

Chapter 5:

Wittgenstein and Parmenides

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* famously ends with a remark that, as he says in the book's "Preface," could also summarize the sense of the book as a whole:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Ignoring, for the moment, the difference between speaking and knowing, the remark can be read almost as a paraphrase of one written almost 2500 years ago:

You could not know what is not – that cannot be done – nor indicate it.¹

The second remark comes near the beginning of the single 'treatise' of Parmenides, long discussed as the first work in the Western tradition to draw a general "logical" distinction between being and non-being. Within Parmenides' poem, it appears immediately after the dramatic narrative description of the narrator's journey to the place of a goddess. The traveler is offered the choice between two mutually exclusive paths, the one the "path of Persuasion," truth, and being; the other, the "indiscernible" path of non-being, error, and illusion. In saying that there are only these two paths that can be thought of, the goddess' argument is the first to restrict thought to the choice of the two stark alternatives of *what is* and *what is not*, all that can be an object of thought and knowledge and what is simply nothing.

This stark choice remains a model for rational or logical thinking throughout the subsequent history of Western thought. In linking thought and knowledge to being, it is closely connected with the unity of being and thinking that the goddess herself appears to uphold:

For the same thing is there both to be thought of and to be [or: thought and being are the same].²

The claim of the unity of being and thinking provides a basis for the eternal, changeless being of the One of all that is, which the Goddess now goes on to describe. This is, of course, the very moment of the *institution* of the sovereign combination of consistency and completeness, the origin of the ontological and logical (indeed, onto-theological) thought of the One which would subsequently govern Western

¹ Fr. 2, as translated by Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983), p. 245. Throughout this chapter, I use Kirk and Raven's translations of Parmenides' poem. In some cases, however, these are controversial; for good alternatives see, e.g., Austin (1986) and Cordero (2004).

² Fr. 3, Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983), p. 246. The right translation of this phrase is quite controversial. Cf., also, Fr. 6.

philosophy for two millennia. The argument that provides for its thinkable link to being by ruling out non-being and contradiction therefore demonstrates, in particularly clear form, what is involved in this institution, and what is at stake in the contemporary results of logical thought and inquiry about the One that today provide for its possible deposition.

The goddess's description of the stark choice identifies, for any object, two and only two possibilities: either being or non-being, existence or non-existence. This stands as an original model for all *bivalent* reasoning in accordance with the principle of non-contradiction, and hence, more broadly, for the "authority" and force of all logical norms, rules, and principles of thought and speech. On this model, in particular, the assertion or thought of *contradictions* is, definitively and essentially, to be avoided. Indeed, the goddess next goes on to warn the traveler against the way of mortals, who "wander," confused, between the two alternatives of being and non-being, constantly mixing them up and confusing them in contradictory fashion.³

As commentators have noted, however, there is a certain interesting ambiguity, amounting almost to a performative contradiction, in the goddess' own instructions.⁴ For if it is the goddess' intention to *describe* in logical terms the structure of whatever is, her words are at the same time also *imperative*; her aim is not simply to point out the two paths but also to *recommend* the first and *proscribe* the second. In so doing, she imposes on thought the force of the very distinction between truth and error that she may be taken to be the first ever to point out. But if the second path is both "indiscernible" and even, necessarily, "not to be," then how is it indeed possible for the goddess herself to indicate it to the traveler in order to prohibit him from pursuing it, demanding that "you must hold back your thought from this way of enquiry"?⁵ Similarly, if the first path is indeed that of that which is, indeed the only "one" of which there truly is "an account," how is it possible for the goddess to *recommend* that the young traveler follow this path, given that there seems to be no alternative that is even so much as conceivable? In describing the two paths, the remarks of the goddess would seem to ambiguously combine description with prescription, demanding the necessary while prohibiting the impossible.⁶ My suggestion in this chapter will be that

³ Fr. 6.

⁴ See, e.g., Austin (1986), chapter 1, Owen (1960), and for an extended interpretation that has influenced me here, Schürmann (1996), pp. 51-109. Owen (1964, p. 30). is one of the first to suggest a parallel between Parmenides' argument and that of the *Tractatus*, suggesting that Parmenides' argument "is a ladder to be climbed up and thrown away."

⁵ Fr. 7, Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983) p. 248.

⁶ The issue is complicated somewhat – although not, I think, in any essential sense – by the question whether Parmenides means, subsequently in fragment 6, to indicate as well a "third way," that of the "mortals," in addition to the two ways of being and non-being (or truth and falsehood) already named. Although there has been some debate

something very like this curiously ambiguous structure is also exhibited, as Wittgenstein himself would only later come to see clearly, by Wittgenstein's ongoing investigation into logic, ethics and the bounds of sense, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and that this overdetermined structure of rational force indeed displays an important feature of the phenomenon of "normativity" itself.

Parmenides and the *Tractatus*

Both remarks, the one of Parmenides at the dawn of Western thought, and that of Wittgenstein at the much more recent moment of its more fully attained linguistic self-awareness, can seem, read *one way*, simply to be tautologies. That is, both can seem simply to assert that *whatever cannot be talked about* (or thought about, or known), indeed *cannot be talked about* (or thought about, or known). Taken this way, the argument (if such it is), in each case, risks arguing nothing; for tautologies say nothing. Taken another way, however, they do indeed both articulate substantial prohibitions, saying that there is an *area* of things or matters – that, as we may say, of "non-being" or perhaps contradiction – about *which* it is impossible to say anything, since these things or matters fail to exist. But now both arguments risk internal incoherence; for they seem to refer to what, by their very saying, they cannot, namely the "realm of non-being" that, according to the argument itself, cannot exist.

More specifically, if we take Parmenides to be outlining an argument with a substantial conclusion, we may take that conclusion to be that it is impossible to know, refer to, or conceive "nothing" or "what is not." The argument, thus construed, plays an essential role in Parmenides' more encompassing attempt to demonstrate the *necessity* of the existence of what is, and in particular of the timeless and unchanging One.⁷ As such, moreover, it is a model for "logical" arguments for ontological conclusions throughout the subsequent history of Western thought, in particular for a wide variety of arguments that attempt to establish the *necessity* of certain existents.⁸

over this question, I think it does not vitiate the present point, since i) the goddess does clearly say in fragment 2 that the way of non-being cannot be indicated (though she indicates it); and ii) if there are two ways in addition to the way of being, it seems clear that the young traveler is barred from both (e.g. by fragment 8: "There still remains just one account of a way, that it is.") See discussion in Schürmann (2003), pp. 55-70.

⁷ Cf. Fr. 2: "The one, that [it] is and that it is impossible for [it] not to be, is the path of Persuasion (for she attends upon truth) ..." and also Fr. 6: "What is there to be said and thought must needs be; for it is there for being, but nothing is not." The participle that Kirk and Raven here translate as "be said" is *legein*.

⁸ Barnes (1979), pp. 165-172, Anscombe (1969), pp. 3-8, Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983), pp. 245-46, and Owen (1964), pp. 28-30 all take Parmenides to be making this sort of argument for the necessity of some existents. Barnes (1979), pp. 170-71 has noted parallels both to Berkeley's argument for subjective idealism and Anselm's ontological argument for the necessary existence of God.

At *TLP* 2.02-2.0212, Wittgenstein gives a highly compressed argument for the necessary existence of certain simple objects which may be taken to be reminiscent, in some ways, to Parmenides' own argument for the necessary existence of the One:

2.02 The object is simple.

2.0201 Every statement about complexes can be analyzed into a statement about their constituent parts, and into those propositions that completely describe the complexes.

2.021 Objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be compound.

2.0211 If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

2.0212 It would then be impossible to sketch out a picture of the world (true or false).

The argument, like Parmenides' own, is premised on the *determinacy of sense*, or in other words on the possibility of issuing propositions, true or false. An essential component of this premise is *bivalence*, the claim that language attempting to describe reality must be restricted to the two alternatives of true or false.⁹ The connection between the requisite determinacy of sense (which makes it possible to draw a true or false picture of the world) and the necessary existence of simples is at first obscure, but it can be reconstructed with the help of a few subsidiary premises from elsewhere in the *Tractatus* (in particular, 3.22-3.24). The key point is that, *if* some of the terms that function as simple (i.e., unanalyzable) names in language *could* fail to refer, then it would be possible for the propositions involving them to fail to be true in *either* of two ways. First, such a proposition could be false in the usual sense, i.e. because the objects it names, though existing, fail to be configured into an actual state of affairs in the way that it says they are. But second, it could fail to be true (indeed, fail to have sense) because the simple names in it fail to refer to anything at all. If this were possible, then whether any proposition had sense at all would depend on the truth of other propositions (namely, the ones asserting the existence of bearers of each of its names). And then it would be impossible to determinately correlate propositions with states of affairs at all.¹⁰

It follows that, if sense is to be determinate, there must be a fundamental ontological distinction between simple objects and complexes formed of them; only of complexes is it possible to deny existence, or

⁹ Wittgenstein (1921) (Henceforth: *TLP*) 2.21 ff.

¹⁰ Here I follow the discussion by Anscombe (1959), pp. 48-49. See also Livingston (2001).

indeed to say anything substantial (true or false). In this way, we may move, as Plato himself does, directly from Parmenidean considerations about the possibility of reference to the position that Socrates sketches (though he does not actually endorse it) in the *Theatetus*, at 201e:

...The primary elements, as it were, of which we and everything else are composed, have no account [*logos*]. Each of them, in itself, can only be named; it is not possible to say anything else of it, either that it is or that it is not.¹¹

And indeed, the Tractarian argument for simples also has as a direct consequence that, as Wittgenstein puts it at *TLP* 3.221:

Objects I can only name. Signs represent them. I can only speak of them. I cannot assert them.
A proposition can only say how a thing is, not what it is.

If, in other words, it were possible to *describe* (rather than simply name) the simple objects that make up the substance of the world, then whether a proposition composed of simple names had sense would again depend on the truth or falsity of other propositions, in this case those describing the objects. But this would again make sense indeterminate. It is therefore a transcendental condition for the possibility of sense that it be impossible to say anything *about* the simple objects. Even to assert that a particular simple sign *has* an object at all will be to violate this condition, to speak what, in seeming to describe the indescribable simples, must actually be nonsense.

Applying the central distinction of the *Tractatus*' elucidatory apparatus, the necessity of simple objects composing the ultimate structure of the world is, then, to be *shown* rather than *said*.¹² Taken as a fundamental feature of the metaphysical structure of the world, as a result of which sense itself is possible, it is to be demonstrated on the level of language simply by the *existence* of names and the possibility of *using* them in propositions. It is, however, impossible to *assert* this necessity, on pain of violating transcendental conditions for the possibility of sense and falling into nonsense. In line with the distinction between showing and saying, we may say, indeed, that *if* there are any necessary metaphysical or ontological preconditions for the possibility of sense themselves, the necessity of these conditions will only be showable and it will therefore be impossible either to assert or to deny them.

¹¹ The passage comes in the course of Socrates' discussion of the analogy between such simple knowable objects and linguistic letters, and should be compared with similar discussions of atomistic themes in connection with language and grammar elsewhere, e.g. in the *Sophist* (252dff) and the *Cratylus* (422a, ff and 434b).

¹² Cf 4.126: "...The name shows that it signifies an object ..."

In line with the *Tractatus*' conception of logical analysis, it must therefore always be possible rationally to decompose any complex state of affairs into its simple constituent objects, which correlate to simple names.¹³ The possibility of such analysis is itself a consequence of the rational structure (what Wittgenstein calls "logical form") shared by language and the world, and here again the existence of this structure is necessary if the determinacy of sense is to be preserved. In the *Tractatus*, the prohibition of non-being – here, the non-being of the contradictory or the "illogical" state of affairs¹⁴ – is thus the direct evidence of the unity of logical structure (or form) which pervades the universe and aligns language and the world in a sublime order of correspondence. Its ontological correlate is the famous "logical atomism" of the *Tractatus*, a reductive picture that underlies the very possibility of logical analysis in the form suggested there.

At the same time, in connection with the *Tractatus*' account of the origination and criticism of philosophical error, the same prohibition of the contradictory plays an essential role in guaranteeing that the elucidation of logical order suffices to provide a rigorous and univocal *delimitation* of the world that is also a determination of the very boundaries of language and sense. For Wittgenstein, the temptation to philosophical error arises when one and the same sign is used in differing ways; in order to expose such error, and thereby provide a rigorous critical distinction between sense and nonsense, it is therefore necessary to "recognize the symbol in the sign" by clarifying precisely the rules underlying the use of signs in each case.¹⁵ It is this critical delimitation of sense that makes possible the clarification of "logical syntax" (3.325-3.33) which aims to correlate each syntactic sign with exactly one coherent rule of use. But this critical delimitation of the realm of sense, which corresponds to the world, also has the effect of *showing* the totality of what is thereby delimited. It thus makes possible the mystical vision with which the book famously concludes, the vision of the world "sub specie aeterni" as a *limited* whole (6.45).

The arguments of Parmenides and Wittgenstein are thus linked on the fundamental level of their ontological articulation of being by the originary assumption of the prohibition against thinking what simply is not. The prohibition is the prohibition of inconsistency, which finds in the contradiction an absolute limit to the One of all that is. For Parmenides as well as Wittgenstein, this yields an injunction on speech strictly correlative to a position of mystical insight into what cannot be said. This is the prohibition that, combining the thought of the One with a rigorous prohibition of the inconsistent,

¹³ *TLP* 3.2 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. 3.031: "It used to be said that God could create anything except what would be contrary to the laws of logic.— The truth is that we could not say what an 'illogical' world would look like."

¹⁵ *TLP* 3.32-3.328. For a clear account of how this works, see Conant (1998).

inaugurates ontological thought in its *sovereign* mode (cf. chapter 1, above), whether subsequently developed into onto-theology (as in Parmenides) or into constructivism (as in the early Wittgenstein). Its correlate is the prescription of rational consistency as the univocity of standards and rules in determining the being of whatever is.

The prohibition and the prescription jointly determine the force of reasons as the non-contradictory coherence of rules and laws, and the totality of the sayable as the realm of determinate logical structure. They institute the necessity of elements and the univocity of their principles as the sublime presupposition of meaning and truth. But as we have seen, and the development of Wittgenstein's own thought would soon confirm, the prohibition and the prescription are equally, and equivalently, overdetermined. As the prohibition of what is anyway impossible, the injunction of non-being enjoins speech to the ultimate silence of "what shows itself" and the thought of the One to the mute position of mystical insight beyond words and logic. As the prescription of what is anyway necessary, the demand for non-contradictory coherence consigns the force of logical structures and linguistic rules to the transcendent authority of an extra-worldly institution. But both the prohibition and the prescription are *themselves* possible, as we may have come to suspect, only by means of a rigorous *foreclosure* of the essential gesture of reflexivity by which the *logos* thinks and inscribes itself as a *moment* of the One it also circumscribes.

From Early to Late Wittgenstein: Rules and Force

After his return to philosophy in 1929, Wittgenstein began to recognize deep and pervasive problems in the *Tractatus* theory of logical form, according to which, as we have seen, the nonsense of contradiction is ruled out by the unitary "deep structure" of the rules of language and logic, which make all determinate sense possible. As we have seen, this prohibition is in a certain sense overdetermined in the *Tractatus*, in that what is ruled out as *impossible* is also effectively *proscribed* by the rules underlying the possibility of logical analysis and rational criticism. In a passage from the *Big Typescript*, first dictated in 1933, Wittgenstein appears to recognize this situation of overdetermination in its general form:

Grammatical rules, as they currently exist, are rules for the use of words. Even if we transgress them we can still use words meaningfully. Then what do they exist for? To make language-use as a whole uniform? (Say for aesthetic reasons?) To make possible the use of language as a social institution?

And thus—like a set of traffic rules—to prevent a collision? (But what concern is it of ours if that happens?) The collision that mustn't come about must be the collision that can't come about!

That is to say, without grammar it isn't a bad language, but no language.¹⁶

The passage comes in the midst of a section of the *Typescript* entitled “Language in our Sense not Defined as an Instrument for a Particular Purpose. Grammar is not a Mechanism Justified by its Purpose.” The sense of the passages immediately preceding it is that we cannot see language as a whole, or the specific rules that we follow in speaking it, as an *instrument* or *tool* designed for the accomplishment of certain antecedently given purposes, for instance the “communication” of antecedently given thoughts. For language has no such purpose, and there is no *specific* task we aim to achieve in speaking it at all. Were there such a task, the constitutive rules of grammar would indeed function like ‘traffic rules,’ prohibiting certain possibilities and allowing others so that the purpose of language as a whole might better be accomplished. But since there is not, we cannot take the force of these rules to rely on their ability to prohibit certain possibilities – instead, as Wittgenstein says, the “collision that mustn't come about must be the collision that can't come about.” In other words, an explicitly stated grammatical rule, if it is indeed constitutive of the language itself, must be conceived as having force *not* in that it rules out certain actual possibilities of expression, but in that in fact it is impossible *not* to follow it and still speak the language at all. Any force that the expression of a grammatical rule might have in leading us to reconsider the sense of one of our remarks, or provide insights into the actual possibilities of sense, must be seen to result, in paradoxical fashion, from this crossing of the constitutive with the descriptive, the necessary confusion of what is *impossible* to say with what is to be *criticized* in what the other *has* said.

A sense of the implications of this paradox also plays an important role in Wittgenstein's developing understanding, at around this time, of what can be meant by “ethics” and the sense of “ethical propositions” (if any such there be).¹⁷ For instance, in the “Lecture on Ethics” delivered in Cambridge in 1929, Wittgenstein considers the possibility of propositions expressing what he calls claims of “absolute value.” These are, for example, claims of intrinsic and non-instrumental goodness or badness, beauty, and the like. He argues that we shall in fact find no such claims anywhere expressed by propositions; for, as he had held also in the *Tractatus*, propositions can do no more than express facts, and facts are all on a level. No fact has intrinsically any more or less value than any other, and so it is impossible, as well, to find any justification *in* the world of facts for any claim or precept of ethics that demands one course of

¹⁶ Wittgenstein (1933), p. 147.

¹⁷ The possibility of ethical propositions was explicitly denied at *Tractatus* 6.42.

action rather than another. It follows from this that we will never find, among states of affairs or their consequences, any that we shall be able to see as an absolute source of rational compulsion, as holding the power to demand absolutely and non-instrumentally what we *must* do:

I said that so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right, etc. And let me, before I go on, illustrate this by a rather obvious example. The right road is the road which leads to an arbitrarily predetermined end and it is quite clear to us all that there is no sense in talking about the right road apart from such a predetermined goal. Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, 'the absolutely right road.' I think it would be the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going.

And similarly the absolute good, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. No state of affairs has, in itself, what I would like to call the coercive power of an absolute judge.¹⁸

What Wittgenstein here says about ethics certainly holds, in a general sense, for anything we may consider to be an expression of rational force. That is, there can be no *proposition* that expresses (non-instrumental) rational force, since no *fact* can have what Wittgenstein here calls the “coercive power of an absolute judge.”

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, in the course of reconsidering the deep motivations of his own *Tractatus* account of language, Wittgenstein revisits the argument that he gave there for the necessary existence of certain simple objects, the bearers of names whose objective reference was seen as necessary for the possibility of sense itself. In an unusual moment of historical reference, he quotes the version of this argument that Plato put in the mouth of Socrates in the *Theatetus*, the argument for the necessary existence of ‘primary elements’ that Plato himself may well have understood as a consequence of the argument of Parmenides. “Both Russell’s ‘individuals’ and my ‘objects’ (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*),” Wittgenstein admits, “were such primary elements.”¹⁹ The critical reflection that assays the argument that purported to demonstrate their absolute necessity will therefore isolate the common

¹⁸ Wittgenstein (1929), p. 40.

¹⁹ *PI* 46. This “logical atomism” is also presented and defended in Russell’s (1918) lectures on “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism.”

element that links the *Theatetus* argument, Russell, and Wittgenstein's earlier self in their common sense of the rational necessity of certain absolute posits or entities, what *must* seemingly exist on the primitive level of naming if sensible language itself is to be possible. Here again, the argument of the *Tractatus* is readable as having attempted to articulate something like a *definitive* and *necessary* connection between what can be named and what can exist at all:

50. What does it mean to say that we can attribute neither being nor non-being to elements?— One might say: if everything that we call 'being' and 'non-being' consists in the existence and non-existence of connexions between elements, it makes no sense to speak of an element's being (non-being); just as if everything that we call 'destruction' lies in the separation of elements, it makes no sense to speak of the destruction of an element.

One would, however, like to say: existence cannot be attributed to an element, for if it did not exist, one could not even name it and so one could say nothing at all of it.—But let us consider an analogous case. There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris.—But this is, of course, not to ascribe any extraordinary property to it, but only to mark its peculiar role in the language-game of measuring with a metre-rule.—Let us imagine samples of colour being preserved in Paris like the standard metre. We define: 'sepia' means the colour of the standard sepia which is there kept hermetically sealed. Then it will make no sense to say of this sample either that it is of this colour or that it is not.

We can put it like this: This sample is an instrument of the language used in ascriptions of colour. In this language-game it is not something that is represented, but is a means of representation... And so to say 'If it did not exist, it could have no name' is to say as much and as little as: if this thing did not exist, we could not use it in our language-game.—What looks as if it *had* to exist, is part of the language. It is a paradigm in our language-game; something with which comparison is made. And this may be an important observation; but it is none the less an observation concerning our language-game – our method of representation.

In revisiting his own earlier argument, Wittgenstein here takes it from another direction, suggesting a transfigured understanding of its sense that may seem to liberate us from its force. The metaphysician's argument for the necessary existence of *what is* – what seemed also, on the level of the critique of language, to articulate the transcendently necessary structural conditions for the possibility of meaning itself – is, from another direction of regard, simply a mystified internal reflection of the structure of our

own institutions. But Wittgenstein's intent here is not simply to "demystify" the apparent necessity of the standard or replace it with mere contingency. For as is clear throughout the "rule-following considerations" of the *Investigations*, the question of rational standards is not simply one about the possibility of making sense of those moments of institution or origin by which we may suppose these standards to have been, at the real or fictitious "originary" moment of a community or a language, explicitly or implicitly adopted. Much more than this, it is the question also of the force of their regular and routine *application*, on an everyday basis, to the manifold and varied linguistic performances that make up an ordinary human life. And it is beyond doubt that the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* takes *this* problem – the problem of how signs get their application, how they get to be meant or used in the ways that they regularly are, of what this regularity means, and more generally of what is involved in talking or thinking of "the use of a sign" or the rules by which we characterize it, and what it means to learn these rules, to know them, to follow them or to dispute them – as one of the deepest and most significant problems that contemporary critical thought can take up.

Here, as we have seen (chapter 1) the question of what it is to follow a rule is explicitly and emphatically *not* to be answered by a conventionalist account of the arbitrary institution of standards. For of course, as we can say paraphrasing the language of the famous rule-following paradox of *PI* 201: any account of the conventional institution of standards would still stand in need of an account of the conventions of their application, and so the conventionalist explanation would hang in the air along with what it is trying to explain, ultimately providing no help.

The paradox of rule-following is thus simply one face of a more general paradox of standards and their institution, which we may begin to articulate by noting the unique logical position that we must see anything like a standard as holding in relationship to the instances it governs, a position that Wittgenstein calls "peculiar." Owing to this role, for instance, the standard meter stick must be treated, ambiguously, as both *one* object among others (it is this that makes it usable as an object of comparison at all) and, at the same time, as occupying the elevated and exceptional position of the general, what in being comparable to *any* other sets the terms by which any other individual can be judged. It is this paradoxical position – as we might say, not the position of the particular (the metre-stick itself) or the universal, but rather the position of their crossing -- that gives the standard metre-stick in Paris the peculiar fate of being able to be called neither one meter nor not one meter long. Thus, the singular position of the standard, neither inside nor outside the language-game it constitutes, marks it also as the singular exception to the general logical law (here, the law of the excluded middle) that it holds in place.

This structurally necessary place of paradox, it is important to note, can by no means be dissipated or resolved *simply* by drawing a distinction between perspectives “internal” and “external” to our language-games or practices.²⁰ For in fact the singular place of the standard appears from *neither* of these two perspectives; to take it as either one is to submit it to the logic of the ordinary run of objects which it in fact underlies. From *outside* the practice, the standard is simply another particular, undistinguished and essentially undifferentiated from any other. From *inside*, the standard does not exist as an object at all; it is useful only as a contingent means of reference to the law of generality which, clothed with the mystical aura of necessity, must always already have been in place. And more generally, here we may grasp what is ultimately unsatisfying about attempts to resolve the temptations of metaphysics, or demystify our relationship to them critically by introducing either a relativism of language-games or a simple distinction between what is internal and what is external to their bounds. For if it can be said that in language we will never be free of the force of reason, that we will never be outside the application of the *logos* to what can be thought or said, we can now say that this is because as long as we are ‘in language’ (as long as we live) we can never be either simply inside a particular language-game nor simply outside all of them.

²⁰ I have in mind here the kind of position mooted by McDowell (1994) according to which the origin of at least some of our metaphysical illusions lies in our (misguided, on this showing) attempt to take a “sideways-on” perspective on our language, attempting to see from an (illusory, on this showing) perspective the relationship between language and the world. Cavell (1979, e.g. p. 239) gives what may perhaps be seen as a more promising account of what is involved in the desire to “speak outside language games.”

Wittgenstein on Russell and Contradiction

In the development of Wittgenstein's critical position from the early to the later work, then, there is an important shift in his conception of the force of "logical" rules and laws. This corresponds, as well, to important shifts in his methods of philosophical reflection and criticism. It is true, and important, that a certain kind of paradox of philosophical edification is already recognizable on the level of the method of the *Tractatus* as a whole, which famously aims to enable its readers (or interlocutors) to "kick away the ladder" of metaphysical speculation and indeed of the "elucidations" and "propositions" of the *Tractatus*' author itself.²¹ But if this paradox may be considered to define the intended critical method of the *Tractatus*, and thus to identify this *method* as an embodiment already of a form of paradoxico-criticism, nevertheless the paradox of rational force and its statement that we have discussed above does not become *explicit* until at least the transitional period. Internally at least, the position of the *Tractatus*, despite the substantial sophistication of its internal register of reflexive self-criticism, remains a (late and highly developed) form of *constructivism* or *criteriology*. This position is not an example of positivism or verificationism. Nevertheless it shares with these projects, as we have seen, the underlying attempt to *delimit* sense by means of a univocal and non-contradictory tracing of the boundaries of meaningful language. The attempt to delimit sense, and so *ensure* its determinacy as a 'transcendental' pre-condition for the possibility of meaningful language, yields the argument for metaphysical simples that we have discussed above as well as for the necessity of a sublime logical structure linking language and world.

It is also deeply connected, as I shall argue, to the *Tractatus*' prohibition of the self-membership of sets or self-reference in language. As we saw above (chapter 1), Russell's paradox embodies a very general problem of self-reference or self-inclusion. If it is possible for a "universal" totality to exist, and for such a totality to include itself, then we are led to an apparently unavoidable contradiction;²² and similarly, if it is possible for a linguistic element to refer to the totality of which it is, itself, a member, we cannot avoid the consequence that this reference is itself inherently contradictory. As we saw above, as well, the

²¹ Cf. *TLP* 6.54. That they should be so recognized is the main heuristic claim of a recently popular line of interpretation of the *Tractatus*, what has been called by some of its adherents the "resolute" interpretation. (See, e.g., Conant (1992), Conant (2002), Diamond (1991), Diamond (2000), Ricketts (1996).) On the "resolute" interpretation, in particular, Wittgenstein is resolute in refusing to distinguish (as earlier interpreters had taken him to) between two types of nonsense, "plain" nonsense and "important nonsense" (such as, perhaps, the seeming propositions of the *Tractatus* itself) that, though ultimately nonsensical, still suffices to *show* something substantive that cannot be said. Instead, according to these interpreters, the rhetorical or dialectical point of the elucidatory propositions of *TLP* is to induce, and then systematically remove, the illusion that *either* of these types of pseudo-sentences actually have any sense, leaving us with a silence that, as Conant has put it, "in the end is one in which nothing has been said and there is nothing to say (of the sort that we imagined there to be)." (Conant (1992), p. 216.)

²² (given also negation).

characteristic response of the *constructivist* orientation (exemplified by Russell's own theory of types) is to *prevent* the paradox from arising by means of prohibitive devices that effectively *prohibit* the problematic objects – such as self-membered sets – from possibly existing.

Although it is importantly (as we shall see) formally different from the standard constructivist treatments of Russell's paradox, Wittgenstein's response to it in the *Tractatus* nevertheless shares with them the same goal of adducing structural principles to prevent the paradox from (so much as) arising:

3.332 No proposition can make a statement about itself, because a propositional sign cannot be contained in itself (that is the whole of the 'theory of types').

3.333 The reason why a function cannot be its own argument is that the sign for a function already contains the prototype of its argument, and it cannot contain itself.

For let us suppose that the function $F(fx)$ could be its own argument: in that case there would be a proposition ' $F(F(fx))$ ', in which the outer function F and the inner function F must have different meanings, since the inner one has the form $\phi(fx)$ and the outer one has the form $\psi(\phi(fx))$. Only the letter ' F ' is common to the two functions, but the letter by itself signifies nothing.

This immediately becomes clear if instead of ' $F(Fu)$ ' we write ' $(\exists \phi):F(\phi u). \phi u = Fu$ '.

With this, Russell's paradox vanishes.

This decisive argument against both Russell's theory of types *and* the coherence of the paradox itself is closely linked to the deepest programmatic assumptions of the *Tractatus* about the relationship between logic and symbolization. In particular, according to Wittgenstein, the construction of logical symbolism, or the articulation of logical rules or laws, must neither make any mention of nor require any knowledge of *how* things are in the world. This requirement is a development of Wittgenstein's earlier motto, that "logic must take care of itself;" here it yields the vision of a "logical syntax," or purely syntactical corpus of logical rules that govern the use of signs, stateable in principle without reference to their meanings:

3.33 In logical syntax the meaning of a sign may never play a role. It must admit of being established without mention being made of the *meaning* of a sign: it may presuppose *only* the description of expressions.

3.331 From this observation we gain an insight into Russell's 'theory of types'. Russell's error is shown by the fact that in establishing the rules for signs he had to mention the meaning of signs.

The point of such a logical syntax is to eliminate philosophical and conceptual errors by showing perspicuously the significant *uses* of signs; in it, each distinct sign is used in just one way.²³ The sign, together with its significant employment, determines a logical form.²⁴ But since it is logical form that determines the possibility of meaning, it is again impossible for logical form to *depend* on the meaning of any signs. It follows from this that the sort of explicit legislation that is present in both Russell's theory of types and the (later) standard axiomatizations of set theory in order to avoid the "paradoxical objects" that would lead to contradiction can play no role in a rigorous formal theory of logical syntax. It can be no part of such a theory to establish that certain sorts of objects (for instance sets containing themselves) "cannot" exist.

But if the substantial theories that Russell and others formulated to respond to the paradox are thus diagnosed as violations of the basic conditions for logical syntax, Wittgenstein holds as well that the very same conditions render *the paradox itself* incoherent. For, given a rigorous logical syntax in which *each sign is used in just one way*, it is impossible, according to Wittgenstein, even so much as to *state* Russell's paradox itself. Specifically, a sign for a function, in a logically purified syntax, must *show* the place for its argument in the very structure of the sign itself. In showing this, it shows its logical form, the possibilities of its significant employment. If, then, we try to make the function its *own* argument, using the sign for the function twice, it appears immediately that the two iterations of the sign in fact have *different* syntactical forms, and so cannot mean the same thing.²⁵ We have in fact been using the same letter in two different ways; in order to be clearer in our notation, we must eliminate the ambiguity by using two different letters. But then the appearance that the function is taking "itself" as an argument – or even possibly *can* do so – vanishes.

Wittgenstein's argument thus enacts a foundational interdiction of the very possibility of stating Russell's paradox, and indeed of all forms of (apparent) linguistic self-reference. Any such reference is effectively blocked, in advance, by the impossibility of using a sign to refer to 'itself.' And this impossibility is itself

²³ TLP 3.325.

²⁴ TLP 3.327.

²⁵ Similarly, if it were possible for a sign, say "A" to symbolize a set that is self-membered, then we would never be able to settle the question whether it is being used in a uniform way (and hence with a uniform meaning). For we would have (for instance): $A = \{A, B\}$. Then, A appears to have the form $\{x, y\}$; but then we would have to ask whether the token of 'A' on the left side of the equal sign signified the same as the token on the right side; and to settle this question we would have to examine the functioning of the token on the right, which would involve putting ' $\{A, B\}$ ' in place of 'A'; we would then have $A = \{\{A, B\}, B\}$, which has the form $\{\{x, y\}, y\}$, and so forth. It would, thus, never be possible (on this Wittgensteinian reasoning) to settle the question of A's actual logical form.

a consequence of the incapability of any (apparent) instance of self-reference to bear a unified sense in each of the (two or more) uses of its linguistic tokens.

The argument against Russell's paradox is also closely connected to the argument at 2.02-2.0212 for the necessary existence of simples, which we have discussed above. As we saw, this argument itself rests on the claim that the possibility of *meaningful* language depends on the determinacy of sense. The same idea underlies Wittgenstein's insistence, against Russell, that it must never be necessary to "mention" the meanings of signs (in the sense, for instance, of stating which objects may exist) while laying down the logico-syntactic rules for their use. For if it were necessary to construct the rules with a view to what objects actually do or do not exist, then their sense would again depend on contingencies, and the determinacy of sense would then be violated once again. Now, there is a fairly obvious sense in which the actual existence of self-reference would make the meaning of self-referential terms and expressions fail to be determinate in just this way. For it would make the meaningfulness of self-referential terms depend on what is presumably an *empirical* event, namely the actual existence, use, inscription or institution of *that very term* in the course of (empirically described) language use. In this case, sense would be indeterminate in very much the same way as it would be if there were no necessarily existing simple objects. It would not be possible to establish the *meanings* of signs (the rules for their use) in advance of their use, for the uses of certain signs (the self-referential ones) would depend on their in fact already having a use within a particular language.

The argument against the possibility of self-reference therefore succeeds *if* it is possible to presuppose, as an absolute requirement for all meaningful language, the determinacy of sense. However, the problems that Wittgenstein finds with Russell's own account here begin to reappear at the level of the very syntactic requirements that Wittgenstein imposes on any language capable of expressing sense. As we saw, Russell's own attempt to solve the paradox through the theory of types tended to refute itself by introducing principles which require reference to the very objects which, according to their own claim, must be incapable of existing. In requiring the determinacy of sense and ruling out contradiction and nonsense, the early Wittgenstein's picture (in, as he would later realize, an overdetermined fashion) imposed a unified regime of rules according to which the very statement of the paradox would be impossible. But the problem arises again on the level of the very statement and maintenance of these requirements and prohibitions themselves, in that their very articulation invokes the possibilities of reference that are supposedly (thereby) prohibited.²⁶

²⁶ We cannot therefore agree with the *Tractatus*-inspired account of A. W. Moore (Moore 2001, p. 197), which sees in the rigid maintenance of the saying/showing distinction a basis for a solution of the problem represented by Russell's paradox. According to Moore, we can resolve the paradox by maintaining that although we wish "both to

Despite the early Wittgenstein's attempt to "dissolve" both Russell's paradox and the theory of types by precluding either from being so much as stateable, the *Tractatus*' prohibition of self-reference (issued at TLP 3.332) thus in fact echoes the Russellian prohibition on a structural level as part of an attempt to theorize language as a clarified regime of sense immune to the possibility of antinomy and contradiction. As we have seen, however, it is abundantly clear that phenomena of self-reference are some of the most ubiquitous occurrences of the everyday discourse in which we discuss the language that we speak and its figuring in our lives. Even if, in the course of reflection about conditions for the fixity of meaning and the determinacy of sense, we may come to consider these expressions and locutions as necessarily introducing complications within the theory of objective reference, it would make a travesty of ordinary language to declare them simply nonsensical. We may come to grasp them, instead, as those points at which language proposes to us an internal image of itself. They mark the place of the paradox by means of which language appears ambiguously, at the outer boundary of the world, as the condition for all possibility of meaning within it, and again as an empirical object, practice, or institution *within* the world whose boundaries it defines.

If the crossing between meaning and fact that occurs in self-reference can thus seem, in the *Tractatus*, to be interdicted always already in advance by the sublime enunciation of a law whose mandate and stake would be the clarity of human life to itself, it is evident, as well, that the interdiction once again makes possible what it prohibits and the stricture proclaims its own breach. That is, if the theory and structure that would hold facts and meanings rigorously apart undermines itself in its own statement, then the question of this statement (what we can see as the origin of all authority and rational force) is neither simply a *quid juris* or a *quaestio facti*. At the factual origin of law stands an auto-nomination that is neither fact nor law, the singular moment of origin at which the totality of an infinite structure is reflected in the finite point of institution. The crossing at this point remains, and is ceaselessly repeated in the ongoing life of language, as the form of the force of the general rule over the particular case.

In the later period, Wittgenstein does not often explicitly revisit the issue of self-inclusion and Russell's paradox; but when he does, he makes it clear that he no longer holds the *Tractatus* position. This is the

affirm and deny" that there is such a set as the Russell set, we are in fact *shown* (without being able to determinately say that there is) such a set. The integrity of this "solution," as stated, clearly depends on our willingness to suspend the sense of incoherence that is produced by being told both that something *is not the case* (for instance that there is a Set of all Sets) – because we have reason to believe that we cannot say that it is the case – but nevertheless that we can be shown *that it is*. Additionally, Moore's own formulation of the solution itself abounds in (seeming) assertions concerning entities which are, according to him, impossible to talk about (for instance the "our subject matter" as a whole and its "infinite framework"). One could be excused for feeling that, if this is supposed to be a solution to the original Russell antinomy, the solution is hardly less antinomic than the problem itself.

case, for instance, in some remarks in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, probably written in the spring of 1944, wherein he revisits Russell's theory of types explicitly:

One may say that the word "class" is used reflexively, even if for instance one accepts Russell's theory of types. For it is used reflexively there too ...

Even though "the class of lions is not a lion" seems like nonsense, to which one can only ascribe a sense out of politeness; still I do not want to take it like that, but as a proper sentence, if only it is taken right. (And so not as in the *Tractatus*.) Thus my conception is a different one here. Now this means that I am saying: there is a language-game with this sentence too.²⁷

Here, in the context of a series of passages (many of which were re-used in the *Philosophical Investigations*) devoted to articulating the problem of what is involved in following a rule, Wittgenstein recognizes the kind of self-inclusion involved in Russell's paradox *not* as nonsense, but indeed as capturing an important general feature of use. That the general term "class" can also be used to designate a class is, here, no longer a confusion of distinct uses of the same token, but rather a relevant and potentially significant feature of grammar, even if it must inevitably, as Wittgenstein realizes, lead to contradiction.²⁸ As Wittgenstein now realizes, the sort of contradiction that Russell's paradox displays may *indeed* result from our ordinary technique of intercombining and calculating with signs, *especially* if we are not sufficiently attuned to their "application." And as he also now recognizes, the attempt to *exclude* this sort of contradiction on *a priori* grounds, which the young Wittgenstein shared with Russell, can also be successful *only if* the rules themselves can be held rigorously apart from their use or application, as the *Tractatus* stipulated. This would be the case, again, only if there were no problem with assuming the rules of language (or of logical syntax) to be fixed once and for all and capable, as such, of underlying all possible meaning. But:

²⁷ Wittgenstein (1956) (henceforth: *RFM*), VII-36.

²⁸ Compare this remark from 1939-40:

81. Our task is, not to discover calculi, but to describe the *present* situation.

The idea of the predicate which is true of itself, etc. does of course lean on *examples* – but these examples were *stupidities*, for they were not thought out at all. But that is not to say that such predicates could not be applied, and that the contradiction would not then have its application!

I mean: if one really fixes one's eye on the application, it does not occur to one at all to write ' $f(f)$ '. On the other hand, if one is using the signs in the calculus, *without presuppositions* so to speak, one may also write ' $f(f)$ ', and must then draw the consequences and not forget that one has not yet an *inkling* of a possible practical application of this calculus. (*RFM* III-81).

125.The fundamental fact here is that we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, and that then when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. That we are therefore as it were entangled in our own rules.

This entanglement in our rules is what we want to understand (i.e. get a clear view of).

It throws light on our concept of *meaning* something. For in those cases things turn out otherwise than we had meant, foreseen. That is just what we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: "I didn't mean it like that."

The civil [*bürgerliche*] status of a contradiction, or its status in civil life: there is the philosophical problem.²⁹

The possibility of such an "entanglement," whereby the rules, techniques and calculi that we ourselves have laid down can come to entrap us, or whereby we become immobilized by the kind of contradiction that results formally from our own necessary failure to keep this ideal moment of stipulation distinct from the everyday use of signs itself, will indeed involve Wittgenstein in a far-ranging investigation of the meaning and "status" of contradiction. This investigation is, as he suggests here, fundamentally *political* in that it relates directly to the question of rules and their force, their role in constituting and regulating "civil life" (the word Wittgenstein uses here – *bürgerliche* – can also mean "civic" or "bourgeois"). This investigation extends, moreover, to the role of rules and "agreement" on them in constituting or forming any community as such, as well as to the regulative force of rules in determining and constraining behavior. As Wittgenstein now recognizes, the kind of contradiction that Russell's paradox embodies essentially *cannot* be excluded by any kind of prohibition issued from an ideal point *outside* the practice it would regulate; philosophy, henceforth, cannot be the regulative attempt to prohibit paradox and contradiction through whatever form of authority, but must instead become the concrete investigation of

²⁹ *PI* 125. Compare what Wittgenstein says explicitly about Russell at *RFM* III-85:

Is there such a thing – it might also be asked – as *the right* logical calculus, only without the contradictions?

Could it be said, e.g., that while Russell's Theory of Types avoids the contradiction, still Russell's calculus is not THE universal logical calculus but perhaps an artificially restricted, mutilated one? Could it be said that the *pure, universal* logical calculus has yet to be found?

I was playing a game and in doing so I followed certain rules: but as for *how* I followed them, that depended on circumstances and the way it so depended was not laid down in black and white. (This is to some extent a misleading account.) Now I wanted to play this game in such a way as to follow rules 'mechanically' and I 'formalized' the game. But in doing this I reached positions where the game lost *all* point; I therefore wanted to avoid these positions 'mechanically'.—The formalization of logic did not work out satisfactorily. But what was the attempt made for at all? (What was it useful for?) Did not this need, and the idea that it must be capable of satisfaction, arise from a lack of clarity in another place?"

the role of paradox and contradiction in relation to rational force itself. This is the question of the life of language, as we live it and express it to ourselves, and of the meaning, force, and role of the rules and techniques we devise in the life we collectively pursue.

With this in view, we can now see very clearly some of the larger critical and political implications of Wittgenstein's development from the *Tractatus* to the position of the *Investigations*. As we have seen, the internal position of the *Tractatus* embodies the *criteriological* orientation in a paradigmatic (perhaps *the* paradigmatic) form. On this position, the work of philosophy consists in the regulative maintenance of the boundaries of sense and the criticism of illusion in the demonstration of these boundaries. In the *Investigations*, on the other hand, the original criteriological position, which simply assumes the unproblematic existence of external standards from which the use of language can be specified and regulated, is transformed into a far-ranging critical investigation of the role of standards in life and practices. This is the *paradoxico-critical* orientation, again in an exemplary form.

This suggests that responses to Russell's paradox and to the contradiction it implies will essentially define differing possible responses to the problem of the constitution and maintenance of political power itself.³⁰ Indeed, since there is reason to suspect that the issues involved in Russell's paradox represent something like the origin of contradiction as such, here we can apparently witness a transformative metalogical formalization of the *inadequacy* of traditional political responses to the occurrence of contradiction and antagonism within any specific social whole.³¹ The model for such traditional responses is the overdetermined gesture of Parmenides as well as the early Wittgenstein, which amounts to the fundamental gesture of prohibitive force. To replace it with a reflexive tracing of the paradoxical

³⁰ Cf. what Wittgenstein says about the possibility of a transformed logic, based on Russell's paradox itself at *RFM* IV-59: "Why should Russell's contradiction not be conceived as something supra-propositional, something that towers above the propositions and looks in both directions like a Janus head? N.B. the proposition $F(F)$ – in which $F(\xi) = \sim \xi(\xi)$ – contains no variables and so might hold as something supra-logical, as something unassailable, whose negation itself in turn only *asserts* it. Might one not even begin logic with this contradiction? And as it were descend from it to propositions.

The proposition that contradicts itself would stand like a monument (with a Janus head) over the propositions of logic."

³¹ To see this, suppose there to exist a world that is a totality (perhaps infinite) of objects, each holding determinate properties; suppose also that no single object is (yet) contradictory. That is, there is no object p and property, A , such that p both has and does not have that property. We can now allow the formation of arbitrary sets of these objects, and the treatment of such sets as objects themselves. As long as we do not consider the set comprising the totality of all sets, there are still no contradictions in the world; that is, there are no two sentences B and $\sim B$ that are both true of objects (or sets) in the world. Even the property of being non-self-membered does not (yet) lead to any contradiction, as long as the totality of objects with this property is not considered. But as soon as it is, we have, of course, Russell's paradox, and hence the existence of an object that has contradictory properties. In this precise sense, Russell's paradox and the issues it formulates plausibly represent the *only* possible way for contradiction to enter the world that does not depend on the psychology of an individual subject or on any supposed liability of such subjects to error or delusion. Rather, Russell's paradox suggests that contradiction as such arises in *formal* features of the operation of set grouping itself --- the law of the One over the many – that owe nothing to any empirical or even any specifically human origin.

implications of language's appearance in the world is both to demystify this gesture and to recognize, behind it, our fundamental and unavoidable relationship to language as a whole, our "being in language" as such.