



# Wittgenstein on the Intelligibility of the *Tractatus*

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## Abstract

In §6.54 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously claims that his work consists of nonsensical sentences. Both resolute and orthodox readers try to explain this claim, but the nonsensicality of Tractarian sentences poses a problem for the mechanism of their functioning and our understanding of them. Typically, if I understand a sentence *s*, then I entertain proposition *p*, which is expressed by the sentence *s*. However, nonsensical sentences do not express any propositions. It is also a standard assumption that if a sentence is nonsensical, then it makes no sense to talk of it as implying or entailing anything. If we understand Tractarian sentences, how is this possible? How do we understand nonsensical sentences even though they do not express propositions? The main objective of this paper is to explain the mechanism behind understanding nonsensical Tractarian sentences and how this understanding differs from understanding meaningful sentences in other philosophical works. I develop Cora Diamond's suggestion that understanding nonsense requires an imaginative activity, and I propose interpreting imagination in terms of pretence, as is common in theories of fiction. Nonsensical sentences do not express any propositions, but we pretend that they do. Understanding a nonsensical sentence amounts to understanding the make-believe proposition expressed by this sentence. My proposal has a number of advantages: it favours neither the resolute nor the orthodox readings of the *Tractatus*; it shows that nonsense attributions are meaningful and that understanding nonsense is conceptual, and it explains the difference between understanding meaningful sentences and understanding nonsensical sentences.

**Keywords** Ludwig Wittgenstein · *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* · Pretence · Nonsense · Understanding

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## 1 Introduction

When we begin to read the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, it seems no less intelligible than other philosophical books.<sup>1</sup> It seems to consist of a series of sentences expressing some more or less clear propositions. For this reason, the penultimate thesis of the *Tractatus* must come as a shock to most readers. Ludwig Wittgenstein claims in this fragment that some or all of the sentences (*Sätze*) in his work are nonsensical (*unsinnig*); therefore, they must be overcome and thrown away (TLP, §6.54). How is it possible to understand Tractarian sentences if they are nonsensical? Is there such a thing as understanding a nonsensical sentence? How do we understand, say, the sentence ‘A picture is a fact’ (TLP, §2.141) if it does not express a proposition? And why do we think that this sentence, together with other Tractarian sentences, implies that ‘A picture is composed of things’?

I develop Cora Diamond’s (2000, 157) suggestion that understanding nonsense requires ‘a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense’ to answer the question of the intelligibility of Tractarian sentences. Recently, Denis McManus and Roger White have criticised Diamond’s view. According to McManus (2014, 171), Diamond’s view is underdeveloped and is little more than a proposal. White (2011, 39) claims that there is simply no imaginative activity in taking mere nonsense for sense, no therapeutic activity in disabusing someone of the illusion that mere nonsense makes sense. On the other hand, James Conant (2011) acknowledges the importance of the question of how to understand nonsensical sentences and refers to Diamond’s paper for details. I share McManus’s critical assessment of the drawbacks of Diamond’s proposal, but I agree with her general idea; therefore, I want to provide all the details needed to work out a full-fledged view. I propose interpreting imagination in terms of pretence, as is common in theories of fiction (Gendler, 2003; Walton, 1990, 1993, 2015).<sup>2</sup> The imaginative activity of the taking of nonsense for sense should be understood as an activity of making believe. Nonsensical sentences do not express propositions, but we make believe that they do, and understanding a nonsensical sentence amounts to understanding the make-believe proposition expressed by that sentence.

The topic of this paper is important, regardless of our interpretation of the *Tractatus*. McManus (2014), Peter Sullivan (2003) and White (2011) have argued that the question of the intelligibility of Tractarian nonsense is particularly problematic for resolute readings, and that the austere view of nonsense in particular is responsible for this alleged shortcoming.<sup>3</sup> Before elaborating on this point, I will briefly

<sup>1</sup> From now on, I will use the abbreviations ‘TLP’ for the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and ‘PI’ for the *Philosophical Investigations*. The number of a thesis follows an abbreviation. I will use Pears and McGuinness’s translation of the *Tractatus*, and Anscombe, Hacker and Schulte’s translation of the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Kendall Walton proposed the pretence theory of fiction, but other theories of fiction also make use of the concept of pretence to explain some phenomena. See, e.g., Lewis (1978), Searle (1975), Thomasson (1999).

<sup>3</sup> In my view, however (as I argue three paragraphs later), both the resolute and the orthodox readings must face the problem of the intelligibility of Tractarian nonsense. This is because both readings must acknowledge that nonsensical sentences do not express propositions. There is no way around this problem.

outline the resolute reading, the austere conception of nonsense, and their rival interpretations.

The resolute reading claims that Wittgenstein's intention in the *Tractatus* was not to express an ineffable doctrine but was strictly anti-metaphysical. This anti-metaphysical aim directed him against both a realist and an idealist metaphysics. Moreover, the resolute reading rejects the irresolute idea that some Tractarian sentences, while nonsensical, can convey propositional or quasi-propositional content — content that can be shown but not said (Conant and Bronzo, 2017). Nonsensical sentences cannot say or show anything.<sup>4</sup> The main proponents of the resolute reading include Conant (2002, 2007, 2011), Diamond (1995, 2018, 2019), Floyd (1998, 2007), Goldfarb (1997, 2011) and Kremer (2001, 2007). The austere view of nonsense is a part of the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*. It rejects the idea that violation of logical syntax rules is the main source of nonsense and maintains that nonsense arises from a lack of meaning in one or more of a sentence's components. This view also postulates that 'Julius Caesar is a prime number' and 'Batman is penvincible' are nonsense of the same kind. In contrast, the substantial view of nonsense holds that the former sentence is a violation of logical syntax, but the latter is not a violation of logical syntax because it contains an element that has no meaning. The substantial view of nonsense is a component of the orthodox reading of the *Tractatus*. The orthodox reading says that the main objective of Wittgenstein's work was to convey some ineffable insights into the nature of the world, language, and logic. This reading includes both a realist and an idealist metaphysical interpretation of the *Tractatus*. Well-known proponents of the orthodox reading include Anscombe (1965), Geach (1976), Glock (1996), Hacker (1986, 2000), McGuinness (2002), Proops (2001), and White (2011).

McManus (2014, 163) maintains that the austere reading cannot explain the intelligibility of Tractarian sentences in as much as it identifies nonsense with 'a sheer lack of meaning'. He proposes rejecting this kind of reading and accepting the equivocation interpretation, which, according to McManus, can be found in the resolute literature. The equivocation reading says that nonsense is a matter not of underdetermination but of overdetermination of meaning. Sullivan (2003, 196) holds that the austere view implies that the influence of Tractarian sentences on the reader is causal rather than conceptual. White (2011, 40) argues that philosophical problems are universal, but the austere view reduces these problems to the psychology of individual readers. All in all, McManus, Sullivan and White conclude that the austere conception of nonsense is untenable.

But the problem of understanding nonsensical sentences is urgent for both the resolute and the orthodox readings of the *Tractatus*. Both resolute and orthodox readers agree that a significant number of Tractarian sentences are nonsense (Conant, 2002, Diamond, 2000, Hacker, 1986, 25, 51; 2000, 359; McGuinness, 2002, 166–167; White, 2011). This is enough to cast doubt on the intelligibility of Tractarian sentences. Typically, if I understand a sentence *s*, then I entertain proposition *p*, which is expressed by

<sup>4</sup> But the resolute reading does not reject all interpretations of showing. It rejects showing understood as revealing ineffable content (Conant and Diamond 2004).

the sentence *s*.<sup>5</sup> There is common ground between the substantial and the austere view of nonsense in that both state that nonsensical sentences do not express any propositions. Hence, when the reader of the *Tractatus* tries to understand its sentences, she cannot grasp the propositions that are responsible for understanding sentences. Moreover, it is a standard assumption that if a sentence is nonsensical, then it makes no sense to talk about it as implying or being implied by other sentences (Conant, 2007, 55; Glock, 2004, 243; White, 2011, 56; Whitherspoon, 2000, 348). Nonsensical sentences do not stand in logical relations because they do not express propositions, and propositions stand in logical relations in a primary sense. If there are no propositions standing in logical relations, then sentences cannot have logical relations in a secondary sense. If we understand Tractarian sentences, how is this possible? Both resolute and orthodox readers should explain how we can understand nonsensical Tractarian sentences even though they do not express propositions.

My proposal embraces the austere view of nonsense and the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*. Nevertheless, for the reasons given in the previous paragraph, I believe that my project should be attractive for both orthodox and resolute readers because they should look for a convincing explanation of understanding nonsense. My proposal also has other merits: it provides an explanation of the contrast between understanding nonsense and understanding sense; it shows that understanding nonsense is conceptual in form and not purely causal, and it indicates that nonsense attributions are meaningful. None of these features are enjoyed by rival conceptions.

Having said that, I want to underline that the problem I wish to address in this paper is different from the problem of the overall reading of the *Tractatus*. I am not asking the question, ‘How should the *Tractatus* be read in the light of 6.54?’ or ‘What is the purpose of Tractarian nonsense?’. The problem I want to explain is more specific and, I believe, more neglected in the literature. I’m asking: ‘How can we explain the “phenomenological” fact that reading the *Tractatus* is not at all like reading a book of meaningless gibberish?’, ‘How can we perceive Tractarian sentences as intelligible if they are nonsense?’, ‘How can we think that Tractarian sentences imply other sentences if they are nonsense?’, and ‘How can we reason by means of Tractarian sentences if they express neither propositions nor logical relations?’. This problem is taken up and emphasized by McManus (2006, ch. 4; 2014).

For the above reason, I am not discussing the merits and demerits of the resolute and orthodox readings and another popular interpretation — the elucidatory reading (Kuusela, 2012, 2019; McGinn, 1999; Moyal-Sharrock, 2007, 2017).<sup>6</sup> But I think

<sup>5</sup> See Cappelen (2013) and Keller and Keller (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, I do not think that the elucidatory reading is a real alternative to either the resolute or the orthodox reading. According to the elucidatory reading, the main purpose of Tractarian sentences is to introduce logical notation and related formal concepts. But, as the resolute reading shows, if the elucidatory sentences are nonsense, they cannot correctly introduce either logical notation or formal concepts, since nonsensical sentences cannot express propositions. If the proponents of the elucidatory reading think that nonsensical sentences cannot express propositions but can convey some (ineffable) insights, then their reading is simply a variant of the orthodox reading. A proponent of the elucidatory reading, then, has to decide whether she wants to understand Tractarian sentences resolutely or not. I see other difficulties with this reading which I cannot discuss here.

that one issue should be clarified now. Conant and Diamond (2004, 78–80) emphasise that, according to their reading, Wittgenstein really held some views (‘dogmatic assumptions’) in the *Tractatus*, and that these views are expressed in his work.<sup>7</sup> For example, Wittgenstein really did think that there is such a thing as logical analysis of sentences and that there is a general form of propositions.<sup>8</sup> According to Conant and Diamond (2004), the later Wittgenstein recognised the dogmatic and metaphysical nature of these views and rejected them. Nevertheless, the early Wittgenstein had believed in some underlying picture of language and logic, despite always rejecting metaphysics (e.g., metaphysics of simple objects or metaphysics of possible worlds). I agree with Conant and Diamond in this respect. In my view, Wittgenstein did not claim that literally all the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical. He seriously believed in the logical order of language and logically perspicuous notation, and expressed these beliefs through meaningful sentences. But Wittgenstein rejected the assumption that the logical order of language must be justified by something external. He dispensed with metaphysics describing the necessary structure and properties of the world (see Diamond, 1995, 115–144).

The paper is organised as follows: In Sections 2 and 3, I will discuss, respectively, McManus’s and White’s explanations of the intelligibility of Tractarian sentences. In Section 4, I will present my own position on understanding the *Tractatus*. In Section 5, I will point out the main merits of my view. In Section 6, I will discuss three possible objections to my view.

## 2 McManus’s View of Understanding Nonsense

McManus (2014) criticises both the austere view and resolute reading.<sup>9</sup> I do not agree with his arguments, but I limit my comments to the issue of understanding nonsense sentences. As I said in the introduction, McManus thinks that the problem of the intelligibility of Tractarian sentences is particularly problematic for the austere view. He suggests that this problem gets its momentum from the ‘sheer lack’ reading of nonsense. As McManus sees it, the main idea of this reading of nonsense is the claim that nonsensical sentences express no content (e.g., propositions or thoughts) and have no logical relations. But, according to McManus, the ‘sheer

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<sup>7</sup> In my view, much of the criticism of the resolute reading stems from overlooking this point. For example, a number of remarks by Hacker (2000) and Proops (2001) are misplaced if we take this point into account. However, as noted by Conant and Diamond (2004, 95, fn. 82), some resolute readers deny that Wittgenstein made any substantial commitments in the *Tractatus* (e.g. Floyd 1998). I side with Conant and Diamond in this family dispute.

<sup>8</sup> For a full list of these views, see Conant and Diamond (2004, 79).

<sup>9</sup> All subsequent references to McManus are to this work. I will only give the page number in references to it. McManus (2006, especially chapters 4 and 10) also addressed some of the issues discussed in McManus (2014). For reasons of space, however, I will limit my discussion to the later paper.

lack' reading of nonsense is wrong because it is subject to psychologism. If nonsensical sentences do not have any content, then there is no explanation of how the Tractarian critique of philosophy works. A critique of philosophy must involve some concepts, some relations between these concepts, and some relations between sentences that consist of these concepts. The ladder that is to be rejected at the end of the *Tractatus* cannot consist of the illusions of assertions but must include real content and concepts; otherwise, it is a mere psychological phenomenon that should be dealt with by a psychologist rather than a philosopher.

McManus's solution to the problem of the intelligibility of the *Tractatus* is direct and adamant. He rejects the standard assumption that has always been the common ground between the austere reading and the substantial view. McManus claims that nonsensical sentences convey some kind of content, have a logical structure, and stand in logical relations to other sentences. In a number of fragments (162, 167, 167–168, 171, 177, 178, 179, 187, 193 [fn. 20], 196 [fn. 48]) he distances himself from the common view. There are also passages in which he directly rejects the view that nonsensical sentences express no content and have no logical relations. For example, he comments on philosophical nonsense as follows (179):

Rather than say that the 'propositions' that emerge have 'no articulable content' and no 'logic', one might say they have *too much*, being confused hybrids of two (or potentially more) particular senses.

For these reasons, there is, I think, something misleading in the claims that 'entailment is a relation between sentences only in so far as they are meaningful' and that the 'nonsensical ... really and truly [has] no articulable content'.<sup>10</sup>

In this fragment, McManus points out that the belief that nonsense sentences do not express content and do not have logical relationships is false. He also gestures towards the equivocation reading of nonsense, which says that nonsensical sentences express more than one proposition rather than no propositions. These propositions are 'confused' because they have incompatible logical structures and lead to mutually contradictory implications. In another passage, McManus (179) says that the equivocation reading requires granting not only that nonsense is logically structured but also that it requires the same conceptual abilities that are essential for understanding meaningful sentences:

Am I guilty of surreptitiously using 'irresolute' concepts here, in talking of 'quasi-following' 'quasi-logical relations', etc.? I think not, in that my use of them is anything but surreptitious. On my understanding – just as elucidatory nonsense calls from us the same projections of meaning that sensical strings do – 'climbing' a 'ladder' of such nonsense calls for us to bring to bear the same capacities to follow patterns of inference that arguments composed of sensical propositions do.

<sup>10</sup> Remarks in parenthesis come from Cora Diamond's paper *Criss-cross Philosophy*.

I think there are several reasons why McManus's view of understanding nonsense is untenable. First of all, his view is a kind of capitulation. Our original problem was how to explain the understanding of nonsensical Tractarian sentences, and what distinguishes understanding nonsense from understanding sense. McManus's position implies that understanding nonsense does not differ from understanding sense. The former involves exactly the same capacities as the latter. Understanding nonsense sentences requires understanding concepts, contents, logical forms of these contents, and relations between them. All these abilities are present in the understanding of meaningful sentences. This consequence means that the critical power of the concept of nonsense is lost. In general, we do not want to believe in nonsense, we do not think it is a good idea to draw conclusions from nonsense, and we usually do not understand nonsense. McManus's view seems to blur this difference by attributing to nonsensical sentences most of the characteristics that are typical of meaningful sentences.

For the same reason, McManus's view makes nonsense too much like a necessary falsehood.<sup>11</sup> But nonsense is flawed in a more radical way than falsehood. Nonsense in itself is unintelligible; falsehoods are truth-evaluable even though their conditions for being true are not satisfied. According to the standard assumption, nonsensical sentences are unintelligible because they do not express content. McManus rejects this very assumption. It seems that he could have supported the view that there is no such thing as nonsense. If he were to claim that sentences violating logical syntax are necessarily false, the logical properties of nonsensical sentences in his theory would not change: they would express content, properties, logical structures, and perhaps even logical relations, the only difference being that they would be meaningful but necessarily false. On the other hand, the contrast between the austere view of nonsense and the no-nonsense view is easy to see, since the former view may point to the fact that necessary falsehoods, unlike nonsense, express propositions.

Secondly, in a number of places (e.g., 168, 178, 194–195 [fn. 36]) McManus offers us no more than a redescription of our initial problem, i.e., the problem of understanding the nonsensical Tractarian sentences. He insists that we seem to 'grasp' the content of nonsensical sentences, we draw some conclusions from them, and we perceive some structure in them. But these are facts that no reader of the *Tractatus* denies. There is a difference between the semantics and psychology of language. Tractarian sentences seem to be psychologically understandable to some extent. It is not *prima facie* obvious that they are nonsensical. The main question, however, is how to explain the fact that Tractarian sentences seem to be intelligible even though they are nonsensical? How are we supposed to play the 'multiplication game' (McManus, 179)? How can we 'make sense' of nonsensical sentences and 'follow' logical relations between them? McManus accepts the paradoxical conclusion without offering any real explanation: nonsensical sentences express content and logical relations, but they remain devoid of meaning. He also distances himself

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<sup>11</sup> Some philosophers have claimed that category mistakes such as 'The theory of relativity is eating breakfast' are necessary falsehoods rather than nonsense. See Bradley (1978), Camp (2004), Magidor (2009, 2013). I mean here 'necessary falsehood' of this stronger kind.

from the distinction between psychology and logic (167, 171, 177, 182, 187). This move serves to concede that nonsense has some sort of internal structure and may be logically related to other propositions. However, it is not clear what this retreat from the psychology/logic distinction ultimately leads to. Nonsensical sentences such as ‘Julius Caesar is a prime number’ and ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ seem to be psychologically understandable to some extent. According to the substantial view of nonsense, the former sentence is exactly the same kind of nonsense as numerous Tractarian sentences (see TLP, §4.1272). The problem with these nonsensical sentences lies in the domains of logic and semantics, not psychology. The rejection of a clear-cut distinction between logic and psychology deprives us of a firm grasp of such cases.

Finally, McManus draws some conclusions too hastily. He aims to show that philosophical confusions are universal illusions, not psychological phenomena.<sup>12</sup> He sometimes suggests that philosophical illusions are universal because they are rooted in the surface grammar of language (178, 187, 194–195 [fn. 36]). But the fact that nonsensical statements are prompted by surface grammar is not an argument for the claim that philosophical illusions are universal rather than person-relative. McManus does not take into account that only some people are confused by the surface grammar of language. Whether or not people are misled by language depends on their biases and propensities; moreover, people are confused by surface grammar in ways that are specific to them, and thus philosophical therapy must be adapted to the propensities of confused philosophers and be done case by case. McManus’s conclusion that philosophical problems must be universal was too quick. On the other hand, McManus overlooks the fact that proponents of the austere view of nonsense can explain the nature (and the alleged universality) of philosophical confusion by appealing to the misleading character of surface grammar. Indeed, Conant (2002, 394–405) and Diamond (2004) have already pointed out the importance of surface grammar for philosophical illusions. In the subsequent parts of this paper, I will also stress the role that surface grammar plays in our thinking about nonsense. If McManus wants to differ from the austere view in this respect, he has to claim that the *deep* grammar of a sentence plays the main role in philosophical illusions. As we saw above, however, attributing real logical structure to nonsensical sentences leads to serious difficulties.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, McManus’s line of reasoning assumes that if something is psychological, then it cannot be universally valid and therefore cannot be a common illusion. But this assumption is not correct. There may be a psychological law that constantly leads us to make logical errors or suffer from illusions. For example, people’s habit of looking for patterns in the world leads them to false conspiracy theories. This habit is a psychological phenomenon that is universal to all people.

<sup>13</sup> Behind McManus’s conviction that the austere view has nothing to say about surface grammar may be a common misreading of the austere view. According to this misreading, we are completely devoid of our regular conceptual abilities when we try to find sense in nonsense, and when we deal with nonsensical sentences in general. I will not discuss this issue in this paper for reasons of space, but I have raised it in one of my previous papers (Bogucki, 2023a, 18–19).

### 3 White on the Uses of Nonsense

White accepts the assumption that nonsensical sentences neither express propositions nor imply other sentences (52, 56).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, he embraces the orthodox reading of the *Tractatus* and the substantial view of nonsense. White criticises a number of theses proposed by resolute readers of the *Tractatus*. In my discussion, I will focus exclusively on White's conception of understanding Tractarian sentences. I will first examine his specific claims about nonsense and then move on to more general observations.

According to White, Tractarian sentences are nonsensical, but it is still possible to communicate philosophical insights by using sentences that are nonsense (37). He stresses several times that nonsensical sentences do not convey propositions or anything propositional in form. White claims that the main drawback of the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* is that it overlooks the possibility that one can, under appropriate circumstances, use nonsensical sentences to communicate (35). At the same time, the idea of communicating by means of nonsensical sentences does not oblige one to think that Tractarian sentences have any kind of meaning or that they are meaningful in the technical sense of the word. White also stresses the (apparently) Fregean idea that nonsensical sentences are necessary to convey ineffable insights, since no meaningful use of language could successfully 'capture' them (36).

What if someone is not convinced that nonsensical sentences can be used to communicate? White's first answer is (37):

Well, we do it all the time. (...) We frequently communicate by using sentences that are void of any literal sense whatever—consider commonplace examples that afford paradigm cases of Carnapian 'violation of syntax,' 'category mistakes,' and the like, such as Wemmick's delightful summary of Jaggers:

'Deep' said Wemmick, 'as Australia.' Pointing with his pen at the office floor, to express that Australia was understood, for the purpose of the figure, to be symmetrically on the opposite of the globe.

'If there was anything deeper,' added Wemmick, bringing his pen to paper, 'he'd be it.'

The resolute reading questions the possibility of communication through category mistakes and other violations of logical syntax. If White wants to prove that this is possible, rather than assume it, then the validity of the argument depends on the example of Wemmick's remark. White says of this remark that 'The sentence used by Wemmick is mere nonsense, and expresses no thought' (37). He says, 'the sentence', but which sentence does he mean? In fact, he means the sentence 'If there were anything deeper, he'd be it'. According to White, there are three reasons why this sentence is nonsensical. Firstly, it does not describe any situation or state of affairs. Secondly, we cannot report Wemmick's thought about Jaggers by saying that

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<sup>14</sup> All subsequent references to White are to the article 'Throwing the Baby Out with the Ladder: On "Therapeutic" Readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*' (2011). I will cite only the page.

‘Wemmick thinks that if there were anything deeper than Australia, it would be Jaggars’. Thirdly, we cannot specify what the hearer learns by pointing to the sentence ‘If there was anything deeper, he’d be it’.

The first reason White gives for the nonsensicality of Wemmick’s proposition seems to assume a very narrow conception of facts. The conception suggested by his argument is very similar to the positivist one and it treats facts and states of affairs as some parts of the physical world. The difference with logical empiricism is that there is no requirement of verification. However, there is no reason to think about facts in this way, and it would be a misinterpretation of the *Tractatus* to accept it. It is quite natural to say that if God exists, then it is a fact that God exists. This fact would be as good as Davidson’s state of affairs that ‘Snow is white’ (Davidson, 1967). Such a less demanding view of facts is plausible given the conception of propositions at issue in the *Tractatus* and various accounts of truth (Carruthers, 1990, ch. 1; Hornsby, 1997; Sullivan, 2002, 2005). Hence, in my opinion, the sentence ‘If there was anything deeper, he’d be it’ describes facts and states of affairs no worse (or no better) than any other sentence.

Secondly, White’s contention that the sentence ‘If there was anything deeper, he’d be it’ is nonsensical is false. Every word in that sentence is meaningful and has a Kaplanian character (Kaplan, 1989). If I want to understand what Wemmick meant, I must first understand the character of the expressions and, then, the content of the demonstratives (‘he’) and anaphors (‘it’). Once I have found the content of these expressions, I can try to grasp the intended ‘insight’, ‘message’, ‘metaphor’, whatever you want to call it. How the information intended by Wemmick can be adequately expressed is irrelevant to the fact that the original sentence was meaningful. The intended sentence may be defective in some sense: it may lack truth value or even content, but in such cases the character of a sentence guarantees its meaningfulness. Hence, there is a principled way of distinguishing between nonsensical sentences and sentences that have character but no content.

Moreover, White claims that the sentence ‘Wemmick thinks that if there were anything deeper than Australia, it would be Jaggars’ does not accurately describe Wemmick’s thought and suggests that this is the reason for its defectiveness. But this sentence has clear semantic content; therefore it is not nonsensical or semantically defective. The sentence seems, at some level, to be an accurate representation of Wemmick’s belief. If it does not fully capture the information Wemmick intended, it is because there is additional pragmatically enriched content in Wemmick’s assertion. Wemmick meant the word ‘deep’ not in its geographical sense but to indicate Jaggars’ unusual personality. However, this is no reason to believe that Wemmick’s assertion was defective. Wemmick’s assertion is correct on the semantic level, and — as Gottlob Frege rightly observed — the theory of propositions does not have to do justice to all aspects of the content of sentences (Frege, 1984, 356–357).

Finally, White (45) signals that he rejects the standard Gricean view of non-literal uses of language (Grice, 1975). White is free to choose any theory of non-literal use of language. However, it is not obvious either that his position is consistent with the Tractarian view of language or that any reader of the *Tractatus* must accept all of his assumptions about the relationship between literal and non-literal uses of language.

White provides an additional example of communication by means of nonsense. It is the remark ‘I like this move a lot: Bj10 would have been even stronger’, uttered by a chess player in the context of his move, annotated in chess notation as ‘Bh8’ (41). What is supposed to make the chess player’s comment nonsensical is the fact that chess notation contains only the files a–h, and the ranks 1–8. The move ‘Bishop to j10’ is inconsistent with the rules of chess. However, it is again doubtful whether the chess player’s comment can be considered nonsensical. To which language does the comment belong? Chess notation is not an independent language. As Zoltan Szabo (2022, 4.1) has pointed out, chess notation lacks the fundamental properties of natural languages (the most important of which is compositionality), and it cannot be understood without a large amount of extra-linguistic information. On the other hand, when we talk about a chess move, we usually operate within a broader language (an ordinary language), of which chess notation is a part. The remark ‘I like this move a lot: Bj10 would have been even stronger’ is part of such a wider language, i.e., ordinary English. The rules of English are different from the rules of chess notation; thus, if something is inconsistent with the latter, it may be consistent with the former. What makes sense in the former does not necessarily make sense in the latter. In the sentence ‘I like this move a lot: Bj10 would have been even stronger’, all the words except the proper name ‘Bj10’ have meaning. On the one hand, empty names usually do not make sentences nonsensical. ‘Ulisses’ and ‘Zeus’ are empty names, but they can occur in meaningful sentences. On the other hand, the word ‘Bj10’ seems to have a fairly definite meaning in the context described, and it is clear that it is meant to refer to a possible move in chess. It is easy to establish the intended meaning.

Last but by no means least. When we watch sport, we often talk about situations that are in conflict with its rules, but that does not make our comments nonsensical. If, while watching a volleyball match, I said, ‘It’s a pity he didn’t try to score that point with his head’, this would not be nonsensical. The chess player’s remark is simply an utterance describing a move that is incompatible with the rules of chess. This does not make it nonsensical in natural language.

This concludes the description of the rival conceptions of understanding Tractarian sentences.<sup>15</sup> In the next section, I discuss my own position on the intelligibility of the *Tractatus*.

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<sup>15</sup> In another proposal, Cerbone (2022) and Moore (2003) suggest that we have some kind of practical understanding of nonsensical sentences. It seems to me that such a position fails to account for the fine-grained structure of propositions and the apparent Tractarian truths. Sullivan (2003) notes that Moore’s view is more in line with the later Wittgenstein than the early Wittgenstein. The final evaluation of Cerbone’s and Moore’s position, however, requires a deeper examination of practical knowledge, especially knowledge-that. I cannot discuss this issue here for reasons of space.

## 4 The Use of Pretence in Order to Understand Nonsense

Diamond claims that understanding nonsense requires ‘a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense’ (2000, 157–158). In my view, she correctly observes that when we understand someone who is talking nonsense, we are neither inside nor outside that person’s thought. We’re not inside her thought because there is no thought or proposition to grasp. Nonsensical sentences do not express propositions, thoughts or truth-conditions. We cannot understand the content of nonsensical sentences because nonsense lacks the semantic properties that are characteristic of meaningful sentences. On the other hand, there is no outside because the naturalistic method of describing one’s thoughts from the point of view of empirical psychology is not satisfactory. A description of one’s inclinations to put together some signs and to assert sounds is not enough to understand one’s illusion. There is a temptation to retreat to either the inside or the outside.<sup>16</sup> Diamond resists that temptation. Instead, she insists that our way of understanding nonsense must be modelled on understanding sense. ‘You are under the illusion that  $p$ ’ must be modelled on ‘You believe that  $p$ ’. But, as I have stressed, if sentence  $s$  is nonsense, there is no proposition  $p$ , therefore there is no proposition that we grasp. At the same time, we want to keep the idea that someone else is talking nonsense and that we somehow understand him. Is there a way out of this? It seems like an attempt to square the circle.

I think that we should interpret imagination in terms of pretence.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, this means accepting the standard assumptions that Tractarian nonsensical sentences do not express propositions and do not have logical relations. There is no inside — there are no propositions expressed by nonsensical sentences. On the other hand, when I understand someone who utters nonsense, I go as far as I can with the idea that this person is expressing some propositions that have logical relations. An imaginative activity is an activity of making believe. If you understand a nonsensical sentence, you understand the make-believe proposition it expresses. Nonsensical sentences do not express propositions, but we make believe that they do. This enables us to share a vehicle of communication without postulating that genuine propositions are expressed by nonsensical sentences. For example, according to my view, the sentence ‘A picture is a fact’ (TLP, 2.141) make-believelly expresses the proposition [ $P_1$ ] *A picture is a fact*, and the sentence ‘Form is the possibility of structure’ (TLP, 2.033) expresses the make-believe proposition [ $P_2$ ] *Form is the possibility of structure*. Moreover, it is pretended in the *Tractatus* that the proposition [ $P_1$ ] *A picture is a fact* implies the proposition [ $P_3$ ] *A picture is composed of things*. This fact accounts for the inferential relations between Tractarian sentences.

I will now make a brief excursion into the sources of pretence and my view of it, then I give a detailed description of how Tractarian pretence works.

<sup>16</sup> McManus’s position is a kind of retreat into the inside, i.e., into the admission that nonsensical sentences have almost all the properties of meaningful sentences.

<sup>17</sup> Curiously enough, Diamond herself speaks of pretence in footnote 11 (2000, 173).

Pretence is a kind of third way between inside and outside. As I noted in the introduction, the mechanism of pretence is usually indicated as the key to describing the way fiction works. We talk about people, events, stories and countries that never existed or that are sometimes outright impossible, and we do not *really* believe that any of these events took place. We just make believe that such and such an event happened, that such and such a person existed, and that such and such a story took place in such and such a country. Thinking of fiction in terms of pretence helps us to eliminate unwanted entities without considering sentences of fictional works to be semantically defective. The proper name 'Jean Valjean' is meaningful even though it does not refer to any real or fictional object. Another class of semantically defective sentences that is easily accommodated in fiction is category mistakes. In a fairy tale, inanimate objects can talk, see and eat. They can do things that in the real world are reserved only for animate objects. Other techniques used by writers to populate a fictional world that lead to category mistakes are tropes of personification (e.g., abstract entities like Death can ride a horse) and metafictional techniques (e.g., fictional protagonists can 'chase' the author of the book) (Nolan, 2021).

Wittgenstein notes a connection between nonsense and fiction in *Philosophical Investigations* (§282):

'But in a fairy tale a pot too can see and hear!' (Certainly; but it *can* also talk.)  
'But a fairy tale only invents what is not the case; it does not talk *nonsense*, does it?' It's not as simple as that. Is it untrue or nonsensical to say that a pot talks? Does one have a clear idea of the circumstances in which we'd say of a pot that it talked? (Even a nonsense poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babble of a baby.) (...)

On the face of it, 'a pot talks' is nonsense and does not express a proposition. 'A pot talks' is a category mistake of the same kind as 'Julius Caesar is a prime number'. However, Wittgenstein leaves the issue of the nonsensicality of this sentence open to some extent. I think this fact indicates that Wittgenstein was at least intuitively aware that understanding nonsense involves pretence as a third way between inside and outside. Elsewhere Wittgenstein was explicit that nonsensical sentences do not express propositions (TLP, §4.1), and he does not want to explain the understanding of nonsense in terms of psychology (TLP, §4.111, 4.1121). The fact that Wittgenstein wanted to find a third way is also suggested by the almost-final words '(...) anyone who understands *me* finally recognises them [my sentences] as nonsensical' (...) (TLP, §6.54). There are no propositions expressed by nonsensical sentences. If you want to understand Wittgenstein, you have to go as far as you can with the idea that Tractarian sentences express propositions. Understanding nonsense is a matter of making believe that some sentences make sense. This enables us to grasp their illusory logic and content.

There is another reason that comparison between the mechanism of understanding fiction and the mechanism of understanding nonsense is not arbitrary. Both a game of make-believe of understanding fiction and a game of make-believe of understanding nonsense are of the semantic kind. The props for these games of make-believe are all linguistic expressions (unlike, for example, children's games of make-believe).

Make-believe is described by stating its rules (Armour-Garb & Woodbridge, 2015; Crimmins, 1998; Evans, 1982; Walton, 1990).<sup>18</sup> First, we need to distinguish between the direct and indirect rules of make-believe. The direct rules specify outright the basic principles of a game of make-believe; they include props and other stipulated pretences. Indirect rules specify what to pretend based on the direct rules and some real-world circumstances. Indirect rules are divided into principles of generation and recursive principles. Thus, the rules of a game of make-believe typically include:

- a) Props,
- b) Stipulated principles,
- c) Principles of generation (PG) and recursive principles (RP).

Props and stipulated principles establish things that are explicitly make-believe. For example, in the fictional story of *Les Misérables*, they establish that the proper name 'Jean Valjean' refers to a man, that this man exists<sup>19</sup>, that he is a former prisoner, and so on. The principles of generation and recursive principles allow the participants of a game of make-believe to draw on their general knowledge of the world to generate the propositions, facts and events prescribed by the story. For example, unless we are told otherwise, we assume that all the protagonists in a novel eat, sleep, have blood in their veins, have ambitions, dreams, and so on. We assume that the fictional world contains similar truths to our own world.<sup>20</sup> The rules of make-believe directly and indirectly determine what is true in a world of pretence.

The rules at work in the *Tractatus* must determine which sentences express propositions, which proper names mean objects, which predicates express concepts, and between which sentences inferential relations hold. These rules are as follows.

## A Props:

The props for the game are the following types of linguistic expressions: names, designation expressions (including demonstratives and definite descriptions), predicative expressions (ascribing properties, relations etc.) and other types of linguistic expressions (quantifiers, logical connectives, etc.).

The following pretences are prescribed for these types of expressions.

- (A.1) Every proper name or designation expression means an object.
- (A.2) Every predicative term expresses a property or a relation.
- (A.3) Every other expression has a semantic value.

<sup>18</sup> My discussion of the rules of games of make-believe and their formulation is indebted to my other paper (Bogucki, 2023b).

<sup>19</sup> Hence, the rules of make-believe in *Les Misérables* specify that 'Jean Valjean' is not an empty name but that 'Hercules Poirot' is; these rules describe the differences between Jean Valjean and other stipulated characters.

<sup>20</sup> See on this topic Walton (1990, 144–161) and Lewis (1978).

**B Stipulated principles:**

(B.1) It is to be pretended that predicative expressions describe objects (denoted by names) as having or lacking some properties.

(B.2) It is to be pretended that sentences formed from props express propositions.

(B.3) It is to be pretended that sentences formed from props have logical form.

(B.4) It is to be pretended that sentences formed from props stand in logical relations.

**III. Indirect principles:****The principle of generation:**

If  $P$  is true, and if there is no set of make-believable true sentences  $Q_1 \dots Q_n$  such that if  $Q_1 \dots Q_n$  were true then  $P$  would not be true, then  $P$  is make-believable true.

**Recursive principle:**

If  $P_1 \dots P_n$  is a set of make-believe truths, and the counterfactual 'If  $P_1 \dots P_n$  were true, then  $R$  would be true' is true, and there is no set of make-believe truths  $Q_1 \dots Q_n$  such that the counterfactual ' $Q_1 \dots Q_n$  were true, then  $R$  would not be true' is true, then  $R$  is make-believable true.<sup>21</sup>

These general rules, together with Tractarian sentences, determine the propositions expressed in the *Tractatus* and their other semantic properties, such as inferential relations. For instance, the rules prescribed for the sentence 'A picture is a fact' (TLP, §2.141) are:

**Props:**

The props are the terms 'a picture', 'is', and 'a fact'.

**Stipulated principles:**

The sentence 'A picture is a fact' expresses the proposition that A picture is a fact. The make-believe proposition has the logical form of ' $a$  is  $\varphi$ '.

**Indirect principles:**

The truth 'A picture is a fact' entails (together with some other Tractarian sentences – TLP, §2 and 2.01) the truth 'A picture is composed of things'.

This demonstrates that the sentence 'A picture is a fact' make-believable expresses the proposition *A picture is a fact* and explains how it is pretended in the *Tractatus* that the proposition *A picture is a fact* implies the proposition *A picture is composed of things*.

Furthermore, the rules of a game of make-believe establish the success conditions for the intelligibility of nonsensical sentences. When an utterer of nonsense communicates the nonsensical sentence  $s_1$ , she makes believe that this sentence expresses the proposition  $p_1$  of the logical form  $LF_1$ . A hearer understands the utterer of nonsense if and only if she correctly grasps the make-believe proposition  $p_1$  together with its form  $LF_1$ . For example, the nonsensical sentence 'A picture is a fact' is successfully communicated if and only if the hearer grasps the make-believe

<sup>21</sup> See discussion of PG and RP in Evans (1982) and Walton (1990). I have slightly amended their proposals.

proposition *A picture is a fact* and correctly recognises its make-believe logical form. Moreover, when a hearer makes an inference between the nonsensical sentences  $s_1$  and  $s_2$ , she makes believe that there is a relation of implication between the proposition  $p_1$  expressed by the sentence  $s_1$  in this game of make-believe and the proposition  $p_2$  expressed by the sentence  $s_2$  in this game of make-believe. For instance, there is a relation of implication between the nonsensical sentence ‘A picture is a fact’ and the nonsensical sentence ‘All picture are facts’ if and only if it is made believe that the proposition ‘All picture are facts’ implies the proposition ‘A picture is a fact’ within a game of make-believe. A logical implication is successfully communicated if and only if the hearer grasps the make-believe logical implication expressed by the speaker.

From the above rules it should be clear that Wittgenstein accepts, as I see it, the assumption that nonsensical sentences are signs that have neither logical form nor other logical properties, such as inference relations (TLP, § 3.32–3.332, 5.4733). Propositions have logical form and inferential relations. If a sentence expresses a proposition, it can inherit logical form from the proposition. Logical forms and inferential relations are pretended in a game of make-believe. These logical forms and inference relations are based on the surface grammar of nonsensical sentences. The logical form of a make-believe proposition is usually suggested by a nonsensical sentence that make-believely expresses this proposition; however, this is not numerically the same logical form because nonsensical sentences do not have logical forms. The rule that the logical form of a proposition is based on the surface grammar of a nonsensical sentence is not exceptionless. There are known cases where the logical structure of propositions is concealed by the surface grammar. Contrary to its surface grammar, the Russellian sentence ‘The present King of France is bald’ does not have the form of a singular proposition but is a general proposition of complex form (e.g., it contains a quantifier and logical connectives) (Russell, 1905).

## 5 The Main Advantages of the Use of Pretence in Understanding Nonsense

In this section, I examine the four problems that my view resolves and that McManus’s and White’s conceptions either fail to explain satisfactorily or do so at the cost of some questionable assumptions.

McManus (2014, 174), Adrian W. Moore (2003, 190), and Sullivan (2003, 196) rightly point out that the correct interpretation of the *Tractatus* must explain why the influence of Tractarian sentences is conceptual in form. Understanding nonsense is not causal ‘like a blow on the head’ (Sullivan, 2003, 196). It is effective because the content of sentences involves words that express concepts. Understanding nonsense through pretence fulfils this requirement. Within a game of make-believe, there is a clear difference between understanding nonsensical sentences and not understanding them. Within a game of make-believe, there is also a clear difference between being able to follow inferential relations and not being able to follow them. The information received in a game of make-believe plays a necessary role because without it the effects on the reader would be different or absent. If the props, the stipulated

pretences, or the Tractarian sentences are different, the resulting propositions will be different. Pretence enables us to make use of concepts and logical forms, thus we can draw conclusions from sentences. Understanding nonsense engages our conceptual skills. To some extent, the use of these conceptual skills is parasitic on our everyday knowledge of concepts and logical relations, but this should not be surprising. When we want to understand someone, we use our knowledge of the meaning of words, even if our attempt to understand this person ultimately fails.

Furthermore, the act of rejecting an illusion sometimes relies on pretence. This rejection amounts to pointing out that a sentence has no meaning, and one must engage in pretence in order to understand the discarded information as nonsensical.<sup>22</sup> One has to entertain the make-believe proposition and grasp its logical relations to other make-believe propositions. On the other hand, one can (temporarily) accept the information acquired within the pretence, and this also clearly involves exploiting the rules of make-believe. It is possible that one of the functions of the word ‘really’ in ordinary language is to indicate that the information has been felicitously obtained and that we are ‘really’ thinking about objects and properties. Wittgenstein takes the opposite step in §6.54 of the *Tractatus*: he negates ‘really’, which by default precedes sentences in philosophical and scientific work.<sup>23</sup> ‘Not (really) (*p*)’ says that the information received cannot be relied upon because it is infelicitous and has been acquired within the scope of pretence.

My position can also explain why nonsense ascriptions are meaningful. Diamond (2000) takes the opposite view. She maintains that nonsense ascriptions are nonsensical if there is no proposition that we want to ascribe to someone. According to Diamond, ‘Smith thinks that *p*’ is nonsense if ‘*p*’ does not make sense. Similarly, the sentence ‘You are under the illusion that *p*’ is nonsense unless ‘*p*’ makes sense. However, the result of this view is that the sentences ‘Wittgenstein thinks that a picture is a fact’ and ‘I was under the illusion that a picture is a fact’ are nonsense! We could not meaningfully say that Wittgenstein has the belief that a picture is a fact, and we could not meaningfully deny that Wittgenstein has it, but it seems necessary for interpretive and other practices to be able to ascribe to a speaker a belief or a lack of a belief in a nonsensical proposition. Although there are some ways of defending Diamond’s view (Cappelen, 2013, 28–33), I think it would be better to reject it, since — as we have just seen — it leads to paradoxical consequences.

According to my proposal, nonsense ascriptions are meaningful even though they contain a nonsensical sentence as a component. For instance, the sentence ‘A picture is a fact’ is — in line with the *Tractatus* — nonsense, but nonsense ascriptions ‘Wittgenstein believes that a picture is a fact’ and ‘Smith was under the illusion that a picture is a fact’ are meaningful. In general, the sentence ‘Smith thinks that *p*’ makes sense if there is a make-believe proposition that *p*, and ‘You are under the illusion

<sup>22</sup> I am talking here about illusions of sense, which are one of the main themes of the *Tractatus* and of Wittgenstein’s other work. But there are other kinds of illusions, such as perceptual illusions. Evans discusses the treatment of perceptual illusions within the framework of pretence (*Existential Statements*, sec. 10.2, 10.4). This paragraph owes much to Evans’ observations.

<sup>23</sup> The so-called frame of the *Tractatus* may be seen as a series of remarks intended to prepare the reader for this conclusion (Diamond 2000, 149–152).

that  $p$ ' makes sense if there is a make-believe proposition that  $p$ . The sentence 'Wittgenstein said that a picture is a fact' is meaningful because there is the make-believe proposition that *a picture is a fact* (TLP, §2.141). Similarly, 'Wittgenstein was under the illusion that a picture is a fact' is meaningful since there is the make-believe proposition that *a picture is a fact* (TLP, §2.141). These nonsense ascriptions are meaningful because it is pretended in the *Tractatus* that appropriate sentences express propositions. Moreover, other people may share a make-believe proposition in order to understand someone's behaviour and thoughts. We can talk about an illusion of thought described by a make-believe proposition, and we can ascribe it to other people on the basis of the words they say. So, other people may share an activity of pretence in order to understand someone who is talking nonsense.

A further advantage of the view presented here is that it does not favour rival readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Pretence provides a mechanism for a problem that is common to both resolute and orthodox readings. The problem, of course, is that nonsensical sentences do not express propositions and do not stand in logical relations. I think that any plausible view should accept this common assumption. As I said in the introduction, readers as diverse as Conant, Diamond, Hacker, McGuinness and White have claimed that Tractarian sentences are nonsensical. This deprives us of the basic explanation of how it is possible to understand the *Tractatus*. If we want to find a rational explanation of how it is possible to ascribe thoughts to Wittgenstein and describe his reasoning in his work, pretence is appropriate, regardless of our view of nonsense. Rejecting the view that nonsense sentences do not express propositions seems to be tantamount to rejecting the notion of nonsense itself.

I must, however, make one qualification. All propositions that are true within the scope of pretence are true *only* within that scope. The same applies to inferential relations that are valid in a game of make-believe. If we accept some sentences as premises and these sentences then turn out to be nonsense, they cannot lead to true conclusions. This means that if we throw away the nonsensical Tractarian sentences that were accepted within the pretence, their (apparent) consequences should also be thrown away (insofar as they follow from nonsensical premises). This should be obvious. Nonsensical sentences do not magically change their status. If they are nonsense, no theory can make them true. I think this is a reasonable and even desirable consequence. It is a consequence not so much of any view of pretence as of the nature of nonsense in general. If a sentence is nonsensical, it simply cannot be true (or false), thus it cannot serve as a premise. That's how semantics work. The problem of the self-refutation of Tractarian sentences has its source in the attempt to have both nonsensical premises and true conclusions derived from them. But this is impossible. If premises are nonsensical, then they cannot formulate truths that can be relied upon. The problem of self-refutation shows that the orthodox reading is unstable: it wants to have theories that are both correct and nonsensical. Instead, we have to accept the fact that Wittgenstein did not want to propose an unsayable theory.

Finally, pretence provides an explanation for the contrast between understanding nonsense and understanding sense. The fact that there is a difference between the mechanism of understanding nonsense sentences and the mechanism of

understanding meaningful sentences should not be surprising, but it needs to be explained. In my view, the difference is that understanding nonsense relies on the mechanism of pretence, whereas understanding meaningful sentences does not require such a mechanism. Scientific discourse is about asserting meaningful propositions that can be read in a straightforward way. It involves a normal mode of understanding propositions and logical relations. On the face of it, understanding nonsense must be of a different nature because nonsense sentences are semantically defective. Pretence and engagement in games of make-believe are essential to understanding nonsense. Moreover, for the early Wittgenstein the very method of philosophy requires the conscious use of nonsense and pretence. An exemplary application of a philosophical method is the *Tractatus*, a reader of which must be under the illusion that Tractarian sentences are meaningful. She must begin by reading the book as a standard philosophical work and then recognise the illusory nature of the standpoint that allows her to entertain Tractarian statements. The reader must believe that there is logically structured content to be entertained and that there are logical conclusions to be drawn. The only way to understand and then dissolve this illusion of meaning is to enter it through pretence and to realise that the entertained state of affairs is an apparent possibility. By contrast, scientific inquiry does not require the deliberate use of pretence: it is about finding true statements about specific domains of the world.

## 6 Replies to Some Possible Worries

In this section, I consider three possible objections to my position.

Firstly, one may worry that, contrary to what I claim in Section 4, my view is inconsistent with the observation (emphasised by Diamond, 2000) that in the penultimate thesis (TLP, §6.54) Wittgenstein speaks of understanding him, not his claims.

This observation does not contradict my view. In my view, the primary object of understanding is the author of the *Tractatus*. I take into account that Tractarian sentences are nonsensical, therefore they cannot be understood in a regular way since this would require them to express propositions. Tractarian sentences are not the object of the reader's understanding *sensu stricto*. The primary object of understanding is the person who utters these nonsensical sentences, i.e., the author of the *Tractatus*. In a secondary sense, however, we can say that we understand nonsensical sentences.<sup>24</sup> The use of pretence helps us to understand Wittgenstein's intention and the aim of his statements. The fact that pretence enables us to understand the

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<sup>24</sup> One could argue that I should use asterisks or scare quotes when talking about understanding and reserve the word 'understanding' for understanding meaningful sentences. The common assumption that understanding means grasping a proposition is an argument in favour of this claim, but the word 'understanding' is used in many ways and has many possible objects. We talk about understanding people, music, works of art, theories, someone's behaviour and many other things (see Dąmbska 2016, Jadacki, 2003, Rorot & Miłkowski 2023). Therefore, I do not think that there is a dominant sense of the word 'understanding' that is reserved only for understanding meaningful sentences. But if one wants to talk about other kinds of understanding, one has to introduce and explain the main reasons and mechanisms of this kind of understanding. My paper can be seen as such an undertaking.

author of this book is a reason to claim that we can talk about understanding in relation to nonsensical sentences. We use nonsensical sentences in order to understand their author. This kind of understanding is in some ways different from propositional understanding. As a result, by the end of the work we understand not Tractarian sentences but the author of the work. We are no longer inclined to advance philosophical theses because we understand Wittgenstein's elucidatory aim. Understanding this aim is achieved through the use of pretence.

Secondly, a critic might worry that I am attributing an alien theoretical apparatus to Wittgenstein. The author of the *Tractatus* was unaware of the tradition that introduced and developed the concepts of pretence, props and rules of generation. This tradition, in fact, postdates Wittgenstein's life and work and, therefore, could not have influenced his work.

I can agree with the observation that Wittgenstein did not know the concepts of props and rules of generation, and that he did not have these specific concepts in mind when he wrote the *Tractatus*. However, my aim in this paper is to propose a rational reconstruction of Wittgenstein's position. I want to rationalise Wittgenstein's philosophical practice in the light of the *Tractatus* and his other views. On the one hand, as we saw in Section 4, Wittgenstein was intuitively aware of the connection between nonsense and fiction, and hence between pretence and imagination. On the other hand, as some historians of philosophy suggest<sup>25</sup>, virtually all interpretations of philosophers' views are rational reconstructions that include some 'alien' elements. Every interpretation systematises someone's position and tries to make it into a coherent whole — an intelligible and organised unity. For example, White (2011) rationalises Wittgenstein's views on nonsense by using an example from a Charles Dickens novel, which the author of the *Tractatus* might never have read. Furthermore, his systematisation of the *Tractatus* includes a comparison between nonsense and the comments of a contemporary chess player. McManus (2014), on the other hand, uses examples from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to explain the nature of nonsense in the *Tractatus*. He also cites the work of the later Wittgenstein. I think this is methodologically sound. It is possible to find many rational reconstructions of a philosopher's position, and we should compare their predictive power and other virtues.<sup>26</sup> According to my rational reconstruction of the *Tractatus*, it is not surprising that Wittgenstein invokes fiction in the context of nonsense in the *Philosophical Investigations*. I think that my proposal also clarifies other aspects of Wittgenstein's views that I pointed out in the previous section.

<sup>25</sup> I am thinking here of Michael Beaney (2013), who describes Russell's work on Gottfried Leibniz as a paradigm of rational reconstruction. In this context, Beaney (2013, 248–249) notes that Leibniz's views are 'scattered over numerous pieces of writing' and need to be 'redescribed and reorganized into a system that reveals their logical relations'. However, this is true of any philosopher's remarks (one possible exception is Socrates if we take the word 'pieces of writing' literally) and of any philosopher's interpretation. Beaney's terminology is more complicated, however, and he contrasts a rational reconstruction with an examination of the historical context of a work. I treat them as a unity.

<sup>26</sup> I am referring here to Imre Lakatos's methodology of historiographical research programmes. His methodology, however, is much more nuanced than the methodology suggested in this paper, but I do not have the space to discuss it here (see especially Lakatos 1971, 116–122). In any case, Lakatos focuses on the *positive heuristic* of the (historiographical) research programmes that I emphasise in the text.

McManus and White have offered different systematisations of the *Tractatus*, and all three reconstructions can be compared in terms of their usefulness in clarifying Wittgenstein's position and their fidelity to the text.

Thirdly, the history of science shows that scientists have used propositions they believed to be meaningful, which are later exposed as nonsensical. In such a scenario, a speaker does not appear to be pretending because she genuinely believes in these propositions. Consequently, one may wonder at what point the speaker moves from genuine belief to pretence.<sup>27</sup>

According to my theory, pretence is not an intentional or deliberate act. A speaker of nonsense does not need to intend to pretend, nor does she need to be aware that she is doing so.<sup>28</sup> She may genuinely believe in the propositions she asserts, yet at the same time engage in a pretence based on existing conventions, props, stipulated pretences, and other rules of a game of make-believe. The speaker engages in the practice of pretence from the moment she employs a nonsensical sentence. This is not a deliberate act; rather, it is mediated by existing conventions that help the speaker to communicate. This act is independent of the speaker's theoretical knowledge. Analogously, a proponent of a pretence theory of fiction does not claim that artists or their audiences are aware of any pretence occurring (Walton, 1990, 2015). Similarly, a pretence theorist of mathematics does not think that mathematicians need to pretend when making claims in their field (Armour-Garb & Woodbridge, 2015; Yablo, 2001). On the contrary, mathematicians genuinely believe that numbers and other mathematical entities exist. The speaker's knowledge is practical and dispositional<sup>29</sup>. She engages in the practice of uttering certain sentences in order to achieve specific communicative aims, but she does not reflect on how her sentences work. More generally, the rules of make-believe are not explicitly agreed upon or formulated, and participants in a game of make-believe are not required to consciously keep the rules in mind. However, these rules are operative in the practice of speaking nonsense because speakers act in accordance with them. In order to identify these rules and formulate them explicitly, one must observe this practice.

## 7 Conclusion

In the light of §6.54 of the *Tractatus*, how we understand Tractarian sentences is problematic. This proposition says that Tractarian sentences are nonsense, but it is common to think that nonsensical sentences do not express propositions and do not stand in logical relations. So, the question is: how is it possible to understand Tractarian sentences if they do not express any propositions? In this paper, I have proposed that we make believe that nonsensical sentences express propositions

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<sup>27</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this journal for raising this concern. They mention the Bohr model of the atom as an example of such a situation.

<sup>28</sup> This issue is discussed in more detail by Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015, 63), Walton (1990, 38) and Yablo (2001, 97). See also my discussion of the problem in (Bogucki, 2023b, 387–388).

<sup>29</sup> See again Armour-Garb and Woodbridge (2015, 71)

and stand in logical relations. Pretence provides us with common make-believe propositions that we share with the author of the work. I have pointed out several advantages of my proposal, which shows that understanding Tractarian nonsense is conceptual and that nonsense attributions are meaningful. It also provides an explanation of the intelligibility of the *Tractatus* that can be accepted by both resolute and orthodox readers and gives a clear explication of the difference between meaningful sentences and nonsensical discourse. Finally, I have argued that the rival positions of McManus (2014) and White (2011) have several disqualifying characteristics that make my view superior.

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