory, while nonsensical, remains in some sense true, and hence leads to the postulation of ineffable but graspable truths that can be shown but not said. Rather, the process of working through the ostensible theory of the book is simply a process in which the illusion of sense possessed by that theory dissolves. The resulting disillusionment is all the insight the Tractatus hopes to convey. And, for both Diamond and Conant, one of the main illusions that the Tractatus means to dispel is the idea of “ineffable content,” of truths that can be shown but not said.

In their early papers, as exemplified by the quotations above, Diamond and Conant make use of strong rhetoric in their effort to dethrone the ineffability reading of the Tractatus. This has sometimes misled critics into thinking (1) that on their view every proposition of the Tractatus is consigned irredeemably to the category of “nonsense” and (2) that in particular there is no room on their view for any distinction between saying and showing. Critics then seize on the apparent conflict with (1) their apparent reliance on certain passages of the Tractatus in arguing for their interpretation and (2) their willingness to talk of what the Tractatus “shows.” However, it is clear from much of their later work that (1”) on their view at least some propositions of the Tractatus can be redeemed as making sense, once we have learned the lessons of the Tractatus, and in particular (2”) there is an innocent version of the saying/showing distinction that can be applied to make sense of at least some uses of that distinction in the Tractatus. (1”) is actually a necessary consequence of the account of philosophical confusion and the resulting philosophical nonsense, an account inspired by Diamond and Conant, which I develop below. On this account, philosophical nonsense derives from a kind of equivocation in which we try to make one word conform to two uses at once. Once we become aware of this confusion, we can decide to use the word in one of these two senses. Our propositions, so understood, will then make sense and may even be true—but they will be incapable of doing the philosophical work that we earlier confusedly wanted them to do. I will argue below that (2”) is merely an instance of this general point; but it is important to be clear to begin with that the idea rejected by the resolute reading is that of “it” which can be shown but cannot be said, but which nonetheless has something like the structure of a proposition, a truth. Rejecting this idea need not mean rejecting all talk of “showing” as contrasted with “saying.”

Diamond and Conant’s interpretation of the Tractatus has been dubbed “resolute” by Thomas Ricketts. This label reflects the idea that to “chicken out” is to unstably waffle between two views—the view that the Tractatus presents true metaphysical doctrines, and the view that the propositions of the Tractatus are nonsense. In contrast, the “resolute” reading of Conant and Diamond holds firmly to the view that the propositions of the Tractatus are simple nonsense and refuses to countenance the idea of inexpressibly true theories or doctrines. Proponents of the resolute reading (myself included) have also taken to labeling the ineffability reading “irresolute,” to mark the contrast between the two views—the view that the Tractatus presents true metaphysical doctrines, and the view that the propositions of the Tractatus are nonsense. In contrast, the “resolute” reading of Conant and Diamond holds firmly to the view that the propositions of the Tractatus are simple nonsense and refuses to countenance the idea of inexpressibly true theories or doctrines. Proponents of the resolute reading (myself included) have also taken to labeling the ineffability reading “irresolute,” to mark the waffling, oscillating character they attribute to the view. In this essay, however, I will speak in terms of “ineffability” and “resolute” readings, in the hope that this will be acceptable to both the so-labeled camps.

In earlier work, I have made an attempt to contribute to the resolute reading of the Tractatus. In “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” I sketched an answer to one outstanding question facing the resolute reading: why, if the Tractatus consists entirely of nonsense, would Wittgenstein bother to write such a book at all? My response built on Wittgenstein’s well-known remark that the point of the book was ethical. I argued that the Tractatus aims to relieve us of a felt need for justification of our thoughts, our words, and our lives “by revealing that all such justificatory talk is in the end meaningless nonsense,” made up of sentences that “cannot serve the purpose for which
they are intended," since "any system of ethical or logical propositions will itself stand
in need of justification." I suggested that the idea of an ineffable proposition-like
content that can nonetheless be "shown" if not "said" tempts us as a way in which we
may "have our justificatory cake and eat it too." Seeking a source of justification
that cannot itself be put into question, we hit on the idea of an "internal" justifica-
tion, which is "present unspeakably in what I do and what I say." Thus we seek "some-
thing sufficiently like a proposition to serve as a justification, an answer to a question,
, yet sufficiently different from a proposition to need no further justification, to raise
no further questions in turn." It is this that the doctrine of "truths" that can be
"shown" but not said seems to provide. But, by unmasking the idea of such ineffable
content as itself nonsensical, I argued, the Tractatus "reveals [to us in the end that this
temptation is founded on illusion, confusion, and nonsense. Only by rejecting
the demand for justification, and thus the temptation to satisfy that demand in the
realm of the 'shown,' can we resolve our difficulties."15

My interpretation of the ethical point of the Tractatus turns on the "irresolute" char-
acter of the ineffability reading. The central idea of the ineffability reading, that there
are truths that are "shown" but cannot be said, involves an unstable combination of
two notions: the notion of a truth, something with the structure of a proposition, and
the notion of an insight that is beyond expressing in propositions. Ineffability readers
sometimes recognize the incoherence of this idea, but nonetheless do not hesitate to
saddle the Tractatus with it—after all, they say, the book was later recognized by
Wittgenstein as defective. Resolute readers, on the other hand, see this idea as a tem-
peration that the Tractatus presents to its readers only to show them in the end its inco-
herence. Resolute readers, therefore, must look elsewhere for the difficulties that
Wittgenstein eventually came to see in his early work.16

The resolute reading of the Tractatus has not gone unanswered. Defenders of the
ineffability reading, and others, have been quick to respond to detailed critiques of the
resolute interpretation.17 Their criticisms have taken a number of different forms,
often combined in a single article. The resolute reading is argued to be internally inco-
herent, inconsistent with the text of the Tractatus, out of line with the descriptions of
the Tractatus given by those who knew Wittgenstein best, refuted by what Wittgen-
stein wrote about the book in his pre-Tractatus journals, looking forward, or in his
later work, looking back. Each such argument deserves its own response—with the
result that a list of criticisms contained in a single article might require a whole list
of articles in reply. This essay will take up only one of these many criticisms—but one
that is especially significant because it is based on what Wittgenstein said about the
Tractatus shortly after its completion.

Wittgenstein completed the Tractatus in the summer of 1918, while on leave from
his service in the Austrian army.19 By early 1919, he found himself in an Italian
prisoner of war camp, and from there he was able to send a copy of his manuscript to
Bertrand Russell, who apparently received the book sometime in late June or early
July, 1919.19 By mid-August, Russell had read the manuscript and concluded that it
was "of first-class importance." He wrote to Wittgenstein on August 13, commenting:
"I have now read your book twice carefully.—There are still points I don't under-
stand—some of them important ones—I send you some queries on separate sheets. I
am convinced you are right in your main contention, that logical proposition[s] are
tautologies, which are not true in the sense that substantial proposition[s] are true."20
Wittgenstein replied on August 19—roughly one year after completing work on the
Tractatus: "I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which
the whole business of logical proposition[s] is only a corollary. The main point is the
theory of what can be expressed [gesagt] by proposition[s]—i.e. by language—and
what cannot be expressed by proposition[s]: only shown [gezeigt]: which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of
philosophy."21 Wittgenstein went on to address some of Russell's queries, in two cases
apparently applying the "theory of what can be expressed . . . by propositions . . . and
what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown" in constructing his
replies.22

Wittgenstein's insistence that this "theory" is the "main point" of his book is repea-
tedly cited by ineffabilist readers in support of their interpretation.23 Critics of the res-
olute reading have also seized on this passage as proving that the ineffability reading
accurately captures Wittgenstein's own understanding of the book. P. M. S. Hacker,
noting both Wittgenstein's insistence on the importance of the "theory" of saying and
showing and Wittgenstein's apparent use of this theory in responding to Russell's
queries, writes that "It is implausible to suppose that he was pulling Russell's leg and
that the real point of the book is that there is nothing at all to be shown."24 Ian Proops
further argues that Wittgenstein's talk of a "theory" of the expressible and the in ex-
pressible gives "reason to doubt that 4.112 ['philosophy is not a theory but an activ-
ity'] could be intended to refer to philosophy as embodied in the Tractatus."25 And
John Koethe sees the letter as providing "straightforward" and "decisive" evidence
against the resolute reading.26

Nonetheless, I will argue, the evidence of the Russell letter, not only does not con-
ict with the resolute reading, it actually supports it. In "The Purpose of Tractarian
Nonsense," I already sketched such a response,27 albeit one that has not proved con-
vincing (except to the already converted). While admitting that Wittgenstein calls the
“theory” of what can be said and what can only be shown his “main contention,” I focused on the fact that he also describes this theory as the “cardinal problem of philosophy.” I linked this description to the Tractatus’s claim to have solved the “problems of philosophy” by showing that “the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language,” and argued that “if the showing/saying distinction is a ‘problem of philosophy,’ the Tractatus must have ‘solved’ it by showing how it ‘rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language,’” and that “if it is the ‘cardinal’ problem of philosophy, then we will find the key to the resolution of all the problems of philosophy in its dissolution.”

This response has not met with universal approbation, to say the least. In fact, both responses to it that I am aware of have been dismissive. John Koethe considers it “quite strained,” arguing that “the problems of philosophy alluded to in the Preface are most naturally taken to be those the Tractatus actually discusses, including realism, solipsism, epistemology, causality, induction, synthetic a priori knowledge, and ethics. These are to be dissolved by a proper understanding of ‘the logic of our language’ (which includes the showing/saying distinction) the book is meant to instill in us.” Peter Sullivan finds my suggestion more mysterious than strained: “I cannot explain what attracts Kremer to this wholly unpersuasive juxtaposition of unconnected texts, and I think it better simply to discount the argument.” In light of this reception, perhaps a more fully spelled-out defense of my suggestion is in order; such is the task I have set myself in this essay. I will try to show, contra Sullivan, that the texts I have juxtaposed are not simply unconnected, and contra Koethe that the showing/saying distinction as a “problem of philosophy” belongs among the “problems of philosophy” alluded to in the preface and actually discussed in the Tractatus.

My reading of Wittgenstein’s letter to Russell puts great emphasis on his description of the showing/saying distinction as a “problem of philosophy.” Sullivan thinks that linking this to Wittgenstein’s claim in the preface to have solved the “problems of philosophy” is unmotivated and unpersuasive. Yet it must be admitted that there is something curious in the description of a philosophical “theory” as a “problem.” Moreover, Wittgenstein uses the phrase “the cardinal problem of philosophy” in a letter to Russell, the author of The Problems of Philosophy, a work that, as Russell knew, Wittgenstein hated. Wittgenstein surely would have expected Russell to take note of his claim to have solved “the problems of philosophy,” and would therefore have expected the phrase “cardinal problem of philosophy” to have some resonance for Russell, especially after his reading of the Tractatus. Yet most authors who cite this passage do not mention Wittgenstein’s use of “problem” at all. But some ineffabilist readers do try to account for it. The best attempt I know of is that of David Stern:

The ‘cardinal problem of philosophy’ is the question of the limits and nature of language, the question of what, in general, can be said, and what can only be shown. In the Preface to the Tractatus, Wittgenstein expressed his belief that he had arrived at the definitive ‘final solution’ to the problems of philosophy. That confidence was based on his conviction that the book makes clear the limits of language by sharply demarcating what can be said—namely, factual assertion—and placing all philosophical abut such matters as the nature of self and world, aesthetics, morality, or religion on the other side of the limit. The demarcation depends on a conception of language and logic that was not so much defended as presented in the text of the Tractatus, where Wittgenstein aims at an insight that lies beyond assertion, argument, or theory formation. For that reason, my exposition of the Tractatus begins with a discussion of the crucial role of insight in the picture theory. As the very use of the term “picture theory” suggests, however, Wittgenstein’s insistence that all philosophical theories are nonsense was subverted by his own dependence on a distinction between plain nonsense, which can be dismissed, and important nonsense, which points to philosophical insights that cannot be put into words. The concept of showing is supposed to bridge the gap: while any attempt to state the picture theory as though it were an empirical fact must lead to nonsense, the truth of the theory can be shown by drawing the reader’s attention to the structure of certain sentences.

Stern here treats the “cardinal problem” as a straightforward philosophical question; the problem is to demarcate the limits of what can be said. The solution to this is to be given in the “picture theory” and the accompanying “concept of showing.” The difficulty here is that Stern’s response seems to make “the theory of what can be expressed . . . by propositions . . . and what can not be expressed by propositions, but only shown” into the solution of the cardinal problem of philosophy rather than explaining its status as the cardinal problem of philosophy.

Can we do better? In order to answer this question, I want to spend some time unpacking the phrase “the cardinal problem of philosophy.” I begin with “philosophy.” In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein uses “philosophy” in two senses—on the one hand, positively, to refer to the activity that the Tractatus itself inculcates, and on the other hand, negatively, to refer to the activities of philosophers in general, which are something like an illness for which the philosophy of the Tractatus is something like a cure. Of the former, Wittgenstein says that it “is not one of the natural sciences,” that it is “not a theory but an activity,” whose object is “the logical clarification of thoughts” and whose result is “not a number of ‘philosophical propositions,’ but to make propositions clear.” Philosophy in this sense is to “limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable” by saying clearly all that can be said clearly. In doing so, however, philosophy in this sense will unmask the pretensions of philosophy in the second, negative, sense, with its multifarious “problems.”

Traditional philosophy, with its problems and questions, consists for the most part of simple nonsense, according to the Tractatus. Wittgenstein states in the preface that
the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language." He reiterates this claim at 4.003, connecting it to the nonsensicality of traditional philosophy:

Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsense. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their nonsensicality. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language. . . .

And so it is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really no problems. 40

But in what way do philosophers fail to "understand the logic of our language," and how does this result in nonsense? To answer this we need to turn to Wittgenstein's distinction between sign and symbol.

Wittgenstein tells us that "the sign is the part of the symbol perceptible by the senses." 41 Conversely, the symbol is the linguistic sign that has been put to use in propositions with sense, and so endowed with a meaning. "An expression [symbol] has meaning only in the context of a proposition." 42 In order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant use [sinnvollen Gebrauch, use with sense].

Nonsense, then, is the result of concatenating signs that do not have a determinate meaning: "Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts." 43 To put in another way, in nonsense we have signs in which we cannot recognize any symbol. How does this come about?

Wittgenstein's answer is, on the surface, surprising: often, we fail to recognize the symbol in the sign because there are too many ways in which we might do so. Since the symbol is simply the sign put to some use, "Two different symbols can . . . have the sign . . . in common—they then signify in different ways." 44 James Conant has dubbed the resulting confusion "cross-category equivocation." Wittgenstein traces the problems of philosophy to this root:

In the language of ordinary life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways—and therefore belongs to two different symbols—or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition.

Thus the word "is" appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence; "to exist" as an intransitive verb like "to go"; "identical" as an adjective; we speak of something but also of the fact of something happening . . . .

Thus there easily arise the most fundamental confusions (of which the whole of philosophy is full).

In order to avoid these errors, we must employ a symbolism which excludes them, by not applying the same sign in different symbols and by not applying signs in the same way which signify in different ways. 45

Thus philosophical nonsense, according to Wittgenstein, typically involves an equivocal sign, which is part of two symbols. The philosopher generates problems by using the sign simultaneously in two incompatible ways. The solution of the philosopher's puzzlement consists in distinguishing among the meanings his words might have. This can be accomplished by introducing a notation within which the distinct symbols involved are associated with distinct signs. Once such distinctions have been made and such symbols introduced, the philosopher can be asked to choose which meaning he intends his signs to have. Confronting this choice, he will see that he actually confusedly intended his signs to have both meanings at once and that it was this confused intention that resulted in his philosophical puzzlement. 47

Wittgenstein embraced this conception of the source, and resolution, of the problems of philosophy throughout his career. 46 In his lectures at Cambridge in 1930, he is recorded as saying: "When a philosophical problem is elucidated, some confusion of expression is always exposed. For example 2 x 2 is four, the door is brown. (Remember the trouble the word 'is' has given to philosophers.) The confusion is resolved by writing = for the first phrase and ε for the second." 48 One of Wittgenstein's characteristic examples of a problem of philosophy is Augustine's puzzlement about time in the Confessions. In the Blue Book (1933–34) he offers this analysis:

Consider as an example the question "What is time?" as Saint Augustine and others have asked it . . . it is the grammar of the word "time" which puzzles us. . . . Now the puzzlement about the grammar of the word "time" arises from what one might call apparent contradictions in that grammar.

It was such a "contradiction" which puzzled Saint Augustine when he argued: How is it possible that one should measure time? For the past can't be measured, as it is gone by; and the future can't be measured because it has not yet come. And the present can't be measured for it has no extension.

The contradiction which here seems to arise could be called a conflict between two different usages of a word, in this case the word "measure." Augustine, we might say, thinks of the process of measuring a length: say, the distance between two marks on a travelling band which passes us, and of which we can only see a tiny bit (the present) in front of us. Solving this puzzle will consist in comparing what we mean by "measurement" (the grammar of the word "measurement") when applied to a distance on a travelling band with the grammar of that word when applied to time. The problem may seem simple, but its extreme difficulty is due to the fascination which the analogy between two similar structures in our language can exert on us. (It is helpful here to remember that it is sometimes almost impossible for a child to believe that one word can have two meanings.)

Here a philosophical problem arises from the fact that the word "measurement" is used in two senses—the same sign is part of two distinct symbols. We are thus led to
think of the "measurement" of time as somehow like the measurement of a length, a
process which itself takes place in time. To remove the problem, we need to compare
the two uses of "measure." We may be helped in this by the introduction of distinct
signs for the distinct symbols.

In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein adds to his remark that "most propositions and
questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical" the comment: "All philosophy is 'Critique of language' (but not at all in
Mauthner's sense)." Russell's merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form
of the proposition need not be its real form." Wittgenstein's reference here appears to
be to Russell's theory of descriptions. In light of 4.002, which emphasizes that "lan-
guage disguises the thought; so that from the external form of the clothes one cannot
infer the form of the thought they clothe," one might take Wittgenstein's compliment
to Russell to refer simply to the idea that the true, more complex, logical form of an
apparent subject-predicate sentence with a definite description in the subject place
can be revealed in Russell's logical notation. However, if we reflect on Russell's argu-
ment in "On Denoting," we can see a direct link to Wittgenstein's conception of philo-
sophical problems as arising from "the fact that we do not understand the logic of our
language" because "in the language of everyday life it very often happens that the
same word... belongs to two different symbols."54

Russell proposes in "On Denoting" that "a logical theory may be tested by its cap-
acity for dealing with puzzles" and presents three such puzzles that his theory of descrip-
tions is supposed to solve: a puzzle about informative identity, a puzzle about the
law of the excluded middle, and a puzzle about nonexistence. What is most signifi-
cant for our purposes is that Russell's solutions to the first two of these puzzles turn not
just on revealing a hidden logical form in the sentences of ordinary language, but on
revealing a hidden structural equivocation therein. Thus consider the second puzzle,
concerning the law of the excluded middle. Starting from consideration of the sentence

(A) Either the King of France is bald or the King of France is not bald

we seem to be driven into a contradiction. For on the one hand, (A) is an instance of
the law of excluded middle, and so must be true. On the other hand, if (A) is true, then either

(B) The King of France is bald

or

(C) The King of France is not bald

must be true. Searching through the bald men, we fail to find the King of France. So
we conclude that (B) is false. This implies that (C) is true. On the other hand, search-

ing through the nonbald men, we also fail to find the King of France. This leads us
to conclude that (C) is false, and so (B) is true. Hence our contradiction.

As is well known, Russell solves this puzzle by pointing to an ambiguity in (C), and
so also in (A). (C) can be read as either

(C1) The King of France is (not bald),
or

(C2) It is not the case that (the King of France is bald).

The difference between (C1) and (C2) is made explicit using Russell's logical notation:
(C1) comes out as

(C1') (3x)(y)((Ky=x=y) • ~By) (There is exactly one King of France, and he isn't
bald),

while (C2) comes out as

(C2') ~(3x)(y)((Ky=x=y) • By) (It is not the case that there is exactly one King of
France, and he's bald).

Here (C2) is the negation of (B), which is represented formally as

(B') (3x)(y)((Ky=x=y) • By) (There is exactly one King of France, and he's bald).

Given this disambiguation of (C), we can see that (A) is ambiguous as well, between

(A1) (B) or (C1),

and

(A2) (B) or (C2) (that is (B) or not-(B)).

(A1) does imply that there is a present king of France, and that he is both bald and
nonbald; so (A1) is contradictory. But there is no need to assert (A1) as it is not an
instance of the law of the excluded middle. On the other hand, (A2) is an instance of
the law of the excluded middle, but there is no difficulty in asserting it as true, since
it implies neither that the King of France exists, nor that he is either bald or nonbald.

From Wittgenstein's point of view, what Russell has pointed out is that in both (A)
and (C) we have cases in which the same (propositional) sign belongs to two differ-
ent symbols (different propositions). When properly analyzed, the two readings of (C)
(and so of [A]) have different logical form. Russell suggests, in introducing the puzzle,
that "Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he [the King of
France] wears a wig." This conclusion is dispelled by logical analysis, which reveals
the equivocation on which it turns. Anyone who holds onto the problem and continues to remain puzzled by it must be intending (A), incoherently, as both (A1) and (A2), slipping between the two meanings at different stages of his argument, thereby failing to mean anything determinate by his words. Thus, (A), when seen as philosophically puzzling, is in fact not false, but nonsensical—it has no fixed sense.

Here we have a model of Wittgenstein’s account of philosophical problems as nonsense arising from the “misunderstanding of the logic of our language.” I believe that this model can be applied to many of Wittgenstein’s discussions of more serious philosophical problems in the *Tractatus*. For example, an interesting case can be made concerning Wittgenstein’s treatment of identity in the *Tractatus* and his accompanying dissolution of the problems concerned with Russell’s Axiom of Infinity.37 The claim that this case can be seen as the application of the model we have been discussing for the resolution of philosophical problems may be surprising. Nonetheless, I believe that it is correct. I plan to address this in detail in further work. But the basic idea can be spelled out briefly.58

The key point is that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein recognizes two uses of the identity sign, one to mark the intersubstitutability of expressions with the same meaning, as in the giving of definitions in *Principia Mathematica*, the other, in combination with quantifiers, to express counting, number, and the like, as in the use of “(x)(fy).”39 A confusion of these two uses of “=” can lead to the idea of identity as a relation between things. On the one hand, the use of identity in stating a “rule of substitution” allows us to place the identity sign between names, outside the scope of any quantifier. On the other hand, the use of identity in combination with quantified variables requires that the variables range over nonlinguistic objects, not signs. If we allow these two uses to slide together, we will come to think that “x = x” and “x = y” respectively express a property of x and a relation between x and y. This confused thought results in the formation of such things as “(x)x = x” and “(∃x)x = a,” which Wittgenstein dismisses as pseudo-propositions at 5.534; it is also at the heart of *Principia Mathematica*’s formulation of the Axiom of Infinity. For the Axiom of Infinity states that the result of adding one repeatedly to zero is always a nonempty class. Zero, in turn, is defined as the class whose only member is the empty class, and the empty class is defined as the class of all x such that x ≠ x. Similarly, one is defined to be the class of all unit classes, where a unit class is the class of all y such that y = x, for some fixed x. The first definition requires that x ≠ x, and so also x = x, express genuine properties of x, and the second requires that x = y expresses a genuine relation between x and y.40 This is why clarification of the different meanings of identity can lead to the resolution of the problems surrounding the Axiom of Infinity—the very formulation of the axiom, for Wittgenstein, trades on the way that the sign “=” is part of more than one symbol.62

In response to these confusions, Wittgenstein offers a new notation. He dispenses with the second use of “=,” instead expressing “identity of the object by identity of the sign,” and “difference of the objects by difference of the signs.”63 Thus, for example, “(f(x)f = a) • (¬(f(x)f ≠ y))” says that only a is f.64 In this new notation, there is no longer a temptation to view “=” as expressing a relation between things; indeed supposed propositions like “(x)x = x” and “(∃x)x = a” have no counterparts in this notation.65 For in moving from the old notation to the new, uses of identity within the scope of quantifiers are best seen as indications for how to identify or distinguish the quantified variables. But this requires propositional functions other than identity within which the identified or distinguished variables can occur. For example, “(x)(y)(x = y • Ray)” would be replaced by “(x)Rx” (identifying the variables), whereas “(∃x)(∃y)(x ≠ y • Ray)” would be replaced by “(∃x)(∃y)Ray” (distinguishing the variables). But this pattern would have us replace “(x)x = x” by something like “(x),” and “(∃x)x = a” perhaps by something like “(∃a)a”—in both cases the result is not something for which we have fixed any meaning at all. Thus, if we accept this new notation, the puzzlement we may have felt over self-identity simply disappears along with the puzzling sign x = x.

Thus we see how Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* understood the problems of philosophy as resting on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language, and how he saw in this the key to their resolution. In the letter to Russell, however, Wittgenstein speaks of the cardinal problem of philosophy. Here we encounter an idea which was central in Wittgenstein’s early thinking, but which he gave up in his later philosophy. As Matthew Ostrow puts it, Wittgenstein’s early thought is dominated by the “governing idea of an essential confusion from which we can be essentially liberated.”66

In his pre-*Tractatus* journals, this theme recurs repeatedly. Wittgenstein speaks of “the whole philosophical problem,” “the main problem,” “the whole single great problem,” “his whole task,” “the great problem round which everything I write turns.”67 He seeks a “correct overview”68 that will allow him to see “that every problem is the main problem,”69 and so find an “extremely simple” solution to all my questions.70 He hopes to find the key to all his difficulties through discovering a single “liberating thought” or “liberating word” (erlösende Gedanke, erlösende Wort).71

Over the course of these journals, Wittgenstein offers a variety of formulations of his “single great problem”: “the logical identity of sign and thing signified,”72 “the general concept of a proposition,”73 “the principles of representing as such,”74 “explaining the nature of the proposition . . . giving the nature of all facts . . . giving the nature
of all being, and finally "is there an order in the world a priori, and if so what does it consist in?"

In my view, these are so many different ways of formulating the same problem: to give the general concept of a proposition would be at the same time to give the principles of representation as such, the form of logic and the world that provides the identity of sign and thing signified, the a priori structure of the world. It would be to fix the limits of that which can be said. The “one single great problem” is none other than that which Wittgenstein identifies as the task of the Tractatus: to “draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts.” See in this light, the “cardinal problem of philosophy” that Wittgenstein describes to Russell is yet another variation on the same theme: to distinguish that which can be expressed in propositions from that which cannot be so expressed, but only shown, is yet another way of trying to establish the limits of the expression of thought in language.

Wittgenstein was convinced at the time of writing the Tractatus that through solving this one great problem, all the problems of philosophy would disappear. We must be brought to see that “every problem is the main problem,” so that one “extremely simple” solution will suffice for all. As Matthew Ostrow has emphasized, this idea, unlike the general conception of the problems of philosophy and of their resolution discussed above, is one that Wittgenstein rejected in his later philosophy. Ostrow cites Philosophical Investigations §133: “Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem.” Ostrow sees here a rejection of Wittgenstein’s “Tractarian views,” a “deepening” of “his original insight.” But, I will argue, it is really a consequence of the Tractatus’s solution to the “cardinal problem of philosophy.” In dissolving this problem, we do not thereby solve all other problems. Rather, in revealing the “cardinal problem” to be an illusion, we at the same time show that the thought that all problems are solved in solving it is a part of that very illusion. Thus, if my argument is right, Ostrow has not identified here the real discontinuity between the thought of the Tractatus and that of the Investigations. Yet, as we shall see, the discontinuity is spelled out in the very remark Ostrow cites, Investigations §133.

Toward the end of his wartime journals, with his mind turning more and more to matters of religion, ethics, and the mystical, Wittgenstein expresses frustration at his inability to bring unity to his thinking. In a passage noted by both his biographers, he writes: “Colossal exertions in the last months. Have thought a great deal on every possible subject. But curiously I cannot establish the connection with my mathematical modes of thought.” The next day, however, he exclaims: “But the connection will be established! What can’t be said, can’t be said!” Neither Ray Monk nor Brian McGuinness mention this remark, but Monk tells us that: “the connection between Wittgenstein’s thought on logic and his reflections on the meaning of life was to be found in the distinction he had made earlier between saying and showing. Logical form, he had said, cannot be expressed within language, for it is the form of language itself; it makes itself manifest in language—it has to be shown. Similarly, ethical and religious truths, though inexpressible, manifest themselves in life.” Certainly, in the apparent tautology “what can’t be said, can’t be said,” Wittgenstein sees a way to unite his diverse thoughts on ethics and logic, mathematics and the mystical. The preface to the Tractatus tells us that the “whole meaning” of the book “could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Does this not require some positive way to delimit “what can be said” from that “whereof one cannot speak”? Don’t we then need a “straight solution” of the “cardinal problem” rather than its dissolution? Arent Monk and the other ineffectual readers right after all?

I will argue, to the contrary, that the connection Wittgenstein needs is made not through the distinction between saying and showing, in the form Monk appeals to here, but through its dissolution. This thought itself is part of the illusion that the Tractatus aims to dispel. To see this is to see in what way the “cardinal problem” is a problem of philosophy in precisely Wittgenstein’s sense. But if this is so, then there must be some sort of cross-categorial equivocation involved in “the theory of what can be expressed... by propositions... and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown.” Some sign used therein must be part of two distinct symbols, and the theory itself must require us to waffle between these two uses of the one sign. What might this equivocal sign be?

In a largely unsympathetic presentation of the Tractatus in general and the saying/showing distinction in particular, Graham Priest remarks: “the word ‘show’ in English has both a propositional use and a non-propositional use. In its propositional use, ‘show’ is followed by a that-clause (she showed that she could play cricket); in its non-propositional use it is followed by ‘what,’ ‘how,’ etc., or even a simple noun-phrase (she showed him the bat/how to use it/where he could put it, etc.). Priest clearly thinks that Wittgenstein himself is guilty of equivocation here, claiming that “Structures in the world and language show in both these senses.” But, alert to the importance of such equivocation in the formulation of the problems of philosophy, we can turn his observation to more sympathetic uses.

Of particular importance to us is the contrast between propositional “show” followed by a that-clause (“He showed me that the door was locked”) and nonpropositional “show” followed by “how” (“He showed me how to pick the lock”). A number of readers of the Tractatus, myself among them, have been drawn to the idea that
the Tractatus's talk of "showing" can be redeemed through an association with practical knowledge, knowledge-how rather than knowledge-that. In "The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense," I spoke of the Tractatus as "showing" us "a way of life." I argued that this use of "showing" need not be thrown away with the ladder of the Tractatus. What we have to discard is the thought that what is shown is "something like a proposition." But, I argued, if what is shown is practical knowledge, this "is not even the sort of thing we could be tempted to take for a proposition." In "To What Extent Is Solipsism A Truth?" I suggested further that "uses of 'showing' in the Tractatus may be two-sided. On the one hand, talk of showing can tempt us into the nonsensical illusion that we grasp a realm of super-facts beyond the reach of language. On the other hand, talk of showing can, innocently enough, direct us to the practical abilities and masteries that are part of our ongoing talking, thinking and living." But if talk of showing is "two-sided," given our account of the roots of philosophical problems, we should expect this two-sidedness itself to be part of what tempts us into philosophical difficulties and nonsensical illusions. Any awareness of "a sense that can be given to some of . . . uses of 'showing' [in the Tractatus] which does not degenerate into the incoherence of envisaging in the form of a fact that which we declare not to be a fact," can only be something that we arrive at after working through the Tractatus. It is only after we have seen through the difficulties, and the equivocation that is their source, that we can choose one of the two symbols expressed using the sign "show" and decide to use that sign as one symbol rather than the other.

How, though, might the fact that "showing" can have both a propositional and a practical use contribute to philosophical illusions and difficulties? Recall my suggestion in "The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense" that the doctrine of truths that cannot be said, but only shown, seems to fulfill a certain purpose: it provides an "internal" justification for our language, our thoughts, our lives. For this purpose, I argued, we "need something sufficiently like a proposition to serve as a justification, an answer to a question, yet sufficiently different from a proposition to need no further justification, to raise no further questions in turn"—an insight that can be shown, but not said—but an insight into a truth nonetheless. If we allow ourselves to use the word "show" in a way that trades on the fact that this one sign is part of two different symbols—"practical" showing and "propositional" showing—we may come to think we have a grip on just such an insight. For what is shown can't be said, we think, running in the grooves laid down by the use of "shows how," yet it is certainly something like a fact, we convince ourselves, running in the grooves laid down by the use of "shows that." And so we seem to have what we want.

This little story may seem hopelessly far-fetched, however. Has any philosopher really thought like that? I want to make this more plausible by considering one of the most subtle and persuasive presentations of the ineffabilist reading, Peter Geach's "Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein." Peter Sullivan rightly remarks that Geach's essay is "at once an inspiration and a startling horse" of Diamond's and points out that it is an early source of the idea of "connecting showing with practical knowledge." Geach argues that the saying/showing distinction has roots in Frege's philosophy of logic. He posts four theses, the first of which is: "Frege already held . . . that there are logical category-distinctions which will clearly show themselves in a well-constructed formalized language, but which cannot be properly asserted in language: the sentences in which we seek to convey them in the vernacular language are logically improper and admit of no transformation into well-formed formulas of symbolic logic. All the same, there is a test for these sentences having conveyed the intended distinctions—namely, that by their aid mastery of the formalized language is attainable." Geach's second thesis adds that "the category-distinctions in question are features both of verbal expressions and also of the reality our language is describing." Geach thinks this "notion of what comes out but cannot be asserted is almost irresistible, in spite of its paradoxical nature, when we reflect upon logic."

Geach here seems to commit himself to the view that there are inexpressible truths, truths about reality, language, and the features that they share. Peter Sullivan, however, has argued that it is unfair to impose this conclusion on Geach. Sullivan makes much of Geach's use of the term "features" here: "Wittgenstein, and those of his interpreters Kremer condemn as irresolute, typically talk of what is shown as certain features—features of a proposition, of state of affairs, of language, of reality, the world." Sullivan's claim is demonstrably false of some of the "interpreters Kremer condemns as irresolute"—it is at least as true that Hacker, Hans-Johann Glock, Monk and others typically talk of what is shown by producing apparent propositions—and is only partially true of Wittgenstein, who often does the same. What is correct, however, is that Geach speaks of what is shown as "features of reality;" and in "Throwing Away the Ladder," Diamond does accuse Geach of thereby "chickening out." Sullivan, however, denies that by countenancing talk of inexpressible "features of reality" one necessarily countenances "the idea of a quasi-truth or inexpressible state of affairs." He bases his argument on the claim that "that is not true of ordinary talk of features—of a landscape, for instance, or a face."

Of course, ordinary talk of features does not bring with it the idea of a "quasi-truth or inexpressible state of affairs." But this does not suffice for Sullivan's point. For ordinary talk of features, even of facial features, often does bring with it the idea of an ordinary truth or an ordinary state of affairs. Thus, a diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome is made "based on the history of maternal alcohol use, and detailed physical examination for the characteristic major and minor birth defects and characteristic facial
features." These features include "small eye openings (measured from inner corner to outer corner), epicanthal folds (folds of tissue at the inner corner of the eye), small or short nose, low or flat nasal bridge, smooth or poorly developed philtrum (the area of the upper lip above the colored part of the lip and below the nose), thin upper lip, and small chin." A doctor making such a diagnosis on the basis of such "facial features" will surely include in her report propositions stating such truths as that the patient has a short nose, a thin upper lip, and so on.

But if ordinary talk of features can thus bring with it talk of truths and states of affairs, by the same token might not talk of inexpressible features bring with it talk of inexpressible truths and states of affairs? Certainly, this transition is a natural one for the ineffabilist Peter Hacker, who is happy to move from the claim that "categorial features of things" are inexpressible to the claim that "one cannot say of a thing that it belongs to a given category, for example that red is a colour or that a is an object." Hacker's move from talk of features to talk of categorization, and so of seeming propositions like "that red is a colour," is encouraged by Wittgenstein's own talk of "features" (Züge) in the Tractatus. Two of the three propositions in which the word "feature" occurs lie in the stretch of the Tractatus from 4.12 to 4.127 in which Wittgenstein officially introduces the saying/showing distinction (Tractatus 4.1212) and develops the related idea of "formal properties of objects and atomic facts," the "holding" of which "cannot . . . be asserted by propositions but . . . shows itself." At 4.1221, Wittgenstein introduces the phrase "feature of a fact" as an alternative expression for "internal property [Eigenschaft] of a fact," writing that the phrase is used "in the sense in which we speak of facial features." At 4.126, he writes that "in the sense in which we speak of formal properties we can now speak of formal concepts [Begriffe]," and adds that "the expression of a formal property is a feature of certain symbols." Thus for Wittgenstein the three notions: "feature," "formal property," "formal concept," are closely intertwined, if not identified. Over the course of this stretch of remarks, he gives as examples of things that can only be shown, not said, that the object a occurs in the sense of the proposition fa; that two propositions fa and ga are about the same object; that two propositions contradict one another; that one proposition follows from another (all in Tractatus 4.1211); that internal properties and relations hold of objects (Tractatus 4.122, 4.124); that one blue color is brighter or darker than another (Tractatus 4.123); and that an object falls under a formal concept (Tractatus 4.126)—only to go on to declare such seeming propositions nonsensical (Tractatus 4.124, 4.1241, 4.1272). Given all this, Geach's insistence on the "paradoxical" nature of the "Frege-Wittgenstein notion of what comes out but cannot be asserted" is easy to understand, whereas it would be hard to fathom if talk of "features" were as innocent as Sullivan maintains.

So far, however, I have left out a crucial aspect of Geach's story, the connection that he draws between practical knowledge and the idea of showing, when he writes that "masterly of the formalized language" provides a test for having grasped the distinctions and features that certain nonsense sentences are meant to convey. Geach emphasizes that "the insight we gain . . . into the workings of logical notation can be definitely tested—even by University examiners." Sullivan thinks that this idea can be used to defend Geach against the charge that he assigns to "nonsensical elucidations" the "additional positive role of conveying a kind of inexpressible insight." Sullivan makes two claims here: First, and somewhat trivially, Geach nowhere in his article actually describes an elucidation as imparting an 'inexpressible insight.' But secondly, and much more importantly, it is absolutely plain from Geach's discussion that, had he described an elucidation in this way, this would not be to ascribe to it an additional role, but only to redescribe its 'didactic' role in instilling the mastery of the symbolism.

The first claim is literally true—the phrase "inexpressible insights" does not occur in Geach's paper. But the concept appears to be present—Geach does speak of the "insights" "conveyed through ethical, aesthetic, and religious utterances," and by "the elucidatory sentences that introduce us to the use of logical notation," and clearly Geach thinks these insights are inexpressible. Thus the only question is whether these insights amount to anything over and above "mastery of the symbolism." But here a return to the claim that "the category-distinctions in question are features . . . of the reality our language is describing" does seem to yield this conclusion (pace Sullivan's remarks about the innocence of talk of "features").

Let us consider this situation a little more closely. Geach holds that the nonsensical elucidatory sentences used to introduce us to a logical notation convey to us "category-distinctions" that are "features" of both the symbolism we are mastering and the "reality" it describes; and he holds that our mastery of the symbolism is evidence of our having grasped these distinctions. From this it follows that mastery of a notation is sufficient for grasping "features" of reality. But why should this be? The fate of Frege's own logical work should give us pause here. For Russell's paradox convinced him in the end that his logical notation was defective, and in fact described no reality—yet Frege was able to reach this conclusion only because of his mastery of his own symbolism.

One might argue that since "the formal articulation of a proposition precisely reflects—i.e., simply is—the formal articulation of the situation it presents," to
master a symbolism is to grasp the structure of propositions, and so of the reality corresponding to them. This argument presupposes, however, that the symbolism we are mastering does present situations, does consist of meaningful propositions. Here the question of justification raises its head: how do we know our symbolism is not, like that of Frege’s Grundgesetze, radically defective? And we seem to be tempted by an answer: in mastering the symbolism we achieve an insight into the “formal articulation” of the reality that our language depicts. With this thought, however, we seem to be moving close to the transcendental idealism that Sullivan himself sees as the target of the Tractatus. In my view, Geach’s understanding of “showing” involves precisely the confusion of practical and propositional showing that I have argued is at the heart of the ineffability reading of the Tractatus. It may be that the use of the word “feature,” far from being innocent, helps to compound this confusion. For, as we have seen, talk of features, even facial features, can simply point us to the facts about a face—facts that might form the basis for a medical diagnosis. Yet not all talk of features is of this sort. When I recognize my daughter by her facial features, I may not be able to articulate a set of concepts to describe precisely what it is that allows me to pick her out of a crowd. Hence, Sullivan is right after all to say that not all talk of features necessarily brings with it talk of propositions and facts. Talk of “facial features” may call on abilities of recognition and of comparison involved in the understanding and use of “family resemblance” terms without requiring the articulation of a concept. In fact, the very word “feature” has the same equivocal nature we have found in “show.” When a doctor speaks of the characteristic facial features of a patient with fetal alcohol syndrome, she is, I suppose, saying something about how the patient’s face is. In contrast, when we speak of the features of language, we are saying something about how the language is used. But if we speak of “reality” as having “features” that we can grasp in mastering a symbolism, and go on to illustrate this through examples such as one proposition’s following from another, or one color of blue being lighter than another, we are confusedly thinking of these features both as having to do with how reality is, and as having to do with how language is to be used. 116 It is this confusion that is at the root of the “cardinal problem of philosophy.” The notion of a “showing” of inexpressible truths, while sorely tempting to us, is also the source of great philosophical puzzlement. For the desire to express the truths we think we grasp is constantly competing with the thought that these truths must not—and so cannot—be expressed. But the Tractatus, in bringing us to recognize its propositions as nonsense, brings us to see that no meaning is attached to the ineffabilist use of the word “showing,” which had seemed to be the key to understanding the book. And once we see that there is no clear notion here at all, the perplexities that it brought in its train disappear.117 But if this is how the “cardinal problem of philosophy” is resolved, does its resolution then lead, as Wittgenstein had hoped, to the solution of all the problems of philosophy at one stroke? The answer to this question must be negative—the hope for one solution to all problems is itself part of the problematic illusion that the Tractatus aims to dispel. The solution to the “cardinal problem of philosophy” is not to be found in a “theory” of that which can be said and that which can only be shown, or a criterion of sense and nonsense. The desire for such a theory is itself part of the problem and involves the same philosophical fantasy. Once this fantasy loses its grip on us, we are left with simply an awareness of that which does, in an entirely innocent sense, show itself—our ability to use the language that we speak and understand, and with it our ability to recognize when the use of language makes sense and when it does not. Relying on this awareness, we can get down to the difficult work involved in tackling philosophical problems, revealing the confusions involved in them, showing in what ways they degenerate into nonsense. But, as Diamond and Conant put it, this work most proceed “piecemeal,” case by case.118 Hence, the real conclusion of the Tractatus is already in harmony with Wittgenstein’s insistence in Investigations §133 that “problems are solved . . . not a single problem.” Nonetheless, to use Diamond and Conant’s lovely phrase, there is here a “profound discontinuity in thinking that is folded within a fundamental continuity in Wittgenstein’s philosophy.”119 For, according to the Tractatus, there remains a single “correct method in philosophy”: “to say nothing except what can be said, . . . and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.”120 The method of which Wittgenstein speaks is that of the “logical clarification of thoughts”121 and its fundamental tool is the construction of “a symbolism . . . which obeys the rules of logical grammar”—a Begriffsschrift, a language in which, as in the model from Russell discussed above, every philosophical equivocation can be laid bare and every philosophical problem thus put to rest.122 As Diamond and Conant argue, it is the Tractatus’s implicit commitment to the idea that this method can be used to dissolve every philosophical problem that Wittgenstein later came to reject as the metaphysical dogmatism of his early work—and indeed this commitment came under pressure as soon as it was made explicit in Wittgenstein’s first attempt at serious philosophy after his return to Cambridge, “Some Remarks on Logical Form.”123 At Investigations §133, Wittgenstein tells us not only that there is no single problem, but also that “there is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different
therapies.” If the argument of this essay is correct, it is the second of these claims, not the first, which marks the real discontinuity between Wittgenstein’s early and late works.196

Notes

1. Versions of this essay were presented to the University of Chicago Wittgenstein Workshop, to the philosophy department of the Universität di Roma, La Sapienza, and to the philosophy department of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Thanks are due to all three audiences for helpful comments and discussion. Special thanks go to Jim Conant for invaluable comments on an earlier draft.


5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Tractatus 4.112. Quotations from the Tractatus will be by numbered proposition and will be from the Ogden translation, unless otherwise noted.


7. Ibid., 182.


9. Tractatus 3.3.

10. Tractatus 5.4733.

11. The terminology of “resolute” and “irresolute” interpretations is introduced in Warren Goldfarb, “Metaphysics and Nonsense: On Cora Diamond’s The Realistic Spirit,” where it is attributed to an unpublished manuscript of Thomas Ricketts.

12. In the debate, inspired by Diamond’s work, over the proper way to read the Tractatus, some interpreters have tried to stake out a third position, intermediate between the ineffability and resolute readings—for example, Marie McGinn, “Between Metaphysics and Nonsense: Elucidation in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus”; Roy Brand, “Making Sense Speaking Nonsense.” A. W. Moore’s Points of View and “Ineffability and Nonsense” may also belong in this category; but his project

13. In the essays mentioned in the bibliography.


16. For illuminating discussions of this issue see James Conant and Cora Diamond, “On Reading the Tractatus” and “On Reading the Tractatus” and “Ineffability and Nonsense.” See also Moore, “Ineffability and Nonsense,” 180.

17. P. M. S. Hacker, John Koethe, and H. O. Mounce criticize the resolute reading in order to defend the ineffability reading—see P. M. S. Hacker, “Was He Trying to Whistle It?” and “When the Whistling Had to Stop”; John Koethe, “On the ‘Resolute’ Reading of the Tractatus”; and H. O. Mounce, “Critical Notice: The New Wittgenstein.” Ian Proops seems more concerned to argue that the textual basis for the resolute reading is no better than that for the ineffability reading. See Proops, “The New Wittgenstein: A Critique.” Peter Sullivan, while sympathetic to some of the main themes of the resolute reading, thinks that what is clearly right in the resolute reading is also present in the best versions of the ineffability reading. See Sullivan, “On Trying to be Resolute,” and “Ineffability and Nonsense.”


21. Ibid., 124.

22. I have addressed Wittgenstein’s appeals to “showing” in replying to Russell in Kremer, “The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense,” 64–65, and will not repeat here what I have said there.

23. For example in Pears, The False Prison, 142; Hacker, Insight and Illusion, 19; Glock, A Wittgenstein Dictionary, 330; Stern, Wittgenstein on Mind and Language, 69; Anscombe, An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, 161; McGuinness, Young Ludwig, 277; and Monk, How to Read Wittgenstein, 19.


28. Tractatus, preface, 27.
32. McGuinness, Young Ludwig, 173.
33. Stern, Wittgenstein on Mind and Language, 70.
34. Similarly Monk writes that the Tractatus’s “main point is to answer ‘the cardinal problem of
philosophy,’ i.e. the question of where the limits of expressibility lie” (Monk, How to Read Wittgenstein,
23).
35. Tractatus 4.111.
36. Ibid., 4.112.
37. Ibid., 4.114-16.
38. For much of what I think about Wittgenstein’s account of the “problems of philosophy,”
I am indebted to Conant’s “The Method of the Tractatus.”
39. Tractatus, preface, 27.
40. Following Pears and McGuinness in translating “unsinnig” and “Unsinnigkeit” as
“nonsense” and “nonsensicality.”
41. Tractatus 3.32.
42. Ibid., 3.314.
43. Ibid., 3.326.
44. Ibid., 5.4733.
45. Ibid., 3.321.
46. Ibid., 3.323-3.325.
47. Sullivan memorably calls this kind of philosophical confusion “double-think.” Sullivan
recognizes that the Tractatus holds such “double-think” to be “characteristic of philosophical discourse.” Peter Sullivan, “What Is the Tractatus About?,” 35. But, I will argue, he fails to see how
deply the ineffabilist notion of showing involves such double-think.
48. Wittgenstein often mentions Hertz’s treatment of the concept of force in The Principles of Mechanics as a model here; but arguably Russell’s application of the theory of descriptions to solve philosophical puzzles is another source, as I argue below.
49. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1939-1932, 4. Similar thoughts are
recorded in notes from Wittgenstein’s conversations taken in 1939 and 1946, both times with
explicit mention of Hertz. In the first case, after expounding Hertz on force, Wittgenstein is
reported to have said that “he must confess that this passage seemed to him to sum up philos-
50. Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Blue and Brown Books, 26-27. See also Wittgenstein, Public and
Private Occasions, 379. In the full passage from the Blue Book which I am excerpting here, Hertz’s
Principles of Mechanics is again mentioned.
51. Tractatus 4.003.
52. Ibid., 4.0031.
53. Ibid., 4.003.
54. Ibid., 4.003.
56. Ibid., 485.
57. Tractatus 5.53ff.
58. The story is made more complicated than the sketch I give here by the fact that “=”
is a
defined sign in Principia Mathematica, whereas Wittgenstein seems to proceed as if it were primi-
tive. This objection can be met, but only at the cost of introducing a third layer of ambiguity —
distinguishing the use of “=” to refer to the defined relation of sharing a11 predicates, the use of
“=” to express intersubstitutability, and the use of “=” to express counting and the like—as in
the theory of descriptions. I thank Peter Hylton for bringing to my attention the significance
here of the defined status of the identity predicate in Principia.
60. Ibid., 5.53ff. These two uses of the identity sign and the potential for confusion they
bring with them were discussed at length by Wittgenstein in his lectures at Cambridge
207ff.
61. The Axiom of Infinity is defined at *120.03 in Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell,
Principia Mathematica, vol. 2, 203:
*120.03 Infin ax. . : z = NC induct. . +a . I+ a Df.
“NC induct” refers to the class of all inductive cardinal numbers, that is, the cardinals resulting
from 0 by repeated addition of 1 (*120.01, 2:203). Working through the definitions of 1 (*52.01,
1:347) and of 0 (*54.01, 1:360) yields:
0 = a (a = 3(x ≠ x))
1 = a ([3a) . a = y (y = x)].
62. In his pre-**Tractatus** wartime journals, Wittgenstein stated that “all the problems that go with the Axiom of Infinity have already to be solved in the proposition (3x)x = x” (Wittgenstein, Notebooks, 10, entry for 9.10.14) and worried that the “Russellian definition of ‘rought’ might be ‘nonsense’ since it is doubtful that either x = x or x ≠ x is “a function of x” (Notebooks, 16, entry for 21.10.14). He found satisfaction in the realization that the identity sign could be dispensed with, so that “x = y” is not a propositional form” (Notebooks, 19, entry for 27.10.14) and “the pseudo-proposition (x)x = a or the like would lose all appearance of justification.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*: 1914–1916, 2nd. ed., 34, entry for 29.11.14.

63. **Tractatus** 5.53.

64. Ibid., 5.5321.

65. Jaakko Hintikka’s logical regimentation of Wittgenstein’s method of dispensing with the identity sign falls to capture Wittgenstein’s thought here, since on Hintikka’s account, (x)x = x is translated into a tautology in the new notation, while (3x)x ≠ x is translated into a contradiction. Jaakko Hintikka, “Identity, Variables, and Impredicative Definitions,” 231–234. But for Wittgenstein, neither of these pseudo-propositions corresponds to anything that can be said—not even to something *simul* such as a tautology or a contradiction. **Tractatus** 5.534.


67. Wittgenstein’s journal entries were written partly in (a very simple) code. The uncoded parts have been translated by Anscombe in *Notebooks*. The coded parts have been published in German as *Geheime Tagebücher*, but have not been translated into English. Except where noted, translations from these entries are my own.


70. *Notebooks*, 23, entry for November 1, 1914.


72. *Notebooks*, 53, entry for June 1, 1915.

73. *Geheime Tagebücher*, 24, 25, 30, entries for September 21, 1914; September 29, 1914; October 14, 1914; *Notebooks*, 23, entry for November 1, 1914.


75. *Notebooks*, 7, for September 29, 1914.

76. *Geheime Tagebücher*, 32, 44, entries for October 17, 1914; November 21, 1914; *Notebooks*, 39, 54, entries for January 1, 1915; June 3, 1915. Baker and Hacker note the “frequent” occurrence of the idea of the “liberating word” in the wartime notebooks. They also point out that in a letter of about the same time (July 24, 1915), Wittgenstein tells Ludwig von Ficker “You are living, as it were, in the dark, and have not found the saving word [erlösende Wort].” Wittgenstein goes on to recommend to Ficker Tolstoy’s *The Gospel in Brief*. Gordon Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, part 2, 284; Wittgenstein, “Letters to Ficker,” 91. Matthew Ostrow builds his Interpretation of the *Tractatus* around this notion of the “liberating word.” He begins with remarks taken from the early 1930s in which Wittgenstein says that the philosopher’s task is to find “the liberating word,” and then asks “could such claims be applied to Wittgenstein’s early work as well?” arguing for a positive answer (Ostrow, *Wittgenstein’s “Tractatus”*, 1). He fails to note that Wittgenstein uses the very phrase four times in his pre-**Tractatus** journals—perhaps because the coded entries (*Geheime Tagebücher*) are not available in English translation, while in the translation of the uncoded entries in *Notebooks*, Anscombe renders the phrase “erlösende Wort” as “key word,” not “liberating word.”

77. *Notebooks*, 3, entry for September 3, 1914.


82. **Tractatus**, preface, 27.

83. Peter Sullivan has argued that it is illuminating to see the target of the *Tractatus* as transcendental idealism (Sullivan, “What Is the *Tractatus* About?” 42–43). This strikes me as also right—the problem of an a priori order in the world is one of the forms of the cardinal problem. But I think this is entirely compatible with seeing the book as exposing the ineffabilist form of the showing/saying distinction as itself problematic.

84. This point is recognized by Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein*, 23, as well as by Baker and Hacker, *Understanding and Meaning*, part 2, 284, and Garth Hallett, *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s “Philosophical Investigations,”* 232. But none of them understands the way in which the “cardinal problem” is resolved in the *Tractatus*.


86. Hallett, and Baker and Hacker, both see Wittgenstein as rejecting what he “previously” thought (Hallett, *Companion*, 232), “the spirit of [his] early work” (Baker and Hacker, *Understanding and Meaning*, part 2, 284) in asserting that “problems are solved, . . . not a single problem.” If “previous” and “early” refer to Wittgenstein’s thought at some time before he completed the *Tractatus*, I would agree with these assessments. But on my view, the *Tractatus* itself has already rejected its author’s "previous" conception that the solution of one great problem will solve all other problems in its wake.

88. "Was sich nicht sagen lässt, lässt sich nicht sagen!" Geheime Tagebücher, 73, entry for July 7, 1916.


90. Tractatus, preface, 27.

91. Graham Priest, Beyond the Limits of Thought, 2nd ed., 186.

92. I focus on the distinction between propositional and practical showing below; as Priest points out, there is also a sense in which what is shown can be an object. This usage is also relevant to some occurrences of "show" in the Tractatus. Eli Friedlander’s reading of the Tractatus makes the "showing" of objects fundamental. Eli Friedlander, Signs of Sense: Reading Wittgenstein’s Tractatus. I will not discuss issues of the relative priority of practical showing and the showing of objects here. (For brief discussion see my review of Friedlander’s book.)

93. Others include Peter Geach, Marie McGinn, Roy Brand, and A. W. Moore. While McGinn and Brand, and perhaps also Moore, try to use this idea in service of constructing readings of the Tractatus alternative to both ineffabilist and resolute readings, the idea itself is, I think, implicit in much of Conant and Diamond’s work, and explicit in their "On Reading the Tractatus Resolutely".

94. The distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that is famously drawn in Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind. Recently, however, the distinction has been questioned, in Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, “Knowing How,” 411-444; Paul Snowdon, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” 166-173. Stanley and Williamson’s arguments in particular have met with many replies, notably: Stephen Schiffer, “Amazing Knowledge,” 200-202; John Koethe, “Stanley and Williamson on Knowing How,” 325-328; Ian Rumfield, “Savoir-Faire,” 158-166; Tobias Rosefeldt, “Is Knowing-How Simply a Case of Knowing-That?,” 370-379; and Alva Noë, “Against Intellectualism,” 278-290. As Moore himself points out, however, the important question for our purposes is not whether every instance of "knowing how" is irreducible to "knowing that." All that matters are that there are some instances of practical knowledge that can’t be equated with propositional knowledge. I am not going to enter this debate here, but will only record my agreement with Moore against Stanley and Williamson that not all practical knowledge can be reduced to propositional knowledge, though much practical knowledge certainly involves propositional knowledge. However, in my view Moore comes too close to treating "knowledge" as a genus of which "propositional knowledge" and "practical knowledge" are species, when he gives "marks" of knowledge that both are supposed to share (Moore, Points of View, 173-180). I think these "marks" are more like the "family resemblances" of Philosophical Investigations §67—so that the table of types of knowledge provided by Moore (Points of View, 192) is somewhat like a table of games with headings "board games," "ball games," and so on.
illusion when, in attempting to provide a logical foundation for numbers, I tried to construe numbers as sets.” Gottlob Frege, Posthumous Writings, 270.


116. Jim Conant helped me to achieve clarity on the issues discussed in the last few paragraphs.

117. In the final paragraphs I am again indebted to Jim Conant for clarification of my conclusion.


119. Ibid., 84.

120. Tractatus 6.53.

121. Ibid., 4.112.

122. Ibid., 3.325.

123. Conant and Diamond, “On Reading the Tractatus Resolutely,” 80-87; 96, n. 78.

124. I believe, nonetheless, that the abandonment of the fantasy of a single method is ultimately required by the abandonment of the fantasy of the single great problem, the solution of which will solve all other problems. It is this that Wittgenstein began to come to see once he tried to apply his single method in “Some Remarks on Logical Form.”

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3 Wittgenstein and the Inexpressible

Juliet Floyd

The greatest clarity [Deutlichkeit] was to me always the greatest beauty.

—G. H. Lessing, *Das Testament Johannis*

Lessing once said, “Language can express everything we think clearly.”

—M. Heidegger, *Holzwege*

The most fundamental divide among interpreters of Wittgenstein lies, for me, between those who detect in Wittgenstein’s writings some form of semantic or epistemic resource argument, an argument ultimately appealing to the finitude or expressive limitations of language—whether it be truth-functional, constructivist, social-constructivist, antirealist, assertion-conditionalist, formalist, conventionalist, finitist, empiricist, or what have you—and those who instead stress Wittgenstein’s criticisms of the assumptions lying behind the desire for such resource arguments, criticisms that in the end turn upon stressing the open-ended evolution, the variety, and the irreducible complexity of human powers of expression. The former kind of reader sees the inexpressible as a limitation, a reflection of what is illegitimate in grammar or fails to be epistemically justifiable; the latter sees the inexpressible as a fiction, an illusion produced by an overly simplified conception of human expression.

While there are several important readers of Wittgenstein who have insisted on the fundamental character of this divide in relation to Wittgenstein’s later thinking (I am thinking here especially of my teachers Stanley Cavell, Burton Dreben, and Warren Goldfarb), it is to Cora Diamond that we owe the most wide-ranging and pointed articulation of what is at stake in this contrast of interpretive approaches for Wittgenstein’s thought as a whole. Her work has forcefully and very originally pressed the latter approach forward, deepening and broadening it to include topics of central concern to contemporary philosophy—among them the nature of truth, fiction, realism, ethics, logic, mathematics, language, and experience.