

**MEANING, A PRIORICITY AND REALITY:
WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL
PHILOSOPHY**

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In recent years, largely due to the emergence of the so-called Therapeutic readings of the *Tractatus*,¹ Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics has become a subject of hot debates. Arguably, three major issues divide Wittgenstein scholars. The first one is how Wittgenstein criticized traditional philosophy in the *Tractatus*. Did he espouse any doctrines in order to show that metaphysical utterances are nonsensical? Did he lay down necessary conditions for meaningful speaking? How are we to make sense of the penultimate remark of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein states that his own propositions are nonsensical? The next issue concerns Wittgenstein's later criticisms of metaphysics. Notably, most interpreters of the *Philosophical Investigations* do not see any connection between what is arguably the central argument of the book—the famous rule-following argument—and his 'deflationary' conception of philosophy. So, many scholars doubt whether Wittgenstein's rejection of metaphysics is sustained by well-developed arguments (cf. Soames 2003: 29). Those who think that he presents genuine arguments against the meaningfulness of philosophical contentions disagree on how to interpret their nature. Do they support philosophical theses? If not, then what kind of theses they support? Are they intended to support *theses* at all? The third issue is about the dis/continuity of Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy. Which of the Tractarian reasons for considering metaphysical questions nonsensical were maintained in Wittgenstein's later work? Are his later criticisms of philosophical theorizing essentially different from the early ones? Did the *Philosophical Investigations* jettison the Tractarian strategy of attacking metaphysics?

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on these issues by discussing the subject, the purpose, and the methods of Wittgenstein's critique. On first glance, the subject is pretty clear. We are told that Wittgenstein criticized metaphysics. But what did Wittgenstein understand under 'metaphysics'? To be sure, he did not mean a special philosophical discipline studying reality but not knowledge and ethical values. Rather, he meant the whole of traditional philosophy. So, if we are to understand his

¹ The most influential of them are presented in Crary & Read 2000.

critique of metaphysics, we have first to bring to light his notion of traditional philosophy. The next step is to clarify the purpose of Wittgenstein's critique. What was he trying to show: that most philosophical questions are nonsensical, or rather that no philosophical question can ever be meaningful? Here, I shall argue that his purpose was to show the latter, i.e. the impossibility of posing meaningful philosophical questions. His general method of accomplishing it was (1) to show (or indicate) certain *conditions of sense*² and (2) to make plain that *a priori* propositions about *reality* cannot satisfy them. Thus, I disagree with the Therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein, since, as I argue, they fall short of elucidating his reasons to reject metaphysics.

After clarifying the purpose and the general method of Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy, I move to discuss the ways in which the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* are trying to show the nonsensicality of metaphysical utterances. By my lights, the controversy surrounding the *Tractatus* critique of metaphysics may be settled by elucidating the role of the idea of bipolarity. According to Peter Hacker, it is the central idea of Wittgenstein's early philosophy (cf. Hacker 2001: 15-16). The New Readers,³ however, think that the *Tractatus* rejects the ideas that the 'standard' readers attribute to it. Thus they are reluctant to assign any role of the idea of bipolarity in the *Tractatus*' critique of traditional philosophy. I shall argue here that Hacker is right, since without the idea of bipolarity Wittgenstein's rejection of the meaningfulness of metaphysical claims would hang in the air.

The more difficult, and arguably more important, issue is about Wittgenstein's later criticisms of philosophical theorizing. The paper will argue that the rule-following argument is not only related to his non-cognitive conception of philosophy, but is, in fact, the main argument against metaphysics. Indeed, it can be shown that it is a metaphysical language argument. Yet, it is not an *argument* in any traditional sense.

² I prefer the expression 'conditions of sense' for two reasons. Firstly, the early Wittgenstein thinks that propositions have a sense but not a meaning. Secondly, and more importantly, its use highlights the internal relation between the conditions of sense and the bounds of sense. To be sure, the expression has its shortcomings, since we ordinarily say of statements and questions that they are *meaningful*, and not *senseful*. I shall also abide by ordinary usage.

³ This is a label coined by Ian Proops in his 2001 paper.

1. Wittgenstein's Critique of Traditional Philosophy: Subject, Purpose, and General Method

We need to clarify Wittgenstein's notion of traditional philosophy if we are to understand the target of his criticism. The way to do this is to make plain how he conceived of the differences between philosophy, a priori disciplines, and empirical sciences.

1.1. Wittgenstein's View of the Difference Between (Traditional) Philosophy and Science

According to Wittgenstein, early and late, philosophy is not a science. The reason is that philosophical claims are nonsensical. However, this is not the only difference between philosophy and science. Nonsensicality may be a characteristic feature of philosophical statements, but it cannot be the only one. Surely, the class of philosophical statements does not coincide with the class of nonsensical statements. 'Philosophical' and 'nonsensical' are neither synonymous nor co-extensive terms. Being a nonsensical utterance is not a sufficient condition for being a philosophical utterance.

For many empiricists, the basic difference between traditional philosophy and science is that the latter is empirical, whereas the former is not. To be sure, Wittgenstein would agree that philosophical questions are not empirical (cf. PI § 109). However, he would deny that logic and mathematics are empirical disciplines. For Wittgenstein, early and late, neither logical nor mathematical nor philosophical propositions are empirical in nature.⁴ How, then, does he distinguish between non-

⁴ Traditionally, the question of whether certain propositions are empirical or a priori belongs to the domain of epistemology. Therefore, given the fact that Wittgenstein took the linguistic turn, one may be tempted to think that he refrained from characterizing propositions as a priori or empirical. But this is not true, as many passages in the *Tractatus* (cf. 2.225, 3.04, 3.05, 5.133, 5.4731, 5.634, 6.31, 6.34, 6.35) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (cf. PI: §§ 85, 158, 251, 295, and 617) show. In line with the linguistic turn, Wittgenstein thought that the question of the nature of a priori propositions is not epistemological, but rather logical/grammatical. His reason was that they are essentially related to

empirical statements that are philosophical and non-empirical statements that are logical or mathematical? Leaving aside that the former are nonsensical and the latter are not, what else could be the difference between them?

To begin with, let us first clarify how Wittgenstein conceives of the difference between the a priori sciences of logic and mathematics and empirical sciences. This will help us to see more clearly how he distinguishes between traditional philosophy and non-empirical disciplines. For Wittgenstein, most propositions of natural (and social) sciences are empirical and contingent.⁵ Those propositions of the latter that are a priori are, in essence, not about reality. They deal with the possible forms of scientific propositions (see 6.34), or, as the later Wittgenstein thinks, express norms of representation (cf. Glock 1996: 341-345). By contrast, Wittgenstein regards all propositions of logic and mathematics as non-empirical and non-contingent. However, he sees another, more important difference. Natural and social sciences say how things stand in reality, whereas logic and mathematics say nothing about reality. Logical and mathematical propositions do not represent states of affairs. They are not about (logical or mathematical) entities (cf. Baker & Hacker: 281).⁶ This makes them essentially different from both empirical and philosophical propositions. Admittedly, philosophical assertions

the conditions of sense, and not to the conditions of knowledge, (partly) because the former are antecedent to the latter. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, the turn to language not only does not imply a rejection of the problem of a priori propositions, but provides the key to its solution. Indeed, as this paper will argue, Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysics turns on his view of a priori propositions.

⁵ Wittgenstein maintained Kant's contention that only a priori statements are necessary. But he did not regard it as a substantial philosophical thesis. In the *Tractatus*, he regarded the a prioricity of necessary propositions as an internal property of the latter. In his later work, he considered it a matter of grammar (cf. Baker & Hacker 1985: 267).

⁶ But this is not to claim that they are true in virtue of the meanings of expressions. According to the early Wittgenstein, logical and mathematical expressions do not stand for anything, and hence have no meaning (cf. Hacker 2006: 127). For the later Wittgenstein, the propositions of logic and mathematics are grammatical in nature. Grammatical propositions, however, are partly constitutive of the meanings of the expressions involved and thus could not be true in virtue of them. The later Wittgenstein criticizes the very idea that stands behind the traditional notion of analytic statements, namely that the meanings of words are specific entities with which one can be acquainted (see Hacker 2006: 129). Apparently, if the meanings of words are not entities, the very expression 'true in virtue of the meanings of words' is true of nothing.

purport to say something about (a certain region⁷ of) reality, i.e. about what and how things are (or ought to be). No matter what the subject is—nature, or mind, or knowledge—traditional philosophers claim to cast light on it by making (meaningful) non-empirical statements.⁸ Thus, Wittgenstein sees the differences between traditional philosophy, empirical sciences and a priori disciplines in the following way. All sciences that say something about reality are empirical. Logic and mathematics are non-empirical and thus say nothing about reality. In line with empirical sciences, traditional philosophy purports to say what and how things are. But along with logic and mathematics, it claims to be a priori. Hence, traditional philosophy attempts to combine characteristic features of empirical and non-empirical sciences. As far as it is not a part of empirical sciences, it claims to consist of a priori assertions about what and how things are (or ought to be).

1.2. The Purpose of Wittgenstein's Critique of Traditional Philosophy

One of the reasons why there are sharp disagreements about Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy is that there is no clarity on its purpose. Indeed, one cannot reconstruct the ways in which Wittgenstein tried to show that there is something wrong with philosophical theories, unless one knows where they lead. Therefore, it is hardly exaggerated to say that the crucial step in interpreting his attack on traditional philosophy is to determine its purpose. Since it is a characteristic feature of traditional philosophy that it consists generally of philosophical *assertions*, we can elucidate the objective of Wittgenstein's critique by clarifying what he tried to show about them. Thus we have to

⁷ Language, thought, and ethical values can be taken as (different) regions or aspects of reality. Surely, they are in an important sense *real*. Thus, not all claims about reality are claims about reality 'as it is in itself', i.e. independently of mind and/or language.

⁸ Empirical claims belong to empirical sciences. According to Wittgenstein, no empirical claim is philosophical (cf. PI § 85).

answer the following question: What did Wittgenstein, early and late, try to show about philosophical assertions?

There are four conceivable answers to this question. The alternatives are as follows:

1. *At least* some philosophical assertions are nonsensical.
2. *Most* philosophical assertions are nonsensical.
3. *All* philosophical assertions made *so far* are nonsensical.
4. Philosophical assertions are *necessarily* nonsensical.

Before looking more closely at these alternatives, let us mention the possibility to substitute 'are' for 'may be' in each of the statements from (1) to (4). In my view, we must dismiss it, for such a substitution would render these statements hypothetical, and thus would go against the letter and the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Wittgenstein explicitly denies that philosophical considerations have something to do with hypotheses (see PI § 109). Certainly, his writings do not purport to advance hypotheses about philosophical assertions.

The first of the alternatives presented above is untenable. To take Wittgenstein's writings as trying to show that *at least* some philosophical assertions are nonsensical is to take them as leaving open the possibility that a large part, if not the vast majority, of philosophical assertions are, in fact, meaningful.⁹ By my lights, no serious reader of Wittgenstein's works would subscribe to such an interpretation, for it lacks textual support. If I am not mistaken, no passage in Wittgenstein's writings, published and unpublished, admits the existence of even *one* meaningful philosophical *assertion*.

What about the second and the third alternatives? Could it be that Wittgenstein was trying to show the nonsensicality of *most* or *all* of the philosophical assertions made *so far*? However, how could he succeed in such a task? To be sure, he had to consider, one by one, all philosophical questions that had been posed and show that most or all of them are

⁹ As a matter of fact, many metaphysicians would agree that at least some philosophical claims are meaningless.

nonsensical. But it is clear that this is an impossible task to perform. Therefore, there is no surprise that Wittgenstein did not proceed in this way—neither in the *Tractatus* nor in the *Investigations* nor in his other works. Wittgenstein's writings do not aim at analyzing all known philosophical claims. On the contrary, they consider only a few of them. Given this fact, one might toy with the idea that Wittgenstein shows the nonsensicality of *some* philosophical claims and then puts forward the (philosophical) hypothesis that *all* philosophical claims made thus far are meaningless. However, as argued above, such an interpretation deserves no serious discussion, for it goes against the demarcation between science and philosophy that Wittgenstein draws in his writings. Thus, to choose the second or the third alternatives is to misinterpret Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy.

The only possibility left is to take early and late Wittgenstein as trying to make clear that there cannot be meaningful philosophical assertions. Indeed, this is the true purpose of Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy. In the Preface to the *Tractatus*, he states that 'the reason why philosophical problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood.' (Wittgenstein 1974a: 3) Obviously, he speaks not of *some* but of *all* (past, present, and future) philosophical problems. In section 6.53 he explicitly denies that there can be meaningful metaphysical propositions:

'The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science-- i.e., something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.' (6.53)

In the same vein, Wittgenstein's later pronouncements reveal that he did not admit the possibility of formulating meaningful philosophical problems. In section 38 of *Philosophical Investigations* he says that

‘philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday’. Again, it is clear that he found something wrong with *all* philosophical problems. His remarks on philosophy show beyond doubt that he found it impossible to state meaningful philosophical *assertions* (about reality, or knowledge, or language...) and to propound meaningful philosophical theories (cf. PI §§ 109-133). If he thought otherwise, he would not say that the ‘results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.’ (PI § 119)

1.3. The General Method of Wittgenstein’s Critique of Traditional Philosophy

The general method of Wittgenstein’s critique of metaphysics was to elucidate the conditions of sense and make plain that a priori propositions about reality cannot satisfy them. Actually, this was the only feasible method, as there was no other way to show that philosophical assertions are necessarily nonsensical. The rationale is simple: the only conceivable reason why no philosophical assertion can be meaningful is that the conditions under which an assertion can say something about (a certain realm of) reality are conditions under which it cannot be a priori.

This interpretation of the general method of Wittgenstein’s critique of traditional philosophy goes against (some) therapeutic readings of his works, according to which Wittgenstein was not trying to show necessary conditions for meaningful speaking.¹⁰ In this section, I shall argue that these readings misrepresent Wittgenstein’s criticisms of metaphysics.

According to Wittgenstein, there are utterances that the vast majority of philosophers consider meaningful but that are in fact nonsensical. His critique of philosophical theorizing clearly turns on the

¹⁰ The view that Wittgenstein, early and late, did not try to show necessary conditions for meaningful speaking is defended by Cora Diamond and Juliet Floyd (see Diamond 1991: 39-72; Floyd 1998 81-2). I owe to Hilary Putnam my acquaintance with their ‘unorthodox’ interpretation of Wittgenstein.

conviction that being a meaningful utterance for someone is not a sufficient condition for being a meaningful utterance indeed. Thus, it involves the view that an utterance must satisfy certain conditions if it is to be meaningful. If, in order to have a sense, utterances need not fulfil certain conditions, then each utterance that someone regards as meaningful would be meaningful indeed. Obviously, this would do away with the difference between those questions that only appear to be meaningful and those questions that are truly meaningful, and hence would make Wittgenstein's attack on traditional philosophy futile. To put it somewhat differently, the absence of necessary conditions for meaningful speaking would mean the absence of good grounds for regarding (some) philosophical statements as nonsensical.¹¹ Hence, if we do not wish to present Wittgenstein as a superficial critic of traditional philosophy, then either we have to reject the objection that he was not committed to showing (or indicating) necessary conditions for meaningful speaking, or we must give up the view that according to him (certain) philosophical assertions are nonsensical. Since, however, there are no good reasons to do the second, we have to do the first one.

A possible objection to this line of reasoning is that it threatens to render Wittgenstein's view of philosophy incoherent. Both in his early and later writings, Wittgenstein maintains that philosophy 'is not a body of doctrine' (see 4.112; cf. PI §§ 109-133). But it seems that to think that philosophical assertions cannot satisfy certain conditions of sense is to espouse a doctrine. So, the objection goes, if we stick to the principle of charity, we should accept that Wittgenstein was not trying to show necessary conditions for meaningful speaking, and hence that he was not

¹¹ One cannot show the nonsensicality of even *one* philosophical claim, unless one points out some necessary condition for making a meaningful claim. This is so because one cannot show that a philosophical claim is nonsensical without indicating some grounds for its being nonsensical. Now, the point is that one's reason for regarding some statement as meaningless cannot be a sound one, unless one (implicitly) refers to some necessary condition for making a meaningful statement. For example, when one is trying to show that a certain metaphysical statement is meaningless because of combining incompatible features, one (tacitly) presupposes that a meaningful statement cannot do this, that is, that coherence is a necessary condition for producing meaningful statements.

trying to make it clear that there cannot be meaningful philosophical assertions.

The obvious problem with this objection is that it leads to an intolerable dilemma: Wittgenstein's criticisms of metaphysics either contradict his view of philosophy or are groundless. Therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein's works arise out of the attempt to avoid the first horn of the dilemma. Since, however, they deny that Wittgenstein was trying to show necessary conditions for meaningful speaking, they are impaled on the second horn of the dilemma. As explained above, the reason for this is that the absence of such conditions implies the absence of rational grounds for distinguishing between those utterances that only appear to be meaningful and those utterances that are meaningful indeed. Therefore, to advance a therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy is to misrepresent it. One cannot do justice to his criticism of metaphysics, unless one recognizes that Wittgenstein, early and late, was trying to show that the conditions under which a proposition can say something about reality are conditions under which it cannot be a priori. This idea constitutes the core of his conception of the bounds of sense and, thus, of his critique of metaphysics.

The way out of the presented dilemma is to undermine the assumption behind it, namely that Wittgenstein found it impossible to show (indicate, gesture at) the conditions of sense without making meaningful philosophical assertions about language. Actually, Wittgenstein thought that it was possible, to some extent, to indicate such conditions without stating propositions about (a certain realm of) reality that are both meaningful and non-empirical. In his later work, he took 'grammatical propositions' as capable of achieving this task, for they are neither empirical nor about entities. Since there are no analogous propositions in his early philosophy, the only viable alternative is to acknowledge that Wittgenstein considered the nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* capable of elucidating the bounds of sense.

2. The Tractarian Critique of Traditional Philosophy

Perhaps the central idea of the *Tractatus* is that the conditions under which a proposition can be a priori are conditions under which it cannot be meaningful. In other words, to be a meaningful assertion is to be an empirical and contingent assertion. This is known as the idea of bipolarity. Lying at the heart of the Tractarian account of the limits of language, it links all ‘doctrines’ of the early Wittgenstein and is supported by all of them (see Hacker 2001: 13-49). In this part, I shall (1) reconstruct the emergence of the idea of bipolarity, (2) discuss briefly its links with the main ‘doctrines’ of the *Tractatus*, and (3) specify the condition under which Wittgenstein’s nonsensical propositions can possibly indicate ineffable truths.

2.1. The Emergence of the Idea of Bipolarity

Notably, Wittgenstein’s rejection of Russell’s view that there are logical objects proved to be a decisive point in his philosophical development.¹² The repudiation of logical objects in conjunction with the maintenance of the Frege-Russell view of the special status of logic led him soon to champion the famous idea of bipolarity.

Under the influence of Frege and Russell, the young Wittgenstein came to adopt a kind of logical foundationalism—the view that logic pertains to the very core of philosophy. He believed that the explanation of the nature of logical propositions could provide the key to understanding the nature of philosophy, for both logic and philosophy are essentially a priori. Now, Russell’s view that there are logical objects does not involve any substantial difference between logical and non-logical a priori propositions: both the latter and the former are about

¹² In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says that his ‘fundamental idea is that the “logical constants” are not representatives’ (4.0312).

certain objects; the difference between them reflects the difference between their objects. Thus, in rejecting Russell's view of logical objects, Wittgenstein faced two alternatives. The first was to take up the position that there are two essentially different kinds of a priori propositions: logical and non-logical, the latter being about certain objects. However, holding on to both logical foundationalism and the rejection of logical objects, Wittgenstein opted for the second alternative—the view that no a priori proposition is about objects (or states of affairs). His reasons for taking this view were complex. For one thing, it made it possible both to maintain logical foundationalism and to reject the existence of logical objects. For another, it made room for Wittgenstein's non-referential account of what Russell called 'logical constants'.

Now let's take a closer look at Wittgenstein's original reasons for dismissing necessary propositions about entities. Firstly, if one admits the existence of such propositions, then one's attempt to explain the necessity of logical propositions on the basis of the absence of logical objects would appear dubious. This is so because the nature of necessary propositions is usually explained by reference to the nature of the states of affairs they speak about; e.g. it is traditionally held that logical and mathematical propositions are non-empirical since logical and mathematical objects are abstract. Secondly, and more importantly, logic, as understood by Wittgenstein, cannot account for the existence of necessary propositions about entities, since logical propositions do not deal with any entities. Therefore, if there were such propositions, logic would not be as philosophically important as the young Wittgenstein considered it. Thirdly, and still more important, the existence of non-logical necessary propositions would sit uneasily with Wittgenstein's non-referential explanation of 'logical constants'. The reason is as follows. If logical constants do not stand for objects, then—as the truth tables indicate—propositional connectives are nothing but truth-functional operations by means of which we construct compound

propositions from elementary ones (see Glock 1996: 209). Now it is clear that the nature and scope of truth-functional operations on elementary propositions turns on the truth-possibilities of the latter. Therefore, propositional connectives have to be explained by reference to the truth-possibilities of the elementary propositions. But the truth-possibilities of elementary propositions flow from their nature; e.g., a necessary true proposition cannot have the truth value 'false'. Hence, truth-functional operations must lie in elementary propositions: they must somehow flow from their nature. Otherwise, given the absence of logical objects, propositional connectives would be unexplainable. And here is the crucial point. All truth-functional operations can be reduced to the operation of joint negation, i.e. to conjunction and negation. Therefore, truth-functional operations can lie in the nature of elementary propositions only if the latter are *bipolar*, i.e. *contingently* true or false. Both the possibility of being true and the possibility of being false must be essential to elementary propositions, since otherwise the operation of (joint) negation could not arise from their nature. Consequently, logical operators can be explained without reference to logical objects only if it is of the essence of elementary propositions to be contingent.

Given the contingency of elementary propositions, a proposition can be necessarily true only if (1) it is logically compound from other propositions and (2) its truth does not depend upon their truth-values. Provided that propositional connectives do not stand for objects, compound propositions can say how things stand in the world only via the elementary propositions. Therefore, if the truth of a compound proposition does not depend upon the truth-values of the elementary propositions from which it is generated, then it cannot say anything about the world, because it is true no matter how things are in the world. This is exactly the case with logical propositions. They are necessary and a priori, but at the cost of saying nothing about reality. Therefore, bipolarity characterises not only elementary propositions but also all propositions

that say how things are. This is to say that only contingent propositions tell us something about reality. But, as the young Wittgenstein thought, a proposition can be meaningful only if it says something about reality. As a result, he championed the view that only bipolar propositions can be meaningful.

To be sure, this view has profound consequences for the nature of philosophy, since philosophical statements are considered usually to be non-contingent. Thus, in the course of developing a new understanding of logic and language, Wittgenstein came to an idea which he never abandoned. This is the idea of the bounds of sense. Essentially, it consists in the view that no assertion about reality is both meaningful and necessary (or a priori).¹³ So, to sum up, the idea of bipolarity made it possible (1) to maintain the Frege-Russell view of the special status of logic, (2) to explain the nature of logical propositions, (3) to sustain the non-referential account of logical constants, (4) to suggest a new conception of the relation between language and reality, and (5) to develop a powerful critique of traditional philosophy.

2.2. The Idea of Bipolarity and the Main ‘Doctrines’ of the *Tractatus*

Now let us see how the idea of bipolarity permeates the whole of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy. In my view, the upshot of the so-called picture theory is stated in 2.225 of the *Tractatus*:

‘There are no pictures that are true a priori.’

The rationale behind this is that only contingent states of affairs can be pictured. Therefore, we cannot know from the picture alone that it is true. For this purpose, we have to compare it with reality: it is true, if the contingent states of affairs that it represents obtains; otherwise it is false.

¹³ This interpretation owes much to von Wright’s comments on Wittgenstein. In my view, G. H. von Wright argues convincingly that Wittgenstein’s philosophy is pervaded by the idea of the contingency of all assertions about the world (cf. Wright: 163-182).

However, we could not know a priori whether a contingent state of affairs exists or not. Hence, only experience could tell us whether the picture is true. Since all representation is pictorial, there cannot be an a priori (and thus philosophical) representation of how things are (or ought to be).

Wittgenstein's theory of truth-functions leads us to the same conclusion.¹⁴ Meaningful propositions are either elementary or complex. Elementary propositions are contingently (and empirically) true or false, since they are about contingent states of affairs. Complex propositions can be necessary and a priori only if they are tautologies, that is, if they do not say anything about reality. Since propositions that do not say anything about how things are have no meaning, the Tractarian theory of truth-functions implies that no a priori proposition is meaningful.

Also the saying-showing distinction arises out from the idea of bipolarity. According to Peter Geach, Wittgenstein took over from Frege the view that there are aspects of reality that cannot be said but only shown (cf. Geach 1976: 68). Maybe there is a kernel of truth in Geach's interpretation, but I think that it conceals rather than reveals the real source of Wittgenstein's conception of showing. The latter has its roots not so much in Frege's writings as in the rejection of the logical Platonism they espouse. Firstly, the negation of logical objects in conjunction with the idea of bipolarity implies that logical propositions do not *say* anything about reality. Since the young Wittgenstein was far from thinking that logical propositions have nothing to do with reality, the only possibility left was to interpret them as *showing* certain aspects of reality.¹⁵ Secondly, the idea of bipolarity does not license the existence of genuine propositions about necessary features of things, since such features cannot be represented by contingent statements. Therefore, Wittgenstein came to regard the propositions of Russell's theory of types as *unsinnig*. He naturally moved to argue that what they try to express

¹⁴ According to Anscombe, Wittgenstein's 'picture theory and theory of truth functions are one and the same' (Anscombe 1996: 81).

¹⁵ If logic neither says nor shows anything about reality, then it cannot be 'a mirror-image of the world' (6.13).

cannot be said but only shown. A similar line of reasoning forced him to apply the notion of showing to matters of ethics and aesthetics. Evidently, the propositions of the latter do not treat contingent states of affairs, and hence are not empirical in nature. Accordingly, values cannot be put into words—they can be only shown. Thus, it becomes evident that the idea of what cannot be said but only shown arise in close connection with the idea that the conditions under which a proposition can be meaningful are conditions under which it can be only empirically true or false. These two ideas represent different strands of the Tractarian notion of the limits of language, the latter of them—the idea of bipolarity—being the more fundamental. Certain features of reality cannot be said exactly because no a priori proposition can be meaningful.¹⁶

Most importantly, the *Tractatus* conception of philosophy stems also from the conviction that only empirical statements have a sense. Philosophical assertions are generally non-empirical and therefore cannot possibly be meaningful. The same holds for the propositions of the *Tractatus*. They are nonsensical, since they try to put into words necessary features of (some region of) reality, that is, something that cannot be said. Consequently, philosophy should not propound doctrines, as long as the latter purport to consist of assertions that have a sense.¹⁷ Philosophy is an activity (cf. 4.112).

All important views of the *Tractatus* arise from the idea of the necessary contingency of genuine propositions and at the same time serve to support it by building together a powerful philosophical system.¹⁸ But this is not to claim that his argumentation is circular. In fact, Wittgenstein gives independent reasons in support of the Tractarian conception of the

¹⁶ This brings to light the proper relations between the Tractarian idea of the limits of language, the idea of bipolarity, and the idea of the bounds of sense.

¹⁷ This is why Wittgenstein states that ‘philosophy is not a body of doctrine’ (4.112). But this does not imply that he rejects the ‘doctrines’ of the *Tractatus*, since they are expressed (indicated) by nonsensical propositions. The use of quote marks does not indicate agreement with the New Readers’ view that the *Tractatus* eventually abandons all conceptions developed within its body. Rather, it does justice to the fact that Wittgenstein used the word *doctrine* to refer to a body of *meaningful* assertions.

¹⁸ Notably, it was Wittgenstein himself who wrote in a letter to Ludwig Ficker that the *Tractatus*’ ideas form a system (cf. Wittgenstein 1969: 32).

bounds of sense. To begin with, logical atomism plays a crucial role here. According to Wittgenstein, propositions have a sense only if they say how things stand,¹⁹ i.e. something about certain entities. Now, the basic entities of which empirical reality consists (cf. 5.5561) are such that there cannot exist necessary states of affairs. This is the point of Wittgenstein's logical atomism. Since the final constituents of reality are simple objects, and no simple object is necessarily connected with other objects, there are only contingent states of affairs. Hence, meaningful propositions are only about contingent states of affairs. For this reason they cannot be necessary and a priori.

But the fact that there are only contingent states of affairs does not imply that there are only contingent properties and relations. On the contrary, Wittgenstein explicitly states that there are internal (necessary) properties and relations (cf. 4.122, 4.123, 4.124). Why then is it impossible to speak meaningfully about them?—Well, there are two important reasons for this. The first is Wittgenstein's (implicit) distinction between entities and non-entities. Simple objects, states of affairs, and facts are entities, whereas logical forms, internal properties and relations, and ethical values are not entities. The other reason is Wittgenstein's semantic realism, that is, the view that the meanings of words are extra-linguistic entities. However, before explaining its role in Wittgenstein's early philosophy, I'd like to discuss briefly the main reasons for the non-realist interpretation of the *Tractatus* that was advanced by Ishiguro 1989 and Winch 1992. They reject the view that according to the *Tractatus* the meanings of names are extra-linguistic objects. Their reading rests mainly on Wittgenstein's view that 'in logical syntax the meaning of a sign should never play a role' (3.33) and his claim that 'only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have meaning.' (3.3) But it seems to me that their arguments are unconvincing. By my lights, they arise out of (1)

¹⁹ In section 4.5 Wittgenstein says: 'The general form of a proposition is: This is how things stand.'

misunderstanding of the emergence of Wittgenstein's notion of logical syntax and (2) misinterpretation of some key passages in the *Tractatus*.

Not surprisingly, Wittgenstein's conception of logical syntax is bound up with the idea of bipolarity. According to Wittgenstein, the rules of logical syntax cannot be laid down by propositions that mention the meaning of signs (cf. 3.33), for such propositions would be both meaningful and a priori,²⁰ and thus not bipolar by their nature.²¹ Therefore, logical syntax is to be established 'without mentioning the meaning of a sign' (3.33). One can do this by describing the symbols in language and the propositions that are characterized by them. How the description of symbols proceeds is, for Wittgenstein, unessential (cf. 3.317).

In the sections of the *Tractatus* where Wittgenstein presents his alternative to Russell's theory of types (see 3.31-3.331) he does not speak of the logical syntax *per se*. As a matter of fact, he speaks of the logical syntax of language as established by logicians. This interpretation is confirmed by Wittgenstein's statement in section 3.33 that logical syntax may presuppose *only* the description of expressions. Clearly, Wittgenstein does not mean that the logical syntax *per se* arise out of our description of symbols, since (1) 'logic is transcendental' (6.13), (2) 'all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order' (5.5563), and (3) the existence of symbols that are described indicates the existence of logical syntax. The logical syntax that presupposes the description of symbols is not the logical syntax that governs these symbols. Apparently, the former is only a mirror of the latter. It seems to me that one of the main arguments in favour of the non-realist reading of the *Tractatus* stems from a conflation of these two meanings of 'logical syntax'. In the first meaning, logical syntax is not grounded in the meanings of the expressions which description it

²⁰ A proposition that mentions the meaning of a sign does not describe a contingent state of affairs. Therefore, it cannot be empirical.

²¹ This partly explains why Russell's theory of types consists of nonsensical propositions (cf. 3.331).

presupposes. But I see no good reason to think that the same holds for the logical syntax *per se*.

As regards the dictum that a name has meaning only in the nexus of a proposition, it is of crucial importance to understand why Wittgenstein had adopted it. To say that Wittgenstein had taken it over from Frege is not to explain how it fits with the overall philosophy of the *Tractatus*. If we are to understand the role it plays in Wittgenstein's early conception, we have to draw the consequences of its rejection and see how they contradict his fundamental ideas. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of a name is the object it stands for (cf. 3.203). In order to know the object, one must know its internal properties (cf. 2.01231), that is, its logical form (cf. Glock 1996: 189). Thus, the external properties of the object play no role in the naming of the latter. However, there are objects that have the same logical form (cf. 2.0233). Hence, a name could stand for an object outside the context of a proposition only if this object has a unique logical form; otherwise, the name would stand for all objects that have the same logical form, which is impossible. But how could we know that a given object has a unique logical form? Arguably, we can know this neither a priori nor empirically, since objects may be countless. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that names can stand for objects only in the nexus of propositions. This assumption may be important in another respect as well. If a simple object cannot simultaneously appear in different states of affairs,²² and if it could be named outside the context of a proposition, then all elementary propositions that contain its name would be logically related, for they could not be true at the same time. However, the truth-function theory is not in a position to account for the existence of logical relations between elementary propositions. According to the *Tractatus*, elementary propositions are independent. If they were not, then the logic of truth functions would not exhaust the logic of language, and hence would not imply the contingency of meaningful

²² The *Tractatus* is unclear on this point.

propositions. Consequently, the context principle fits in with Wittgenstein's theory of truth functions and the idea of bipolarity.²³

My contention is that Wittgenstein's conception of the essential contingency of meaningful statements is ultimately grounded in *Tractatus*' ontology and semantic realism. But why is the view that the meanings of descriptive words are extra-linguistic entities so important for the *Tractatus*' critique of metaphysics? How does this help us understand the roots of Wittgenstein's early conception of the limits of language? Well, I have already pointed out that internal properties and relations are not entities. Consequently, a meaningful proposition about internal features of (some region of) reality would consist of descriptive words which meanings are not entities. Since this is impossible, necessary properties and relations cannot be said.

If this interpretation is true, atomistic ontology and semantic realism underlie the *Tractatus* notion of the limits of language. Those readings that reject Wittgenstein's commitment to logical atomism and semantic realism leave his rejection of the possibility of meaningful metaphysical utterances hanging in the air. This holds especially for the 'resolute' readings of the *Tractatus*.

2.3. The 'Riddle' of the *Tractatus*

For the proponents of the New Wittgenstein, the *Tractatus* aims to get us to see that all aforementioned 'doctrines' are illusions that inevitably implode, since nonsensical propositions cannot indicate anything but are mere gibberish. However, there are many problems with this interpretation.²⁴ A major weakness of the New Reading is that it cannot explain the main points of the *Tractatus*' critique of traditional philosophy, namely (1) that 'most of the propositions and questions to be

²³ According to Ian Proops, the context principle is also bound up with Wittgenstein's view of logical syntax (cf. Proops 2001: 163-181).

²⁴ For my part, I find Hacker's critique of the New Reading devastating (see Hacker 2003: 1-23; Crary & Read: 353-88).

found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical' (4.003), and (2) that meaningful metaphysical utterances are impossible (6.53). Clearly, to show that most propositions of the *Tractatus* are mere gibberish is not to show that *all* metaphysical utterances are nonsensical. There is a gap here that the 'resolute' readers of early Wittgenstein cannot possibly bridge. The New Wittgensteinians do not elucidate his reasons to claim that *no* metaphysical statement can be meaningful. This is not an accident since they take Wittgenstein as jettisoning the theories of the *Tractatus*, and thus the conditions of sense that it lays down. However, it is hopeless to try to show that *all* metaphysical propositions—past, present, and future—are nonsensical without indicating that the conditions under which genuine propositions about reality are possible are conditions under which a priori propositions about reality are impossible. From the so-called austere conception of nonsense that the New Wittgensteinians attribute to the *Tractatus* does not follow that nonsensicality is a characteristic feature of metaphysical utterances. It remains unclear why exactly metaphysical questions *cannot* be meaningful. Wittgenstein's view of the *impossibility* of making meaningful metaphysical assertions needs explanation that the New Wittgensteinians cannot provide without jettisoning their own therapeutic readings of the *Tractatus*. In my view, they are wrong to think that their interpretation better suits the penultimate remark of the work where Wittgenstein says:

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

For my part, I think that the important question here is: How can the reader recognize that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical? I have already argued that there is only one possible way for the reader to do this: she has to recognize that they do not satisfy certain necessary

conditions for meaningful speaking. But how could she understand these conditions? Well, there are roughly two possibilities. The first is to assume (1) that some propositions in the *Tractatus* have a sense and (2) that they express the conditions that its nonsensical propositions fail to fulfil. On this interpretation, one is able to recognize that most of the *Tractatus*' propositions are nonsensical by understanding its meaningful propositions. As far as I can see, this is the only way to make sense of those therapeutic readings of Wittgenstein's early work, which do not explicitly deny that the *Tractatus* deals with conditions of sense. Nevertheless, I find this alternative for interpreting the *Tractatus* unsustainable. Meaningful propositions that state necessary conditions for meaningful speaking cannot possibly be empirical, at least from the perspective of Wittgenstein's demarcation between philosophy and science. Hence, they must be a priori. But if the *Tractatus* asserts the existence of meaningful a priori propositions, then why does section 6.53 reject the possibility of meaningful metaphysical statements? On what grounds could Wittgenstein distinguish between a priori propositions about the conditions of sense and metaphysical propositions about the conditions of Being or knowledge? By my lights, no satisfactory answers to these questions are to be found in the *Tractatus*. The reason is simple: the early Wittgenstein is not the later Wittgenstein, that is, he does not espouse a grammatical view of a priori propositions. Certainly, all attempts to find in the *Tractatus* a grammatical conception of a priori propositions would be futile. No passage in Wittgenstein's early writings speaks in favour of such an interpretation. Consequently, the conditions of sense that metaphysical utterances do not satisfy are to be elucidated by the nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus*. To understand the author of the *Tractatus* is to grasp the conditions of sense that his propositions purport to indicate and thus to recognize that the latter violate them because of being non-empirical assertions about (some region of) reality. However, how is it possible to grasp necessary

conditions for meaningful speaking by reading nonsensical propositions? This sounds like a riddle but it is not. Wittgenstein did not think that the *Tractatus*' propositions are internally related to the conditions of sense they try to indicate. Hence, he did not hold that any (intelligent) reader can understand these conditions. Taken on their own, the propositions of the *Tractatus* do not convey anything. Otherwise, the *Tractatus* would be a textbook that reveals to anyone who reads it the conditions of sense. Notably, Wittgenstein explicitly says the opposite: the *Tractatus* 'is not a textbook' (Wittgenstein 1974a: 3). How, then, do Wittgenstein's propositions convey the conditions of sense? As a matter of fact, the answer is given by the very first sentence in the Preface: 'Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts.' Wittgenstein does not claim that any (intelligent) reader of the nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* is capable of understanding what they try to indicate. On the contrary, only those readers that have had his thoughts, or similar thoughts, are likely to recognize what Wittgenstein's nonsensical propositions gesture at. Hence, the propositions of the *Tractatus* are not illuminating (elucidating) on their own, but only, or mainly, for readers who have already gained some insight in the limits of language. In themselves, they are neither illuminating nor plain nonsense.²⁵

²⁵ 'Therapeutic readers' could raise the objection that the proposed interpretation admits the existence of ineffable thoughts (insights), whereas Wittgenstein states in section 4 of the *Tractatus* that 'a thought is a proposition with a sense'. My brief response is that Wittgenstein might use the word 'thought' in two different ways. In section 4, it refers to thoughts about contingent states of affairs, properties, and relations. But there can be also thoughts (insights) about internal properties and relations, logical forms, and ethical values. For example, although one can understand that it is an internal property of 1 to be a number one cannot put it into words. Further, in the Preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein says that he finds the truth of his thoughts unassailable and definitive. Since for Wittgenstein only an a priori truth can be unassailable and definitive, and since an a priori true thought cannot possibly be a proposition with a sense (cf. 6.31), it is not too much to say that the *Tractatus* asserts the existence of ineffable insights.

3. Wittgenstein's Critique of Traditional Philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations*

After his return to Cambridge, Wittgenstein came to reject many of the central ideas of his early philosophy. However, he did not dismiss the view that constitutes the core of his critique of metaphysics, namely that meaningful propositions about reality cannot be a priori.²⁶ So, let us see how he substantiates the idea of the bounds of sense in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

3.1. Wittgenstein's New Conception of A Priori Propositions

The later Wittgenstein came to new understanding of necessary/a priori propositions. He gave up the Tractarian view that only contingent propositions can be meaningful. His new conception of meaning as use implies that non-empirical propositions can also have a sense. For example, the propositions of logic and mathematics are a priori but meaningful, for they have use in various language games. However, Wittgenstein maintained his early conviction that only contingent propositions could say something about reality. Therefore, he regarded all non-empirical meaningful propositions as grammatical in nature. They do not say anything about reality but express only rules for the use of certain expressions. Therefore, all statements that claim to be both about reality and a priori true are either disguised grammatical propositions or just gibberish.²⁷

Wittgenstein came to espouse this 'grammatical' view of a priori propositions soon after his return to philosophy in 1929. Initially, his main argument was his verificationism: assertions about reality are

²⁶ On 05.11.1929 Wittgenstein wrote in his notebooks: 'Alles was nötig ist damit unsere Sätze (über Wirklichkeit) Sinn haben ist, dass unsere Erfahrung in irgendeinem Sinne mit ihnen eher übereinstimmt oder eher nicht übereinstimmt.' (Wittgenstein 1994: 118)

²⁷ My interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of grammatical propositions is indebted to Baker & Hacker 1985.

meaningful only if they allow verification (cf. Wittgenstein 1994: 84). Wittgenstein thought that it belongs to the grammar of all statements about reality that they are liable to verification. Gradually he began to consider this argument insufficient to establish the impossibility of meaningful philosophical assertions. For one thing, he became aware of the lurking difficulties of verificationism. For another, he realized that semantic realism to which he adhered in the *Tractatus* was in tension with his grammatical interpretation of a priori propositions. If non-logical words have for their meaning entities, then all meaningful propositions are about entities. Given that this is so, it would be more reasonable to assert that a priori propositions represent necessary relations between entities than to claim that they state rules for the use of expressions. A further implication of semantic realism is that the rules for the use of words may be derived from the entities that are meanings of those words, i.e. that grammatical propositions may be grounded in a priori propositions about entities.²⁸ This would mean that Wittgenstein's grammatical account of a priori propositions implies the possibility of what it seeks to reject, namely the possibility of meaningful metaphysical assertions. Following this line of thought, Wittgenstein came to realise that his insight about the bounds of sense is in fact incompatible with the view that the meanings of non-logical words are entities. As a result, he rejected semantic realism. This proved to be the most decisive step he took towards his later philosophy. From this moment on, he began to work out entirely new arguments in favour of the view that a priori propositions cannot say anything about reality.

3.2. The Semantic Presuppositions of Philosophical Theories

If I am not mistaken, no influential interpretation of *Philosophical Investigations* explains how Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy

²⁸ This will be explained in detail in the next section.

relates to his rule-following considerations. This lacuna in the literature is largely due to the fact that Wittgenstein did not explicitly state the semantic presuppositions of philosophical theorizing, which he succeeded to reveal in the course of his critique of semantic realism. He became aware (1) that metaphysically used words purport to stand for (abstract) entities, (2) that the rules for their use have to be derived from the entities for which they stand, and (3) that these rules have to be established and followed by mental acts. Unfortunately, Wittgenstein did not state explicitly the semantic presuppositions of philosophical theories. This is why the interpreters of the *Philosophical Investigations* fail to relate Wittgenstein's view of the nonsensicality of philosophical assertions to his grammatical discussion of rule-following. Thus, they fail to make it clear that the so-called rule-following argument is, in fact, Wittgenstein's metaphysical language argument.

Why did Wittgenstein not formulate explicitly the semantic presuppositions of philosophical theories that he came to realize? Well, perhaps he thought that they are relatively obvious. Actually, they belong to the 'essence' (grammar) of philosophical contentions. As far as the latter claim to be a priori, they are not to be compared with reality. For one thing, comparison with reality requires experience. For another thing, only contingent propositions need to be compared with reality. For that reason, the truth of a priori propositions about reality is to be established only by understanding (and analyzing) the meanings of the constituent words (cf. Wittgenstein 1989: 96). But what condition must these meanings satisfy for a priori propositions to say something about reality? Or, to put it more precisely: what must be the relation between the meanings of words and the rules for their use so that a priori propositions can say what and how things are? Obviously, if the rules for the use of words are constitutive for their meanings, then a priori propositions would amount to grammatical propositions, that is, would be norms of representation. Hence, a priori propositions can say something about

reality only if the meanings of the constituent words are primary in relation to the rules for their use. But they could be primary only if they are extra-linguistic entities. Hence, non-empirical claims can say what and how things are (or ought to be) only if (some of) the words they consist of have for their meanings (abstract) extra-linguistic entities. Otherwise, they would be either nonsensical propositions or grammatical ones. Therefore, given (1) that philosophical claims are non-empirical and (2) that non-empirical claims can 'reach' reality only if the meanings of the words they involve are extra-linguistic entities, philosophical theorizing is bound up with semantic realism.

The first two presuppositions of philosophical claims are two sides of the same coin: the primacy of the meanings of words in relation to the rules for their use. Clearly, the correct use of a word which meaning is supposed to be an (abstract) entity must be guided by the entity itself. The combinatorial possibilities of the latter must be mirrored in the grammar of the word that stands for it. Accordingly, the rules for the use of the word are to be derived from its meaning. But how can this be accomplished? The answer of this question gives us the third semantic presupposition of philosophical theories. A given entity can determine the grammar of the word that stands for it only if it is given to the language user's mind. However, it can be given to the latter only by mental acts. Thus, a priori propositions can say something about reality only if the rules for the use of the words involved can be established and followed by mental acts. This condition belongs to the grammar of philosophical assertions.

3.3. Wittgenstein's Metaphysical Language Argument

It is not difficult to see that most of Wittgenstein's remarks on family resemblances, language games and rule-following are designed to show that the grammatical (semantic) presuppositions of philosophical theories

are in fact grammatical fictions. To be sure, the remarks on rule-following play the most important role in Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy. Wittgenstein was aware that the notions of family resemblances and language games provide only a grammatically correct picture of the working of our language. He knew very well that they do not make clear that metaphysically used words cannot possibly stand for abstract entities or that rules cannot be established only by mental acts. Therefore, the burden of showing that there are limits of language,²⁹ that is, that meaningful philosophical assertions are impossible falls on the rule-following remarks. They accomplish this task by clarifying the grammar of 'following a rule', e.g. that rules cannot be established and followed (only) by mental acts, that following a rule is a matter of practice, etc. Consequently, the point of Wittgenstein's criticism of traditional philosophy is not so much that the metaphysical use of words contravenes the rules of their ordinary use, but rather that the metaphysical use of words only apparently follows rules. To be sure, the violation of the rules for the ordinary use of words is not a sufficient condition for making meaningless statements, since it is compatible with the possibility of following other rules. One of the points of the rule-following argument is exactly to make plain that this possibility is a grammatical fiction.

According to Wittgenstein, meaningful speaking involves following of rules for the use of words. He had good reasons to think so. Language would be impossible if words were used in an arbitrary manner; certainly, stability in the use of linguistic expressions is a necessary condition for meaningful speaking. However, it cannot be due to naturally motivated links between words and objects. With few rare exceptions, linguistic signs have an arbitrary character, as the existence of mutually translatable

²⁹ In rejecting both the principle of bipolarity and semantic realism, Wittgenstein gave up much of the Tractarian notion of the limits of language, e.g. that there are ineffable features of reality. As a result, Wittgenstein's later notion of the limits of language amounts to the idea that a priori propositions cannot say anything about reality, that is, to the idea of the bounds of sense.

languages shows. Therefore, in order to be relatively stable, the use of words has to follow rules.

The possibility of language depends on the possibility of following a rule. The possibility of a meaningful metaphysical language depends on the possibility of following a rule by mental acts. Wittgenstein's remarks purport to show that the latter possibility is essentially a grammatical impossibility. In fact, Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations* begins with the grammatical notion of language as a rule-governed activity and concludes with the grammatical remark that following of a rule is a matter of practice. Thus it aims to make it clear that the conditions under which a proposition can say something about reality are conditions under which it cannot be a priori. Since this is the linchpin of Wittgenstein's later conception of the limits of language, the rule-following argument could also be labelled the limits of language argument.

More broadly conceived, the rule-following considerations aim to elucidate the autonomy of grammar. There is much truth in Baker and Hacker's statement that the view of the autonomy of grammar is 'Wittgenstein's most fundamental principle' (cf. Baker & Hacker 1985: 164). For one thing, the autonomy of grammar means that rules cannot be grounded in meanings, i.e. that a priori propositions cannot say anything about reality. For another thing, the autonomy of grammar implies that the understanding of grammar does not depend on scientific or philosophical theorizing. Thus it guarantees that the critique of traditional philosophy can be free of scientific and metaphysical assumptions, i.e. that therapeutic philosophy can be coherent. To put it briefly, the autonomy of grammar implies both the impossibility of successful traditional philosophy and the possibility of successful post-traditional philosophy. But does it imply the possibility of successful *arguments* against the possibility of a priori propositions about reality?

3.4. Arguments, Grammar, and Conditions of Sense

Is the rule-following argument indeed an argument? In what sense is it an argument? Does it establish the truth of a thesis? There has been much talk about Wittgenstein's arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations*, but little talk about their nature.³⁰ To be sure, they are not intended as arguments in support of *theses*. Wittgenstein does not argue for empirical or philosophical theses, since he claims to be neither a scientist nor a traditional philosopher. Perhaps, then, he argues for grammatical theses? But there is no evidence that Wittgenstein would accept the notion of 'grammatical theses'. It is of the essence of theses to say that things are so-and-so, whereas grammatical propositions only state norms of representation (of things), and do not say how things are. Thus, in an important sense, there is no such thing as a grammatical thesis. Yet, in drawing an analogy between the grammatical propositions in philosophy and the grammatical propositions in mathematics,³¹ one may be tempted to claim that the former can be deduced from or justified by other grammatical propositions. Indeed, if it is possible to prove grammatical propositions in logic and mathematics, then why not to argue for grammatical propositions in philosophy? Why should philosophy be so different from logic and mathematics, if all they are, in a certain sense, 'grammatical' disciplines?

These questions have to be answered if we are to understand the way in which the later Wittgenstein is trying to elucidate the bounds of sense. To begin with, philosophy is not a science of grammar, empirical or a priori. Therefore, it does not explain or justify grammatical propositions by other (grammatical) propositions. Rather, it only describes the grammar of certain expressions in order to dissolve

³⁰ Backer and Hacker are an exception, since their notion of synoptic descriptions sheds important light on the character of Wittgenstein's 'grammatical' arguments (see Baker & Hacker 1985: 23).

³¹ I am indebted to Adrian Moore for drawing my attention to this analogy.

philosophical problems. Philosophy should not deduce or explain grammatical propositions.

Still, this explanation does not get to the root of the difference between philosophy and a priori disciplines. The reason for it is that logic and mathematics create rather than simply express norms of representation. They add new norms of representation by deducing grammatical propositions from other grammatical propositions. For instance, most mathematical propositions do not state rules that have been followed prior to them. Rather, they constitute rules. By contrast, philosophy only describes the grammar of certain expressions for the purpose of curing philosophical diseases. It does not invent norms of representation. Surely, the reason why metaphysical utterances are nonsensical cannot be that they do not obey rules invented by Wittgenstein himself. His remarks purport to make plain the conditions of sense, and not to form them. That is to say, they claim to elucidate already accepted norms of representation, and not to add new ones.

Given this difference between grammatical propositions in philosophy and mathematics, it makes no sense to assume that Wittgenstein's arguments are in favour of grammatical (or conceptual) theses. Actually, Wittgenstein does not argue *that* to follow a rule is a practice, or *that* a private language is impossible. For one thing, there is no point in arguing for propositions that state pre-existing norms of representation, even were they implicit ones. For another thing, Wittgenstein does not try to make more complete the grammar of ordinary language by inferring new rules from already established ones (cf. PI §§ 132-133). Hence, his arguments are therapeutic. They serve therapeutic purposes: to destroy the grammatical illusions that lie at the heart of philosophical theorizing. Their function is to make more perspicuous those parts of the grammar of ordinary language that are (most likely to be) misunderstood by traditionally-minded philosophers.

The proposed interpretation of the central argument of the *Philosophical Investigations* has the merit that it relates Wittgenstein's remarks on philosophy to his remarks on rule-following. But does it really fit Wittgenstein's rejection of philosophical theorizing? Let us remember some of his famous pronouncements on philosophy:

'Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything' (PI §126)

'If one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.' (PI §128)

'In philosophy conclusions are not drawn. "But it must be like this!" is not a philosophical proposition. Philosophy only states what everyone admits.' (PI §599)

I have argued that this non-cognitive conception of philosophy does not hang in the air, as Soames thinks (cf. Soames 2003: 29-30), but is sustained by Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following. A possible objection is that the proposed reading succeeds in relating Wittgenstein's view of philosophy to his rule-following considerations only because it takes the latter as implying some non-trivial and, thus, debatable propositions (theses), e.g., that it is impossible to establish and follow rules solely by mental acts, and, more importantly, that a priori propositions cannot say anything about reality. Thus, the objection goes, it succeeds at the cost of rendering Wittgenstein's critique of philosophical theorizing inconsistent. For if his remarks imply non-trivial propositions, then they are nothing but disguised philosophical assertions.

Apparently, there are two reasons for regarding the aforementioned propositions as non-grammatical. Firstly, they seem to assert that something is impossible. Secondly, there is no agreement on their truth value, that is, they are debatable. Let us consider these reasons more closely. Wittgenstein would say that the first of them conflates

grammatical (or conceptual) and metaphysical impossibility. Notably, he explicitly says that it is not possible to follow a rule only once (see PI § 199) or to follow it *privatim* (cf. PI § 202). But in saying this, he does not assert a metaphysical impossibility. He claims that he does not advance non-trivial theses but makes remarks on the grammar of ‘following a rule’ (see PI § 199). Hence, he states a grammatical impossibility. By the same token, the impossibility of following rules only by mental acts is a conceptual one. It is expressed by the proposition that to follow a rule is a practice (PI § 202). This is not an empirical but a grammatical proposition. It does not describe a state of affairs; it is not contingently true or false. Rather, it states a norm of representation, and hence is necessary and non-empirical.

However, and here comes the second reason for questioning the proposed interpretation, how could it be a grammatical proposition, if it causes disagreement? It is a matter of fact that not all readers of Wittgenstein would agree that it is not possible to follow rules *privatim*. In my view, Wittgenstein would retort here that universal agreement on the truth of a proposition cannot be a necessary condition for its being a grammatical one. The fact that many philosophers are in the grip of grammatical fictions indicates that they regard certain grammatical propositions as saying how things stand and hence as debatable. This is the case with the debates between idealists, solipsists and idealists (cf. PI § 402). Being caught in grammatical illusions, they misinterpret grammatical propositions. Hence, the lack of consensus on grammatical propositions does not imply that they are (disguised) philosophical assertions.

In section 371 Wittgenstein says:

‘*Essence* is expressed by grammar.’ (PI § 371)

I think that it is not too much to say that the same holds for *necessary conditions*. In my view, Wittgenstein would say that the necessary conditions for following a rule are expressed by the grammar of

‘following a rule’. Indeed, he claims that the conditions of comparing a proposition with reality belong to grammar:

‘That one empirical proposition is true and another false is no part of grammar. What belongs to grammar are all the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. That is, all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense).’

(Wittgenstein 1974b: 88)

There are other pronouncements in his writings, which reveal that he makes (grammatical) use of the notion of condition. For instance, in a passage written around 1943-1944, which is cited by Baker and Hacker, Wittgenstein wrote:

‘Wie kann Übereinstimmung *Bedingung der Sprache* sein?(...)Fehlte die Übereinstimmung, d.h. könnten wir unsere Ausdrücke nicht zur Übereinstimmung bringen, so hörte damit das Phänomen der Verständigung + der Sprache auf.’

(See Baker & Hacker 1985: 7, my emphasis)

Given these remarks of Wittgenstein, it must be not surprising that he thought it possible to show by means of grammatical propositions that the metaphysical use of words cannot satisfy necessary conditions for following a rule, and hence for meaningful speaking. Indeed, if the impossibility of making a priori propositions about reality is grammatical, and not metaphysical, then why not to elucidate the limits of language by grammatical remarks?

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