

INTERVIEW

Inheriting Wittgenstein

James Conant in Conversation with Niklas Forsberg

Part 2

FORSBERG: In the first part of our interview (Forsberg and Conant, 2013), we talked a great deal about your philosophical upbringing, and the image that came up there – and that we used in the title of that interview – of *the positivist rabbi*. I think it really brings into view a theme that recurs in your work. That discussion led you to reflect on the way you work and write in philosophy. You said that you strive to criticize *only*, as you put it, “forms of philosophical temptation that I can get going in myself”. So this tells us that you strive to do philosophy in a way that remains faithful to the traditional ideal of philosophy as a form of self-criticism. And the immediate question this raises for me is: in what sense is your reading of the *Tractatus* a work of self-criticism?

CONANT: Thank you. It’s a good question! Or, a couple of questions maybe. I think that there is a specifically biographical sense in which *my* reading of the *Tractatus* is a form of self-criticism (where the “self” in “self-criticism” now stands for “me”); then there is a more structural sense in which any work of philosophy pursued in the spirit of Wittgenstein must be a work of self-criticism (where the “self” in “self-criticism” stands for the self of someone implicated in or by that book). That second observation itself, I suppose, divides into two points: a first one about how Wittgenstein’s work always involves some dimension of criticism of his earlier self (where the

term “self” now stands for “Wittgenstein”); and a second one about how any genuine experience of *reading* that work must draw on a reader’s capacity for self-criticism (where the term “self” should now be understood to stand for “a reader of Wittgenstein’s work”). So we now already have three things to discuss.

FORSBERG: Let’s begin with the biographical sense that pertains to you. How were you criticizing *your* earlier self in your readings of the *Tractatus*?

CONANT: Well, the thing that I called in a number of my writings “the standard reading of the *Tractatus*” (and by “standard” I meant a reading that had come to be prevalent in the 1970s and early ‘80s) was a reading that I had initially been taught and accepted. So, what I was doing a bit later, in trying to dethrone it, was trying to free myself from that reading. That means, I was trying to free myself from it both as an exegetical framework through which to interpret the book, but also from the kinds of philosophical temptations and attractions that must be at work in one, in order for one to find that reading to constitute a satisfying place to come to rest philosophically. This means: I was not only trying to free myself from a certain picture of where early Wittgenstein himself comes to rest philosophically; but I was also working to free myself from my own earlier attractions to some of the philosophical demons that the author of the *Tractatus* seeks to exorcise both from himself and his reader.

FORSBERG: Still on the autobiographical side. The image of the positivist rabbi seems to me to capture something that continues to be present in many contemporary readings of early Wittgenstein, and it goes with ideas about what we are left with when we have climbed all the rungs of the *Tractarian* ladder – things we supposedly can’t really talk about in philosophy.

CONANT: I think you are right about this. Why is this true? Why do the options for making sense of the *Tractatus* seem to involve

ascribing to it a positivistic form of nihilism (about what philosophy can achieve), or the supplementation of such a conception with a bit of supernatural mysticism (so that it seems to give us a bit more than nothing, only we can't talk about it)? Initially, there can seem to be only these two options for reading the *Tractatus*: either (1) its author is out to convey numerous metaphysical “insights” but they are all banished to the realm of the unsayable; or (2) he is out to convey no “insight” at all, where this is understood to mean that philosophy can impart no understanding. It is a mark of how inescapable this pair of options for reading Wittgenstein has proven to be, that most commentators assume that I myself must be embracing (2). They think this, because it is at least clear to them that I am certainly rejecting (1). What they miss, however, is how a proper understanding of the *Tractatus* requires coming to appreciate how these two options do not exhaust the field of play. Really to overcome the specter of the “positivist rabbi” here requires not only overcoming the conception of language that makes it seem as if everything interesting in philosophy has to be banished to the realm of the ineffable, but also overcoming the latent conception of how what belongs *to*, or *within*, language, must figure as an element “in” language – as a possible logical subject of a proposition – if it is to be philosophically thematizable at all. When Wittgenstein tries to show us in the *Tractatus* the sorts of things he seeks to show (such as that the logical constants do not represent, or that the subject is the limit of the world and hence not part of it, or that the activity of philosophical clarification requires a use of language through which nothing about what is the case ends up being asserted), he is seeking to illuminate dimensions of that which belongs to language (and that which belongs to a subject, and to the world) that previous philosophy has been unable to accommodate – unable to accommodate because of the manner in which it seeks to pull language, world and subject apart and then bring them back together again. This leaves previous philosophy with three options: (a) trying to talk about these matters as if they constituted linguistically expressible relations between features of language and features of reality and/or subjectivity or as if they involved extraordinary but nonetheless expressible kinds of subject matter (really big or elusive objects of reference such as: “the world as a whole” or “the I who

thinks”), or (b) treating them as features of reality or kinds of subject matter so extraordinary or peculiar that they, in their extraordinariness or peculiarity, burst the bounds of language, or (c) assuming that because they do not seem to involve any kinds of feature or subject matter, they are therefore nothing at all – where this is understood to mean that there’s nothing here to understand, and hence nothing for philosophy to illuminate. Everyone understands that the *Tractatus* rejects option (a), leaving them with (b) or (c). What they tend to miss is how (a), (b) and (c) all share a common picture of what must be of concern to philosophy in order for it to be more than nothing. My reading of the *Tractatus* is, indeed, one according to which it seeks to show that where traditional philosophy thought there was something to say, there is nothing to say. This leaves us with the question: How can philosophy in the end turn out to be concerned with nothing, without *itself* turning out to be nothing?

FORSBERG: Well, I must say that it strikes me as quite a reasonable question. How CAN philosophy be concerned with nothing without *itself being* nothing?

CONANT: The common misreading of my writings on the *Tractatus* is one that attributes to me the idea that Wittgenstein thinks that – because language, world and the thinking subject cannot figure as the logical subjects of (either meaningful or illuminatingly nonsensical) propositions – there is nothing for philosophy to illuminate, and hence philosophy itself is really nothing. What is true is that my reading of the *Tractatus* aims to show that, given the usual picture of what it is for philosophy to be “about” something (and what it is to have “insight” into such a “something”), it is about nothing (and conveys no “insights” so understood). What tends to be missed (especially in the way in which that reading has been invoked in contemporary debates between so-called “resolute readers” and their opponents) is that the *Tractatus* wants to show how this nothing is nonetheless – philosophically – *everything*. To chart the contours of what here appears seemingly as a kind of nothing is to delimit the contours of that which Wittgenstein’s primary early

philosophical terms of art (such as “logic”, “world”, “subject”, “ethics”) seek to bring into view and to allow us to understand. This means that it is important to my reading of the *Tractatus* that the book seeks to convey *understanding* – that it seeks to *show* us (hence to enable is to *see aright*) the logic of our language, its openness to the world, and its internality to the thinking subject. But the difficulty here is to appreciate how these forms of “understanding”, “showing” and “seeing” are not such as to allow the forms of clarity they confer to be captured through that-clauses seeking to specify the supposed “something” that they convey. As soon as we try to say “The *Tractatus* shows us that...”, thereby trying to shoe-horn the grammar of that which it allows to show itself into the logical form of a proposition saying what is the case, we can end up only with nonsense. The clarity we here seek requires that we pass through such nonsense and come out the other side. Part of what “coming out the other side of the nonsense” here means is coming to see that there’s nothing that is expressible through propositions that exhibit the form of those to which we are naturally drawn when philosophizing – there is no “it” of the sort that we are prone to imagine there must be – that can be the possible content of even a pseudo-proposition. The form of understanding that is here required is itself misunderstood whenever it is modeled on the form of understanding involved in the understanding of a proposition. It does not help to introduce this model and then take it back: to say it is like understanding a proposition, but with the proviso that what the proposition-like string of words in this case seeks to say is the sort of thing which, alas, cannot be said. One has not yet even begun to appreciate the logical character of the gulf that separates the form of understanding that the *Tractatus* requires of its reader and that which is involved in the understanding of propositions, if one says that “that which” the elucidatory sentences of the propositions seeks to show is the sort of “something” that cannot be said. This passage through nonsense – through that which is, in this sense, nothing – takes us philosophically “somewhere”, only once we have given up our original conception of what it is for philosophy to arrive at a “place” of clarity. For early Wittgenstein, we must travel this route through nonsense to arrive at a genuine understanding of language, world and subject. Insofar as such a form of understanding is hard

to earn and worth having, it is, in one sense, certainly not nothing. But, given a traditional philosophical conception of what it is for philosophy to have something to say, it remains true that, on the *Tractarian* conception, there is nothing to say. It is remaining on this razor's edge that is so difficult for a reading of the *Tractatus* to achieve. The difficulty is to see how this nothing gives us everything we should need or want without turning it back into a something – a seemingly possible (or seemingly strangely impossible) subject of predication or discourse.

FORSBERG: So, let us return to the question of self-criticism.

CONANT: Yes, you can see why I wanted to divide up your initial question into parts!

FORSBERG: I can indeed. You suggested a *structural* aspect regarding the *Tractatus* and the question of self-criticism, beyond the merely personal autobiographical question as it pertains to you.

CONANT: Well, let's turn next to how a version of the autobiographical question pertains to Wittgenstein himself. First of all, I do see the *Tractatus* as the culmination of the work of “the later early Wittgenstein”. That is to say, I see him in that work criticizing things that “the early early Wittgenstein” thought over various stages of his development – especially the following three stages: (1) when he first came to philosophy through reading figures such as Kraus, Weininger, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, (2) then slightly later when he first became a student of Russell's, (3) then a bit later still when he first got excited about what he was learning from Frege. The *Tractatus* combines a critique of all three of these stages of his prior development. Hence it contains a critique of (1) an ineffabilist picture of inside and outside, i.e. a certain picture of there being substantive limits to the world and language, with there being that which lies within those limits and that which lies beyond them – or, to take a different instance of that picture: a certain picture of the self-world relation, with something over here, the judging or

speaking subject and then, something over there, that which is judged or said, where these then need somehow to be brought together in yet a further step. It also contains a critique of (2) a Russellian picture of how to make sense of the multiplicity of a proposition or a state of affairs, one which brings with it mysteries regarding how to make sense of the unity or form of either. Finally, (3) it contains a critique of a Fregean understanding of the logical resources available to someone who wants to mount critiques of (1) and (2) – hence a critique of Frege’s understanding of negation, the relation of force to content, the need for a judgment stroke, and so on.

FORSBERG: I think that many of your readers think that you think that Frege is more of a hero for the author of the *Tractatus* than you have just suggested.

CONANT: Well, Frege is something of a hero for him. I think Anscombe is right when she says that Wittgenstein’s relative estimate of Russell and Frege is expressed in the words he employs to express the character of his indebtedness to each in the Preface of the *Tractatus*. And Frege himself is concerned to insist that there is no possibility of thought outside of logic. Nevertheless, Frege still thinks that we must sharply distinguish what belongs to the logical unity of a thought (what can be true or false) from what belongs to judgment (to the recognition that it is true or that it is false). The first belongs to the content of the judgment independently of the subject’s activity; the second requires the activity of the subject but in such a way as not to affect the logical unity of that which is judged. This is one aspect of Frege’s doctrine that the *Tractatus* will target. Here is another: Frege still thinks of language as simply being a necessary means for us to think and judge. To fully emancipate oneself from the picture of inside and outside (from which the author of the *Tractatus* seeks to free himself) means to no longer see the act of recognizing a proposition as true (or false) as something that enters our understanding of what the proposition says *from the outside*. And this requires no longer seeing language as simply a medium through which beings such as us do our thinking and

judging – as something external to the unity of thought as thought. To see thought, language, and the activity of a judging/speaking subject as having, in this sense, no outside or inside, requires seeing them as “nothing” in the sense explicated in my previous answer – seeing them as that which pervade the unitary interrelated being of logic, world and subject. So this means that Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Schopenhauerian ineffabilism, Russellian atomism and Fregean logicism are all part and parcel of one extended exercise in self-criticism – that every act of criticism in the *Tractatus* is in part directed at a philosophical temptation by which the author of that work was once gripped.

FORSBERG: This is true for later Wittgenstein as well, right?

CONANT: Yes, that is right. So nothing I just said is meant to deny that the self-criticism continues – that, in each of his phases, later Wittgenstein continues to criticize versions of his earlier self.

Thus, for example, what remains an issue in his much later criticism of Frege’s conception of logic is not only how Frege continues to rely in certain ways on the picture of inside and outside from which the author of the *Tractatus* seeks to free himself throughout, but also how the author of the *Tractatus* himself remains in the thrall of that picture in ways he had failed to appreciate.

FORSBERG: Could you say something about how you think the character of that self-criticism changes in the transition from the *Tractatus* to Wittgenstein’s later writings?

Conant: Well, one thing that Wittgenstein came to think about the *Tractatus* is that, though it seeks to eschew dogmatism in philosophy, it everywhere has an outwardly dogmatic form. It *seems* to be laying down theses. In Wittgenstein’s later writing, it becomes important for the reader to be able to distinguish different kinds of voice. There are a great many of these in *Philosophical Investigations*. Just to mention some of the most common ones: a voice of philosophical *temptation* (one with which the reader is invited to identify), a voice of

philosophical *insistence* (in which a philosophical requirement is laid down), voices of philosophical *correction* (denying what the voices of temptation and insistence say) and *over-correction* (trying to amend or soften or otherwise save the counter-thesis arrived at by negating what the initial voices say), voices of *diagnosis* and *mis-diagnosis* (that lead or purport to lead us back to the fateful yet undetected initiating move in the philosophical conjuring game – a move that strikes all of the aforementioned voices, locked in the dialectic of philosophical assertion and denial, as perfectly innocent), along with related voices of *invitation* (asking: “then what would you be inclined to say about ...?”), voices of *grammatical reminder* (“under what circumstances would you say ...?”), and of *imaginative exploration* (now try to conceive of this as a complete primitive language (PI, §2), or imagine a language that you are unable to come to understand no matter how hard you try (PI, §207), now try to imagine one that only you can understand (PI, §243)).

Let us just focus on the first of these voices, for the moment – that of *temptation*. The philosophical temptations that later Wittgenstein is so good at bringing to expression in his writing are ones that he was able to feel gripped by at the moment of writing, as he set forth those words on the page. That sometimes meant that he needed – and was able – at the time of writing, to re-inhabit the mindset of someone who, in philosophizing, now wants to say those very words. In some cases, for later Wittgenstein, that meant re-inhabiting the mindset of the author of the *Tractatus*. For part of the point of this voice (the voice of temptation) is precisely to accurately characterize exactly what that philosophical temptation feels like from the inside – what it is that one now feels moved to say – at a certain juncture in the unfolding dialectic of philosophical reflection.

FORSBERG: So does that mean that you think that the “earlier Wittgenstein” that is criticized in later Wittgenstein’s writings is usually just the author of the *Tractatus*?

CONANT: Thank you so much for asking me that question! I do *not* think that. I did not mean to imply above – though I can see how it might have sounded that way – that the earlier self that the later

Wittgenstein is criticizing is always to be identified with the author of the *Tractatus*. In particular, I think it is a huge mistake to think that later Wittgenstein's central targets of criticism are generally to be equated simply with philosophical requirements that have been laid down by the author of the *Tractatus*. Sometimes he is equally concerned in his so-called "later" writings to criticize things he thought or continued to think well into the 1930s.

FORSBERG: One thing that I think sometimes confuses some of your readers is how you can hold both that the *Tractatus* aims to put forward no philosophical theses and that in his later writings Wittgenstein is still concerned often to criticize the *Tractatus*. What is there then to criticize?

CONANT: First, the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* have many common targets – for instance, the idea that a name, all by itself, could have a meaning, apart from any larger context. With respect to such common targets, the difference between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* lies not in *what* they are criticizing, but in *how* they criticize it. In such cases, what later Wittgenstein is criticizing in early Wittgenstein is *not* his earlier philosophical doctrines but his understanding of what it is to fully realize and practice his non-doctrinal conception of philosophical method. Second, even where the author of the *Investigations* is criticizing the author of the *Tractatus* on matters of substance, the target of the criticism is not ever something the author of the *Tractatus* would have himself regarded, at the time of writing that book, *as* a philosophical thesis. This does not mean that there's no criticism of Tractarian philosophical commitments in the *Investigations*. On the contrary, such criticism is everywhere, and is part of the reason why, as Wittgenstein says in the Preface to the *Investigations* that "[my present way of thinking] could be seen in the right way only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking" (PI, p. viii). For the difference in the way the *Investigations* undertakes to criticize those philosophical targets it shares with the *Tractatus* is sufficiently deep as to bring almost the whole of latter book within the target range of the former – including a great deal that early Wittgenstein tacitly

presupposes through the manner in which he launches his criticism of their common targets. This includes a great many ideas that the author of the *Tractatus* regarded as philosophically too uncontentious to be stateable in the form of a thesis – for instance, the idea that there’s only one logical space, or that the real logical form of a proposition is something hidden, that it is something that must be brought to the surface, that this activity of bringing what is hidden to the surface requires the application of logical notation, and so on. These are all under criticism in his later work, along with the philosophical preconceptions that make them seem mandatory.

FORSBERG: I know you have sometimes been accused of holding a “strong continuity thesis” with regard to Wittgenstein’s development. And I know that you have denied this charge, and I know that this has led some of your critics to think that, in denying that charge, you must be taking back everything you have previously claimed about the relation between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*. How would you relate what you just said to the ongoing debate between those who think there are two Wittgensteins and those who think there is just one?

CONANT: I have sometimes been accused of not taking a clear position in the debate between those who think there are two Wittgensteins (an early and a late) and those who think there is only one Wittgenstein (as if the development of his philosophy involved no self-criticism whatsoever). What is right in this accusation is that I am at a loss as to how to determine which of the two positions in that debate I find stupider. It is misguided to think that the earlier self that Wittgenstein is criticizing in his later work is always, or even generally, to be identified with a self who predates the moment of division of Wittgenstein’s work into two halves – an earlier half and a later half – a moment usually placed somewhere around 1929. This leads to a picture in which the earlier self that Wittgenstein is concerned to criticize is one who suddenly dies at one and the same mythical moment in which the later Wittgenstein is not only born but suddenly emerges as an entirely different philosopher from the one he was just moments before. Just as I distinguished above

between different phases within the trajectory of development of that single figure usually referred to as “the early Wittgenstein”, I would want to do the same for “the later Wittgenstein”. In my previous answer, when talking about the *Tractatus*, I distinguished between the early early and the later early Wittgenstein. So too, when talking about his progress towards *Philosophical Investigations* and beyond, I would want to distinguish between at least an early later Wittgenstein and a later later Wittgenstein. For much of what is under criticism in the writing of the later later Wittgenstein are particular conceptions of what it is to do philosophy, what sort of method that presupposes, and what kind of break with the past that involves – conceptions that very much remain in force in Wittgenstein’s writings over the first half of the 1930s. Thus, for example, when Wittgenstein says (in section 133 of the *Investigations*) “there is not *a* method, though there are indeed methods”, he is just as much concerned to criticize his early later conception of philosophical method (still found in *The Big Typescript*) as his later early one (that of the *Tractatus*). This means that there isn’t a single big turn in Wittgenstein’s philosophical career in which he exchanges one conception of how to do philosophy wholesale for another. To appreciate the extent to which it is self-criticism throughout therefore requires both, on the one hand, acknowledging the extraordinary continuity in certain aspects of the philosophical conception that runs from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*, while, on the other, seeing how the gradual deepening of that conception involves Wittgenstein at every moment in a constant struggle with himself over the course of the entirety of his philosophical development.

FORSBERG: What about the third dimension of the topic of self-criticism that you mentioned above? How does that come in here?

CONANT: The third dimension has to do with what it is to be a reader of Wittgenstein’s work. I take it that, for all of their differences, the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* have this much in common: They are both works in which the reader is invited to recognize certain ways of speaking (and, along with them, certain putatively possible ways

of thinking) as ones that are *attractive* to her, to fully feel the attraction of those ways of speaking, to explore the philosophical difficulties into which they lead her, and eventually to attain a philosophical point of view from which those difficulties completely disappear. If you do not feel the attraction of these ways of speaking – if you are, as it were, somehow simply immune to such temptations – then this writing will have nothing it can teach or show you. At this very high level of abstraction, the following sentence is true of both early and later Wittgenstein: The reader must engage in an exercise of self-criticism in order to engage the work and be engaged by it. There is no engagement with the work apart from an engagement with oneself – with one’s own philosophical temptations and confusions.

FORSBERG: Doesn’t this involve a very different conception of philosophy from that which one often encounters in contemporary academia?

CONANT: I think you are right. I think what I have just said does, indeed, place Wittgenstein in a somewhat awkward relation to the contemporary institutionalization of philosophy. For the latter is a dispensation of philosophy in which, to put it mildly, there is plenty of room for philosophical work whose aim is to show up the view under criticism as being nothing other than gratuitously mistaken. Such philosophical work tends to be cheered on by those who agree with what the author deplores and deplored by those who do not. This is no less true of writing “for” and “against” Wittgenstein than it is for so much else written within such a dispensation of philosophy. To read such work in accordance with the spirit in which it is written (to regard its criticism as powerful in the manner it intends it to be) requires that one be able to take a certain form of enjoyment in it: one enjoys it because it demolishes a view that one would oneself never be inclined to hold. One’s sense of philosophical superiority is a function of one’s sense that one is entitled to condescend to the object of philosophical criticism. Such criticism thereby invites one simply to cheer on the demolition of the authors’ opponent without oneself having to feel in any way implicated in the criticism. There’s a lot of philosophical writing

nowadays that allows the reader to remain in this utterly detached relation to the target of philosophical criticism. I can summarize the main point of the third dimension of our topic of self-criticism now by saying this: Wittgenstein's writing, early and late, seeks actively throughout to eschew such a relation to its target of criticism. If one practices philosophy in the manner Wittgenstein envisages, the only problems with which you will be able to make a decisive form of progress – and hence about which you will be able to write well – are those that are in some sense genuinely *yours*. This requires that philosophy itself be something far more *personal* than what it is usually turned into when it is taught as an academic university “subject”. This is not the least of the reasons that it involves a conception that can only fit awkwardly into the disciplinary landscape of the modern university.

FORSBERG: Doesn't this mean that, according to you, many – perhaps most – self-proclaimed Wittgensteinians are unfaithful to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy?

CONANT: It would be hard to deny that there has been many a self-styled “Wittgensteinian” who has wanted to condescend to a great deal of philosophy – writing about it and looking upon it as something that *he* would never be so stupid as to think – while invoking Wittgenstein's name to underwrite these acts of philosophical condescension. It is a mark of how poorly Wittgenstein's thought has been received that such a note of condescension and an understandable backlash against it have become the characteristic earmarks of a typical exchange between supposed followers and critics of Wittgenstein's philosophy. When the essence of his conception of philosophical method comes to seem inseparable from such a tone of ideological condescension, then I do think it *utterly* betrays Wittgenstein's spirit, displaying a deep misunderstanding of what he himself wanted to achieve in philosophy. This doesn't mean that Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy is right; it certainly doesn't mean that it is the only way. But it surely does mean that, if the aim of writing about Wittgenstein is to help us understand that author, one fails to do this, if one

contrives to make it seem as if one could be doing philosophy in his spirit while completely sparing oneself the forms of anguish and difficulty that come with genuine *self*-criticism.

FORSBERG: How did you arrive at your view of the relation between the *Investigations* and the *Tractatus*?

CONANT: Well, like many other people in the late 70s and early 80s, I began by reading books on Wittgenstein bearing titles such as *Wittgenstein: The Man and his Works*, *Wittgenstein: The Development of his Philosophy*, and so forth. In such books – some of the more prominent ones were by authors such as David Pears, Peter Hacker, Norman Malcolm, and Anthony Kenny – there would be a few introductory chapters on the *Tractatus* and then two or three times as many chapters on later Wittgenstein, mostly on the *Investigations*, perhaps with a final chapter on *On Certainty*. The chapters on the *Tractatus* would contain summaries of the supposed *doctrines* central to early Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and in the later chapters we would learn how those doctrines were demolished by later Wittgenstein. So we would, in effect, be invited to regard the relationship between early and later Wittgenstein as one that could be accommodated by the schema “early Wittgenstein held *p* and later Wittgenstein held not-*p*”. What first struck me, already as a fairly young student, was how many of those supposed doctrines of the *Tractatus* – indeed, supposedly *central* doctrines – actually already come in for trenchant criticism in the *Tractatus* itself. (I am thinking here of doctrines such as a baptismal theory of naming, a mentalistic conception of meaning, the idea that we can understand how language works from a perspective situated outside language, with the primary dispute being whether the *Tractatus* advances a realist account of how language mirrors world or an anti-realist one in which world mirrors language.) The second thing that struck me was that at just those junctures in the *Investigations* when later Wittgenstein was explicitly concerned to reprimand the author of the *Tractatus*, he never ascribes any of those supposedly central doctrines to that work. At those junctures, he always seems instead to be on about something that could only appear to be comparatively peripheral,

given a standard conception of what the work's central teachings were supposed to be by the authors of the books I mentioned above.

In the thrall of such a conception, you were left with this question: Why, whenever the *Investigations* is most concerned to target the *Tractatus*, does it criticize that work only for comparatively secondary philosophical commitments? Why, in just those remarks, does Wittgenstein always seem to be just nibbling at the edges, or ambushing the suburbs, of the *Tractatus*'s main teachings? Why doesn't he go in for the kill? This seemed very strange to me. This led me to attempt something that was originally intended merely as an experiment.

FORSBERG: What was that experiment?

CONANT: It involved supposing that those aspects of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein was most concerned to thematize in the *Investigations* whenever he mentioned his earlier book (such as an illicit subliming of logic, the idea that there is something hidden that only logical notation can bring to the surface, etc.) were, indeed, the very aspects of his early conception of philosophy that he later regarded as most problematic. This allowed the possibility to remain open that the reason Wittgenstein so often failed to mention the *Tractatus* in connection with this or that other target of criticism in the *Investigations* (such as a baptismal theory of naming, a mentalistic conception of meaning, etc.) was that his dissatisfaction with the *Tractatus* there (in so far as he had one) had to do with *how* that early work prosecuted its criticism of something that early and later Wittgenstein were equally concerned to criticize. When I started going down the path opened by this experiment, I was finding initially to my surprise, that it was yielding a surprisingly helpful alternative framework for making sense of the *Tractatus* as a whole. Moreover, it was resolving a lot of textual puzzles that remained quite pressing for the authors of the aforementioned books on Wittgenstein. Those authors were constantly struggling to find a textual hook on which to hang some supposed doctrine of the *Tractatus*, where the doctrine in question was presumed to be findable in the *Tractatus* on the alleged ground that if later Wittgenstein was

so very concerned to criticize it in the *Investigations*, then it must stated and endorsed as doctrine in the *Tractatus* somewhere. So *where* was it? Not only did I not need to read the sections that were thus recruited as textual hooks for these doctrines, but I was free to reconsider what those passages might be up to instead. When I did this, I started to find the *Tractatus* yielding forms of intelligibility that I had not originally anticipated.

FORSBERG: What effect did this experiment have on your understanding of the relation between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*?

CONANT: It freed me up to explore continuities between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* – continuities that the authors of the commentaries mentioned above generally felt themselves obliged to minimize. The most central of these, touched on briefly above, was the aspiration to eschew philosophical doctrine. That is, I came to see early and later Wittgenstein as both sharing with Kant an aspiration to arrive at a non-dogmatic method for making progress in philosophy. To avoid dogmatism means that one must not *assume* anything, or simply *assert* anything, in philosophy – and that one must be especially careful to eschew doing so wherever one finds oneself wanting to assume or assert something that is the contrary of what one’s philosophical interlocutor wants to say. Rather, through procedures of clarification or elucidation – more specifically in Wittgenstein: through a method of interrogating sentences – one must uncover forms of philosophical confusion. One must do this without ever engaging in a single dogmatic assumption, without ever relying upon something one’s interlocutor simply has to take on board as a contestable ground upon which the whole procedure rests. Continuing our earlier theme: this is another place in which Wittgenstein offers nothing where many contemporary philosophers think they must supply something. Hence this affords another example of a case in which a proper understanding of why there is nothing just there, where most readers are apt to assume there ought to be something, is crucial to achieving an understanding of his entire philosophy. It is a condition of the possibility of genuine

philosophical progress for Wittgenstein that philosophy never presuppose anything philosophically contestable – that, qua philosophy, it must always be in the business of striving to presuppose nothing.

FORSBERG: If that is the most important continuity, then where, according to you, lies the most significant discontinuity?

CONANT: To say that early Wittgenstein aimed to practice philosophy in such a way is not to say that he *succeeded* in that aim. A further advantage of the aforementioned experiment turned out to be that it allowed me to place later Wittgenstein's criticisms of his earlier self in a new frame – to see those criticisms as concerned to bring out moments of hidden dogmatism in his early philosophy. On this understanding of their relationship, what later Wittgenstein seeks to show is how his early conception of logic (and its supposed role within a non-dogmatic enterprise of philosophical elucidation) actually brings along with it a whole tacit or hidden metaphysics. So that, even though his early *aim* officially is already one of eschewing the laying down of metaphysical requirements, he fails, by his later lights, in his early work to live up to his own original aim. The motor that drives his later criticism of his early work is therefore tied to a desire to remain faithful to and fully realize certain core aspects of his original aim in philosophy.

Indeed, the *Investigations* aims to show that there are a great many such moments of hidden dogmatism in the *Tractatus*: moments in which the crucial philosophical conjuring trick precisely comes already with a move that strikes the author of that work as utterly innocent – as not being the sort of thing that, properly understood, anyone could so much as even try to contest. That is to say: it comes at a point in the philosophical proceeding before the later early Wittgenstein thinks he has even begun really to do philosophy – before he has even begun to say something possibly controversial, well before he has even so much as made a move. Later Wittgenstein takes the author of the *Tractatus* to be the example par excellence of the sort of philosopher he wants to criticize, precisely because the author of that book so beautifully exemplifies how one can

constantly fall into making such moves (and hence fall, over and over again, into dogmatism), while thinking all the while that the most important thing in philosophy is precisely to avoid ever making such moves (and hence to be thinking to oneself, while one falls prey to such dogmatism, that one is all the while practicing an utterly non-dogmatic method of philosophy).

FORSBERG: We have discussed this idea of philosophical criticism where the critic must share the problems of his opponents, or at least, be able to feel the force of the philosophical temptation that is in play. So, it may seem as if Wittgenstein is not for everyone. Not everyone does, or will, share his problems. Not everyone will share the forms of philosophical temptation that drive him.

CONANT: I agree with you this far: Not everything in Wittgenstein is for everyone, all of the time. And I do think that, as one reads and rereads Wittgenstein over the years, certain philosophical voices that do not initially strike one as very interesting, can suddenly seem to get something exactly right. So that one is suddenly struck by the thought: “Oh, my God, that is it! That is now what I want to say about this!” So that you suddenly find *that* voice to be the one that is asking or answering what now seems to you to be just the right question. Or there is some philosophical problem to which one of Wittgenstein’s interlocutors likes to give voice that has always left you cold, and then, suddenly, it strikes you now as being the deepest and most significant problem – not just one whose depth and significance you had not previously appreciated, but one which we must all come to appreciate before any of us are in any position to appreciate much of anything that Wittgenstein is doing in philosophy. It can take years before a problem that strikes one as uninteresting in this way can then suddenly strike one as being as deep as any problem in philosophy possibly can be. (A problem as such as this one: “How can one think what is not the case? If I think King’s College is on fire when it is not on fire, the fact of its being on fire does not exist. Then how can I think it?” (BB, 31).) Hence what in Wittgenstein is for *you* will depend in part on your ability to feel the bite of a philosophical problem, as well as on how far you

have progressed in your own philosophical thinking about that problem or on how far into the dialectic of his exploration of it he has managed to draw you. But I don't think it follows from this that there are people genuinely interested in philosophy for whom it could be the case that Wittgenstein is never for them at any time. That is hard for me to imagine. If that were true, Wittgenstein would be a much less interesting philosopher than I think he is, and he would have *failed* quite fundamentally to accomplish what he is trying to do, because he is not just trying to get at just any old idiosyncratic temptations. He is trying to trace the problems that lie at the heart of philosophy back to their roots. He is trying to get at temptations and confusions that (as he himself says) lie *deep* in the nature of language or thought – problems which language or thought itself seems to force upon us. Those are the kinds of questions he is after. So if you yourself are serious about philosophy, if you do find yourself gripped by some of philosophy's most fundamental questions, then there should be points at which your path through philosophical reflection and that of Wittgenstein not only intersect but genuinely overlap for a stretch.

FORSBERG: I am asking this question because there is a sense in which Wittgenstein holds a peculiar place in contemporary philosophical culture, or in the contemporary philosophical scene. I often feel that there are a great number of contemporary philosophers who shy away from Wittgenstein, and from the kinds of philosophy associated with his name, for the wrong reasons. What they have gathered about Wittgenstein puts them off. Now, if one says to them that “one has to share his problems”, then isn't that just going to put them off even more?

CONANT: You are raising a very interesting question here, but also a difficult one, which is: What is it “to share a problem”? In particular, your question has to do with what it means to share one of Wittgenstein's problems. In responding to your question, the first thing I want to do is to raise further questions about what it means to individuate a philosophical problem in the first place. On Wittgenstein's conception of what is really involved here, the final

arbiter of whether two people share a philosophical problem is not one that can be settled by simply deferring to their supposed first-person authority on the matter.

I think I know what my problem is. I look at what Wittgenstein says about something and I think “No! That is not my problem!” Does it *follow* that I am right? I might be. But it might be that a deep enough, or a fundamental enough, characterization of the real shape of my problem – abstracting from a great many details that distract me – leads to a characterization of the problem in which I am initially no longer able to recognize it as my problem. I think this also has to do with how difficult it can sometimes be to recognize that problems in different areas of philosophy share a common form. Often someone who is gripped by such a problem, in one of its guises, is not able to recognize the problem as it occurs in another area of philosophy as being of the same form. They think: “Over there the problem is about language, or it is about other minds, or it is about perception; and I am not interested in language or other minds or perception, I am interested in free will or ethics or politics; so their problem cannot be my problem!” There is a great tendency to understand philosophical problems as attaching in this way to a special subject matter and to understand one’s interest in the problem as being a function of one’s interest in that subject matter. Wittgenstein is a philosopher who self-consciously pushes against the grain of this tendency in contemporary philosophy – a tendency to divide up the landscape of philosophy into different areas and assign the administration of each to a different department of the discipline. He wants to bring out how problems drawn from such supposedly distinct “areas” are really the same despite the fact that they initially may seem to us to be totally unrelated.

The titles that have been assigned to his posthumously published work are in this regard extraordinarily misleading – in some cases, indeed, disastrously so. I am thinking of titles such as *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, or *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, or *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. The sort of order that these titles seek to impose onto the various manuscripts he left behind, and surviving transcripts of lectures, is one that has its place in a conception of philosophy utterly alien to

Wittgenstein's own. They make it seem as if each such work of Wittgenstein's is devoted to something he himself conceived of as a distinct area of philosophy. Contrast these titles with the two titles he himself chose for his first and last book. The first of these is particularly interesting in this regard. For, in it, not even the words "logical" and "philosophical" are permitted to appear apart, as if they named two different things that could be separated by, and hence flanked around, an "and". That is to say, properly to understand the philosophical significance of the *hyphen* in the title of that book is an essential part of the task of understanding the book as a whole. This, in turn, requires, understanding the sense in which for Wittgenstein philosophy, like virtue, must be one. And the almost nothing, the forms of notation, he employs to express such a unity – in this case the hyphen in the title of his first book – must not be mistaken for the wrong sort of something. In this sense, fully to understand the hyphen is to understand the book!

These posthumously assigned titles, on the other hand, give the impression that in any one of these works the author is primarily concerned with a sort of something whose circumference we know how to demarcate before we read Wittgenstein: the problems of the philosophy of psychology is his concern in this book, whereas in that other book he is turning his attention instead to a supposedly fully distinct set of problems – say, those in the philosophy of mathematics. But, if one attends closely to what is actually in these texts, one cannot help but notice that large stretches of one of them reworks earlier draft material drawn from the other. Moreover, in so far as one imagines one has some clear conception of what it is that makes something a problem in the philosophy of mathematics as opposed to one in the philosophy of psychology, what one will have to conclude that Wittgenstein is doing in these texts is constantly weaving to and fro between the one supposed "set" of problems and the other "set" – moving promiscuously back and forth between supposedly distinct areas of philosophy – for example, jumping from the question "What constitutes a correct continuation of a mathematical series?" to unrelated questions, such as "What constitutes the relation of an expectation to its fulfillment or of a hope to its satisfaction?". Part of the reason he weaves back and

forth in this way is to bring out the shared *form* of the problem across these different cases, to bring out that what really is the source of our puzzlement across these cases lies elsewhere than we imagine it does.

FORSBERG: I would like you to elaborate a bit on an excerpt from a long sentence of yours. The bit I have in mind is from your article “Putting Two and Two Together”. In that bit, you are talking about Kierkegaard but also connecting it with something in Wittgenstein. I understand you there to be exploring an important connection between ethical difficulties and confusions of grammar. Here’s what you say:

[C]onfusions in grammar are not mere confusions in grammar (because grammar in the relevant sense is not merely about words), but also confusions in life. They are symptoms (and sometimes contributing causes) of soul-sickness. (Conant 1995, p. 281)

Now I can see why someone might shy away from this formulation on the ground that it suggests that if one has a philosophical problem then one is somehow sick. So the question is: what *kind* of “soul-sickness” are we talking about when claiming that we suffer from something of this kind when we suffer from “confusions in grammar”?

CONANT: I see the worry. In my experience, it is a worry that can also be triggered by certain of Wittgenstein’s own remarks. I don’t know how helpful it would be to discuss this question at the level of abstraction at which you just asked it. Admittedly, *my* sentence (which you just quoted) does try to say something at such a level of abstraction. But I permit myself this formulation only after having discussed particular cases in some detail; then I step back to make a point about the sorts of confusions at issue in these cases and try to say something about why they are not *merely* grammatical (or linguistic, or conceptual – or whatever word one wants to reach for here that might seem apt for qualification through a parallel employment of the term “merely”). I don’t know what it would be

to convince someone of the point I am after here just by talking about the topic of “grammar” in the abstract.

FORSBERG: Then, by all means, please feel free to get concrete!

CONANT: Well, if I recall the context of that remark correctly, I have just been talking about what Kierkegaard means when he says *Christendom* is a “monstrous illusion”. “Christendom” is a word he coins in order to oppose it to that of “Christianity”. The latter term denotes a conception of a way of living dear to Kierkegaard’s heart; the former denotes something that is to be unmasked as a pseudo-concept – a pseudo-concept engendered by the illusion that in using certain words one is using Christian concepts and applying them to one’s own life. The illusion comes about through a failure to appreciate that those concepts partake of the grammar of Christian concepts only if they are used in certain ways. *Christianity*, according to Kierkegaard, involves actively being engaged by certain ideals, striving to live a certain way – where nothing about that way of living, from within the attempt to do so, could be more obvious than that it is infinitely *difficult*. Like Christianity, *Christendom* also appears to denote a set of practices and institutions that encourage and sustain a religious way of life – however, in fact, it involves a set of practices and institutions that, at one and the same time, are tied up with the state, the nation, a regional culture, and so forth. Through the manner in which it comes to be used within the context of Christendom, the concept *Christian* – and the related concepts from which it derives its grammatical life, such as *faith*, *authority*, etc., each – comes to appear to be employable in such a way that a person can fall under such a concept simply in virtue of certain facts being true of them: facts pertaining to their having been born, baptized, grown to maturity, and performed certain rituals in a certain mid-nineteenth century Danish dispensation. It comes to appear as if someone is “Christian” if that person takes himself to be a Danish citizen, hence a citizen of a “Christian” country, born of “Christian” parents (where this means, among other things, that they have the habit of going to the right sort of church on Sundays), and so forth. It comes to look as if a sufficiently large accumulation of facts, belonging to this order,

can suffice to make an individual a *Christian*. For Kierkegaard, what it is to be a “Christian” in this sense, is to be a member of, or to take oneself to be a member of, Christendom. What has happened, Kierkegaard thinks, is that by this point in 19th-century Denmark, the very concept of Christianity has been lost to many, because the original sense of a great many Christian concepts have been lost; for their original sense has been overlaid by the manner in which they are now employed within Christendom – that is, within a context in which what it is to be a Christian is, as it were, nothing more than being an appropriate subject of predication for (what Kierkegaard calls) “objective” predicates: predicates whose applicability to the subject are independent of the inner life of the individual. This turns the concept “Christian” itself into such an objective predicate – one whose applicability can be determined simply by surveying a set of institutional and cultural facts about an individual, such as where he was born, what his passport says, who his parents are, what sorts of holiday rituals he observes. That is to say, the facts that determine whether one is a Christian or not come to seem to belong to the same logical order as facts about oneself such as what color one’s eyes are, how much one weighs, what one’s age is, and so forth – facts that are true and false of one regardless of the state of one’s soul – indeed, regardless of whether one even predicates them of oneself. Kierkegaard draws a logical contrast between concepts that belong to this order (what he calls “objective categories”) and those that articulate a sort of life that the subject, on the one hand, recognizes as worth living, yet on the other recognizes as involving demands that are difficult to live up to – concepts that apply to one only insofar as one strenuously strives to live through them. Kierkegaard calls such concepts “subjective” categories. A life lived within such categories is one in which one strives to become a certain sort of person. Hence, for Kierkegaard, it is already the mark of a grammatical mistake to say one *is* a Christian. One *becomes* a Christian – where it, on this employment of the term “becomes”, marks an infinite task. The two main kinds of subjective categories for Kierkegaard are ethical and religious categories. Ethical and religious categories are categories that don’t apply to one simply based on certain facts about oneself. But rather only *come* to apply to one because one strives to *make oneself into* the sort of person to whom

such predicates are appropriately applicable – one makes oneself into a fit subject for those predicates. This is, as he puts it, an “existential” task (thereby coining a term that later became philosophically fashionable for a period of time).

FORSBERG: So, on your reading, Kierkegaard’s use of the terms “subjective” and “objective” are not to be understood epistemologically?

CONANT: That is correct. To understand them epistemologically, I take it, would mean to understand them as drawing a distinction within theoretical philosophy. Whereas I think it comes closer to the truth to see Kierkegaard’s distinction between subjective and objective categories as inheriting and refashioning the traditional philosophical distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge – a distinction that, as Kierkegaard well knows, was important to ancient philosophy. That latter traditional distinction is also one that induces a fundamental difference – Kant would say a formal difference, Kierkegaard says a dialectically qualitative difference – in concepts. For Aristotle or Kant, words such as reason, knowledge, thought, inference, etc., fall on either side of that distinction: there is practical and theoretical knowledge, practical and theoretical inference, etc. But, here too, the difference is not merely one of two species of a genus, but involves a difference in form. For both Aristotle and Kant, in theoretical knowledge the object of knowledge is the ground (or formal cause) of our knowledge; whereas in practical knowledge, it is the other way around: it is our practical knowledge that is the cause of the object known. Thus only certain sorts of beings can be fit subjects of predication for certain sorts of practical concepts. One is only an appropriate subject for such predicates if one is the sort of being whose understanding can be the cause of what one understands. For Aristotle and Kant, practical knowledge therefore is limited to subjects capable of rational agency and it is essentially *efficacious*: it issues in a form of understanding the mark of whose efficacy is that it involves some transformation of the world through the subject’s practical agency. The parallel to Kierkegaard’s distinction should now be obvious.

The difference is that for Kierkegaard the most fundamental mark of (what he calls) subjective categories is the degree to which *I*, qua subject of such predicates, strive at every moment, in living through them, not merely to transform the world around me, but above all to transform *myself*.

The reason that Kierkegaard says that Christendom is an enormous illusion is because he thinks that people who live under the regime of Christendom see themselves as Christians without having to strive thus to transform themselves. That is, they *want* to be able to think of themselves as exemplifying a Christian life, while evading the difficulty of such a life. But, given the manner in which they deploy Christian terminology within their lives, what actually entitles them to regard themselves as Christians has merely to do with the fact that they fall under certain objective predicates – thereby transforming the sort of *who* one needs to be in order to count as a Christian into a sort of *what* that is knowable through the exercise of theoretical rather than practical reason. So what is true is that if one has the sort of mistaken understanding of Christian concepts that Kierkegaard thinks characterizes Christendom – according to which the application of such concepts requires only the exercise of theoretical cognitive capacities – then it is true that there is no way to understand a distinction between any two supposed sorts of concepts (hence also a supposed distinction between so-called “subjective” ones and so-called “objective” ones) except in epistemological terms. But to attribute such an understanding to Kierkegaard of the very distinctions he is most concerned to elucidate is to misunderstand pretty much everything in his philosophy!

FORSBERG: Could you tie what you have just said back to the topic of grammar for me?

CONANT: Thank you for trying to keep me on track! The point to which I was building was this: Kierkegaard’s distinction between subjective and objective categories is a version of what Wittgenstein would have called a “grammatical distinction” (as is the distinction between the practical and the theoretical in Aristotle or Kant). The

distinction in Kierkegaard is between predicates that apply to you on account of how you live (where “living” here involves living *through* those concepts) and concepts that apply to you merely because of certain facts about you (facts that would be true of you, hence concepts you would fall under, even if you fail to live up to your own ethical or religious ideals). Kierkegaard is trying to get that logical (or categorical or grammatical) difference between such concepts to stand out clearly, so that he can bring out certain kinds of confusion. And it ought to be clear that at least with respect to *these* sorts of concepts, grammatical confusion with regard to them can never be “merely” grammatical confusion – at least if the “mere” here is taken to mean that it has to do only with language or thought and hence not at all with agency or living. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, the lack of grammatical clarity here is itself motivated by and tied to a desire to evade the ethical or religious demands that the subject of the confusion wants to be able to imagine himself as living up to. It is a form of *motivated confusion*. Confusion with regard to the grammar of such concepts will itself be reflected throughout the texture of a human life – in a person’s wanting things like the baptizing of their child, or their mere presence at a church ceremony, to have a false sort of significance, to carry the wrong the sort of weight. Conversely, this falsity or wrongness in how one lives will show up in every nuance of *how one talks* about such matters. This is a point that plays a central role in the writings of the Viennese author of Karl Kraus – someone who was both an admirer of Kierkegaard and admired by Wittgenstein – hence not accidentally the proximate cause of Wittgenstein’s first coming to be interested in Kierkegaard’s writings. What Kierkegaard and Kraus think is true for ethical and religious concepts, Wittgenstein aims to show can also hold for what might seem to be comparatively more garden-variety forms of intellectual confusion about concepts such as, say, “pain”, or “going on in the same way”. Philosophical unclarity about the grammar of such concepts, Wittgenstein thinks, is no less a function of the difficulty of looking our own lives in the face.

FORSBERG: Well, I asked you to comment on that passage of yours that I quoted because, it seems to me, it brings together two themes

that we touched on above: the theme of self-criticism and that of Wittgenstein's resistance to the idea that philosophy can be divided up into separate areas. I would now like to connect this with a further issue. I have often heard or read people saying that Wittgenstein says nothing or very little about ethics. What would you say to that?

CONANT: Well, yeah: there is a sense in which I think it is right that he says nothing "about" ethics, on a certain conception of what ethics is and what it would be to engage topics "falling within" that supposed "area" of philosophy. If one starts out with the idea that philosophy divides into self-compartmentalized areas, then, as we saw above, one is likely to impose artificial divisions onto Wittgenstein's writings. Hence if one approaches those writings with a certain conception of what a stretch of philosophy "about" ethics is supposed to look like, then I think it is true that hardly any self-contained subset of Wittgenstein's corpus will appear to be "about" ethics. But this is another nice example of the dialectic of the problem of the "something" and the "nothing" in Wittgenstein's work that we touched on earlier. Precisely given a certain conception of what it is for ethics to show up "somewhere" in a body of philosophical work, it is apt to seem to be *nowhere* – or almost nowhere – in Wittgenstein's work and this is apt to blind one to the way in which it is actually *everywhere* in his work.

If one thinks Wittgenstein is "doing" philosophy of language when he talks about naming, and is he "doing" philosophy of psychology when he talks about pain, and so on, then one will only think he is "doing" ethics where one finds the explicit occurrence of words such as "good", "evil", etc. If such a conception of what it is to "address" problems in a particular area of philosophy guides one's conception of where to look for "a philosophical topic" in Wittgenstein's work, and one then looks for the "ethical" part of his work, it is bound to seem to comprise a very small part, indeed hardly any, of his corpus.

Before we say more about why this way of thinking about "ethics" is bound to remain blind to the ethical dimension of Wittgenstein's work (and hence his own understanding of what the ethical is), it is worth pointing out that the above conception is no

less useless as a guide to locating and demarcating the supposed circumference of Wittgenstein's engagement even with a "topic" that everyone would in some sense agree he discusses a great deal. Consider in this connection Wittgenstein's relation to the "topic" of "logic" (on his own understanding of what the logical is). Neither "logic" nor "ethics" names an "area" for Wittgenstein: both are everywhere or nowhere – in our thinking and living and hence in our philosophical reflection upon thought and life. Notice that in this respect, Wittgenstein's understanding of these matters is surprisingly traditional – at least compared to that of most contemporary analytic philosophers. Logic, for Aristotle or Kant, is not simply one area of philosophy alongside others. It stands at the apex of philosophy and must encompass all of it. Similarly, on a classical conception of ethics – this is especially clear in ancient Greek philosophy – the ethical is a pervasive dimension of philosophical work: the question how one is to live is not just a question among others, rather it is the question to which all the rest of one's philosophical reflection is internally related if it is to be fully worthy of the title philosophy. This is not to deny that the details of Wittgenstein's understanding of how the logical and ethical pervade all thought and action is in certain respects highly original. It is only to say that a more traditional understanding of how ethics and logic each pertain to the *form*, rather than to the *matter*, of thought and action provides one with a far better angle of entry into Wittgenstein's philosophy than the contemporary analytic philosopher's idea that ethics and logic represent two self-contained areas of philosophy, each concerned with its own proprietary subject matter.

FORSBERG: Ancient philosophy brings us back to another difficult "buzz word" that comes up in discussion of Wittgenstein: namely, "therapy" and with it the whole idea of "therapeutic philosophy".

CONANT: I am not particularly fond of that particular buzz word, to tell you the truth. I have noticed that a number of times when my own philosophical work comes up for discussion, especially when it is my work on Wittgenstein, it's quickly associated with something that gets called "a therapeutic reading" or "a therapeutic

conception”. I don’t much care for the label “therapeutic”. It is not one *I* have used, though it is one that has been used quite a bit in writing about me. One problem with the word is that it doesn’t say very much. It doesn’t bring out the significant differences between different readers of Wittgenstein or between Wittgenstein and other philosophers. To get at what the real differences are, I do not think it is helpful to try to assess to what extent the one conception as opposed to the other counts as being *more* “therapeutic” than the other – even if the term “therapeutic” actually marks some feature present in the work. If, for example, a conception is “therapeutic” to the extent that involves an effort at the diagnosis of the sources of philosophical confusion, then on that criterion Plato, Aristotle, and Kant surely have all written works that involve a therapeutic dimension. On the other hand, if it is used to mark something purely negative, namely what is not in the work, say that the work contains no theory or no doctrine, then the word “therapy” does not help us much – both because a therapy can presuppose a theory and because where it does not the designation “therapeutic” sheds no light on how or why it does not.

In certain contemporary debates, the term “therapeutic” can *seem* to mark an interesting difference between the work of one philosopher and that of another because it is taken to be a synonym for “anti-theoretical”. But that term too tends, in my view, to be deployed in ways that often induce as much confusion as “therapeutic”. Those who use the term “therapeutic” when talking about Wittgenstein are often concerned to celebrate or deplore the idea that philosophy, as he practices it, is not supposed to issue in any theses. So therapy becomes an apparently non-privative way of expressing the idea that philosophy eschews a certain form of theory or doctrine. But this still says nothing in the absence of considerable prior clarification regarding what it could so much as mean to succeed in doing this, and how doing *that* amounts to a way of living up to the aspiration to philosophy.

Indeed, many think that, whatever the term “therapeutic” stands for when it is predicated of a conception of philosophy, it is not a way of aspiring to inherit the philosophical tradition. Sadly, this often forms the one basic point of agreement between admirers and

detractors of Wittgenstein who agree that he has a “therapeutic” conception. Hence often the term is taken to indicate a sort of nihilism about philosophy and its possibilities for conferring genuine illumination or understanding. On this understanding of the term, to say of someone that they are “a therapeutic philosopher” amounts to an indirect way of saying that they suffer from a form of self-hatred: for some reason they spend their time doing philosophy, yet they have no positive conception of the point of philosophy, they in no way *love* philosophy; their aim is simply to bring philosophy to an end once and for all, thereby also putting themselves out of business. I am by no means denying that there are such self-styled Wittgensteinians – philosophers who are aptly so described. Indeed, some of the people who first introduced me to Wittgenstein were Wittgensteinians of just this sort. But I am saying that if this is what it means to practice a “therapeutic” conception of philosophy, then I deny that that is either Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy or mine. It is true that it is not only due to the example of Wittgenstein’s (rather than, say, Socrates’s or Kant’s) passion and devotion to it, but it is certainly in no small part due to it, that I learned to love philosophy.

Another word – one that I just allowed myself to use – that tends to be taken hostage in these debates is the word “positive”. The idea that philosophy must fundamentally consist in a very particular sort of activity of theorizing – in which one constructs arguments or elaborates hypotheses on the basis of certain premises, or intuitions, or some other supposedly foundational philosophic starting points – is often taken simply to exhaust what it could mean to “have a positive conception” of philosophy. So if someone refuses this conception, then is one permitted immediately to infer that they want to abstain from having *any* positive conception of philosophy. This inference involves a staggering degree of philosophical provincialism. It also requires a spectacular ignorance about the diversity of conceptions of philosophy to be found throughout the historical tradition from Plato’s time to the present. For on this way of speaking, if someone wishes to present an alternative conception of philosophy that challenges the prevailing one in certain crucial respects, then that already suffices to allow one

to classify them as having a merely “negative” conception. This way of drawing the distinction between the “positive” and the “negative” assimilates those whose conception is, indeed, purely nihilistic (aspiring merely to bring philosophy to an end) and one that presupposes a genuinely positive vision for philosophy (albeit one that does not yield “positive” “results” of a sort that the standard analytic philosopher will recognize as dovetailing with his conception of the point of his activity). This way of stipulating what it is to have a positive conception of philosophy thereby assimilates under a single undifferentiated heading both those who are determined to have no positive conception of philosophy of any sort and those who are determined to fight for the viability in our present historical moment of a positive conception that rejects the currently dominant one. It thereby encourages one to fail to distinguish between the purely nihilistic reading of Wittgenstein that I most deplore and a way of reading Wittgenstein that turns on a vision of philosophy that is deeply alien to that which prevails in much contemporary analytic philosophy: one in which the forms of intellectual and spiritual difficulty, the forms of progress, and the forms of self-understanding – the starting points, process, and product of philosophical activity – cannot be assimilated to a standard analytic model of what philosophical “data”, “theory” and “results” ought to amount to.

FORSBERG: But this topic does seem to be related to an idea that you yourself have ascribed to Wittgenstein just a few minutes ago in this interview: namely, the idea of a non-doctrinal conception of philosophy – a conception of philosophy that requires a form of work on oneself. Though I suppose you would say that, put this way, such a conception of philosophy is hardly new with Wittgenstein.

CONANT: You are right. I think that Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy strikes many contemporary analytic philosophers, in so far as they can get it into focus at all, as being simply *perverse*. So part of what I was trying to do in my foregoing remarks was to diagnose at least one of the sources of this sense of perversity. It is only in the very provincial setting of contemporary analytic philosophy that

Wittgenstein is apt to seem a complete weirdo for seeking a way of doing philosophy, that is – as already Socrates could have put it – nondogmatic; or to use a grander word and a favorite one of Kant and his philosophical heirs: presuppositionless. This is not to deny that an alternative conception is any less old – indeed, truth be told, the main competitor to this conception is probably just one tick older, dating back to a moment just prior to Socrates. According to one of these conceptions, philosophy conceives of itself as just one branch of theory among others, with its own proprietary subject matter and unquestioned starting points; according to the other, it must differ from all other forms of reflection not only in being prior to all of them, but in relying upon nothing it is unable to vindicate on its own terms. Now I am not trying to say that one member of this pair of conceptions has an older or more distinguished pedigree than the other. They have almost equally ancient and time-honored pedigrees. What I am saying is that it is quite philosophically provincial is to think of one of these as the historical outlier and of the other as having always been the historically dominant conception. So I am suggesting that at least some of what is apt to strike an analytic philosopher as being so very perverse about Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy may come into focus as considerably less perverse, if one compares him with central figures from further back in the tradition (such as Socrates, Aristotle, or Kant) or from an alternative tradition (such as Hegel, Kierkegaard or Heidegger). This is not to deny that, even once it placed up against this series of alternative conceptions of philosophy, Wittgenstein’s own conception ought to continue to strike us as stunningly original in certain respects. It is just to suggest that, once viewed against this background, it ought to strike us as considerably less perverse than it is sometimes taken to be.

FORSBERG: Sometimes the word “therapy” is used more pointedly – as if it were a synonym for what is sometimes also called “a quietist conception of philosophy”. Do you think this is a good label for Wittgenstein’s philosophy?

CONANT: It could be. There is a recent book by Irad Kimhi, in which he employs that label in connection with Wittgenstein's (and not only Wittgenstein's) conception of philosophy, in which most of what he says about Wittgenstein's conception, so categorized, seems to me to be fairly faithful to Wittgenstein's own understanding of what he was up to – or at least certainly nowhere grossly and obviously inaccurate to it.¹ So it all depends how you understand the label. Kimhi takes this label from the writings of other commentators. In their writings, it stands for what they take to be comparatively *sui generis* about Wittgenstein's conception. But, in their writings, it involves a very different conception of “philosophical quietism” than the one Kimhi works with. So he accepts the label and then challenges their reading of Wittgenstein. I have adopted the opposite strategy: letting the contemporary commentary stipulate what the point of the label is and then contesting that Wittgenstein, on that understanding of what it is to be a “quietist”, is properly so described. Whether, at this particular crossroads, one chooses to go Kimhi's way or mine is a matter of rhetorical strategy. Kimhi's strategy is to try to transform the analytic philosopher's understanding of what that label ought to mean if it is to be able to serve as an apt characterization of a conception of philosophy intermittently found in the tradition from Socrates to Wittgenstein. I avoid the label because I think it invites misunderstanding. The original idea of quietism, as it occurs in the history of religious practices, involves some idea of a regime of self-discipline or self-restraint or asceticism. It therefore involves the idea of saying “No” to something that we could say “Yes” to. There's an implicit conception at work here of there being something that we *could* do, there are various forms of excess or vice or behavior that we *could* go in for, but in *choosing* to be quietists with respect to those matters or possibilities, we are going to be more fastidious and not let ourselves slide into doing those things. A quietist, so understood, is someone that one *decides* to be, or not to be, and one expresses one's commitment to this decision by exercising a form of *restraint* – where that which one refrains from doing is conceived of as something that one could have done. Drawing on this background,

¹ Kimhi 2018.

the label of quietism as applied to Wittgenstein originally re-entered contemporary philosophy in the writings of critics of a supposed form of so-called “methodological quietism”, where their thought in so deploying this label was something like the following: “Wittgenstein develops a philosophical problem very clearly. He owes us an answer to this problem. And then he stops! He rejects the very idea of trying to answer the question he has helped to make so pressing! He *refuses* to answer the very philosophical questions he himself poses, on principled grounds, because he himself holds this perverse conception of philosophy according to which one should not answer philosophical questions”. On this understanding of the term, for you to be “a principled philosophical quietist” is for you to be someone who has adopted a meta-philosophical policy that precludes you from engaging in the activity of attempting to answer certain questions, even if they seem to be perfectly well-posed. On this conception, there is something that someone else could do in philosophy that the principled philosophical quietist refuses to do because he has decided it is not the sort of thing we ought to go in for. This seems to me a *terrible* description of Wittgenstein’s practice. For Wittgenstein the following is a grammatical truth: Any question that can genuinely be asked is one that we should try to answer. The only “questions” that he does not think we should not try to “answer” are those that he tries to show us are not well posed – that, in the end, can be shown to fall apart when we think them through, so that in the end we will see that there was no “question” where we thought there was one. The solution of the problem lies in the vanishing of the problem. Thus, the dissolution of the search for an answer lies in the achievement of the disappearance of the question. These sorts of dicta of Wittgenstein’s are not happily interpreted along quietist lines. The quietist form of response to a philosophical question, on the standard understanding of quietism, is one according to which we still have a question, but – even though we must fully acknowledge the intelligibility of the question with which we are faced – we exert self-control, stare it down and just say “No” to it: we just flatly refuse to answer it. There is something that we *could* do in philosophy, and now “quietism” calls upon us to exercise this self-restraint in which we refuse to do the thing we could do: we are to practice philosophical quietism in the face of the continuing

felt urgency of the questions of philosophy. On that understanding of quietism, Wittgenstein is *not* a quietist. Moreover, if the expression “having a therapeutic conception” is an alternative form of notation for saying Wittgenstein is a “quietist” so understood, then Wittgenstein does not have a therapeutic conception.

FORSBERG: And then there is the idea of philosophy as a “work on oneself”. Could you say a bit more about that?

CONANT: Of course. That’s perhaps the most immediate link to the analogy with therapy. The term “therapeutic conception”, if it is supposed to make contact with the idea of work on oneself, will probably end up meaning something like this: In getting clear about a philosophical problem we are not just, as it were, working on the intellectual aspects of ourselves (refining our powers of thought), but we are changing ourselves in more fundamental ways (molding the shape of our soul). Overcoming our resistance to seeing philosophical issues in certain sorts of ways, on such a conception, requires not just acts of the mind but those of the will. That is fine, as far as it goes. But, so put, that again is a very old philosophical idea. It is all over Plato and indeed even in Descartes, and many others. So, again that term (“therapy”) is a very particular, partial and modern term to use if its point is to indicate the idea that the object of philosophical criticism is the whole person: his entire soul and not just one aspect of his cognitive faculty – the intellectual one considered in complete abstraction from the appetitive, passionate, and practical aspects of the soul. But as soon as one puts it in that classical register, one realizes that it is not clear that even very many of the arch-rationalists in the history of philosophy (say, Descartes or Spinoza) held a therapy-free conception of philosophy. You need a certain kind of attenuated, diluted, super-secularized, relatively historically recent form of philosophical rationalism before you find in the history of philosophy a conception of the subject that is entirely free of any admixture of a therapeutic dimension so understood. If the point of the term is simply to indicate the need for a form of work on one’s self that must take place as a condition of philosophical progress, then it is only from this very particular

modern vantage that a “therapeutic conception” can so much as appear to be the proposal of a radical idea – let alone one that appears to threaten the very idea of philosophy.

FORSBERG: I think many commentators do not think that they are imposing some idea of philosophy on Wittgenstein when they say he thinks philosophy is therapy, rather they think they are just explaining what he means when *he says* philosophy is therapy.

CONANT: No doubt, you are right that they think that Wittgenstein says this. This raises the question: where does he say this? There are conversations, lectures, and unpublished notes in which he explores various parallels between his own understanding of philosophical method and Freudian psychoanalytic technique. But those discussions are quite nuanced: they never simply equate or identify an aspect of the one with an aspect of the other. The main section that is adduced to establish the supposedly Wittgensteinian thesis that “philosophy is therapy” is section 133 of the *Investigations* in which Wittgenstein says: “Es gibt nicht eine Methode der Philosophie, wohl aber gibt es Methoden, gleichsam verschiedene Therapien.” Now, “gleichsam” is a little tricky to translate here. This is what Anscombe has: “There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed different methods, like different therapies.”² To bring out the sense of the German, one might also translate this as follows: “... though there are indeed different methods – in the same way that there are different therapies.” Or: “... in the same sense as there are different therapies.” Or more simply: “.... just as there are different therapies.” In saying this, he is rejecting an aspect of his conception of method that he held in the *Tractatus* and, indeed, continued to hold all the way up till 1937. Up until then, what he is looking for may be described as: *a* philosophical method. What Wittgenstein thought “the method” was that he was practicing differed in points of detail at different points in his development; but the common thread from 1913 to 1937 was that there was supposed to be *a* method. If one practiced *it* correctly one would be able to get free from philosophical problems of a certain sort. After 1937, he

² Wittgenstein 1967, § 133.

sees that conception of “*the method*” as connected with various other forms of philosophical confusion in his earlier thought from which he had been trying to free himself – questions revolving around how to conceive the unity of language. Between 1929 and 1937, while his conception of the unity of language is undergoing dramatic change, he was still trying to hold his conception of the character of the unity of philosophy – and of philosophical method – in place. The earlier version of this section (that later becomes section 133 of the *Investigations*) that you find in the *Big Typescript* does not yet reject the idea that there is *a* method. In the later version of this section (in *Philosophical Investigations*) with the introduction of this sentence that ends with the words “therapies”, we have one of a whole series of changes he made to those sections of the *Big Typescript* where he sets forth his earlier (where “early” here means pre-1937) conception of philosophy. And this change is part and parcel of a wide-reaching criticism of an aspect of his entire conception of philosophical method that is present in the *Tractatus* and remains in force up until that point. So I think that sentence of section 133 is, indeed, an important section for understanding Wittgenstein’s very late conception of philosophy. But I do not think that sentence says what some of his readers have taken it to.

FORSBERG: Why is it important to Wittgenstein now to say “Es gibt nicht eine Methode der Philosophie, wohl aber gibt es Methoden”? What kind of change in his conception of philosophy does that mark?

CONANT: Good question! I take it not to mark a rejection of the centrality of a proper conception of method for philosophy, but rather only a rejection of the more limited presupposition that there is just one method, that it can be fully fixed once and for all, and hence that the future development and unfolding of philosophical problems will never require any further form of methodological reflection. Pre-1937 Wittgenstein wanted to introduce a kink into the history of philosophy, such that it could be claimed that with his work “the” method of philosophy had now been found – much philosophical work might remain, in the sense that the method

needed to be applied to the problems of philosophy, but the problem of what the method of philosophy should be would have been solved once and for all. It is against this idea that that remark in section 133 is directed. Now he says, directly negating what he earlier held: there is not *a* method, there are methods. He now wants to draw attention to the possibility of a way of conceiving the logical character of plurality in philosophical method that is continuous with a point he had already been concerned to make in earlier (i.e. prior to 1937) writings about the logical character of the plurality of forms of language. A favorite word of his in this connection, that he employs to articulate his new conception of unity, is “family”. So we may speak in this connection of there being families of methods of philosophy for the post-1937 Wittgenstein. The character of their relation to one another has an essentially open-ended dimension. The task of achieving a perspicuous survey thereof is in principle infinite. We can never be sure that we have arrived at all of the methods that are required in order for us to make progress with our problems in philosophy. This is one crucial aspect of the contrast drawn here between “There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed different methods”.

FORSBERG: What is it about the way in which there are different therapies that is supposed to illuminate what Wittgenstein is saying when he says “Es gibt nicht eine Methode der Philosophie, wohl aber gibt es Methoden”?

CONANT: Good. We could also ask your question, if I understand it correctly, this way: what point is he making in the part of the passage that begins with the word “gleichsam”? Before he wrote this passage, Wittgenstein felt under considerable pressure to be able fully to specify what *the* method was that he now sought to recommend and exemplify through his philosophical practice. But if we reflect more broadly on the grammar of the term “method”, as it is employed outside philosophy, we can see that there may be many different sorts of methods for doing such and such (say, executing a penalty kick in European football), without there being anything which is *the* method. The availability of an extraordinary diversity of methods

(say, for successfully shooting a penalty kick) does not necessarily render it more difficult for us to apprehend that each member of such a manifold of methods is indeed such a method – there are different methods here, “just as there are different therapies”. There isn’t anything that is *the* therapy in psychology or indeed in any other aspect of treatment of human pathology. The point here goes well beyond psychology. There are physical therapies, too – directed at different forms of bodily unhealth. There is nothing that is *the* physical therapy of which each such therapy is a mere application or species. If we are just focusing on pathologies and their treatment, then our grasp of the unity of the family concept *therapy* goes through our grasp of the forms of treatment themselves, not the other way around. Moreover, our appreciation of what can count as a genuinely productive form of therapy can be expanded or deepened as new forms of therapy develop over time. Contrary to what many commentators claim, section 133 does not claim there is a correct method of philosophy and that the correct method of philosophy is that of therapy. Rather it denies that there is only one thing that is the correct method of philosophy and seeks to illuminate the relation between the kind-term *philosophical method* and its instances through a grammatical analogy to the relation between our grasp of the family concept *therapy* and our grasp of the unity of its instances.

FORSBERG: So does this mean that philosophy for the very late Wittgenstein has no unity?

CONANT: No, it does not. But it does mean that we cannot see the unity of philosophy by focusing too narrowly on the diversity of its methods and of what they treat – that is, without widening our examination so that it also encompasses that which confers significance on these methods. Similarly, if we look at all of the things that count as illness in the human body, we will be hard pressed to find the common denominator they all share. In this respect, the concepts therapy and illness belong to a particular grammatical category – one in which Wittgenstein will now also include the concept of philosophical method. Our understanding of the unity of such cases is parasitic on our understanding of a category

whose instances are given prior to those that belong to the category under investigation. We must look to the logically prior category to appreciate the unity of the phenomena in question: the unity is to be found in (what we might call) the category of the happy case. The phenomenon, in its happy condition, involves the absence of the sort of trouble or defect or unhappiness that calls for method in treatment. For Wittgenstein this means that in order to understand the source of the unity of philosophy we must look to the condition of our capacity for speech and thought as it manifests itself in the absence of those forms of perplexity and confusion to which his philosophical methods address themselves. Wittgenstein's most general term for language in that happy condition – undisturbed by those particular forms of disturbance – is the *ordinary*. The need for an expression such as “undisturbed”, one that involves the idea of the privation of a privation, in order to characterize the source of the unity of philosophy is a topic to which perhaps we can return below. It is connected for Wittgenstein with why the ordinary can only come perspicuously into view for us in philosophy – when we are not just living *within* it, but attempting to step back and look *at* it – when we first depart from it and then return to it.

Wittgenstein is often interested in showing how certain kinds of concepts of defect or attenuation depend grammatically on more fundamental concepts pertaining to the successful or healthy case – hence, for example, in showing how the possibility of doubt depends upon that of knowledge, or how the possibility of visual illusion depends on that of seeing what is the case, or how the possibility of interpreting a rule depends on there being a way of grasping a rule that is not an interpretation. Similarly, the concept of, say, physical therapy presupposes the concept of bodily health and the aim of its restoration. That is, our grasp of a concept such as “therapy” presupposes our grasp of a concept for which the unity of the whole is prior to our grasp of the unity of its parts. This is consistent with the concept “therapy” itself being one for which our grasp of *its* unity being of such a sort that it goes through our grasp of each of its instances – and how they each serve the end of undoing a certain form of disturbance. There can be as many kinds of therapy as there

are ways of harming or hurting our selves, where our grasp of the former goes through our grasp of the latter.

What confers upon the manifold of different therapies their unity is a conception of what it is for a human being to flourish as opposed to suffer from disturbance or pathology or illness. As I said before, we won't find that unity by attending directly to the varieties of forms of pathology and looking for a common feature or set of features than unite them. Rather the unity of the concept of therapy is a function of the ways in which the different cases of pathology each involves a falling away from flourishing. And, similarly – this is ultimately a part of the point of that famous sentence in section 133, whose topic is the grammatical parallel between the concepts of therapy and method – we are not going to understand what unites different philosophical methods, making each a way of practicing philosophy, without some conception of what is to be able to think *without* being beset by the forms of perplexity that such methods seek to treat. Here, too, what holds the different methods together, what makes them part of one thing, has to be gleaned from the *unity* of what it is to think clearly, what it is to use language to a purpose, what it is for words to be “at home” in a language game. It is only through an appreciation of what it is for language *not* to be on holiday that we can understand the unity of the cases of which we treat in philosophy and hence the unity of the methods required to so treat them. Against his former selves – from the Wittgenstein of 1913 all the way to the Wittgenstein of mid-1937 – the Wittgenstein who speaks in this passage is saying: we can't start with a prior notion of method, anymore than we can start with a prior abstract, high level notion of “therapy as such” and leverage that into an understanding of what accounts for the plurality of different methods of philosophy, as if they were simply species of a single genus. The unity of philosophy for Wittgenstein – like that of being for Aristotle – is not that of a genus.

FORSBERG: Why do you think that your reading has stirred up the strong responses that it actually has?

CONANT: Well, you know I have written things about Wittgenstein that have not been taken up very much at all. So it is not as if everything I write about Wittgenstein has provoked this sort of strong response. It seems especially to be particular things about the *Tractatus* that I have written and that Cora Diamond has written that elicit this response. And I think there are a number of reasons for this.

Before I say anything more about this, however, I should first say that anything I have to say in answer to this question ought to be treated as mere speculation. I have no first-person authority with regard to why other people react to my work in the ways that they do. So what I am about to say is sheer conjecture as to what might be the cause of outrage. And the reason that I do not have much faith in what I am about to say is because it is anyway clear to me that I have a poor understanding of the sociology of the field. Indeed, I have lots of evidence that I do not understand very well what drives “contemporary philosophy”, where those latter two words now merely designate a particular sociological category. I have to say that most of the things that count as hot journal topics generally don’t seem to me to be generating very interesting literature. One measure of this for me is something that is constitutive of what it means to say that they are “hot topics” – namely, that they remain in vogue for five or six years, and then, ten or fifteen years later, when one reads these articles, it is very hard not to wonder what all the fuss was about. If one invests a lot of time trying to be at the cutting edge of these historically momentary blips in the passing show of intellectual fashion in analytic philosophy, I cannot help but think that in retrospect one is bound to end up feeling that one’s time wasn’t well spent. Once those issues come to seem quite passé, especially if more heat than light turns out to have been generated by the controversy, one will need to supply oneself with new motivations to philosophy. Any conception of philosophy that I care about is not one on which one’s motivations should vary in this way – as they sensibly well might, if one were, say, an experimental physicist. So I do think it is important for one to develop a nose for what in the ongoing debates of the current moment in philosophy will prove to be merely transitory noise and

what might genuinely contribute to a historical conversation of lasting significance.

FORSBERG: I know you have not quite gotten to my previous question yet, but may I interject and ask: do you think that what you just say also holds of the recent *Tractatus* wars?

CONANT: Definitely. Surely those debates in *Tractatus* scholarship are subject to the perils of superficiality that come with the pursuit of any supposedly hot topic. For whatever reason, certain (in my view, largely unhelpful) ways of framing what might be at issue in certain initial disagreements about how to read that extraordinarily difficult book suddenly became detached from their original context and thereby became a certain kind of hot topic in their own right – that is to say, the sort of topic to which lots of people suddenly thought they could easily contribute something “new” in a way that would garner attention. The appearance that something like this might suddenly be possible is what makes something into a hot topic. Whatever the historical accidents were that led to this happening in the previously *recherché* area of *Tractatus* scholarship, a kind of tertiary literature suddenly burgeoned in which almost every contributor was concerned to declare his or her side in a debate – either by saying why they were for this pre-established party rather than that one, or by declaring that they represented some new non-aligned alternative or avant-garde in *Tractatus* scholarship – where each party to the debate tries to make out that every other party not on their side is as wrongheaded as they can make them out to be. So the literature starts taking on a tone that is increasingly polemical – one that is better suited to a political or an ideological controversy than a fruitfully philosophical one. Whenever debate in philosophy fundamentally assumes the shape of people lining up to “take sides” it is generally a sign that the real interests of philosophy are being sacrificed to those of promoting and participating in mere academic controversy. The latter sort of debate is, admittedly, very conducive to allowing one efficiently to build a dossier of publications in leading journals. This is not the least of the ways in which the current professionalization of the discipline constitutes a threat to the very

possibility of the continuance of a form of serious philosophy that has any chance of being of lasting historical interest.

FORSBERG: Let me try to bring you back to my earlier question about the genesis of the resolute reading and the controversy it created.

CONANT: I remember when I first was in touch with Cora Diamond. People had put us in touch with each other because they noticed we had somewhat similar readings of the *Tractatus*. I had my first chance to speak with her when she came to give a talk at Harvard, where I was a grad student. Thereafter I visited her in Virginia, and we started exchanging correspondence about Wittgenstein. Eventually, as the development of computer technology allowed, those long typed letters sent by ordinary mail turned into e-mail exchanges. I am thinking here of the period from the mid-1980s to the early 90s. I did have the sense, as we were exchanging those missives back then, that we represented a minority view on how to read the *Tractatus*. I mention this because now I am taken aback when I see people say in print that our reading represents some sort of orthodoxy in Wittgenstein scholarship! She had a paper – “Throwing Away the Ladder” – that was finally published in the journal *Philosophy*, which she told me she had submitted to a great many places, and each time it was rejected by the journal, it came with a reader’s report that said something like “Well this is just obviously wrong, everyone knows that”. So there was a time when it was inconceivable that this could be taken to be anything other than rank heterodoxy.

FORSBERG: Why was that?

CONANT: Well, I can think of at least three reasons. First, there was a certain kind of potted history of the analytic tradition the narration of which required that the *Tractatus* play a very particular sort of starring role within its unfolding. This narrative, in turn, was an important part of a widely disseminated origin myth of analytic philosophy – a myth in which early Wittgenstein, along with especially Frege and Russell, each had a preordained part to play.

With that origin myth came certain assumptions about what sorts of doctrines and theories the *Tractatus* sought to advance. (Even people who never had read the book knew this much about it: it was empiricist in its leanings; it advanced a form of logical atomism; and most of its central doctrines were continuous with those to be found in some subset of figures such as Frege, Russell, Carnap, Schlick, etc. – to mention just three widely disseminated untruths about it.) Without going into further detail about this, suffice it to say that the need to hold on to at least the broad outline of that origin myth was a first source of distortion in the received reading of the *Tractatus*. A second was the positivist reception of that book, which Wittgenstein himself quite rightly thought involved tremendous misunderstanding. For a period, the writings of various members of the Vienna Circle were taken to offer, perhaps not anything exactly resembling a reading of the *Tractatus*, but nonetheless some sort of generally accurate appreciation of the overall philosophical spirit of that book, as well as some putatively pertinent elaborations of some of the book's central doctrines and concepts. So those writings by the logical positivists fixed subsequent understandings of some of the basic notions that occur in the book – notions such as logical syntax, nonsense, pseudo-proposition, formal concept, and so forth. Then, starting in the post-war period, a third source of distortion, which I mentioned earlier, had to do with the ways in which a certain percentage of people writing about the *Tractatus* understood what it meant to be fans of later Wittgenstein, where they were only interested in the *Tractatus* in so far as they could cast it as a whipping boy in their discussions of naming, ostention, rule-following, privacy, etc. They weren't really interested in reading that first book of Wittgenstein's as anything other than a foil for his later work.

This creates a remarkable situation in which the book comes to have a funny kind of status in analytic philosophy: on the one hand, it is supposed to be a kind of undisputed *classic* which everyone is supposed to know something about. The sort of text, for example, on the basis of which an Oxford student studying for the B. Phil Exam might be required to prepare answers for exam questions. On the other hand, the way you know which questions and answers matter comes mostly not from your reading the book itself – your

Oxford tutor might even explicitly discourage you from attempting to do anything that foolhardy in the limited amount time available – but rather from your reading a certain body of secondary literature about it. So, on the one hand, it becomes an extremely important book, in the sense that every serious student of philosophy is supposed to “know” something about it. While, on the other hand, the actual book itself – even though it is remarkably short – completely drops out qua philosophical text, in the sense that almost no one is actually trying to read it carefully. Indeed, it is even regarded as quite unreadable by a non-negligible percentage of analytic philosophers who at the same time take themselves to know why it ought to be regarded as one of the founding texts of their own tradition.

FORSBERG: Could you say more about what you mean when you say that the actual book itself completely drops out?

CONANT: I mean that, after the members of the Vienna Circle were done puzzling over its passages, with the one absolutely towering exception of the magnificent book by Elizabeth Anscombe, for several decades there ceased to be much attempt to actually seriously read it from beginning to end, with the aim not only of trying to make sense of the sentences in it as they appear on the page, but also of how they collectively make up a single finely-wrought whole, constituting parts of *one* text.

FORSBERG: So you are saying this is the background against which the resolute reading excited the outrage that it did?

CONANT: I think it may be a relevant part of an explanation of that outrage – though probably only a part. My suggestion here is fairly simple-minded: insofar as our reading self-evidently challenged a prevailing orthodoxy, it was bound to meet with a certain degree of resistance. The reason I say that I think it is only part of the explanation of the outrage is that one other at least equally salient factor was that our reading later, starting in the mid to late 1990s,

attracted enthusiasts who went on to defend it in ways that involved what were to my mind far more outrageous exegetical proposals than any I had ever sought to criticize. Some of what is written by so-called defenders of the resolute reading strikes me as no less distant from anything I have ever thought about Wittgenstein as anything written by those who take themselves to be opponents of that reading. That is to say, often what happens in putative defenses of the resolute reading is that a number of fateful premises that critics of that reading bring to their account of what must be involved in it are happily accepted by the new defenders of “the” reading – so that what is being attacked and defended is a very different sort of thing from anything Cora Diamond or I ever meant to sign on to. This contributes over time to the genesis of huge sprawling debate in which I not only find myself out of sympathy with most of the parties to it, but I am no longer even interested in the animating issues. Indeed, comparatively speaking, as a general rule I actually tended to find myself, on a given occasion, in a bit more sympathy with my supposed critic than my supposed defender. This creates a situation in which one would first need to engage in a full-scale assault on the shared interpretative assumptions of the entire body of tertiary literature – a body of literature in which there is no longer much philosophy that even interests one – in order to be able to clear space for a hearing for that which one originally wanted to say. And, academic life being what it is, when one chooses to stay out of it all, then it is said that this clearly shows that the criticisms must have been devastating! Not that there isn’t much in my earlier work that isn’t vulnerable to criticism. I now think that some of what I wrote earlier about the *Tractatus* is quite mistaken, just not in ways that line up neatly with the battle lines as they came to be drawn in that body of tertiary literature. Happily, I think that that particular hot topic has – as hot topics do – now largely burned itself out. So perhaps, in a few more years, it will be possible to publish something about the *Tractatus* without any longer having to worry about how it is supposed to fit into the contours of that body of literature.

FORSBERG: Let us turn to one of the central concepts of your reading, namely nonsense. You want to stress that there is basically just one

kind of nonsense at work in the *Tractatus* and that is *mere nonsense* (einfach Unsinn). This marks, I think, a rather clear contrast between your reading and the various opposing readings, since they are more or less forced to introduce, or insert, a contrast between, as it were, “bad nonsense” and “illuminating nonsense” – a distinction that cannot be found in the *Tractatus*, as far as I know.

CONANT: Can I stop you right there, and then you can continue with the rest of your question in a moment. There is something I would like to complain about in the first part of your question (about there being one kind of nonsense) and then something else I would like to complain about in the last part of your question (about bad vs. illuminating nonsense)!

FORSBERG: Absolutely! Please do. What do you want to complain about in the first part of my question?

CONANT: Already right there, in your characterization of what I think, it sounds to me like the way in which various critics characterize what I think. I have no idea what it would mean to say “there is only one kind of x ” – what it would be to say this about anything. I have no idea of what it would mean to say that no more than one kind of umbrella, or mushroom, or elephant is possible. If one has a concept then one can sort its instances into many different kinds. So I would have no idea what it would even mean to say this thing that I am supposed to hold: namely, that there is only one kind of nonsense. One can classify “nonsense” according to a zillion principles – nonsense spoken on weekends versus nonsense spoken on weekdays, nonsense verses that rhyme versus those that don’t, nonsense consisting of phonemes belonging to this language rather than that one, etc.

What I do say is that for Wittgenstein, if one understands what he means by “nonsense”, one cannot sort nonsense into *logical* kinds. From a *logical point of view* there’s only one kind of nonsense. Nonsense, for Wittgenstein, is a string of linguistic signs that lacks logical structure – language in which we cannot see the logical

symbol in the sign. This point needs emphasizing against the view, commonly attributed to the *Tractatus*, that one can distinguish between two kinds of logically characterizable concatenations of signs: a kind of nonsense which is simply *void* of logical structure and another kind of nonsense which involves a kind of clash between the logical symbols involved. On what was then the standard reading of the *Tractatus*, it was supposed that the sort of nonsense that mostly concerned early Wittgenstein was of a sort that involved such putatively logically incompatible internal parts. So, on this reading, Tractarian nonsensical propositions *do have* a logical character, but the kind of logical character they have is such that their “syntactical elements” do not logically cohere. They involve, as commentators of the *Tractatus* used to put it, a *violation* of the logical syntax. And I argued that the *Tractatus* rejects a classification of nonsense into *those* kinds – not into kinds as such. Wittgenstein says: “any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a meaning to some of its constituents” (TLP, 5.4733), and this goes together with earlier remarks just before that, where he says things like “We cannot give a sign the wrong sense” (TLP 5.4732); and when a proposition is nonsensical, it is “because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination, and not because the symbol, in itself, would be illegitimate”(TLP 5.473). I was partly trying to understand remarks like that.

FORSBERG: What did you want to complain about in the last part of my previous question? I guess it was something about bad vs. illuminating nonsense?

CONANT: Yes, thanks. Once it becomes clear that there is nothing in my reading that debars me from sorting nonsense into kinds, then I certainly can allow for the fact that one can classify cases of spoken or written nonsense into (1a) cases in which one unwittingly so speaks or writes and (2a) cases in which one self-consciously undertakes to do so. Relatedly, one can also distinguish nonsense into (1b) cases in which certain sorts of employment of nonsense serve to plunge people into confusion and (2b) cases in which its

employment may lead people out of confusion and serve to confer illumination. I think one needs both sorts of distinction to make any sense at all of what the author of the *Tractatus* is up to. Indeed, the whole idea of a resolute reading presupposes an idea of illuminating nonsense. According to this reading, the sentences of the book are to be recognized as nonsense, and one understands the *author* when one reaches the point of having recognized them as such. In having recognized them as such, one has come to realize that where one *thought* one had been making sense, one had failed to mean anything. That is a certain kind of achievement of insight or understanding, and that achievement of insight or understanding is supposed to come about through one's working with the sentences of the book which one comes to recognize as nonsensical. This insight itself has another side: one comes to achieve clarity about negation, judgment, language, self and world by coming to see why certain sorts of attempts "to say something" "about" them misfire in this way. So I am happy to say – contrary to what some critics of the resolute reading assert about me – that many of the sentences strategically deployed by the author of the *Tractatus* play the role of "illuminating nonsense". I think the very idea of a resolute reading, insofar as I understand what it is, is committed to this.

FORSBERG: So how does your understanding of the concept of nonsense at work in the *Tractatus* relate to our ordinary concept? Is there a contrast here? Does the talk about how there is not two logical kinds of nonsense at play in the work run the risk of turning "nonsense" into something like a technical concept here?

CONANT: Prior readings of the *Tractatus* *did* assume that nonsense *must* be a technical term. This followed from the assumption that there was a very particular theory of language being put forward in the *Tractatus*. The book was thought to provide an *account* of what makes sense and what is nonsense. The sentences in the book were to be viewed as nonsensical because they did not meet the conditions of sense adumbrated by that theory. This required that there still be a way in which a reader could nonetheless understand or grasp or glimpse what the nonsensical sentences were trying to say, even

though they were, as some commentators liked to say (as if the Latin somehow helped the issue along here) *in sensu stricto* nonsense. So, there was a huge tendency in the secondary literature, before the resolute reading came along, to say “yes, the sentences of the book are nonsensical, but they are only *strictly speaking* nonsensical”, and that very way of characterizing the issue here presupposed that the concept of nonsense at issue must be a technical one. Now I would have thought that the point of the word “resolute” within the structure of this controversy is the following: “When the *Tractatus* says of those of its sentences that serve as philosophical elucidations that they are nonsense, it does not mean that they are ‘*strictly speaking* nonsensical’. It means: ‘They are nonsense.’” So to endorse a resolute reading involves rejecting the idea that nonsense for Wittgenstein is a technical term. Moreover, taking seriously the idea that the *Tractatus* did not aim to put forward any theories, and aims at a form of clarification that does not presuppose any prior reliance on contestable philosophical theories or theses, means that his entitlement to the term “nonsense” cannot remain hostage to any particular theory of sense. So if one is to come to see that certain sentences are nonsense, this will have to be a form of achievement that can be conferred by the author of the book without his first having to find a way to get his reader to buy into his preferred philosophical theory of sense. The very idea of a resolute reading requires that the capacity to make sense or to fail to make sense are capacities that we must *bring to* the book, as readers of the book. The book does not seek to define or to confer these capacities; it seeks to refine them and aid us in their deployment. Or more precisely: there is really only capacity here – the capacity to make sense – and three ways to exercise it: successfully (to say things that make sense), defectively (unwittingly falling into nonsense in the effort to speak sense), and elucidatorily (seeking to illuminate the successful exercise of the capacity through its wittingly self-defeating exercise). In the latter case, one self-consciously exercises the capacity in a manner that results in something that non-accidentally falls short of the end of making sense. This general capacity, that can be thus variously exercised, is not conferred upon us by our coming to be convinced of some *theory*. Rather we bring this capacity to the book. In the course of reading the book, this capacity is itself further cultivated.

FORSBERG: Let's turn to another focal point of the debate, which concerns the distinction between the body of the work and the frame of the work – a distinction, I take it, that you have used to show that there are parts of the work that guide the reader to view the work in the right light. And it seems to me clear that the preface and the penultimate paragraph quite literally frame the book. But how is it with the rest of the work? Will not the answer to what constitutes the body and what the frame, vary from reader to reader? I mean, what makes different readers continue to climb the illusory ladder will differ depending on what philosophical problems, motives and drives each reader has. And does not that make the philosophical work that the *Tractatus* goes in for somewhat, let us say, “psychological”?

CONANT: There are at least three questions here – one about frame and body, one about differences between readers, and one about whether things may be becoming worryingly psychological. I will take them in order.

FORSBERG: Thank you!

CONANT: I think that the frame/body distinction ceases to be a useful heuristic for orienting a reader to the text of the *Tractatus* if it is understood in purely spatial terms. It is true that if one just starts out with the preface and the concluding sections as one's initial candidate examples of remarks that play some sort of framing or orienting role in helping the reader to make sense of the kind of book that she is reading, then a highly literal application of the metaphor of frame and body might seem sustainable for the first few minutes or so. But this sort of attempt to literalize the metaphor is going to run into trouble fairly quickly, if one is really working with the text in any serious way. What makes a remark one that is to be regarded as framing other propositions in the book will depend upon *the role* that remark plays within a reading of a particular stretch of passages. And one of the things that resolute readers have disagreed about is which

remarks are usefully construed as playing such an orienting role or not. So the mere fact that readers can agree that one needs some such distinction does not tell us exactly how it is to be applied in detail. It takes a great deal of hard exegetical work to figure that out. Conversely, the fact that this is one of the things that one first has to work out in detail in order to arrive at a satisfying reading of the book does not show that the very idea of such a distinction is itself somehow misconceived.

There is a distinction here that requires unpacking, and, when one turns to the details of the book, it proves more delicate to unpack than one might have thought at first glance; but I do not see why the difficulty at issue is particularly or exclusively a problem for someone who favors a resolute reading of the book. According to a standard reading, 6.54 tells us that the sentences of the book are nonsense; yet, on most standard readings, 6.54 itself is literally true. It can be said. It is not nonsense. So, even on such a reading, that remark has a different sort of status from other remarks. That same point can be made about a great many other remarks in the book, on a standard reading of what their point is. So that reading is going to need a frame/body distinction, too. And detailed answers to particular questions about which sentences are nonsensical (and which are ones that just say things that are true) will turn on the details of that reading as well. So, for any sort of reading of the *Tractatus*, the question is how to make out the details of such a distinction and which remarks should be seen as playing which roles when – and that is not, on any promising reading, likely to reduce to mere principles of geometry regarding the spatial location of certain remarks in the book.

FORSBERG: That takes care of the first part, about frame and body, now what about differences between readers? Is that going to make for a problem?

CONANT: What is true is that the question of how to sort a given remark in the *Tractatus* as playing one sort of role, rather than another over the course of a reader's progress through the book is a question that comes to acquire additional layers of complexity for a resolute

reader that it will not have for a standard reader. For a standard reading, the question which sentences of the book constitute cases of philosophical nonsense is a question that can be answered by advertent to supposedly objective properties of the sentences themselves, considered apart from a reader's engagement with them: the ones that are logically well-formed make sense and those that are logically ill-formed represent cases of nonsense, regardless of what a reader makes of them. Not so for a resolute reader. For such a reader, the difference in question is not properly understood in the first instance as pertaining to certain sorts of *objects* (propositions conceived as part of the furniture of reality) but rather to certain sorts of *acts* (actualizations of our capacity for speech and judgment). Philosophical nonsense is the product of a failure to speak and think, not a mere reflection of a self-standingly obtaining flaw ingredient in an item in the world apart from our engagement with it.

This means that, for the resolute reader, the difference between sense and garden-variety nonsense is a difference whose logical home resides within the *first-person self-conscious point of view* a speaker has on what she is doing with her words. In the case of sense, she self-consciously seeks to say something through her employment of her words; in the case of nonsense, she self-consciously comes out with words without seeking to say something (and knowing that she does not), but rather for some other purpose – to sing scales, talk baby-talk with her infant child, recite *Jabberwocky*, etc. To appreciate the yet further difference between garden-variety nonsense, on the one hand, and what the *Tractatus* calls “philosophical nonsense”, on the other, requires that we now allow that there are cases in which this default transparency of a speaker's first-person understanding to what she is doing with her words can break down. Philosophical nonsense is not a sortal concept that allows us to distinguish sentences into two classes depending upon some set of logical properties they possess apart from our engagement with them. The difference between mere nonsense and philosophical nonsense, for the author of the *Tractatus*, has to do with the difference between those deployments of strings of signs (1) regarding which we are self-consciously aware that, in the manner in which we deploy them, we have *yet* thereby to confer a sense upon them (as is the case in

Tractarian elucidation), and (2) those regarding which we believe that, in so deploying them, we have thereby succeeded in conferring sense upon them (even though we *haven't*). This latter difference is one that (the author of the *Tractatus* will regard as) not residing in the logical properties of the strings of signs, but rather in our psychological relation to them. Relatedly, the difference between a sentence that expresses a genuine sense and a philosophical *Scheinsatz*, for the author of the *Tractatus*, has to do with the difference between those strings of signs upon which we have successfully conferred a sense and those in which we believe that we have done so though we have actually failed to do so. This, too, involves a psychological dimension. Hence a classification of a remark of the *Tractatus* as belonging to one of these categories must always involve an implicit reference to the activity of a thinking subject who takes up the sentence a certain way. Indeed, a central point of early Wittgenstein's disagreement with Frege is that propositions do not possess senses apart from the activity of the linguistic subject who uses them.

FORSBERG: And what about the worry that some people might have that this is going to render things too psychological?

CONANT: Let me rephrase that third worry as follows: The resolute reading has the consequence that, depending upon the psychology of the reader, different readers will have different experiences of the book – so that that reading, in effect, *individualizes* different readers' experiences of reading the *Tractatus*. And now the question is this: Should we take that to constitute a problem for this sort of reading?

FORSBERG: Yes, exactly.

CONANT: This seems right: it follows that resolute readers must not only allow but positively expect it to be the case that different readers will make their way through the dialectic of the work differently. Is this a problem for the resolute reading? If the *Tractatus* is the sort of philosophical book that is constructed on the model of a

mathematical treatise then that would be a problem for this reading. In a mathematical treatise, there is one pertinent construal of each line, and the next proposition follows only if one has grasped that its truth depends upon a proper appreciation of the logical relations in which it stands to each of the previous lines, so that as one moves through the work one's prior construals of each such line must remain fixed. In reading such a work, assuming one manages at every point properly to construe that with which one is presented, there is never any need to re-construe what came earlier in the light of what comes later. Some works of philosophy aspire to have this form – not all do. Indeed, most of the really classic works in the history of philosophy do not have this form. Some, like Spinoza's *Ethics*, are even outwardly constructed initially to encourage the idea that they, through and through, have nothing but this form: even though in the end, in order properly to understand the work in question, one must learn to appreciate how its outer form does not correspond to its inner unity – hence how this aspect of its outward appearance is itself a function of the manner in which the work seeks to engage its reader and operate from within his expectations regarding what a philosophical work must be and how it must progress. There are outward features of the *Tractatus* that might lead one to suppose that it, too, through and through, shares in the aspiration to have nothing but the form of a treatise in which a series of propositions are demonstrated. In this case, too, to conclude this would be to mistake the inner unity of how its numbering system works and what its real purposes are with those that we are initially prone to assume a work of philosophy must have in order to discharge its purpose.

Now I think you are making a point that is true about the *Tractatus* – that our initial form of engagement with it will depend upon features of our own psychology that we bring to the book – but I do not see that as a weakness of the book. Nor does its readiness to engage with features of its reader's psychology strike me as unique to the *Tractatus*. This is likely to be true of any work that has anything like a dialectical structure – be it a Platonic dialogue or even a work that has the structure of a Kantian critique, or a work that has the sort of structure that Hegel himself calls “dialectical”, such as the *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is going to be true of readers of those works

that their progress in the direction of where the book wants to lead them will take varying shapes – and the shapes of their paths of understanding through the book may themselves vary on repeated passes through the text, as they come to appreciate how an understanding of what comes later bears on an understanding of what comes earlier. Even if different readers eventually and completely converge in their understanding of the work, their route to that understanding may well involve individual differences in how they get there, as they initially work their way through various misunderstandings – misunderstandings into which the book seeks to invite them in order to treat of the misunderstanding in question in a manner that the reader is able to recognize as a treatment of a problem that is his. Depending upon to which of these a given reader is more prone, her progress through the work will necessarily take somewhat differing paths, so that her gradual passage to clarity in climbing such a dialectical ladder will involve an individualizing dimension. Different readers, depending upon their particular philosophical prejudices and blind spots, and their countervailing forms of clarity and acuity, initially react in different ways to different moments along the dialectical route. This should be obvious to anyone who has spent any serious amount of time engaging with a Platonic dialogue, especially one with an intricate dialectical structure such as the *Sophist* – especially if they have ever tried to teach that work. This will equally be true for progress up the dialectical rungs of the Tractarian ladder. So I agree with your description of what a resolute reading is committed to, but I do not regard it as a weakness of the reading.

FORSBERG: But does this then not open you up to this follow-up: “If different readers may and should make something entirely different of the book, then is there any sense in which anyone can claim to have a genuine reading of the book that the rest of us should take seriously?”

CONANT: Well, I do not think, if they are reading the book well, they are going to “make something entirely different of the book”, even if they bring different sorts of philosophical baggage to their initial

encounter with it. The point here about the *Tractatus* holds equally for the *Investigations*. Say you are working through a dialectical stretch of sections in the *Investigations* that rehearses an interplay between a pair of voices, say, one that is attracted to mentalism and one that is attracted to behaviorism, where the larger point of the overall dialectic is to bring out how there is crucial trick in the philosophical conjuring game that is shared by both – where Wittgenstein ultimately wants to show that as long as that seemingly innocent move remains in place, these two philosophical positions inevitably feed on and sustain one another. Confronted with the interplay between these two initial voices, some readers will probably react to these sections on a first encounter differently than others. If the larger ambitions of the dialectic are initially lost on you – as is almost always the case when a reader first comes to one of Wittgenstein’s texts – then your initial take on these sections may depend on whether your philosophical predilections lean in, say, a behaviorist direction rather than a mentalist one. But such a reader, in, for example, mistaking the author to be a behaviorist in disguise, though still far from understanding Wittgenstein, will still be working with a certain form of understanding of what is at issue in these passages that is sound – a form of understanding that would be completely lost on someone who, say, has mistaken these sections for an excerpt from a pamphlet on how best to toast marshmallows! The sense in which those two readers, the behaviorist reader and the mentalist, even when they are most far apart, initially make something different of the book is not to be equated with the idea that underlies your question – namely, the idea that they each “make something *entirely different* of the book”. It is simply a mistake to think that a resolute reading introduces so few constraints on what counts as a reading of the various rungs of the ladder that a description of that radically indeterminate sort could be apt. All such a reading needs to be able to claim is this: as two such differing readers of a Wittgensteinian text get increasingly clear about the point of the overall dialectic, they will become increasingly able to converge in their understandings of what the intended dialectical roles of various remarks are. This will be equally true of a pair of readers that come to the *Tractatus* with realist and idealist leanings – or atomist and holist leanings. The differences in the transitory stages such readers need to pass through

in order to arrive at a convergent understanding poses no threat to the very idea of a resolute reading.

FORSBERG: I can see how there is a connection of the sort you suggested earlier between what early Wittgenstein thinks of as “psychology” and how he thinks about nonsense. But doesn’t there have to be a difference between how early and later Wittgenstein regard the relation of the psychological to the logical that should complicate the story here?

CONANT: You are right. There is a difference between the author of *Tractatus* and later Wittgenstein here. Early Wittgenstein, following Frege, is working with what we might call “a garbage-can conception” of the psychological. The notion that wears the trousers here is the notion of the logical. And everything that cannot be made to fit a certain conception of what it is to play a *logical* role within a conception of judgment will be regarded as *merely* psychological. So the conception of the psychological here is a privative one. It marks the line between those capacities that are internally related to judgment, conceived as a logical capacity, and those that are not. The *Tractatus* certainly goes further than Frege in trying to make certain notions – not only that of judgment, but, for example, also that of the subject who judges – the logical “I” – internal to logic. But, for example, the subject who feels pain, expresses her pain, can say true or false things about her pain, how these capacities of hers relate to the space of the logical – how they partake of their own *sui generis* grammar – this remains as mysterious to early Wittgenstein as it does to Frege. In order to spell this out, one needs a conception of the entire category of the psychological in which one no longer pictures it as a self-standing realm that is sealed off from that of the logical. One needs to see how psychological categories are themselves pervaded by (what later Wittgenstein calls) grammatical form.

When early Wittgenstein tries to expand the category of the logical (so that it can, for example, encompass the activity of the judging subject in effecting the unity of the judgment) what happens is this: he tries to move various things out of the Fregean space of the merely psychological, and into that of the logical, without

altogether abandoning the underlying garbage-can conception of the psychological. One thereby arrives at a view that is unstable. The greater the variety of kinds of logically informed psychological concept required to comprehend the activities of judging, knowing, and speaking, the more difficult it becomes to sustain a conception of the psychological in merely logical privative terms. Wittgenstein's early expansion of the scope of the logical – the way it comes to pervade not only language, but also its internal implication in world and self – sets up the transition to his later philosophy, to his later attacks on his early conception of the externality of logic to yet further dimensions of our psychological lives and the externality of psychology to our logical activity.

So in Frege and early Wittgenstein there is no logically positive conception of the psychological. Psychology starts where logic gives out. And all of the phenomena that Frege and early Wittgenstein consign to this garbage bin of the psychological are tossed into it because they cannot be accommodated within their conception of what the logical is. A surprising amount of what later Wittgenstein does in philosophy is devoted, in one way or another, to bringing out what is constrictive about such a conception of the logical; how it is operating without its own philosophically confused conception of the psychological – one that is unable to do justice to the grammar of psychological concepts, hence to the *logical* dimension of the psychological. I am very fond of a remark of Stanley Cavell's where he says:

We know the efforts of such philosophers as Frege and Husserl to undo the “psychologizing” of logic (like Kant's undoing Hume's psychologizing of knowledge): now, the shortest way I might describe such a book as the *Philosophical Investigations* is to say that it attempts to undo the psychologizing of psychology, to show the necessity controlling our application of psychological and behavioral categories; even, one could say, show the necessities in human action and passion themselves. (Cavell 1976, p. 91)

I think this provides a very helpful framework within which to relate early Wittgenstein to later Wittgenstein. We may put Cavell's insight as follows: what later Wittgenstein seeks to do is to de-psychologize Frege's and early Wittgenstein's psychologizing of the concept of

psychology. So, I agree with what I take to be the underlying premise of your question: that early Wittgenstein's conception of the "merely psychological" (and hence: of the non-logical) *is* philosophically problematic by his later lights. But the fact that it helps to bring this weakness in his early philosophy to light doesn't strike me as a weakness in the resolute reading in and of itself. It strikes me rather as pointing to a shortcoming in the philosophical conception of the *Tractatus* from which no accurate reading of the book should seek to avert its gaze.

As a footnote to that remark, I might add that I think my preceding remarks furnish a way of seeing a principle of unity that runs throughout the topics treated in the *Philosophical Investigations* – a way of understanding what binds many of the sections of that book together. The topics treated in the very opening sections of that book involve philosophical temptations that Frege was already trying to criticize: the idea that certain kinds of associations, or mental images passing through one's mind, could suffice to allow one to grasp the meaning of a name when someone points to an object or says a sound – without that name occurring in any wider linguistic or logical context. (These would count for Frege as confusions of the logical with the psychological.) Next, many of the topics treated in the immediately following set of sections of that book are topics that are connected to Fregean doctrines that early Wittgenstein was already concerned to criticize: the separation of thought from judgment, the externality of the activity of the judging subject to the content judged, the superfluity of a judgment stroke, the Fregean notion of a presupposition, etc. (Here we have to do with aspects of our forms of mindedness which early Wittgenstein thinks early Frege must misrepresent because of how he draws the line between the merely psychological and the logical.) In the first forty sections or so of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is mostly not concerned yet to criticize the *Tractatus*, but rather to revisit its targets. However, to say that in these sections later Wittgenstein is criticizing philosophical conceptions that early Wittgenstein was already concerned to criticize is not to say that he is merely repeating his early criticisms. For, in these sections, later Wittgenstein is mounting a very different *form of criticism* than that of early Wittgenstein. In so doing, he is

implicitly concerned to criticize *the way* early Wittgenstein prosecutes his criticisms of Fregean targets and Fregean doctrines. What is faulty in his early manner of criticism is what allows there to be an unwitting philosophical subliming of the nature of the proposition and its underlying logical character in the *Tractatus*. This constitutes the central topic of the next batch of sections, where later Wittgenstein's attention now begins to turn more intensively not just to re-criticizing what he had previously criticized, but to the task of criticizing those ideas to which early Wittgenstein himself remains attached – ideas such as the following: that the underlying logical form of the proposition is hidden, hence the correlative subliming of the proposition, that there is only one logical space, hence the impossibility of a plurality of grammars, the underlying picture of logical unity of essence, hence the implicit denial of the logical unity of a family, that the instruments of logical notation have a privileged role in uncovering philosophical confusion, hence the failure to appreciate the place of the ordinary, etc. This leads, as we move into the rule-following sections and beyond, into an examination of numerous psychological concepts that had been consigned to the garbage can of the psychological (or at least the category of the philosophically hopeless mysterious). Some of these were so consigned only by Frege (not by early Wittgenstein), some by both Frege and early Wittgenstein: the act of grasping the sense of a thought or the meaning of a sign, the objective reference of pain language, the grammar of the first-person/third-person asymmetry that pervades concepts that express self-conscious activity, etc.. The range and variety of the psychological concepts that are drawn into the scope of the examination becomes quite stunning: hope, expectation, grief, and on and on. This completely transforms the entire shape of Wittgenstein's early conception of what belongs inside and what belongs outside the scope of a logico-grammatical investigation.

FORSBERG: How does the concept of privacy fit in here?

CONANT: Everything that is relegated to the realm of the psychological, on the garbage-bin conception of the psychological,

is merely private: beyond the reach of language and unsuited to figure as a possible logical subject of judgment – or even as a possible dimension of judgment. Thus, for Frege, my pains and other sensations cannot be brought within the scope of the content of a logical judgment that is true or false. My sensations are, for him, private. The thread of unity running through the *Philosophical Investigations* touched on in my previous answer can be seen in how that book works its way up to addressing that topic. It proceeds in the following order: first, it brings out what is right in Frege’s and early Wittgenstein’s criticisms of psychologism, while prosecuting the criticism in a manner that does not entail an endorsement of their conception of the realm of the merely psychological; then, second, it seeks to rehabilitate for philosophy the concepts they understood in merely psychologistic terms, hence – to borrow Cavell’s lovely phrase – it seeks to de-psychologize their conception of the psychological, so that a whole range of psychological verbs (such as perceiving, grasping, interpreting, hoping, wishing, and grieving) can all be moved into the space of that which partakes of a logical grammar. This involves seeing how none of these expressions stands for something merely private, beyond the pale of language, hence outside the space of communication, agreement in judgment, and susceptibility to forms of failure in self-knowledge on one’s own part and failures of acknowledgment on the part of others – a space that requires an entire background of grammatical conditions for their mutual intelligibility.

FORSBERG: Let us stay for a while with the topic of nonsense and its relation to meaning and what it means to lose meaning. We are talking about meaning as something that remains in a certain sense personal (which is not to say private). And nonsense is not something that comes about because we speakers have failed to adhere to the laws of language, but because *we* have failed to *give* meaning to our words, as the *Tractatus* says. I suspect that these views may appear rather strange to some. How can we fail to mean in a language that is ours, which we clearly know?

CONANT: The thing that is individualized in the *Tractatus*'s conception is not meaning per se, but rather *failures* to mean. To go back to Aristotle's discussion of the relation of sickness to health, there are many different ways to be sick – sickness individualizes, if you will – but all sick people have this in common: they each fail to be healthy, each in their own way. Our comprehension of a case of sickness goes through the concept of health, even while the latter's mode of logical implication in the former allows for comprehension of what individualizes the particular case. The logical point here is contained in the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*, one of Wittgenstein's favorite novels: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Aristotle makes a similar point about the relation between a syllogism and a sophism. We can paraphrase Aristotle's point in the idiom of Tolstoy as follows: Every healthy and happy syllogism is alike in being logically valid; every sophistical one achieves the illusion of validity in its own way. And early Wittgenstein would add: which sophisms induce illusions of validity in which persons is a psychological as well as a logical matter. Similarly: failures to exercise our capacity for making sense – the ways in which we can fall short of success in the exercise of our linguistic capacity – may differ from individual to individual. The character of the complexity of the philosopher's task here differs only in degree, not in kind, from that which already needed to be faced by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in their understanding of philosophy as the pursuit of a form of insight whose achievement requires the overcoming of our attraction to a range of sophistical illusions and aporias. Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense, like the ancient conception of sophistry, is a concept of radical privation – not merely a defect in thought or speech that leads to falsity, but one that leads to the illusion that that which one thinks or says is so much as a candidate for truth or falsity. As with Aristotelian health and validity, or Tolstoyan family happiness, such failures of sense eventuate in a radical multiplicity of cases. So, too, as with health and validity, Wittgensteinian nonsense involves a mode of privation that can be comprehended only against the background of an appreciation of what it is to exercise the capacity well. In this case: an appreciation of what it is successfully to confer a method of symbolizing upon a sign – something which, if and when I succeed

in doing it, does not specially characterize me or differentiate my being from that of others, but rather manifests accord with a form of understanding we share. When we so succeed, we achieve agreement in judgment, and what we thereby do is no longer radically individualizing in the manner in which the subversion of the conditions of agreement is.

FORSBERG: Some of what you have been saying makes Wittgenstein sound like quite a traditional philosopher!

CONANT:

It is hard I think to strike the proper balance between bringing out what is truly original in Wittgenstein and what it is that renders his ensuing conception of philosophy, nonetheless, part of an effort to inherit the tradition of philosophy – so that what he is striving to be is a kind of *philosopher*, hence not, as many of his detractors and even some of his admirers would have it: a mere anti-philosopher. I think you are right that, in what I just said, I am placing the emphasis in ways that are designed to allow us to see why a reading of Wittgenstein as mere anti-philosopher is off-target. For he seeks to inherit a tradition of philosophy – initiated by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and taken up especially by Kant – whose broadest outline might generically be characterized, drawing on idioms taken from each, as follows: Philosophy in its struggle against the bewitchment of our intelligence – a form of bewitchment that issues in illusions of thought that leave us radically divided – draws upon forms of capacity in which we all equally share.

It belongs, on this overarching generic conception of philosophy, to the very condition of being subject to the pressure of thought that we fall into such sophistries and illusions. Yet which of them we fall into depends not only on what we think, but also on the shapes of our respective wills, desires, and temptations. So our fall into confusion necessarily reflects aspects of our human individuality. But that which I or you must call upon to overcome such confusion is not and cannot be a form of capacity that is peculiarly mine or yours.

If you want me to say in one sentence what is most traditional in Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy it is therefore this: the idea that the overcoming of those confusions of soul that most divide us from ourselves and each other is central to the task of philosophy, where the condition of the possibility of its success lies in an exercise of that which unites us qua bearers of a shared capacity for thought and speech.

FORSBERG: Yes, I see, but I still want to ask: How can we literally fail to mean something by our words? How is *that* so much as possible?

CONANT: There is a very natural and deep intuition here. We might put it as follows: if I think I mean something, then, by golly, I do mean something; *this* is not something I can be wrong about. Already early Wittgenstein is out to upset this intuition. That is to say, already for early Wittgenstein, the principle *esse est percipi* does not hold when it comes to meaning. Just because I take myself to have the experience of meaning something by my words, that does not settle the question of whether I mean something by those words. This, too, is an ancient insight into what philosophy is up against. It lies at the heart of the primal scene of philosophy as depicted in the early Socratic dialogues: in such a scene, we encounter an interlocutor – in whom we are invited to recognize ourselves – of whom Socrates seeks to show he literally does not know what he means by his words. In order to trigger such a scene, all Socrates needs to do is pose a question like “What is justice?” or “What is virtue?” or “What is knowledge?” And the interlocutor tends first to proclaim in response “What could be clearer? This is something that everyone knows, Socrates. Everyone knows what that word means!” But then when they start to give an account of what that word means, it doesn't take very long before Socrates can show them, with regard to something they just said – when they try to say that which they take themselves already to know – that they prove to be not at all clear about what they mean by their words. And neither are we: when we try to take up a reflective stance towards the most fundamental aspects of our ways of living and thinking – when we try to frame in thought

concepts able to exhibit or articulate those most fundamental aspects of our thought and life – we, too, immediately fall into a kind of confusion. When we step back from our lives in this way and try to convert its most fundamental aspects into topics of philosophical reflection, we find that we come out with words which, when we reflect upon them, are subject to a seemingly incoherent set of demands. We both feel that *this* is what we want to say at this point in our philosophizing, and yet, as we proceed, we also become increasingly clear that we are no longer clear about what it means to say this.

So this is a very old discovery – one that goes back to at least Socrates – that, when we reflect upon that which we would have thought we cannot help but know, we are subject to certain sorts of confusions about what it is we want to mean by our words, and hence to certain correlative illusions of thought. And this discovery remains at the center of many conceptions of philosophy throughout its history. Kant will attribute the difficulty of philosophy to the difficulty of bringing to reflective consciousness that which already lies in (what he calls) *der gesunde gemeine Menschenverstand*: the healthy common human understanding. And he will attribute the increasing urgency of philosophy's task to the mounting prevalence of the influence of bad philosophy – failed attempts to articulate the required form of self-knowledge – and its ensuing tendency to corrupt that original understanding and to furnish pretexts for shirking or otherwise occluding the demands of reason. The difference between especially later Wittgenstein and most modern philosophers, hence his comparatively striking resemblance to Socrates in this respect, lies in how he keeps drawing philosophy back to its primal scene, imploring us to not rush past it too fast: to really focus on those initial moments of perplexity, to try to understand what is really going on in them – with the aim of showing us how many of our traditional ways of seeking to undo our perplexity in philosophy actually drive the symptoms deeper, rather than treating and relieving them.

In its broadest outline, this generic conception of the task of philosophy is as old as philosophy itself. This aspect of the conception could only appear to be something radical or anti-

philosophical to a certain kind of philosopher: namely, one who is completely out of touch with the history of philosophy – that is to say, to a certain kind of analytic philosopher. This is not to deny that there is a radicalization in the understanding of the nature of philosophical perplexity that comes with Wittgenstein’s unrelenting focus on the dimension of sense and its possibilities of failure. The tendency in modern philosophy is to focus relentlessly on truth, and to see the philosopher’s task, above all, as one of helping us not to fall short of the truth – not to lapse into speaking falsely. (As we noted above, this was less true in ancient philosophy, due to their preoccupation with sophistry as the characteristic form of the failure of philosophy.) Wittgenstein therefore shifts the terms of criticism from those that predominate in modern philosophy, when he focuses on how the philosopher is prone to come out with forms of speech that, properly understood, fail to live up to the conditions for truth nor falsity. Though here too, I think the beginning of this shift in terms of philosophical criticism – the beginning of the re-inheritance of this aspect of ancient philosophy – really starts with Kant.

FORSBERG: And the shift is a shift from a focus on truth to a focus on meaning?

CONANT: Roughly. We might say it is a shift *from* a philosophical tendency to take the truth-evaluability of our thought or experience for granted *to* a philosophical tendency to reflect upon the conditions for thought’s or experience’s so much as even having, what Kant calls, “objective validity” – of its so much as being able to seem to us to be the sort of thing that could be true or false. Kant seeks to show that the problem with both traditional rationalism and a certain kind of radical empiricism is that they equally deprive us of conditions of the possibility of framing thoughts or having experiences that could so much as be true or false. To that extent, we could say that already in Kant there is a shift from the conditions of truth to the conditions of the intelligibility of thought and judgment. This notion of intelligibility has yet to be subjected to a linguistic turn in Kant – it is not yet Wittgenstein’s notion of sense.

So an inquiry into the forms of our self-knowledge qua beings who are able to *speak* does not stand at the center of Kant's inquiry in the way it does in Wittgenstein's.

FORSBERG: Yes, I see that, but forgive me for interrupting you here, because my question wanted to get at something specific about Wittgenstein. Isn't there something about the way this shift (from a focus on truth to a focus on meaning) happens in Wittgenstein that makes philosophical confusions appear even more paradoxical?

CONANT: Perhaps. It depends what we mean in saying this. This seems right: Wittgenstein ups the stakes that come with the Kantian shift in the terms of philosophic criticism in a way that often leaves us stammering and stuttering in the face of our philosophical perplexities – wanting, as he says at one point, just to emit an inarticulate sound in response to our sense of the shape of the philosophical problem with which we are confronted. When, for example, we reach the paradox in section 201 of the *Investigations*, we want to say something like “There is nothing which is my meaning *this* rather than *that* by my words. Any way of meaning my words just hangs in the air: there is nothing that grounds one interpretation in favor of another; so there is no fact of the matter about what I mean”. But the problem is that when I say *this*, I need there to be something which is *the right way* to understand *those* words – or more precisely: I need there to be some determinate way which is *the way* I mean those words. I need this in order so much as to be able to express the philosophical paradox to which I am trying to respond here. I am seeking to exercise my capacity to say something, where the thing that I am trying to say denies the very possibility of the sort of exercise of my linguistic capacity that I must also, at one and the same time, take myself to be engaged in. I need to take myself to already be engaged in doing something whose very possibility I also wish to deny. I am in a mess. I no longer know my way about at all. I am tormented, whipped back and forth, by questions that I cannot silence, but which – when I honestly try to think them all the way through – I also find that I am unable to understand. So, if this is your point, then I agree with it: There is something very radical in

Wittgenstein's way of portraying what the cast of mind is of someone in the grip of philosophical confusion – what is perplexing in the sorts of confusions he seeks to treat in the *Tractatus* or in the *Investigations*, if we wish to recognize them for what they really are.

FORSBERG: To what extent do resolute readers differ from other readers of the *Tractatus* or the *Investigations* in holding that we suffer from illusions of meaning? I would have thought that many critics of a resolute reading would say that the problem with that reading is that it does not take seriously enough what we think we mean by our words. Over and over again it dismisses as nonsense something we can understand. And it should not do this.

CONANT: I do think Wittgenstein takes our sense that we know what we mean by our words much more seriously than many opponents of the resolute reading seem to think that I do. Indeed, I would argue that I take it more seriously than standard readers of Wittgenstein do. On the standard reading of the *Tractatus*, we are told we are given various criteria for meaningfulness. (Those criteria differ depending upon the reading. Sometimes they have to do with logico-syntactical well-formedness, sometimes they have to do with bipolarity, sometimes they have to do with verifiability, sometimes with some combination thereof.) On such a reading, these criteria for meaningfulness are what we are to *apply* to a sentence in order to make out if it is nonsense or not. And *it doesn't matter how much you seem to be making sense* – you may well be kicking or screaming about how important what you're saying is – but if your sentence fails the test, then it must be nonsense. In this sense, on a standard reading, the interlocutor's experience of sense plays no role in the philosophical task of criticism. Philosophical analysis is supposed to have the authority to force you to admit that you *must* give up *that* sentence, even if it seems to you to make sense. Once the logical inquisition has passed its verdict, all that is left for you to do is to confess your guilt or to go back over the reasons why you should adopt this theory of sense, failing to appreciate its force. Similarly, on many readings of later Wittgenstein, where there is some sort of “use-theoretic” or “practice-theoretic” or “God-knows-what-

theoretic” account of the conditions of meaning – there too, we apply our criteria to the case at hand, and it turns out that, say, the term “private language” is nonsense because it does not fulfill the conditions for meaningfulness that have been laid down. And even though *you* feel like you are making sense when you use these words, this theory tells you that what you are saying doesn’t make sense and now you are supposed to just discount your vivid experience to the contrary.

As I read Wittgenstein, he never asks this of his reader. He never lays down a condition in this way – that is the primal philosophical misstep for him that always lies at the source of our confusions. His aim is to dissipate our illusions of sense, to make them completely dissolve – like a lump of sugar in hot water – so that there is nothing left for us to discount or set aside in deference to the supposed authority of some philosophical theory. On his treatment of cases of philosophical nonsense, what we are supposed to come to appreciate is that there is no “it” that does or does not make sense, where we initially thought there was such an “it”. So, on my reading of both early and later Wittgenstein, the only reason to conclude that you have failed to make sense, is because – through your own reflection on and self-interrogation into what you are doing with you words – *You* come to conclude that *You* can no longer make sense of what *You* mean by your words. It’s only once the sense that you seemed initially to be able to make fully collapses *from within* – under the pressure of its own weight, as it were – that you are entitled to conclude that there is no sense that you are making. You never, as it were, throw out a sentence on the supposed ground that it is nonsense, where that supposed ground is based on some independent philosophical story about what it is that makes a string of words meaningful or nonsensical – where “independent” here means: independent of your own sense of whether you are making sense or not.

FORSBERG: I take it that this means that there is no moment at which one *decides* to give up on a sentence because a philosophical analysis has “proved”, as it were, that it is nonsense.

CONANT: Yes. Rather, what happens is that you suddenly find, if a certain kind of Wittgensteinian criticism is successful, that *you* no longer know what *you* meant. And then you don't have to give up on the sentence, because there isn't anything to give up on. You are just left with a string of words in search of a sense – a string of words which could mean indefinitely many things, but upon which you have failed to confer any particular determination. One philosopher, Michael Williams, when he is writing about skepticism and criticizing certain critiques of skepticism, makes roughly the following point: “How could a theory of sense ever give us better reasons for accepting a sentence as making sense than our own experience of that sentence as making sense? Isn't *that* data, the data of when we think we make sense and when we think we don't make sense, the very data to which such a theory is supposed to be answerable?” And I am very sympathetic to Williams's criticism of the kinds of theories of meaning he has in mind here. But Williams used to formulate this as a criticism not only of Carnap or certain readers of later Wittgenstein, but also of Wittgenstein himself. This criticism was supposed to tell against Wittgenstein's own critical procedures in philosophy. (I gather from conversation with him that Williams has since changed his mind about this.) It is important to see that such a criticism turns on a *complete* misunderstanding of what Wittgenstein himself means by nonsense.

FORSBERG: So what becomes now of philosophical criticism? I mean, it seems deeply problematic for a philosopher inspired by Wittgenstein to go out and tell other philosophers that *they* are not making sense. That seems to be a move one shouldn't make.

CONANT: Yes. There is absolutely no point at all in simply *informing* other philosophers that they are not making sense, as if you could be equipped with some source of authority that ought to cause them simply to defer to your judgment on the matter. And to the extent that a lot of Wittgensteinians do go around acting as if their familiarity with Wittgenstein's somehow provided them with such a source of authority – and they have developed a bad reputation for acting in this way – I think they have fully *earned* their reputation. The

form of philosophical criticism required here has to be far more *responsive* – directed at the *details* of a particular plight of mind at a particular crossroads, within a specific dialectical stretch of philosophical reflection. This is not accidentally related to why later Wittgenstein’s writings assume the form that they do.

To give an example of just one case of the sort of form that such a practice of philosophical criticism can assume – one example of a way of proceeding, for as far as it can take one, that I would regard as faithful to later Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy: you can take a particular philosophical author; note that they say very particular things; then you can try to understand what the pressures are that lead to their saying those kinds of things. And if one thinks that they are equivocating with respect to what they could mean by those words, so that they fail to mean anything determinate by their words, then one can try to show *that* – about *these* words in *that* supposed context of use. And one hasn’t done that well unless *that author* can be brought to see that you are right about her own relation to her words. It has to be, I think, reckoned as a failing of such criticism if its intended target is completely unmoved by it. What is so painful about a lot of supposedly Wittgensteinian philosophical criticism is that its practitioners are so spectacularly uninterested in whether the supposed subject of their criticism is moved by the criticism. And to that extent it seems to me a complete betrayal of Wittgenstein’s practice. You may conclude perhaps that not even Wittgenstein himself was very good at writing philosophy in such a way that the reader will be brought to see what he wanted her to come to see through her engagement with his texts. But if one concludes that, then one has reasons to conclude that *Wittgenstein* did not live up to his own aspirations for philosophy. This should not affect our understanding of what that aspiration for philosophy was: namely, to bring the interlocutor to the point where she can pass from something that does not appear to be nonsense to a recognition of it on her part as just that. Wittgenstein says: “My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense” (PI, § 464). But unless he actually succeeds in assisting you to effect such a transition in your relation to your own words, he has failed – completely failed.

FORSBERG: This seems to be a good opportunity to ask you to clarify the notions of ordinary language and ordinary language philosophy. I remember that you, in the first interview, talked about how these notions have come to mean something extremely narrow, and how you want to understand these notions differently (Forsberg & Conant 2013). It seems to me that we have touched upon accusations that are often directed against ordinary language philosophy as well: that we use ordinary language as some kind of standard for what the *real* meaning is supposed to be, and that the ordinary language philosopher can accuse the philosopher who deviates from the ordinary as committing some kind of mistake. How is all of this connected with what you just said?

CONANT: There is nothing in Wittgenstein, as I read him, that frowns in any way upon unusual or innovative uses of language, or upon coining new expressions, upon introducing new terms, etc. There is absolutely no bar to linguistic creativity, either for the author of the *Tractatus* or for that of the *Investigations*. So departures from established usage are not to be criticized as such, especially if they prove to have the power to initiate new and genuine forms of use. I do think that in a lot of contemporary discussions about ordinary language philosophy there is a tendency to try to understand what makes something ordinary by trading on some implicit contrast between the ordinary and some candidate for its “other”, where in each such case the ordinary is taken to denote some intuitively antecedently delimitable realm. It is taken to mean something that we already know how to demarcate before we start reading Wittgenstein. This is already quite wrong, I think. To come to appreciate what later Wittgenstein means by “the ordinary” is to have achieved a very high level of understanding of his later philosophy. There is a sense, it is true, in which he thinks that we cannot help but already be familiar with that towards which this word is supposed to point us. But the entire difficulty of his later philosophy is tied up with the difficulty of our achieving a reflective form of self-consciousness with regard to *that* – to what he calls: *the ordinary* – to what we, in a non-reflective way, cannot help but already know.

One misunderstands what ordinary language is for later Wittgenstein if one takes it to denote some subset of language, such that, having carved out that part of language, one is now in a position to frown upon other forms of language – where this posture depends upon some straightforwardly intelligible contrast between ordinary and extraordinary uses of language. One such contrast is between the ordinary and the scientific. Another one is between the ordinary and something we might just call “the technical”. Another, which might be brought in to expand the set of cases deemed non-ordinary, is between the ordinary and the metaphorical, or the literary. For each of these contrasts, one wants there to be a whole lot of types of language, or tracks of linguistic phenomena, that are straightforwardly classifiable as instances of the not-ordinary. Then one understands what the ordinary is on account of its not being any one of those. So the logically primary term in the contrast, the one that allows us to understand what the “ordinary” is, is that other term or set of terms with which it is to be contrasted. Now what is right in your question is this: I do think that there are lots of proponents of ordinary language philosophy, as well as critics of it, who operate with just such a notion of the ordinary. The felt oppressiveness of ordinary language philosophy is to be traced to this logical feature of how both its friends and foes alike tend to construe its central concept.

As I understand Wittgenstein, the relevant notion of the ordinary is one that contrasts with what he calls “the philosophical”, or “the metaphysical”. He has two interrelated notions of philosophy – a positive one and a privative one – and here it is the negative notion of the philosophical that is pertinent. He employs a great many metaphors to indicate what this latter sense of the “philosophical” comes to – and hence, at one and the same time, to indicate what the relevant sense of the “ordinary” comes to. Among the metaphors Wittgenstein uses to indicate the contrast he is after here are the following: the difference between language being at work and its merely idling, or its being at work and being on holiday, or the difference between speaking within a language game and speaking outside language games. So ordinary language is language doing what language ordinarily does when it fully succeeds in being *language* –

when it has successfully been put by someone to some genuine communicative or expressive use – be it scientific or mundane, lyrical or prosaic, engineer or bedroom talk. The category of ordinary language, so understood, has no outside: there is no “kind” of language that fails to be ordinary while rising to the conditions of success required of its category of use. The sort of defect that must be present in a purported use of language for it properly to be classified as failing to be “ordinary” in Wittgenstein’s sense cannot constitute the mark of a genuine category of language – in the way each of the terms that figure second in each of the following contrastive pairs can constitute such a mark: ordinary/scientific, ordinary/technical, ordinary/literary, etc. The sort of departures from the ordinary that interest Wittgenstein involve a much more radical privation of sense than can be accounted for on any standard understanding of the term. They involve the *illusion* of language doing what it ordinarily does. The terms “ordinary” vs. “metaphysical” for Wittgenstein does not mark a contrast between two different kinds of language – or two different ways of using language. Rather it marks a contrast between our linguistic capacity being fully in act – in *energeia* – and it only seeming to be so. There are not two kinds of language here – ordinary language and extraordinary language. Similarly: for Wittgenstein, “speaking outside language games” is not a description of another possible location from which one can speak. It is speaking under the illusion that there is a place from which one is speaking when there isn’t any such place. So the expression “ordinary language” for Wittgenstein does not draw its sense from our prior comprehension of some positive substantive contrast between the ordinary and some antecedently specifiable species of the non-ordinary. Much that is difficult about Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, and connected to difficulties we were talking about before, stems from the difficulty involved in appreciating what is at issue in (what Stanley Cavell calls) his appeal to the ordinary – for it is the fundamental gesture of his later philosophy.

While it is difficult to understand this first sense of the word “philosophy” in Wittgenstein – the one that contrasts the philosophical with the ordinary – due its essentially privative

character; it can be even more difficult to understand the further sense of the word “philosophy” in his writings – the one that figures in his descriptions of his own practice: philosophy as that which aims at the reflective recovery of the ordinary. This is due to the way it is essentially the privation of a privation. We might put it this way: *in the order of being* the term “ordinary” is the logically primary term in the contrast between the ordinary and the metaphysical, since the latter represents the former in a condition of privation. Yet *in the order of philosophical reflection* their relations of dependence are reversed: it is only through our departures from the ordinary that we can come to bring “it” clearly into view for ourselves. This means that one completely misunderstands Wittgenstein’s philosophy if one thinks his aim is just to get us somehow to avoid ever departing from the ordinary, to avoid ever falling into nonsense. To the extent that we succeed in the task of living such a life of systematic avoidance – assuming for a moment that that idea even makes sense – we will remain forever reflectively blind to the ordinary and hence to the forms of understanding that Wittgenstein’s philosophy seeks to confer.

FORSBERG: So what exactly is the connection between, if I may call it this, the ordinary sense of the term “ordinary” and Wittgenstein’s way of using that word and related words?

CONANT: Excellent question – answering it will allow me to expand on my last remark. The following remarks from *Philosophical Investigations* suggest a line of answer to your question:

Does everything that we do not find conspicuous make an impression of inconspicuousness? Does what is ordinary always confer the *impression* of ordinariness? (PI, § 600)

Asked “Did you recognize your desk when you entered your room this morning”—I should no doubt say “Certainly!” And yet it would be misleading to say that an act of recognizing had occurred. Of course, the desk was not strange to me; I wasn’t surprised to see it, as I would have been if another one had been standing there, or some other unfamiliar object. (PI, § 602)

The relevant non-philosophical sense of the word “ordinary” upon which Wittgenstein seeks to build, when he uses this term to indicate the central theme of his later philosophy, is that in which it means something like the following: that which is so familiar to me that it is difficult for me to bring it before my eyes – that which is so close to me that it is difficult for me to so much as even notice it. Or alternatively: that which is so familiar to me that it is, if you will, all but invisible to me – “invisible” in the sense that I become able fully to register its continuing presence only through the onset of its absence or the introduction of something disruptive into the character of its presence – only once, that is, something happens to it (or to me, or to both) that allows the otherwise invisible dimension of the phenomenon to acquire an aspect that allows it, for the first time, to obtrude into view.

So “the ordinary” for Wittgenstein stands for that which is most difficult to get into view in philosophy. An individual’s sufferance of philosophical confusion – for Wittgenstein, as for Socrates – is the precondition of the possibility of her achievement of philosophical understanding or clarity or self-knowledge. This is connected to a further insight of Stanley Cavell’s. Cavell says that the great importance of skepticism for Wittgenstein is that it is only under the threat of skepticism that the ordinary becomes visible to us. It is only under the pressure of philosophical confusion and its subsequent release that the ordinary can so much as obtrude. It is only via subjection to the pressure of philosophical questioning that the contours of the ordinary are rendered sufficiently surveyable as to permit of philosophical investigation. This means that there is no route to philosophical insight for Wittgenstein that does not pass straight through the heart of a prior stage of anguishing confusion. This is what he meant when he said – as he often did in conversation with his students and friends: “In philosophy you have to go the bloody hard way!”³

Since Stanley Cavell just recently passed away, perhaps this is the moment to mention one other respect in which I think he stands out as one of our best readers of Wittgenstein – indeed, the reader most

³ See Rhees 1969, p. 169. See also Wittgenstein’s letter to Rhees of November 28, 1944 (quoted in Monk 1990, p. 476).

sensitive to a dimension of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy that tends to go missing on most recent attempts to interpret or receive it. He reads Wittgenstein as seeking to recover and restore an *Einstellung* towards language, towards the world, and towards other minds, that modern philosophy – in its drive to shoehorn everything into a certain form of explanation – cannot help but undo. Cavell sees Wittgenstein as struggling to undo such an undoing – to help us achieve a proper reflective appreciation of our implication in language, world, and human community. This aim is not separable from one of seeking to restore, and hence elicit, our capacity for wonder. (To cite one Cavellian example of this: a sense of wonder at the depth of our agreement – attunement – in language.) What is here called for, Cavell will say, is not an act of knowledge, but one of acknowledgment. To keep this dimension of Wittgenstein's philosophical aim in view requires being able to distinguish wonder from perplexity. Hence it is equally critical to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein that philosophy does not begin in perplexity – even if it is true that philosophy today generally first comes to know itself as philosophy through a felt sense of perplexity: we moderns tend first to become reflectively aware that we have broached philosophical ground when we find ourselves beset with forms of philosophical puzzlement. But it is important to Wittgenstein, not only that our philosophical activity is underway prior to the onset of such felt perplexity, but also that its onset is elicited by aspects of our lives that are properly to be wondered at. Hence his aim, in relieving us of perplexity, is not to deprive us of wonder, but to restore and release it. It comes naturally to most of his interpreters to assume that Wittgenstein, in seeking to bring philosophy peace, also must seek to extinguish all sense of wonder in us. Such a reading of Wittgenstein bears the mark of the Enlightenment – and its most influential analytic offspring, Logical Positivism – in its hostility to anything that smacks of the sacred, to anything that calls for gratitude or awe in the face of world or life. Such a reading of Wittgenstein, as an uncritical child of the Enlightenment, has trouble seeing how the clarity he seeks in philosophy could be sufficiently capacious to accommodate the moment of philosophical Sabbath, of acknowledgment, so critical to Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein. On Cavell's conception, as on Wittgenstein's, in its treatment of each

of its difficulties, philosophy not only begins in wonder, but ends with it.

FORSBERG: That strikes me as a fine note upon which to conclude a discussion of Wittgenstein!⁴

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⁴ The material for this interview was recorded at the Lichtenberg-Kolleg; the Institute for Advanced Study in Göttingen in December 2013. It was shortened, edited, and slightly updated at the Forschungskolleg Analytic German Idealism (FAGI) at the University of Leipzig in 2017 and 2018. This publication was supported within the project of Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (OP VVV/OP RDE), “Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value”, registration No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/15_003/0000425, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and the state budget of the Czech Republic.

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Biographical Notes

Born in Kyoto, Japan in 1958, James Conant is currently Chester D. Tripp Professor of Humanities at the University of Chicago and Humboldt Professor at the University of Leipzig. He has been employed or served as a visiting professor in, among other places, Michigan, Pittsburgh, Mexico, Austria Germany, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Ireland, Switzerland, Greece and Italy. Conant has received numerous awards and honours including the Humboldt Foundation's Anneliese Maier Research Award and their Humboldt Prize. Conant works in a wide range of areas of philosophy, including the philosophy of perception, the history of analytic philosophy and aesthetics – as well as a wide range of figures, including Descartes, Kant, Frege, and Wittgenstein. His publications are mostly in English, French or German and include books on Nietzsche, Orwell, and Wittgenstein respectively. Together with Jay Elliot, he is the co-editor of the Norton Anthology of Philosophy titled *After Kant: The Analytic Tradition*. His next book, *The Logical Alien*, is forthcoming with Harvard University Press.

Niklas Forsberg is the Head of Research at the *Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value*, Department of Philosophy, University of Pardubice, Czech Republic; and Docent at Uppsala University, Sweden, and University of Helsinki. He has written about Austin, Cavell, Coetzee, Collingwood, Emerson, Murdoch, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, discussing various topics such as pain, sin, love, language, and literature's relation to philosophy and philosophical argumentation. He is the author of *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013 [pbk. 2015]), and co-editor of *Language, Ethics and Animal Life: Wittgenstein and Beyond* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). Forsberg is also editor of the book series *Nordic Wittgenstein Studies*, published by Springer.