

# The Leading Edge of Sense: Coming to understand in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Ian O'Loughlin  
Pacific University

## 1. A hypothesis

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein proposes a specific question, and responds with a clear, concrete example:

Can we understand two names without knowing whether they signify the same thing or two different things?—Can we understand a proposition in which two names occur without knowing whether their meaning is the same or different? Suppose I know the meaning of an English word and of a German word that means the same: then it is impossible for me to be unaware that they do mean the same; I must be capable of translating each into the other (TLP 4.243).

As this remark is an elaboration on §4.24, regarding names and his logical treatment thereof, one of his aims here is to go on to show how identity statements and other logical propositions lack sense. Although we will ultimately be interested in the larger context—§4.24 is an elaboration on §4.2, which describes the way that the sense of a proposition is grounded in possible states of affairs, and this in turn is an elaboration of §4, which characterizes the nature of thought—for present purposes let us set aside the question of logical propositions and take up Wittgenstein's hypothesis on its own terms: the hypothesis that intertranslation is necessarily *transparent*, that a speaker who knows both a word and its counterpart in another tongue cannot be unaware of their sameness.

On the face of it, this is false. Living in Nantes and learning French many years ago, I learned and used the word 'chercher', eventually remarking to a friend that it was akin to the English word 'search', but with the sense of the added preposition 'for' already present in the verb. I posited that there was no such word in English. My friend pointed out my error: the English word 'seek' is just this. As a native English speaker, I had perfect facility with 'seek', and could also use and understand 'chercher', and yet I was unaware of their intertranslation. My experience is not unique; any number of language learners have experienced similar revelations. If this is so, it seems that intertranslation is, at best, translucent rather than transparent.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is committed to the meaning of a word being exhausted by the set of sentences in which it can occur. He is also committed to our understanding of a word consisting in our facility with the determinate combinations it allows in depicting states of affairs.<sup>1</sup> Given these commitments, it seems to follow that intertranslation must be transparent to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Peach writes, "If an understanding of possible states of affairs is given with a knowledge of objects, or if all possible states of affairs are given with the objects themselves, then objects themselves are the only material necessary for generating and coming to understand possible states of affairs" (Peach 2007, 644).

speaker, since knowing a word just is knowing the possibilities already inherent in it, without remainder. If this transparency hypothesis is false, as it seems to be, we might be tempted to deny these Wittgensteinian commitments, to claim that our understanding of a word in part stems from some component above and beyond its articulations—a semantically robust Fregean *sense*, perhaps.

Alternatively, the Wittgensteinian might deny the examples, rejecting not only the *chercher* anecdote, but also all similar cases, as genuine cases of *knowing* the relevant words. It might be argued that the subject of such a revelation must also exhibit a mismatch in their possible deployments of the respective terms, or that apparent counterexamples only arise when the speaker's grasp of the terms fails to suffice for sensible articulations in the first place. In any case, if we can know *a priori* that understanding the terms in question amounts to understanding the combinatory possibilities inherent in them, then we can know that anyone who understands the same modal-grammatical extensions for two terms also understands their sameness of meaning.

However, there is a third option. I will argue that there are resources within the *Tractatus* that will allow us to make sense of coming to understand this sameness of meaning—to maintain a Tractarian view of understanding and language while also admitting counterexamples to Wittgenstein's transparency hypothesis. More generally, this will also serve as an illustration of a uniquely Tractarian model of what it is to come to understand something, to make sense out of something not previously understood.

## 2. Picturing to ourselves

How can we come to know something without already having the knowledge we seek before us? This is a version of an old puzzle, of course: Plato grappled with it in the *Meno*, pointing out what a difficulty it posed before proposing *anamnesis*, that we are always only remembering what we once knew, as a radical solution (Plato 2002, 81). The difficulty is especially acute within the Tractarian framework, since the limits drawn herein explicitly forbid additional *discoveries* in elements we already sensibly deploy:

If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs.  
(Every one of these possibilities must be part of the nature of the object.) A new possibility cannot be discovered later (TLP 2.0123).

Any element we can point to already contains all of its possible arrangements with other elements, and to understand this element, or any proposition of which it is a constituent, is to understand it as such.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that every possible combination must have been explicitly imagined, or every possible sentence voiced. A native speaker may hear for the first time the words 'the letters were in the piano' and understand them despite never having considered this scenario. Nonetheless, the hearer must already understand, in some sense, letters as things that can be inside of something, and pianos as things that can have something inside of them. If a hearer's understanding of the

---

<sup>2</sup> David Stern points out that this recipe for holism leads Wittgenstein to eventually give up logical atomism: "For if analysis leads to logically interrelated propositions, then logical atomism and the Tractarian conception of logically independent elementary propositions must be given up" (D. G. Stern 1996, 100). Lippitt and Hutto make a case for this process beginning in the *Tractatus* itself (Lippitt and Hutto 1998, 267).

elements did not already contain these potentialities, the hearer would be unable to make sense of the claim.

An object, in the *Tractatus*, is an element of possible states of affairs—nothing more, nothing less (TLP 2.01). We picture these states of affairs to ourselves, and picturing thus, whether propositionally or otherwise—just is thought (TLP 3). A thought, writes Wittgenstein, “is a proposition with sense” (TLP 4). Articulating this notion of sense, he writes, “the sense of a proposition is its agreement and disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs” (TLP 4.2), and the transparency hypothesis above is just an elaboration of this. The ability to think a word already requires familiarity with its logical space. Any thought about letters at all is already a thought about something that is possibly in a piano. We cannot know *whether* the letters are in the piano, of course, but we also cannot think of letters at all without also understanding them to be the kind of thing that might be in a piano. Any hearer who responded that they did not even realize that letters were the kind of thing that could be in a piano would thereby be demonstrating a deep misunderstanding of what it is to be a letter.

So on this Tractarian view of thought, we have, in an important sense, complete facility with the possibilities inherent in every term we use. Any proposition, no matter how simple, must “describe reality completely” (TLP 4.023), since understanding its constituent parts requires understanding the other possible combinations, the states of affairs, each may take part in. It is helpful here to read 2.012 and 2.013 together—as David G. Stern pointed out, the relationships between “sibling” remarks—those occurring in sequence at the same level, in the text—can be obscured by the linear presentation imposed on a distinctly nonlinear text (Stern 2016, 206). Attending to the tree structure, these are such a sequence:

In logic nothing is accidental: if a thing can occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself (TLP 2.012).

Each thing is, as it were, in a space of possible states of affairs. This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space (TLP 2.013).

That is, imagining anything is already imagining its possible occurrences in states of affairs. Sentences new to the hearer or thinker are simply connecting these elements in ways they had not yet been connected, though the possibilities for these arrangements were always already present in the elements. As Marie McGinn writes, “We see now that a picture depicts the particular possible state of affairs it does by instantiating one particular way of connecting its elements in structures. These structures represent possible arrangements of the things for which the elements stand” (McGinn 1999, 501). We inhabit the whole system of our understanding with every thought we express.

If this is all so, then it seems intertranslation must be transparent, since we cannot learn something of an element over and above its possible extensions. We can meet with states of affairs we had not yet considered involving any given element, but, since the possibility of these was already inherent, it is only the newness of the arrangement, the structure, which can strike us. Since two intertranslatable words do not offer us unconsidered arrangements, they cannot offer us anything new—we cannot fail to already know their intertranslatability.

Moreover, this is a particular implication of a more general limit to newness: our terms can be elucidated by examining unconsidered arrangements, but they cannot be fundamentally changed by this. Wittgenstein reiterates this when considering “primitive signs”:

The meanings of primitive signs can be explained by means of elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known (TLP 3.263).

On the Tractarian view, a sentence can only be understood if its constituents are in some sense already known, and that sense includes knowing all of the possible combinations availed by these. Wittgenstein is speaking of primitive signs in particular in TLP 3.263. Definable names are more complicated: When I hear, for example, “The genus to which blackberries belong is called *rubus*,” I need not already have any facility with the term ‘*rubus*’. However, the place for the named element must already be prepared in logical space in order for this to be sensible—the system of my understanding of the rest of the elements must already include this space. For elements of any kind, knowing their possibilities already is required to understand sentences that include them. The sense of a proposition inheres in the possible state of affairs it depicts, and so any arrangement of terms that violates the possibilities already present in the parts lacks sense. In Anscombe’s words:

Every genuine proposition picks out certain existences and non-existences of states of affairs, as a range within which the actual existences and non-existences of states of affairs are to fall. Something with the appearances of a proposition, but which does not do this, cannot really be saying anything: it is not a description of any reality (Anscombe 1959, 81).

So the limits are strict: the use of any terms that defies possibilities already known results in nonsense. If we understand anything at all, we also already understand everything that can be stated within our system—or we will, when confronted with a sentence. We can “learn”, on this picture, but we can only learn in one of two ways: (1) we can learn which sentences are true and false—that is, which states of affairs actually obtain—and (2) we can come to see the parts we already understand in configurations we had not yet considered.<sup>3</sup> Other varieties of newness are prohibited by virtue of lacking sense.

As Cora Diamond points out, this is a particular articulation of a theme that runs deep through much of Wittgenstein’s thought:

There is a guiding principle in Wittgenstein’s philosophical work, all of it: what you are talking about is given in how you talk about it. Change the logical features of how you talk about it and you change the subject, you are talking about something else (Diamond 2002, 170).

---

<sup>3</sup> Marie McGinn nicely articulates this process: Indeed, Wittgenstein himself is engaged in this very activity, encouraging us to understand pictures and models anew: The distinctions prompt us, rather, to see a certain order in what lies on the surface and open to view. The effect of the remarks is not that we now know something about pictures which we did not know before and which Wittgenstein has dug out by empirical enquiry, but that we look at pictures with a new clarity of vision. The value of the distinctions depends entirely upon their ability to induce this sense of clarified vision in us. Without this change of perception, the distinctions connect with nothing whatsoever. It is in just this sense that Wittgenstein’s remarks are to be understood as elucidatory: their utility and significance are exhausted by their power to get the reader to see something familiar and everyday in a new light (McGinn 1999, 502).

Since the logical features of even the simplest or most complex term are (all) already present in our sensible use of it, any apparent revelation that involves the “same” term must actually just be considering something else. Worse, this “something else” can have no place in our present system, since in order to understand it we would have already have to have been familiar with its possible configurations. The *Meno* paradox only deemed it impossible to come to know something new, but the Tractarian version of this paradox makes is stronger yet: we cannot even consider something new, since anything beyond the limits of our present grammar is senseless.

At this point it may appear that the only recourse is to accept this as a *reductio* of the Tractarian characterization of thought. Humans do learn, and our learning is not limited to discovering which sentences are true and arranging familiar elements in new ways to get clearer views of them. We also change our concepts, foundationally. We sometimes gradually discover that two words we know are intertranslatable, and we sometimes expand the system of our thought so that the concepts we once wielded come to have new logical features. However, these can be reconciled with the Tractarian picture, and they can be reconciled—and insightfully illuminated—by use of resources within the *Tractatus* itself. To see how this is so, we must briefly turn to the scholarship on how we can, in good Wittgensteinian fashion, engage with nonsense

### 3. Inhabiting nonsense

There is a significant amount of work on Wittgenstein and learning in general, although much of it is focused on Wittgenstein’s later work (Williams 1994; Peters and Stickney 2017; Nelson 2009; Winch 2002). The debates that will be most useful in this case, however, are those concerning how to engage with nonsense, or otherwise, in the *Tractatus* itself. A rich debate has arisen regarding what we are to make of the reflexive nonsense claims in the work, especially stemming from the penultimate section:

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

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright (TLP 6.54).

These arguments are exegetical, focused on how to interpret the propositions put forth in the *Tractatus*, given that the author himself seems to claim that these lack sense. Debates over whether to read the *Tractatus* resolutely, accepting the apparent claims within as nonsense, utilize resources from Wittgenstein to support opposed frameworks. One issue—among others—is whether and how we can usefully engage with these propositions if they genuinely lack sense.

For our present purposes, we will bracket the exegetical question about the contents of the *Tractatus* itself.<sup>4</sup> However, in developing Tractarian approaches to nonsense in order to explain how scholars can engage with *Tractarian* nonsense, these scholars have also developed a useful framework for how we might approach *any* concepts and systems that do not cohere with the grammar of our

---

<sup>4</sup> Since I am at least accepting several propositions from the *Tractatus* as sensible and proposed, I am probably tacitly accepting at least a reading that is not among the most resolute. I hope, however, that the present project would be of value to readers of various strategies.

thought. If there is a method for engaging meaningfully with someone else's nonsense, then there is good reason to think that this method may also be helpful for meaningfully engaging with our own.

In considering someone who has uttered nonsense, Cora Diamond articulates the problem thus:

When you understand someone who utters nonsense, you are not, on the one hand, remaining as it were outside his thought and describing what goes on from the point of view of empirical psychology. But, on the other hand, you are not inside his thought as you are when he makes sense and you understand what he says, because there is no such internal understanding, there is no thought that such-and-such to understand (Diamond 2002, 157).

The parallel with the Tractarian *Meno* paradox is striking, even if Diamond's target is nonsense uttered by another, rather than how we might come to see our own understanding as nonsense. Appreciating the strict limits of sense laid down in the *Tractatus*, Diamond frames this problem acutely: it seems we cannot engage meaningfully with nonsense while outside it, and we cannot be inside it either. She outlines a way forward, even acknowledging that we cannot fully inhabit this nonsense from the inside. Diamond writes, "There is, as I said, no inside. But what it is to understand a person who utters nonsense is to go as far as one can with the idea that there is (Diamond 2002, 157). On Diamond's reading, the *Tractatus* allows and invites us to imaginatively inhabit nonsense from the inside, even when, strictly speaking, this is impossible.

Curiously, she also writes—later in the same piece, and presumably responding to Peter Hacker, who has argued against the resolute reading in part by delineating varieties of nonsense (Hacker 2000)—that "the *Tractatus* does not recognize any categories of nonsense, good nonsense and bad, illuminating nonsense and dark murky muddle" (Diamond 2002, 160). If we are to "go as far as one can" toward inhabiting the system presented by some token nonsense, it is difficult to see how it could not be the case that any given bit of nonsense might be better or worse for this than another. Whether or not these make for *categories* of nonsense, it must be that there are important *differences* among instances of nonsense in at least this: some will be significantly more susceptible to this imaginative inhabiting. On Diamond's own suggestion, we can and should try to go as far as we can with nonsense:

Recall the important *Tractatus* point that when I ascribe a thought or belief to someone, I must use an intelligible sentence of a language I understand. And if I understand a person who utters nonsense, I enter imaginatively into the seeing of it as sense, I as it were become the person who thinks he thinks it. I treat that person's nonsense in imagination as if I took it to be an intelligible sentence of a language I understand, *something I find in myself the possibility of meaning* (Diamond 2002, 165).

It is implausible that every instance of nonsense will equally allow us to find in ourselves the possibility of meaning. If in order to meaningfully engage with something that lacks sense we must imagine it in as sensible order as we can, then those nonsenses that share more with our own, sensible, system of understanding will be those with which we more easily and meaningfully engage.

Danièle Moyal-Sharrock criticizes Diamond's response to Hacker's distinction among nonsenses, and points out that Diamond's stark picture of nonsense precludes meaningful engagement with perspectives other than our own, writing, "if Tractarian remarks are unadulterated nonsense, how then are we to understand at all what we are to reject?" (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 150).

Moyal-Sharrock goes on to defend a distinction between utter nonsense and articulable, well-formed sentences that lack sense, in the service of reading the declared “nonsense” of the *Tractatus* “without having to either mystify or reject its contents” (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 173). Moyal-Sharrock urges a reading of the *Tractatus* which invokes shades of nonsense, allowing us to discriminate among thoughts that lack sense, and to understand some of these—such as those in her own sights: the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself—as particularly helpful and imaginable.

While Moyal-Sharrock makes a good case for this intermediary reading,<sup>5</sup> our present interest does not concern assessments of the status of the “resolute” readings, or otherwise, of the *Tractatus*. Our primary interest is not in how a reader can understand the apparent nonsense in the *Tractatus* itself, but rather in how a thinker can understand their own nonsense—how within the Tractarian framework one might have a genuine revelation, understanding something not previously understood, revising logical space itself. Moyal-Sharrock, Diamond, Hacker, and others have, as a product of their disagreement, collaborated to build a process by which this is possible: in order to engage with what is beyond the limits of our sensible structures, we must enter into nonsense imaginatively, and this will be most effective when said nonsense is near to our own good sense. This change of logical features *is* a change of subject, but intrapersonally it constitutes a change of subject in two senses, since the whole of logical space—which just is the world of the subject—is implicated in the use of any single sentence. As Wittgenstein writes, “A proposition can determine only one place in logical space: nevertheless the whole of logical space must already be given by it” (TLP 3.42). If we can treat our own confusions as nonsense we can imaginatively enter into, then perhaps we can break the *Meno* stalemate otherwise suggested by Tractarian limits of sense.

#### 4. Changing subjects

A starting point comes from the same family of debates. Moyal-Sharrock also draws on the work of Jonathan Weiss, who writes of the imaginative semi-understanding that allows us to make sense of the *Tractatus*, despite its own claims that its propositions lack sense:

But how exactly is this (positive) imaginative activity possible? How is it that I am able to imaginatively let myself feel the attractiveness of an illusion of philosophical sense, when, as in the case of Wittgenstein, I am not myself ensnared by such an illusion? ... After all, it would seem that empathic understanding, imaginative identification (especially with respect to an illusion of sense) would require at a minimum some common ground, some kernel of shared experience with which to identify. This is precisely the point. Such a vicarious projection does not require one's previous wholesale implication in the very illusion into which one projects oneself. Rather, it only requires some significant 'kernel' of shared experience. (Weiss 2001, 138).

Weiss is also discussing the possibility of making sense of the particular nonsense that is the propositions of the *Tractatus*, responding to Diamond and other resolute readers, but his formulation

---

<sup>5</sup> The *causis belli* is what Wittgenstein means when he says, in the *Tractatus*, that his own propositions are nonsense. Both camps, I contend, have got it wrong: they fail to see that Wittgenstein's use of 'nonsense' is discriminatory, not pejorative, and this has led them both to consider the work as self-repudiating (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, 147).

of this imaginative process is particularly well suited to intrapersonal shifts of sense: we cannot enter into nonsense wholesale, but we can project ourselves onto a system that fails to cohere provided that there is a shared kernel between the two perspectives. To make new sense of something, for ourselves, offers two perspectives that share much.

On this imaginative inhabiting model, we as readers of the *Tractatus* can meaningfully engage with the propositions therein by entering into the perspective offered by these as though they are sensible, by going as far as we can in imagining them to have sense. Be that as it may, I want to suggest that this model has also offered us a fruitful way to understand possibilities for conceptual change more broadly. If there are Wittgensteinian reasons for a process of semi-understanding those propositions without sense even though, strictly speaking, they cannot be utilizing the elements of our thought—and *Tractatus* scholarship from disagreeing authors has shown that there are such reasons—then we have the tools to find our way out of the Tractarian *Meno* paradox with which we began.

This despite the fact that Wittgenstein is explicit about the impossibility of certain varieties of newness:

If I know an object I also know all its possible occurrences in states of affairs.  
(Every one of these possibilities must be part of the nature of the object.) A new  
possibility cannot be discovered later (TLP 2.0123).

We *cannot* discover a new possibility in the same object; as Diamond pointed out, an object with different logical features is a change of subject. The objects of our understanding are always already complete, containing as they do the whole of our system within them. Our thoughts have sense, and having sense they are comprised of elements whose possible combinations complete the logical space of our comprehension. A new possibility cannot be discovered later, and a new object or element cannot be discovered later—only a whole system can be discovered to have sense.

This is reminiscent of much later remarks by the author of the *Tractatus*: Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*, “when we first begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)” (Wittgenstein 1972, 141), but, as we have seen, the machinery for such epistemic holism is present in the *Tractatus*. Indeed, although speculative, we might read the preface of the *Tractatus* itself as suggesting just this, when Wittgenstein writes that “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 2003, 3). The addition of ‘at least similar thoughts’ here might be puzzling, but if we can only come to understand a new logical space by being able to imaginatively inhabit it from one which shares much with it, then any system that will successfully rework our conceptions can only be approached by those with perspectives near to it.

This kind of conceptual revision is reminiscent of a Kuhnian paradigm shift, but it need not be thoroughly revolutionary in nature. Indeed, a straightforward example of this shift of sense might be found in stock examples of scientific concept change: if we learn that gravity is not a force but merely the shape of spacetime, we revise the logical features of our concept of gravity—but putting it this way obscures the change of subject. On the Tractarian model of thought, we begin this transition by having one sensible system—gravity as force—and then imaginatively inhabiting a novel system that seemingly lacks sense—gravity as shape—until we can inhabit the sense of it, at which time our older system loses sense. Strictly speaking, it is not that there was one object, gravity, which gained new features, since it is the logical features alone which make up the object. Rather, there are similar concepts that share a name in each respective system, and their similarity is



what allows us to transition. The same process holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for any conceptual revision, no matter how banal; we make sense out of nonsense and nonsense out of sense. We do not add logical features to existing concepts, we assume new systems of thought that share much with our old. This transformative learning—the transformation of our worlds and selves into entirely new systems of thought—is an important component in models of learning in the situated learning tradition: Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger write that “one way to think of learning is as the historical production, transformation, and change of persons” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 51). One important lesson highlighted by both Lave and Wenger’s characterization and also the Tractarian model on offer is that these transformations are myriad—they are on offer each time we find a concept wanting. We do not add logical features to existing concepts; we can only imaginatively inhabit nearby systems of thought until these allow us to see the nonsense of the world we thought we knew.<sup>6</sup>

This process proceeds by attention and elucidation, in good Tractarian fashion. Yasushi Maruyama notes the instances of ‘elucidation’ in the *Tractatus*, and develops these into a Wittgensteinian view of what it is to learn:

Perspicuous representation is made by the arrangement of factual contents alone, without adding any explanation to it. Then, how can we have a clear view by arranging the facts? Wittgenstein’s answer is that we can find connecting links between the facts. By finding the links between the seemingly isolated facts, we understand them” (Maruyama 2017, 120).

We can now see that such an elucidatory process can play two different roles. We might benefit by such elucidations merely for the perspicuity and grasp they offer us for the system of thought we already inhabit and deploy, as Maruyama suggests. We might also benefit by these elucidations allowing us to understand our own systems of thought as nonsense, or simultaneously to understand a system that we were only imaginatively inhabiting as fully having sense.

With this in mind, let us revisit Wittgenstein’s hypothesis about the transparency of intertranslation:

Can we understand two names without knowing whether they signify the same thing or two different things?—Can we understand a proposition in which two names occur without knowing whether their meaning is the same or different? Suppose I know the meaning of an English word and of a German word that means the same: then it is impossible for me to be unaware that they do mean the same; I must be capable of translating each into the other (TLP 4.243).

Since knowing a word just is knowing the possible expressions in which it could be sensibly deployed, our understanding of any word is bound to our understanding of the propositions that include it. These propositions, like any proposition on the Tractarian view, depict the whole of reality. A proposition is not a picture of one part of reality, rather, as Wittgenstein writes, “A

---

<sup>6</sup> Compare also to Feyerabend on scientific conceptual change, and how we can duly investigate a system we are already embedded in: “The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the inside. We need an external standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions or, as these assumptions will be quite general, constituting, as it were, an entire alternative world, we need a dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit” (Feyerabend 1975, 22).

proposition is a picture of reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it” (TLP 4.01). Therefore, the “reality” presented by a system where ‘seek’ and ‘chercher’ are inequivalent but also expressed in propositions is in fact nonsensical. It is impossible to be unaware that they mean the same in the same sense that it is impossible to be unaware that ‘prime numbers’ and ‘natural numbers without factors’ mean the same. This is not to say, in either case, that someone cannot articulate sentences including both terms while also averring their nonequivalence, it is only to say that anyone so doing is thereby displaying a confusion, and that proper attention to the system of their thought will show it to be nonsense.

So we cannot *know* the meanings of these two words without recognizing their sameness, although we can articulate beliefs that express a confused system involving the terms. Similarly and more broadly, we cannot thoroughly inhabit nonsense, but we can come to understand that our previous articulations were manifesting confusions. We can also come to thoroughly inhabit a new system that at one time seemed to lack sense, and we proceed through both of these by means of elucidations. The *Tractatus* thus both sharpens and offers a response to the *Meno* paradox: we do not, in fact, incorporate new concepts into our prior belief system, nor can we. Rather, we become subjects whose system of beliefs incorporates concepts that the abandoned belief system did not, as the we transmute nonsense into sense and sense into nonsense. Much later, Wittgenstein wrote: “Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense” (Wittgenstein 1984, 56). Indeed, it is only by carefully attending to the nonsense we speak—both the apparent sense that we come to understand as nonsense and the apparent nonsense that we come to understand as sense—that we can continue to understand the world in new terms.

## References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. 1959. *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Harper & Row.
- Diamond, Cora. 2002. "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus." In *The New Wittgenstein*, 159–83. Routledge.
- Feyerabend, Paul. 1975. *Against Method*. Verso.
- Hacker, Peter MS. 2000. "Was He Trying to Whistle It?"
- Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge university press.
- Lippitt, John, and Daniel Hutto. 1998. "Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein." In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 263–86. JSTOR.
- Maruyama, Yasushi. 2017. "Elucidation in the Transition of Wittgenstein's Philosophy." In *A Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*, edited by Michael A. Peters and Jeff Stickney, 115–21. Springer.
- McGinn, Marie. 1999. "Between Metaphysics and Nonsense: Elucidation in Wittgenstein's Tractatus." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (197): 491–513.
- Moyal-Sharrock, Danièle. 2007. "The Good Sense of Nonsense: A Reading of Wittgenstein's Tractatus as Nonself-Repudiating." *Philosophy* 82 (1): 147–77.
- Nelson, Katherine. 2009. "Wittgenstein and Contemporary Theories of Word Learning." *New Ideas in Psychology* 27 (2): 275–87.
- Peach, Andrew J. 2007. "Possibility in the Tractatus: A Defense of the Old Wittgenstein." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45 (4): 635–58.
- Peters, Michael A., and Jeff Stickney. 2017. *Companion to Wittgenstein on Education*. Springer.
- Plato. 2002. *Plato: Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Hackett.
- Stern, D. G. 1996. *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*. Oxford University Press.
- Stern, David G. 2016. "The University of Iowa Tractatus Map." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, 203–20.
- Weiss, Jonathan. 2001. "Illusions of Sense in the Tractatus: Wittgenstein and Imaginative Understanding." *Philosophical Investigations* 24 (3): 228–45.
- Williams, Meredith. 1994. "The Significance of Learning in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24 (2): 173–203.
- Winch, Christopher. 2002. *The Philosophy of Human Learning*. Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1972. *On Certainty*. HarperCollins.
- . 1984. *Culture and Value*. University of Chicago Press.
- . 2003. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by David Pears and Brian McGuinness. Taylor & Francis.