

INEFFABILITY AND NONSENSE

by A. W. Moore and Peter Sullivan

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ABSTRACT Moore proposes to cut between ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ approaches to the *Tractatus*, suggesting that Wittgenstein’s intention is to convey, through the knowing use of nonsense, ineffable understanding. I argue, first, that there is indeed room for a proposal of Moore’s general kind. Secondly, though, I question whether Moore’s actual proposal is not more in tune with Wittgenstein’s later thought than with the attitude of the *Tractatus*.

I

As I understand it, the respondent’s role in these symposia is to take sharp issue with the first contribution, in the hope that the resulting spat might prove lively enough to penetrate end-of-year hangovers. That seems to me a sound general plan, and so I’m sorry not to be able to fulfil it. Moore’s fascinating paper is in my view largely right. Or at least, where I am clear what Moore’s view is, I broadly agree with it. There is, though, one crucial paragraph—probably the most important paragraph in his paper¹—where I am much less clear what Moore’s view is, but where I *think* we differ; in the final section I’ll try to explore what the difference might be.

Moore’s aims are both substantive and exegetical. His substantive aim is, first, to delineate a notion of expression on which it would be both an intelligible and an important claim that some things are non-trivially incapable of expression; and secondly, to recommend the view that certain states of understanding, and arguably therefore of knowledge, are in the delineated sense ineffable. Moore’s exegetical proposal is that we should understand Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* as having been concerned to convey understanding of that sort. My discussion will be limited, so far as possible, to this exegetical proposal.

1. This is the paragraph of rhetorically posed questions on pp. 189–190. (References to Moore’s paper will be given, as here, by unaccompanied page number.)

To convey expressible understanding (or knowledge) one puts what is understood into words, producing an utterance which has the object of understanding as its content; the understanding will actually be conveyed if one's audience grasps that content as the content of one's utterance. To convey inexpressible understanding (or knowledge), Moore proposes, one attempts, necessarily unsuccessfully, to put what is understood into words, producing an utterance that fails to have the object of understanding as its content, and therefore fails to have any content (since any other putative content would be unintended; see Moore 1997: 198). The understanding will actually be conveyed if one's audience comes to share that understanding, not of course as the content of one's utterance, but, as a first stab, as that which one's utterance fails to express. That first stab is evidently not very good: since one's utterance fails to express anything, its being 'that which' the utterance fails to express is far from identifying the understanding in question. On the other hand, it will not do to assign one's utterance a merely causal role, holding that the utterance conveys whatever understanding it produces: uptake of the utterance should be more like linguistic understanding, and less like a blow on the head, than that; the utterer's words should be effective *as* words, and appreciation of the point of the utterance should involve appreciation of the utterer's point in making it. What Moore's proposal needs, then, is at least some of the following: that the understanding is arrived at through processing the utterance, which will involve recognizing its appropriateness as an attempt to express that understanding, and perhaps also the ways in which it fails, or even also the reasons for which it must fail, to express it. Moore's exegetical proposal is thus that understanding Wittgenstein, taking up the remarks he presents us with in the *Tractatus* in the manner he intended us to do, involves coming to share understanding with him in that kind of way.

II

Having outlined his proposal as to how the *Tractatus* is to be read, Moore is content to leave the question of its affinity with existing approaches—and in particular 'whether [it] is more in line with the traditional reading or the new reading ... [or] with

something intermediate *à la* McGinn'—to be answered by others 'who may be interested in the question' (p. 191). Should one be interested in that question?

In the end, perhaps not. It depends on how real, how central to understanding Wittgenstein's concerns, and simply how interesting are the issues that separate traditional and new readings of the *Tractatus*. Moore would agree with me, I think, that some of the supposed cruxes of disagreement between these approaches are no more than misunderstandings, while others would, in the light of his proposal, appear peripheral. As things stand, though, when so much of recent discussion of the *Tractatus* has been dominated by the traditional-*vs.*-new debate, one can hardly avoid approaching the issue in those terms, even if that means approaching it from some distance and through some unhelpful rhetoric.²

It has for instance been said in advocacy of the new interpretation that, on a traditional ('orthodox', 'standard') narrative of Wittgenstein's development, he advanced in the *Tractatus* 'a metaphysical account of the relation between language and the world', offering 'a metaphysical explanation of how language hooks onto the world', and that rejection of 'metaphysical theorizing' is an unprecedented novelty in his later thought (Crary 2000: 2–3). Yet no significant commentator has advanced that view. Carruthers perhaps comes closest, in his claim that 'the doctrine of philosophy as nonsense may simply be excised from *TLP*, without damage to the remainder' (1990: 5); he rightly anticipated, though, that this explicitly heterodox view would strike many as 'not only incomplete but positively distorted' (1990: xi).

The more typical complaint of new interpreters is that a traditional reading implicitly³ commits itself to regarding the *Tractatus* as a work of conventional metaphysics, not by excising the idea of philosophy as nonsense, but by radically misconstruing

2. Unlike Moore, though, I won't attempt to define the terms. I want to leave open the possibility that, defined enumeratively, they turn out to denote no unified, clear, or clearly contrasting positions. 'Traditional' interpreters, then, include Anscombe, Stenius, Geach, Pears, McGuinness, Hacker; 'new' interpreters include Diamond, Conant, Kremer and, with the exception of Hacker, writers represented in Crary and Read 2000, and McCarthy and Stidd 2001.

3. Kremer, for instance, suggests that Carruthers is only 'more explicit' than 'most commentators' (2001: 40).

it: persuaded of the importance of the book, or at least of Wittgenstein's seriousness in writing it, and unable to square with that conviction a face-value acceptance of Wittgenstein's statement that his propositions are ultimately to be recognized as nonsense, traditional interpreters have tried to gloss that statement in ways that deflect the paradox it threatens by allowing some kind of significance to these propositions. It is allowed that different glosses might be attempted. But what presumably justifies new interpreters in their own eyes in speaking so often of 'the' traditional interpretation is a sense that different glosses can only be different disguises for the incoherent notion that Wittgenstein's propositions have a kind of sense that is nonsense. So we are told that traditional interpreters' reluctance simply to let go of these propositions manifests the commitment

that *these* sentences, while nonsensical, somehow gesture at something that is going on, some inexpressible state of affairs or true but inexpressible thought.⁴

Now it is true that traditional interpreters cannot be defended *en masse* against this last complaint. Certainly some have ascribed to Wittgenstein the intention to communicate ineffable truths; and Peter Hacker, for one, has forcefully reiterated this ascription in response to new interpreters' criticisms.⁵ Further, the form of some such ascriptions carries a strong implication that these ineffable truths are the contents of improper sentences.⁶ Like Moore, I take this idea to be 'quite foreign' (p. 175) to the *Tractatus*. For Wittgenstein, almost as for Frege (1984: 368), a truth is simply a thought that is true. An ineffable truth would then be a thought that could not be expressed in language. Since 'Thinking is a kind of language' (*NB* 82), that would be a thought that could not be a thought.⁷

4. Goldfarb 1997: 61.

5. Hacker 2000: 357, 368; 2001:15; 2003: 3.

6. Some examples: 'The so-called law of causality amounts to no more than that there are laws of nature. But it cannot be said that there are laws of nature—it makes itself manifest (*Tractatus* 6.36)' (Hacker 2000: 354); 'What Wittgenstein is saying ... when he denies that one can say that there are \aleph_0 objects is precisely ...: *if* there are, all right, but *that there are* has to be expressed—has to be *shown*—in another way, namely by features of our symbolism' (Hacker 2000: 364).

7. Compare Anscombe 1971: 163. Hacker is clearly aware of the contradiction, and cites *NB* 82 to establish it (2000: 355); evidently, then, my citing it is not meant as proof that he is wrong.

In new-Wittgensteinian criticism, however, that contradictory idea keeps close company with others that I think are defensible, including some that have to be defended if Moore's proposal is to be found coherent. Given the current state of discussion there might be some independent value in the following section's attempt to separate out some defensible ideas from others that I think no one should want to defend. The immediate aim of the section, though, is to argue that Moore's proposal *is* coherent—or at least, that none of the points made prominent by the traditional-*vs.*-new debate shows it to be otherwise. In the last section I'll turn, with much less confidence, to a trickier question: given that Moore's proposal is coherent—given, that is, that it presents a tenable, consistent picture of Wittgenstein's aims in the *Tractatus*—is it, in fact, true?

III

(A) *Things That Would Be True If They Could Be Said.*

According to Anscombe's traditional interpretation,

An important part is played in the *Tractatus* by the things which, though they cannot be 'said', are yet 'shewn' or 'displayed'. That is to say, it would be right to call them 'true' if, *per impossibile*, they could be said.⁸

It would be right to call these things true, she explains, because for someone to recognize them would be for him to see the world aright (*TLP* 6.54), and for him to learn whatever it is the book can teach him. Can any of that be maintained without slipping into the incoherence of regarding these things as 'something like propositions', 'quasi-truths' whose only difference from truths is that their expressions are, 'strictly speaking', nonsense? I think it can, and that Moore should agree. But first let me amplify the question in terms closer to his.

Though this way of putting things is not prominent in the current paper, things that are shown play a similarly important part in Moore's proposal. To be shown something is, on his account, to have ineffable understanding, and it seems that what is shown may be counted the object of that understanding. One centrally

8. Anscombe 1971: 162.

important way⁹ of specifying such understanding is to register the result of attempting to express it, and Moore reserves the idiom of showing for this purpose: to be shown that X is to have ineffable understanding the result of trying to express which is: 'X' (Moore 1997: 157). Now suppose someone (Wittgenstein) produces 'X' in attempting to express his understanding, and that we understand him. We will then come to share that understanding (p. 183).¹⁰ It must surely be innocent to count this a case of communication;¹¹ and since our understanding is reached through processing 'X', it must likewise be innocent to count 'X' the vehicle of communication. 'X' is, then, a vehicle for communicating what is shown. Is that not to say that 'X' has what is shown as its content, so that, if 'X' is at the same time to be counted nonsense, that can only be in some especially qualified or 'strict' sense?

That train of thought is apparent in Diamond's exposition of an idea she claims to find 'very clearly put by Elizabeth Anscombe' in the passage I quoted from above, that some nonsense sentences are 'as it were closer to being true' than others. Anscombe's idea, Diamond says, is

that there are some sentences which are nonsense but which would say something true if what they are an attempt to say could be said. The unsayability of what they are an attempt to say precludes its being said, but we can nevertheless grasp what they attempt to say. And they can thus, on her [Anscombe's] view, be contrasted with nonsense-sentences which are attempts to deny such truths-that-cannot-be-said...[which are] 'quite incoherent and confused'... So she works with the contrast between nonsense-sentences that have something, something true but unsayable, behind them, and those that have nothing behind them.¹²

9. Though not, in Moore's view, the only way: there may be straightforwardly identifying ways of *referring to* the object of understanding (Moore 1997: 161).

10. Here Moore illustrates that one can pay proper attention to a point stressed by new interpreters (Conant 1991a: 159, 2000: 198; Diamond 2000: 150–51), that a reader is supposed to come to understand Wittgenstein, and not his (nonsensical) propositions, without over-reacting to it.

11. Here I take myself to be agreeing with Section VI of Moore's paper, where he holds that there are reasonable ways of construing 'meaning' according to which it would be churlish and pointless to deny that Wittgenstein means something by the nonsense he produces. Just as 'understands' functions differently when its object is a person or a sentence, so 'means' functions differently when its subject is a person or a sentence.

12. Diamond 2000: 158.

Now Anscombe certainly does work with a contrast between nonsense-sentences that are ‘helpful’ and those that are products of ‘darkness’, ‘error’ or ‘confusion’ (1971: 162)—as, I think, any reader of Wittgenstein must. Diamond’s train of thought encourages us to view that contrast as involving contradiction by construing the helpfulness of helpful nonsense-sentences as a matter of their bringing within our grasp something true but unsayable. That idea, though, is altogether absent from Anscombe’s discussion. And it is instructive to note how Diamond puts it there.

So compare Diamond’s exposition with what Anscombe actually says:

Now the things that would be true if they could be said are obviously important. Can we then draw a distinction between things that are ‘shewn’, and things the opposite of which is ‘shewn’; between things that would be true if they could be said, and things that would be false if they could be said? It is impossible to speak like this of attempted contradictions of what is ‘shewn’.¹³

Two points stand out. First, when the question of a putative distinction is raised, Anscombe makes no mention at all of nonsense-sentences in framing the question. And second, Anscombe answers the question with a firm negative: she floats the idea of a distinction in order to reject it, not to endorse it. In consequence of the second point, when Anscombe does subsequently distinguish helpful nonsense from confused nonsense, ‘confused nonsense’ is not to be glossed as nonsense trying to say something that would be false if it could be said, since Anscombe is clear that there is no such thing.¹⁴ Recognizing that then removes any excuse for running counter to the first point by glossing ‘helpful nonsense’ as nonsense trying to say something true. *Throughout* Anscombe’s discussion, what *would be* true (if it could be said) is something that is shown. She nowhere countenances the idea of nonsense that would be true (if what it is an attempt to say could be said). The reason is obvious: if, *per impossibile*, what is shown *could* be said, then it would be said by a sentence; but

13. Anscombe 1971: 162.

14. Similarly in Moore: if ineffable understanding is knowledge that has nothing to answer to (fn. 31; cf. Moore 1997: 183–6), it has no counterpart in ‘ineffable false belief’.

that sentence would then say something, and so would not be nonsense.

The idea of nonsense that would be true (if what it is an attempt to say could be said) harbours commitment to ineffable truth. It also harbours commitment to nonsense's having content—for it is only if the nonsense already has what is shown as its content that, if what is shown were true, then the nonsense would be true. Those are commitments that Diamond is keen to expose as implicit in a traditional interpretation by teasing out, through the train of thought quoted, the idea she finds in Anscombe. Looking back at the passage in which Diamond attempts this, one sees that instead they are simple importations of the way Anscombe is misrepresented in the very first sentence of that train of thought.

The misrepresentation is an instance of a tendency Moore identifies as marring both sides of recent *new-vs.-traditional* polemics, the tendency to overlook the possibility that things other than truths might be ineffable (p. 180 and fn. 46). Diamond does that by effectively converting Anscombe's '*would be true, if it could be said*' into '*is true, though it cannot be said*'. More generally the tendency manifests itself in the readiness to apply to talk of what is shown inference patterns that hold for talk of what is said. One example would be the readiness to infer that, since what one understands is what is shown, if one is shown that X, then one understands that X. Another is this: if 'X' is an attempt to say what is shown, and if what one is (then) shown is that Y, then 'X' is an attempt to say that Y. In an instance of this pattern whose antecedents were acceptable, for 'Y' we would have 'X', so that the consequent would read: 'X' is an attempt to say that X. (If someone were to pursue the misleading pattern that far, it would then be hardly surprising if he went on to conclude that the attempt succeeded.)

Diamond relies on inferences of just this kind in developing the (assuredly incoherent) consequences of the idea she finds in Anscombe.¹⁵ But one point of Anscombe's insistence that 'it is impossible to speak like this of attempted contradictions of what is "shewn"' (1971: 162) is that such inferences would lead one astray, that 'it is shown...' creates a context in which familiar

15. See the continuation of the passage quoted above, Diamond 2000: 158.

patterns break down (cf. Anscombe 1971:163), or, more simply, that nonsense does not function like sense. That is a point on which Moore is equally and rightly insistent.

But still, one might say, even if it is accepted that Diamond's exposition *is* a misrepresentation, is it not a misrepresentation that Anscombe invites? *Why* say of what is shown that it *would be* true, unless one is thinking of what is shown as 'something like a proposition' or a 'quasi-truth'? What, if not that, is there supposed to be in common between what *would be* true and what *is* true?

I count it a central strength of Moore's proposal that it offers an answer to this question. Grasp of what is shown, like recognition of what is the case, is a species of knowledge. Or, in the more guarded formulation to which he says he would, if necessary, be ready to retreat (fn. 35), it is a kind of understanding, understanding that he elsewhere describes (less guardedly again) as 'knowledge of how to process knowledge' (1997: 189), and that he compares to that competence in applying concepts and appropriately bringing to bear what one knows that Kant calls the 'power of judgement' (CPR A134/B173). For reasons similar to Kant's he counts this a purely¹⁶ practical kind of knowledge, but knowledge nonetheless. And though Moore would be more cautious than to follow the suggestion, there is a readily intelligible point in saying that whatever is known at least *would be* true.

Though I know of no account of it as developed as Moore's, the idea of connecting showing with practical knowledge in general, and with competence in language in particular, has long had a place in discussion of the *Tractatus*. One important source of it is Geach's contention that, for both Frege and Wittgenstein, the 'strictly nonsignificant'¹⁷ sentences' (1977: 70) by which one seeks to convey 'logical category-distinctions which will clearly show themselves in a well-constructed formalized language' (1977: 55) should be ascribed a didactic role (1977: 56): 'There is a test for these sentences' having conveyed the intended distinctions—namely, that by their aid mastery of

16. I compress into this adverb Moore's contention that, while all ineffable knowledge is practical knowledge, the converse is not true; see fn. 29, and Moore 1997: Ch. 8.

17. By 'strictly nonsignificant' Geach means, strictly, nonsignificant.

the formalized language is attainable' (1977: 55). While Geach will not himself endorse the extension, he is clear that for Wittgenstein the idea is not restricted to logic, or to the kind of competence that can be assessed by university examiners: 'Some moral, aesthetic, and religious utterances would serve the same kind of purpose as do in logic the elucidatory sentences that introduce us to the logical notation' (1977: 69). Interestingly, the idea is one that new interpreters have been uncertain whether to adopt as their own or to condemn.¹⁸ Some attempts to distinguish the unacceptably traditional thing Geach intended from its acceptably austere new version can leave one puzzling whether the distance between them has *even* the width of a knife-edge.¹⁹ Roughly, new interpreters have wanted to accept that appropriate nonsense might have the didactic role Geach describes, in instilling an understanding competence in language, while rejecting the further suggestion that the nonsense conveys any kind of ineffable insight. Moore's view, that the understanding *is* the insight, would explain the difficulty they have had in this.

(B) 'Special' Or 'Illuminating' Nonsense.

I remarked in passing above, but think it worth singling out for brief repetition, that any reader of the *Tractatus* must acknowledge a distinction between helpful and unhelpful nonsense. In Moore's view the nonsense we find in the *Tractatus* is of a very special, profoundly illuminating kind. Both new critics and traditional defenders have taken the suggestion that Wittgenstein's

18. Kremer, for instance, holds that 'the resolute [new] reading cannot accept the idea that there are many distinguishable "things which are inexpressible" which "make themselves manifest"' (2001: 46), and so he shifts the connection between showing and practical knowledge to one very general, undivided thing: 'I suggest that the *Tractatus* is concerned to communicate knowledge-how. To understand this book and its author is to learn how to live. The book *shows* us how to live, but does not *tell* us this' (2001: 62). No sooner is this agglomerating move made, though, than it is unmade: 'To understand a proposition *p* is not to know [the truth of] another proposition ... Rather, understanding is a form of knowledge-how ... When a proposition "shows its sense", what is shown is *how* we are to go on using it' (2001: 62).

19. For instance, there is no getting a cigarette paper between Geach's suggestion, which Conant condemns, and Conant's own view—or so I have argued; see Conant 2000: 195 and fn. 93; Sullivan 2002: fn. 7. Geach's discussion is, of course, at once an inspiration and a stalking horse in several of Diamond's most important papers, notably her 1979, 1984, and 1988.

nonsense is ‘special’ or ‘illuminating’ (note the usual scare-quotes) to signal a point of contention. That cannot be so. Provided only that one acknowledges Wittgenstein’s own description of his book, and that one continues to think it of value, then that there is illuminating nonsense is an immediate consequence.

(C) Nonsense That Is Nonsense Because Of What The Words In It Mean.

Since the point just made *is* very obvious, I’m sure that any commentator would agree with it. So the implied complaint of the last paragraph is a complaint only against rhetorical exaggeration, or the smearing of a critical thought beyond its proper target. (That is why I did not cite any particular author in connection with it.) New interpreters do not deny that Wittgenstein’s nonsense is in any way interestingly distinctive. They deny that his propositions are—and indeed that anything could be—‘a special variety of nonsense that results from attempting to do something impossible’ (Conant 2001: 23). Conant terms this variety ‘substantial nonsense’. Claims made about it include the following:

‘Substantial nonsense is composed of intelligible ingredients combined in an illegitimate way’ (Conant 2001: 14).

‘It expresses a logically incoherent thought’ (Conant 2001: 14, 21).

‘It is not literally unintelligible: we know what each of the words means—the trouble lies with the composite they form’ (Conant 2001: 19).

‘It would be a kind of “positive” nonsense’—‘nonsense which is nonsense on account of what the terms composing it mean’ (Diamond 1981: 106).

Rejecting any such notion new interpreters insist that the only sort of nonsense there is, and the only sort of nonsense Wittgenstein countenanced, is (again in Conant’s phrase) ‘mere nonsense’:

‘Mere nonsense is simply unintelligible—it expresses no thought’ (Conant 2001: 14).

It is ‘mere gibberish’ (Conant 2001: 14).

It is nonsense ‘merely because some determination of meaning has *not* been made; it is not nonsense as a logical result

of determinations that *have* been made' (Diamond 1981: 106).

What is classified as mere nonsense 'is, strictly speaking, not a grammatical or logical unit of a language, but a mere mark on paper (or noise) or sequence of marks (or noises)' (Conant 2001: 20).

'Austerity' about nonsense is the view that all nonsense is mere nonsense.

The 'attempt to do something impossible' from which substantial nonsense is supposed to result is the attempt to combine meanings in ways contrary to their logical nature—to force something into an argument place suited only to an argument of a different logical shape. This is a different impossible attempt from the attempt to say what is shown:²⁰ if there were instances of the first, they would not *thereby* be instances of the second. That the same verbal description applies to the two has, despite that, encouraged their association. It is for no better reason than that, I think, that those who take seriously the notion of an attempt to say what is shown have been construed as holding that the nonsense in which that attempt issues is substantial nonsense, which manages to 'show' ('showing' here being co-opted for the kind of expression nonsense supposedly achieves) a logically flawed thought.²¹ Perhaps some traditional interpreter has followed the loose association into that tangle, but I think no one would knowingly defend it. In any case, it is a confusion that might arise in the production or endorsement of nonsense, and our concern now is with its diagnosis and criticism.

In this connection too there are components of the substantial conception that are indefensible and, I think, undefended. Since

20. For one thing, the second exists, while the first doesn't.

21. It is part of the story that traditional commentators adopting this view have not quite known that they were doing so. That, at any rate, is the only reason I can think of why Conant should first invent a neologism '“show”' (in scare-quotes) to denote a relation very much like expression imagined to hold between nonsense and the ineffable truths it is supposed to hint or gesture at (2000: fn. 11), only later to claim that 'most commentators' already use (the un-flagged) 'show' in just that way (2000: fn. 26). (The only actual commentator named in this connection is Geach, who, as Conant recognizes, would reject that use of 'show'. Thus in order 'to avoid confusion' Conant reminds a reader that, when expounding Geach's views, he will be using "“show”" in a way that Geach would not. That seems to me not a good way to avoid confusion.)

Peter Hacker has written most forcefully in defence of the tradition perhaps he can be allowed to speak for it. He ‘emphatically rejects’ the idea that ‘the illegitimacy of [a] sentential combination [should be attributed] to the fact that the meanings of the expressions cannot be so combined’ (2003: 2–3; cf. 2003: 6–8). He is similarly emphatic that if one fails to observe meaning-constituting rules ‘the result is not the expression of a thought that is illogical (since there is no such thing)’ (2000: 367); ‘Nor does it result in the description of a metaphysical impossibility, since there is no such thing’ (2000:366). On the other side, and to even things out, it is worth stressing again that in calling mere nonsense ‘unintelligible’ or ‘gibberish’ new interpreters have not wanted to deny that we can work with it so as to discern its author’s intent: it is only when judged ‘from a logical point of view’ (Conant 2001: 14), with reference to what if anything it says, that mere nonsense is indistinguishable from a random assemblage of words.²² After that round of retractions or clarifications²³ what remains in dispute, it seems, is whether nonsense can be nonsense for reasons to do with the meanings of the words in it, or whether on the other hand anything rightly called nonsense can be no more than marks on paper or noises.

It is easy to oscillate between thinking this a non-issue and thinking it the issue on which the question of the possible value of Wittgenstein’s method must turn. For the first, suppose we have a meaningful sentence S(E) involving the expression E, and a nonsense-sentence N(E). Can it be said that N(E) is nonsense *on account of* the meaning that E bears generally, and in particular the meaning it bears in S(E)? That depends, in the first place, on whether the E that occurs in S(E) occurs again in N(E). But whether E recurs is just a matter of how we count expressions, or what kind of thing we take an expression to be. If an expression is something whose recognition involves appreciating its contribution to the significance of the context in which it

22. Similarly Diamond, expounding *TLP* 6.53, says that, when someone says something metaphysical, ‘you show him that, *as far as the meaning goes*, “piggly wiggle” would do as well as some word he used’ (2000: 155, my emphasis).

23. It is not to the point to try to resolve this disjunction. However, by not pausing to do so I certainly do not want to suggest that nothing has been learned from new interpreters’ criticisms of genuinely absurd components of a substantial view of nonsense.

figures,²⁴ then, since N(E) has no significance, there is no finding *any* expression in it, and so in particular no finding in it that E which occurs in S(E). If, on the other hand, we so count expressions that their recognition demands less than that—loosely, if an expression is something whose recurrence can be taken in by the eye²⁵—then S(E) and N(E) may share an expression, whose features may therefore be relevant both to the meaningfulness of S(E) and the nonsensicality of N(E). Which-ever we say, though, N(E)'s being nonsense amounts simply to its *lacking* meaning. On the first way of counting that conclusion is immediate: the ways of using words that collectively constitute the language accord no status to N(E)—they simply do not touch on it, as the rules of English do not touch on 'La neige est blanche,' or, for that matter, on leaves scattered by the wind. On the second way of counting the rules of language *do* touch on N(E), since they touch on S(E) and E occurs in both. So it will now be relevant that the rules that accord meaning to E in S(E) accord it that meaning only in some configurations, and do not extend to N(E). It will of course not *follow* from that that N(E) is nonsense.²⁶ On the current way of counting, a single expression may be subject to disjoint sets of rules—i.e. there may be different ways of using E than the way it is used in S(E)—and some such way might have accorded it meaning in N(E). By our opening hypothesis, that N(E) is nonsense, that is not so. That it is not so is, as Moore says (p. 186), simply a brute fact; though, as he goes on to say, this makes it no less a matter of what the rules are, and so not a brute fact, that N(E) is given no meaning by the rules that govern S(E). But each of these, the brute fact and

24. If it is what Wittgenstein calls a 'symbol', that is (*TLP* 3.31).

25. Cf. *TLP* 3.32. That this formulation is loose explains commentators' divergence over the claim that 'The propositional *sign* is a fact' (*TLP* 3.14, my emphasis). The point of divergence, roughly, is whether Wittgenstein's account recognizes something half-way between a mere complex of marks and a proposition—something that has a determinate grammatical articulation but is not yet a combination of meaningful symbols. The issue has consequences for how we should read Wittgenstein's presentation of the austere view of nonsense at *TLP* 5.473 ff., and in particular for what we should understand by a 'possible proposition' in his statement that 'Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed' (*TLP* 5.4733). The notation 'N(E)' used in the text overrides some of the complexities arising from that question, but not (I hope) in any way damaging to the limited point in hand.

26. To use Diamond's careful phrase, N(E)'s being nonsense will not be 'a logical result' (1981: 106) of E's meaning in S(E).

the non-brute fact, is, as it were, a negative fact. So whichever of them we emphasize, and thus whether we count N(E) an illegal move or not a move at all, its being nonsense is a matter of determinations of meaning that have *not* been made, as austerity about nonsense demands.²⁷

One way to bring out the other side of the oscillation is to ask what sense we can make of Wittgenstein's declared aim *unless there is* an important issue here.

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.²⁸

If one doesn't think at all hard about it, the intention of this passage seems fairly clear:

'There is a limit to be drawn, but a principled obstacle to drawing it by attending to thought directly, since everything one could then attend to would lie on one side of the limit, and so would be insufficient to fix its location.'²⁹ Happily this obstacle can be got around by attending to language and drawing the limit there, because language does present a domain of items through which a genuine division can be

27. Hacker makes most of these points in Section III of his 2003. He says, for instance, 'Conant's view is akin to claiming that the pawn in chess cannot be moved three squares at a time, since if one were to move a piece thus, it would not be a pawn—a transcendental argument to prove that one cannot cheat in chess. One *could* speak thus, but would it make any difference?' (2003: 16). For current purposes the last sentence is the one I want to emphasize. I don't take Hacker to imply by it, and nor do I think it implies, that for some purposes the difference might not be important. For instance, if determinations *are* made that give meaning to E in N(E), it might be important to ask whether this should be thought of assigning a new, distinct meaning to E, or as extending or modifying the meaning E bore in S(E). New interpreters emphasize the first description, Hacker the second (2003: 19–20). But there are cases and cases, and what to say in a given case may be both momentous and unclear.

28. *TLP* Preface, p. 27.

29. In the same kind of way—the idea is—that any number of remarks of the pattern, 'Berlin is west of the Urals,' 'Prague is west of the Urals,' 'Kiev is west of the Urals' won't fix where the Urals are.

drawn, separating configurations of signs that make sense, or express thoughts, from those that do not.’

There are then various ways of registering the inadequacy that further thought will uncover in that initial, superficial reading.³⁰ The bluntest is that the obstacle Wittgenstein cites to the possibility of drawing the limits of thought is—and is cited by him as—an obstacle to doing it *at all*, so not an obstacle that could be got around by doing it indirectly.

The image that the initial reading conjures up is of our first plotting the limits of language on a transparent graph, on which every configuration of signs has a place, and on which a line is drawn to divide those with sense from those without; and then superimposing this transparent sheet onto a map of the space of thoughts to read off the results. Spelled out the image is immediately and multiply incoherent. The space of thoughts mapped out on the bottom sheet cannot have *any* line running through it, and that means that, *however* the line is drawn on the transparent graph of language, it will resist the superimposition. Our overlooking that, however briefly, amounts to our imagining the underlying space of thoughts as having a place for everything we can think, and in addition for what *we* cannot think. But if that imagining seems to make room for the superimposition, it cannot support its supposed purpose. For now, underneath some outer point on the transparent graph of language, and through the medium of some meaningless configuration of signs located there, we are to find some thought that we cannot think. And of course, *we* cannot do that. If we could, we wouldn’t have needed the transparent sheet in the first place. This doesn’t show there was anything wrong with the transparent sheet: there *are* meaningless as well as meaningful configurations of signs. What was wrong—what was *completely* confused—was the use we imagined we could make of it.

I don’t think we are supposed to recognize that immediately. In the first of the quoted paragraphs Wittgenstein does *not* speak of a single limit, which we cannot draw in one way but can, fortunately, contrive to draw in another, indirect way. He says that we cannot do one thing, but can do another. In the second

30. In calling this a ‘reading’ I am not claiming that anyone has actually adopted it as a settled view of the passage.

paragraph he speaks simply of ‘the limit’, saying that it can only be drawn in language. Looking back at that paragraph, re-reading it after we have read the book, we see that it would be wrong to take this reference to ‘the limit’ to be a reference to the limit of thought, since he has just told us that to draw *that* limit we would have to be able to do something that cannot be done. Even so, it is no accident—it is part of the way these paragraphs are written—that virtually anyone *will* read, or try to read, ‘the limit’ in just that way when they first encounter it. So, if one were to say that these paragraphs belong to a ‘frame’ in which Wittgenstein offers instructions for reading the book, then that ought to come with a warning that the instructions will be tricky to follow straight off.³¹

Is there, though, any following them *at all*? When one sees that the invited, initial reading of these paragraphs is untenable, *one* of the things one sees is that identifying some nonsense as nonsense cannot have the significance one then imagined. It doesn’t offer an indirect route to staking out the limits of thought: there is just nothing underneath that part of the sheet. But that now threatens to rob the enterprise of *any* significance, since it seems to imply that the recognition of nonsense as nonsense can have to do *only* with the sheet itself, hence with mere marks or noises.³² Yet there is, really, no interest in such stuff. And there is no following the instruction to work towards understanding someone by recognizing that he has been issuing such stuff, since that is not a way of understanding anything or anyone. Nor will it help much to add in the idea that this stuff was issued under an illusion—or even, that it was self-consciously issued so as temporarily to instil an illusion, subsequently to be exposed *as* an illusion—that the stuff made sense.³³ To understand him we need

31. Indeed, you might have to say that these instructions share the perversity of instructions for assembling flat-pack furniture: that you can only work out how they’re to be read by comparing them with the finished item. Diamond, who introduced talk of the ‘frame’, recognizes this; see her 2000: 149–50.

32. See again Conant 2001:20, quoted above; and compare Conant 2001: 22, where he appears to take the evident fact that ‘Carnap’s interest here is ... not confined to the words considered as mere marks on paper’ as indicative of Carnap’s commitment to a substantial conception of nonsense.

33. Someone who realized that much would have it confirmed that ‘we can and do imagine that we mean something where we mean nothing’ (Conant 1989: 255); but if he didn’t already know that, which would be surprising, there are easier ways of telling him (cf. Sullivan 2002: 63 and fn. 31).

much more than that: we need to connect with his *particular* illusion, and we cannot begin to do that without being able to treat his words as more than marks or noises.

Moore's proposal provides for that. He does so by making clear that whether what I earlier presented as a non-issue *is* a non-issue depends on one's purpose. So far as respecting what austerity about nonsense demands, it is a matter of indifference how one counts expressions, so whether one connects the nonsense of N(E) with the sense S(E). But if one's concern is not simply with registering *that* N(E) is nonsense, but with understanding how it might seem not to be, that connection is no longer a matter of indifference. Where there are illusions of sense, Moore says, 'There are always relevant concepts: there are always relevant intentions about which concepts are being exercised' (p. 186).

Taken strictly, I don't think that remark is exactly right. In the case of 'It is five o'clock at the North Pole,' it clearly would be the ordinary concept of its being five o'clock that is intended, and that would then be the relevant concept. If a Platonist holds that particulars 'partake' of the Forms, it is less clear that he intends to exercise any ordinary concept of partaking, or that there is any concept he does intend. And if a solipsist says, 'I am the world', he may well make clear that he does not intend to exercise the ordinary first-person concept (and we may well think it clear that there is no other). Still, there are in every case *relevant* concepts: an illusion of sense will always have some point of connection with sense, even if through a mis-projected analogy that it is hard to recover. So, in addition to being strategically important, Moore's remark is close enough to the truth that I would want to defend it.

It needs defending because of the way new interpreters have connected austerity about nonsense in the first place (clearly and importantly) with Frege's context principle, but then through that (and less clearly) with another principle of Frege's *Grundlagen*, which urges us 'always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical' (Frege 1978: x). Connecting with someone's particular illusion will on Moore's account involve recognizing that he intends to exercise in some utterance a concept which his words fail to express: it is that intention that makes the concept relevant to his illusion, and that therefore makes it the particular

illusion it is, rather than merely *an* illusion (not further specifiable) to the effect that his words make *some* (not more closely approachable) sense. But this seems to imply that his intentions can fix a way of taking his words when his use of them does not; and that would be acceptable only if, in general, someone's words could be made to have this rather than that meaning just by his intending that they should; and *that* is the psychologism that Frege's principle targets. At any rate, that seems to be the thought of the following passage:³⁴

Someone might indeed claim that he uttered 'The *event*: the execution of Charles I in 1649, *is in the crater of Vesuvius*' meaning of an *event* that *it was in a crater*. He knows what it is to speak of events and of things in craters, and can he not tell us what he meant? If he says such things, one might well doubt that he does, as he says, know what it is to be speaking of an event; but in any case his reports of his intentions are here irrelevant.³⁵

I suspect, too, that this thought plays a major role in motivating some of the more table-thumping insistence of new interpreters that nonsense is *just* nonsense, and the misleadingly rhetorical use of 'simply unintelligible' or 'pure gibberish' that accompanies it—as if only a radical misconception of the determinants of meaning could lead anyone to imagine that there is *anything*—that is, any remotely determinate thing—'behind' the nonsense, which we might try to deal with.

But whether or not that suspicion is right, anyone sympathetic to Moore's proposal needs to counter the thought. One modest way of attempting that would be to say that Diamond's thought falsifies a sound point by over-stating it: that one cannot make a word mean so-and-so *just* by intending that it should hardly implies that one's intentions are irrelevant to what one means. But that modest response shares a mistake with the thought it tries to counter. The proper response is that Frege's principle has no application at all to the case. Moore's account appeals to a

34. For a closely related line of thought, see Conant 2001: 32–24. There Conant is discussing Carnap's diagnosis of some (putative) nonsense written by Heidegger; he holds that by 'tacit[ly] appeal[ing] to Heidegger[s] *intending* the word "nothing" here to have [a certain] meaning', when 'the logico-syntactic behaviour of the expression' does not determine it to have that meaning, 'Carnap succumbs to psychologism' (2001: 33).

35. Diamond 1981: 105–6.

speaker's intentions to identify the illusion of sense his words betray; it does not appeal to his intentions as determining what his words mean, since it is agreed they mean nothing. Frege's principle warns against supposing that anything psychological could be a determinant of anything logical. In the case in hand, we have a psychological determinant of something psychological,³⁶ and even Frege would allow that.

This section has been concerned only to argue that, so far as the traditional-*vs.*-new debate goes, Moore's is a *possible* view of what is going on in the *Tractatus*; or more fully, that consideration of how Moore's proposal stands in relation to the issues supposed fundamentally to divide traditional and new interpretations reveals in it no structural flaw or internal incoherence of the kind that those approaches are wont to find in each other. Before moving on, it is worth gathering a couple of observations on what this shows about that debate.

First, and most simply, it shows that an interpreter of the *Tractatus* does not have to choose between adopting a traditional or new interpretation. Moore means something subtle by this: that one can simultaneously do justice to what is valuable in both. I mean something more flat-footed: it should never have been allowed to appear that there are just these two approaches, which between them cover the ground. As with any really important text, the field of possible approaches to the *Tractatus* is indefinitely extensive and messy; one naturally looks for order, and the prominence of these two makes it inviting to use them in imposing that order. One might aim at that, as Moore does, by defining them in a way that makes them interestingly non-exclusive. Or one might, I suppose, try to define them in a way that made them both interesting and exhaustive. But in truth these approaches are not clearly defined: they exist as clusters, sometimes unified by real affinities, sometimes, it seems, unified by little more than the sweepingly negligent descriptions each offers of the other. A reasonable attempt simply to describe them as

36. That an illusion of sense is psychological does not imply that it is a quirk of individual psychology, any more than is the moon illusion (cf. Moore, p. 184 and fn. 57; cf. also Moore 1997: 218). Roger White nicely remarks: 'If a man were to say to me that for him "piggly wiggle" made sense, I would regard that as a psychological matter, and a fit subject for the alienist rather than the philosopher to look into. In the *Tractatus*, however, we have a *universal* illusion' (unpublished).

clusters makes it immediately obvious that, between them, they do not cover the ground.³⁷

Second, it shows how schematic and abstracted the traditional-*vs.*-new debate is that, considering a proposal like Moore's in its terms, one can at most reach a conclusion as to whether that proposal presents a *possible* view of the text. This debate arises from the question: How *could* anyone sensibly write a book like the *Tractatus*?—a book that purports to solve the problems of philosophy while disclaiming any content for the propositions by which this solution is effected, or a book that seems to be engaging in the very kind of thing it would have us think cannot be engaged in, and so on. There is nothing wrong with such questions: one ought to have a view on them; and we are dreadfully familiar with work on the internal mechanics of the *Tractatus* that degenerates into nerdish intricacy for lack of any such view. Still, however important, questions about possible overall strategies *cannot* be the only questions.³⁸ And there are already signs that, when new interpreters turn to delineate the *actual* contours of Wittgenstein's thinking, the impression of two unified and opposed approaches begins simply to dissipate.³⁹

'*Tu quoque?*' Fair cop. I'll say no more about it.

37. One might have qualms even about thinking of traditional interpreters as forming a cluster, since, in contrast to new interpreters, they have not thought of or presented themselves in that way: 'the traditional reading' is more nearly an artefact of its opponents' descriptions than *vice versa*. Suppressing such qualms, though, McGinn offers one reasonable description. Her traditionalists represent Wittgenstein as fundamentally committed to a kind of realism whereby 'The logic of our language is grounded in the intrinsic features of an independent reality' (1999: 493); her new interpreters present him as offering therapy calculated to dismantle the impression that a statement of this realism is more than a string of empty words. *Obviously* these two do not between them cover the ground: they are only two of the four schematic positions their description immediately suggests. While McGinn calls the first 'the metaphysical reading', idealists have metaphysics too. So an idealist metaphysical reading would be number three. And if metaphysics invites therapy, there is room for an 'anti-idealist' therapeutic approach as much as an 'anti-realist' one—number four. (Let me emphasize, this is not a criticism of McGinn: her descriptions *do* reflect the clusters that are most prominent in the new-*vs.*-traditional debate. A telling indication of this is that one of the best commentaries on the *Tractatus*, Stenius's 1960, is *never mentioned* in this debate; that is because Stenius, crudely categorized, would belong in camp three.)

38. It is striking that when new interpreters *do* appeal to some parts of Wittgenstein's text to justify their view of it, traditional opponents are apt to accuse them of inconsistency (e.g. Hacker 2000: 360–61). I'm not here concerned with the justice of the accusation, but only to register how very odd this state of affairs must seem to workers in any other exegetical field.

39. See in this connection Mastrow 2002 and Friedlander 2001.

IV

My agreement with Moore extends far beyond questions about what kinds of readings are possible. I think he is *precisely right* in identifying the understanding that Wittgenstein was most centrally concerned to convey in the *Tractatus*—an understanding of language and its limits in virtue of which one appreciates both the allure, and the incoherence, of transcendental idealism. So, if each of us had to compress into a sentence what we took the book to be about, there's a chance we might come up with the same sentence. Even so, I'm left with a sense—that in this brief final section I'll allow myself plenty of latitude in trying to bring to the surface—that we would mean different, maybe even opposite, things by it.

I'll exploit the latitude I've just claimed:

'I am tempted to say: Moore thinks Wittgenstein *was* a transcendental idealist; I think Wittgenstein's aim was to dispel transcendental idealism—*completely*.'

'I am tempted to say' here functions in a similar fashion to what Diamond calls a 'framing' device (2000: 160). She has in mind a device by which a speaker distances himself from the significance of the framed remark; mine has to distance me from its truth. For it is perfectly plain that, without the framing device, this remark about Moore would be just wrong. Moore does not hold that Wittgenstein endorses transcendental idealism: the illusions of sense that attach to enunciations of the doctrine are indeed the 'content' of the book, but crucially also its 'target' (p. 190). Despite that, my sense is that on Moore's account Wittgenstein maintains, to the end, sympathy with the phenomenon of transcendental idealism—sympathy that I regard him as certainly having experienced and indulged,⁴⁰ but also as having aimed finally to uproot, where uprooting the sympathy involves repudiating, not just the truth of the doctrine, nor yet just its meaningfulness, but also its *appropriateness*, even *qua* self-consciously nonsensical and knowingly futile attempt to express the understanding one has of its sources.

40. My agreement with Moore thus includes the view that transcendental idealism is the only form of positive metaphysics to which Wittgenstein was seriously attracted, and therefore that to represent him as primarily concerned to offer a therapeutic dissolution of metaphysical realism is just to miss the point; at any rate, I would say that, and I think Moore would too.

If this is a disagreement between us, it cannot be settled here in sober responsible fashion by submitting to the adjudication of the text. Elsewhere I've tried to argue that one can find the repudiation I mentioned in the close structure of Wittgenstein's engagement with solipsism at *TLP* 5.6 ff. (Sullivan 1996, 2002), but the few alternative readings I then tried to counter were less nuanced than Moore's. And in any case, Moore has not been able to include, in an already rich paper, the kind of textual grounding that he recognizes his proposal would need (p. 190). So I think the best I can do briefly to plant questions about Moore's proposal is to adopt a comparative mode. My purpose in raising the comparisons is to ask what force it has to present something as both the 'content' and the 'target' of Wittgenstein's book.

It will be well to start with a familiar and relatively straightforward case, the understanding of logical category-distinctions discussed by Geach. A logical category is here the range of a formal variable of quantification. Hence no variable ranges over things of distinct categories. Since any predicate contains the form of its argument (*TLP* 3.333), no single predicate can figure in application to things of distinct categories. Hence categories cannot be distinguished by saying that things of the first have some property that things of the second lack (*TLP* 4.1241). Thus, 'That anything falls under a formal concept as an object belonging to it cannot be expressed by a proposition'; instead, 'It is shown in the symbol for the object itself' (*TLP* 4.126). It is shown 'in the symbol' in that the symbol shares its logical category with what it is a symbol for, so that to recognize the symbol at all is to recognize it as, and so as a symbol for, something of that category. That recognition is part of one's understanding of the language to which the symbol belongs: it shows up in one's ability to use the symbol, most centrally in inferences involving generalization. This understanding further includes the ability to recognize as nonsense formulations in which distinct patterns of generalization are run together, elisions that are construable in accordance with none of the patterns they elide. In particular, then, it includes the ability to recognize as unconstruable elisions of that kind some of the formulations by which, earlier in this paragraph, the understanding seemed to be characterized: the use of 'anything' in 'that anything falls under a formal concept...' (*TLP* 4.126) is an example.

So we could say that we find in⁴¹ the parts of the *Tractatus* just sketchily summarized a theory of logical categories, presented to convey understanding, where an essential component of that understanding is the ability to recognize as nonsensical the remarks by which it is conveyed. To understand the author of these remarks will, then, involve coming to share with him the appreciation that the best that can be done in the way of trying to express this understanding will be to produce formulations which the understanding itself enables one to recognize are nonsense. So might we say, to summarize this, that this theory of logical categories is at once the ‘content’ and the ‘target’ of (these parts of) the book?

The question is not asked rhetorically. If Moore’s answer to it were ‘Yes’, then I think that would show that we *do* differ, not about the relatively straightforward issue of formal concepts just outlined, but about the far more important issue that Moore describes in those terms. For I think that transcendental idealism is the ‘target’ of Wittgenstein’s book in a less qualified sense than just described. Even the most austere attitude to Wittgenstein’s ‘theory of formal concepts’ does not challenge the pointfulness of that theory, the genuineness of what it brings us to understand,⁴² nor finally, and most importantly, what one might call the *stability* of that understanding. Because of that, one might reasonably say that Wittgenstein retains sympathy with the phenomenon of such theorizing—and that, at least for its ‘post-neurotic’ form,⁴³ that sympathy can be unqualified. Appreciation of its didactic appropriateness, for instance, can sit happily with acceptance that the understanding instilled will be

41. This usage is intended to echo Moore’s, as when he speaks of ‘the kind of transcendental idealism we find in the *Tractatus*’ (p. 185). That transcendental idealism is, in that sense, to be ‘found in’ the book is obviously not a point of difference between us; the question is what it’s doing there.

42. Thus Diamond is ready to speak, in a non-transitional way, of the ‘logical similarities and differences’ that a conceptual notation may make clear (1988: 183). Similarly Kremer sees Frege’s infamous pinch-of-salt as called for by the attempt ‘to justify his logical language ... as superior to ordinary language, with its misleading subject-predicate grammar’ (2001: 54); but giving up the salt and the justification together Frege might nonetheless have remained ‘justly proud’ of his language (2001: 54)—since after all it *is*, in the ways Wittgenstein described (*TLP* 3.325), superior.

43. Cf. Lear 1984; and Moore, fn. 73. The theorizing has of course a neurotic form, represented in the *Tractatus* chiefly by Russell (*TLP* 3.331), though Frege is sometimes included (e.g. *TLP* 4.1272).

understanding, *inter alia*, of the nonsensicality of the teaching materials. What centrally makes for the stability of this understanding, I think, is that what appeared to be limitations insisted upon by the theorizing when taken *as* theorizing—limitations on what can be said of what, or what can be said at all—are recognized, as part of the understanding, not to be limitations at all.

Things stand differently, in my view, with the issue of transcendental idealism, so with the understanding of language and its limits with which, on Moore's proposal, Wittgenstein is most centrally concerned. This is, on Moore's account, an understanding of the ways our concepts are adapted to our limitations—adapted, that is, so as to have significance *as* the concepts of thinkers so limited. As reflective understanding this is to include the ability to recognize as illusions those illusions that arise when we 'try to apply concepts that are adapted to these limitations as though they were not, indeed as though they were not adapted to any limitations at all' (p. 189). Call an attempted application of concepts meeting the quoted description 'transcendent', and an employment of concepts that is not transcendent 'immanent'. In those terms one might ask, concerning that general understanding in virtue of which one recognizes illusions of transcendence *as* such:⁴⁴ Will not the attempt to express this understanding itself issue in the transcendent application of concepts—in saying, most simply, that their only *real* application is immanent, or more graphically, that the world of which we can speak, in employing these concepts, is structured and bounded by the limitations in which their significance is grounded?

Moore poses that question (or one like it) expecting the answer 'Yes'. And I agree with him both that this is the inevitable answer to the train of thought⁴⁵ he describes, and that the later stages of this train of thought are to be found in the *Tractatus*. What I don't find in the *Tractatus* is anything corresponding to the *beginning* of Moore's train of thought, a *stable* understanding of our concepts as adapted to our limitations, understanding that would be

44. I think it would be in line with Moore's intentions to call this understanding 'understanding of one's finitude'; cf. Moore 1997: 158–64.

45. A 'train of *thought*'? I hope no one will at this stage object to my calling it that. Something very like reasoning is going on here—something as much like reasoning as ever goes on when one engages with an incoherent metaphysical theory—and I don't know what else to call it.

appropriately voiced, however nonsensically, in such terms as that the representable world, sharing with language limits determined by those concepts, is *our* world—that its essential form is conditioned by the requirement of being representable *by us*. Instead, where that idea does figure in the *Tractatus* (at 5.62),⁴⁶ I take Wittgenstein's intention to have been that the instability of the idea should reflect critically back, though the train of thought Moore describes, on its very beginning: the only *stable* understanding of language and its limits—or so I take the intended moral to be—will be one that no longer misconstrues those limits as *limitations* at all.

So what *are* the real limitations that Moore's proposal envisions? This is the point where I am least confident that I understand Moore's view. His proposal is drawn as an architectural outline, and though I am sure it needs filling in here, it may be that the following suggestion mistakes the filling he intends.

These limitations are to be, first, 'the very limitations that enable us to make sense of things in the first place':⁴⁷ they are 'preconditions' of sense (p. 184). Secondly, they are to be limitations that we come better to understand in coming to know more fully how our concepts are to be used and, importantly, how they are not to be used (Section VII). Now the first of these alone would connect with many of the things that traditional Tractarian commentary has counted as in Wittgenstein's view preconditions of sense—isomorphism of structure, categorial appropriateness, and so on, the kind of thing at issue in Geach's discussion. But such matters are poor candidates to meet Moore's second description: there seems vanishingly little to be said for the idea that, in knowing that the concept *prime number* is not to be applied to Roman emperors, we achieve any richer or more reflective understanding of any limitations of ours. What that second description calls for is a conception on which, however absolute is the distinction of sense and nonsense, and however utterly disparate are the things it distinguishes (as disparate as fire-engines and peaches, with no more possibility of a 'borderline case' than there is there), still, the distinction overlays a complexly contoured landscape, where what *makes for* the distinction

46. Like Moore, I am ignoring the differences, emphasized by Williams (1974), between the first-person singular and first-person plural versions of the idea.

47. Cf. fn. 57; although Moore uses this phrase in exposition of Kant, it seems clearly to be part of his account of Wittgenstein's thought too.

tapers by degrees. To accommodate both of Moore's descriptions at once, then, one has to think in terms of the kind of reflective exploration of our conceptual outlook that Williams described in characterizing Wittgenstein's later philosophical method:

[It would make our language] clearer to ourselves ... by moving around reflectively inside our view of things and sensing when one began to be near the edge by the increasing incomprehensibility of things regarded from whatever way-out point of view one had moved into. What one would become conscious of, in so reflecting, is something like: *how we go on*.⁴⁸

'How we go on' is a determinant of our concepts, of what can and cannot intelligibly be said, and therefore also a determinant of the necessities that hold in virtue of the interconnections of these concepts. The idea that in becoming more reflectively conscious of how we go on we understand our limitations brings into connection with that the thought that our going on as we do rather than otherwise rests in a complex of biological and cultural contingencies. Our being subject to and shaped by such contingencies is, for us, a precondition of making sense. Our limitations are what these contingencies have made them. Thus an understanding of the ways our concepts are adapted to our limitations is an understanding that seeks to ground the necessities internal to those concepts in the contingency of our being so shaped.

If anything at all like that is the understanding that is to lie at the beginning of Moore's train of thought, then there is a fairly direct route from it—a route mapped out by Williams (1974), Lear (1984), and Moore himself (1997: Ch. 6)—to transcendental idealism. Moreover, even if along that route one manages to persuade oneself of the self-stultifying incoherence of the doctrine, so long as the route has that beginning one will, at its end, retain sympathy with the doctrine. That is so, I think, because retaining sympathy with the doctrine is just *equivalent to* imagining that one glimpsed contingency at the ground of the necessities we acknowledge, and was not duped by a misleading presentation of a far less exciting dependence of one contingency on another: namely, the banal fact that but for various biological and other

48. Williams 1974: 85.

contingencies humans would not have been such as to acknowledge those necessities or any others.

It will be obvious from that remark that I don't think there is any stable understanding that could lie at the beginning of Moore's train of thought, and issue in the way he describes in the knowingly nonsensical enunciation of the doctrines of transcendental idealism. Indeed I think the impression of understanding here arises essentially from instability—between regarding our limitations as real and as not, between regarding thought adapted to these limitations as having, and as not having, real alternatives. To try to make out that view, though, would be to engage with Moore's substantive aims, when I intended to limit myself to his exegetical proposal. Observing, now, that limitation, my conclusion is that, unless I have seriously misunderstood it, Moore's proposal involves an attempt to insert a major component of Wittgenstein's later thought into the framework of the *Tractatus*; and further, that it doesn't fit.

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