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Specters of Meaning: Deconstructing Wittgenstein and Reconstructing Ethics

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Crucial to the debate over the censorship of hate speech is a question of how meaning operates in language, and the political consequences thereof. I respond through an analysis of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "meaning-as-use," which situates language as an activity, a form of life. I argue Wittgenstein's philosophy is a deconstruction of meaning, anticipating that of Jacques Derrida, which implies an ethical openness to the ambivalence of language. This is ostensibly contrary to the efforts of conscientious censorship. However, it is only by being open to the ambivalence of the word that we can work past hate speech and toward empowerment.

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Introduction

On March 2, 2017, Charles Murray was scheduled to give a public lecture at Middlebury College in Vermont. Murray is the co-author of the highly controversial 1994 book, *The Bell Curve*, which suggested that class divisions were determined significantly by intelligence, and that, moreover, intelligence itself was tied to race.[1] Because of this line of argument, Murray has been accused of promoting a racist ideology, although he has denied that his text does this, and argues that race is not even the main focus of the book.[2] It is worth noting that regardless of what Murray *intended*, the connections that he drew are easily adapted, with little inherent change, for use in arguments that race is a legitimate decider of social status.

A group on campus called the American Enterprise Institute Club invited Murray to discuss not *The Bell Curve*, but his more recent book, *Coming Apart*.[3] Still, given the context of his polemical body of work, Murray's arrival to Middlebury disturbed and enraged many students, who argued that a man who has in fact been labeled a white nationalist by the Southern Poverty Law Center, should not be given a platform at an institution like theirs.[4] To express their dissent, students, as well as some professors and community members, organized a protest of Murray's talk, which included turning their backs and collectively reciting a prepared speech of

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[1] Richard J. Hernstein and Charles A. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

[2] Charles A. Murray, "The Real 'Bell Curve,'" *Wall Street Journal*, December 2, 1994, sec. A14.

[3] Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2013).

[4] "Charles Murray," *Extremist Files*, Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed April 5, 2017, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray.

their own, undermining whatever power could have been afforded to Murray by the podium.

This event was significant for several reasons, not least of all because what began as a peaceful, though deliberately disruptive protest devolved into something of a riot. After waiting on stage for over twenty minutes while audience members chanted to keep him from speaking, Murray was escorted to an alternate location, where his talk and the subsequent Q&A session would be live-streamed. At that time, fire alarms were pulled so that even this privacy could not fully protect him from hearing his objectors. When the event was concluded, Murray and Professor Allison Stanger—who served as the faculty interlocutor—were met by an "angry mob" of students as they tried to leave the campus.[5] While the claims of violence done to Murray, Stanger, and students are certainly worth investigation, they are not what piqued my interest in the story, or at least not directly. I, like many others who have reported on the Middlebury incident, am drawn to it as yet another example of a relatively new brand of liberalism that advocates for conscientious censorship coming to a clash with an older tradition that ardently defends the right to free speech.

In the statement read during Murray's stunted lecture, protesters claimed:

> This is not respectful discourse, or a debate about free speech. These are not ideas that can be fairly debated, it is not "representative" of the other side to give a platform to such dangerous ideologies. There is not a potential for an equal exchange of ideas. We, as students, and community members, cannot

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[5] Allison Stanger, "Understanding the Angry Mob at Middlebury That Gave Me a Concussion," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2017, sec. Opinion.

engage fully with Charles Murray, while he is known for readily quoting himself. Because of that, we see this talk as hate speech.[6]

What is clear in this statement is that the protesters were keenly aware of the discourse that they were entering—the discourse they were disrupting—and they strategically framed their statement to anticipate their objectors. The opening claim that the event, whatever its pretensions, was not and *could not* live up to the standards of free speech was an attempt to forestall those who would (and have) argued that the Middlebury protest was actually a flagrant display of intolerance, counterproductive to the aims of social justice workers. The protesters insisted that Murray's talk, both in its form—Murray figured as an authority, given institutional validation from the podium on stage—and its expected content—if it did not address the racist and sexist tones of his earlier work head on, then they were involved at least by virtue of the fact that they were embedded in *his* ideas— constituted *hate speech*. His talk, therefore, did not fall within the category of free speech, and would not be heard, not on this campus.

The obvious objection is that hate speech, which is conceptually impoverished because of an indeterminate legal definition, is *not* currently excluded from the protections of the First Amendment. That is, even if his dissenters were right that Murray's lecture was hate speech, such a claim, on its own, would not be sufficient to deny him the right to speak. However, many colleges, including

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[6] "Middlebury Students: College Administrator and Staff Assault STudents, Endanger Lives After Murray Protest," *Beyond the Green: Collective of Middlebury Voices*, last modified March 4, 2017, https://beyondthegreenmidd.wordpress.com/2017/03/04/middlebury-students-college-administrator-and-staff-assault-students-endanger-lives-after-murray-protest/, accessed April 5, 2017.

Middlebury, do have policies that restrict speech as part of their codes of conduct. With certain variations, such policies, aimed at curbing harassment and discrimination, prohibit verbal, written, or physical conduct motivated by a person's actual or perceived race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, age, disability, or other characteristics as defined and protected by law. On these grounds, if Murray's talk "undermin[ed] or detract[ed] from ... an individual's educational work or performance," or "creat[ed] an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational, work, or living environment," it *could* fall within the bounds of prohibited speech on the campus.[7]

The trouble is that Murray hardly uttered a full sentence on stage before protesters rejected his lecture. While it is clear that many audience-members anticipated Murray's speech to be deeply offensive—undermining of the academic efforts and broader social lives of people of color, and perhaps even contributive to an atmosphere of hostility toward those individuals—it is not clear that the speech would necessarily have that effect. Protesters seemed to be pointing more to the symbolic power of Murray's presence when they denounced the talk as hate speech, rather than its actual content. This reveals the dilemma of policies that prohibit certain speech, such as those found in the codes of conduct of many colleges. The negative imperative implicit in such policy—*don't* use that word, *don't* make that argument, etc.—is justified on the grounds that the speech it tries to eradicate is not only offensive, but also perpetuates the unjust systems of oppression targeted

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[7] "Anti-Harassment/Discrimination Policy," in *Middlebury College Handbook*, Middlebury College, 2017.

against certain groups of people. Written into the language, in other words, is a history of violence and exclusion that has kept minority groups subordinate to a largely white, heterosexual, and male power. Such dominance might be unwritten, according to this logic, if the language that propagates it is unarticulated. However, to do this, we must not only police our language in a way that seems antithetical to the principle of free speech that is so foundational to this country, but we must also immobilize language in a way that severely reduces its power of signification. That is, in censoring what is preemptively defined as hate speech, we diminish the possibility of that language to become anything other than hate speech.

At the center of this debate is a question of how meaning operates in language, and the political and ethical consequences thereof. Although they have not always involved these latter considerations explicitly, philosophers have long deliberated over the origins and structures of meaning in ways that could prove to be valuable contributions to the current discourse. One such figure is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), whose idiosyncratic philosophy of language offered a radical reimagination of semantic mechanics. Contrary to the idealization of meaning embedded within the reigning logical positivism of his contemporaries, Wittgenstein argued that language was essentially an activity, a form of life, and as such, the meaning of a word was to be found in its *use.* This meaning-as-use theory is part of Wittgenstein's holism, which rejects dualist idealism, and aims at freeing those mired by philosophical conundrums by revealing how they can be *dissolved* through proper grammatical analysis. In this way, Wittgenstein's work anticipates that of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), whose innovative method of deconstruction

was aimed at dismantling what he saw as absurd hierarchies plaguing traditional philosophy.

I see Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, which is really a philosophy of life, as a proto-deconstruction of meaning and a powerful tool for working through the problem of censoring hate speech. The meaning-as-use theory dislocates the power of the word from the object or idea that it is said to represent, and situates it, on the contrary, in the negotiation of the word's relationship with other signs. As a consequence, the meaning of a word, its efficacy in language, cannot be absolutely fixed without presupposing an incongruous logic of language (and life). This logic is not only erroneous, but dangerous; in the attempt to defang language by excising the hate from it, we also disarm ourselves of the tools necessary for the realization of a more just world.

In what follows, I argue that the Wittgensteinian meaning-as-use theory is the right way to conceive of how language operates, not only in the way it figures the structure of language, but also insofar as it leads us out of the quandary of ethically treating language. Wittgenstein's deconstruction of meaning reveals what Derrida would later call the necessary ambivalence of the word, which calls for an ethics of openness to precisely that ambivalence. It is in that ambivalence that evil is rooted, but it is also from that ambivalence that the good emerges.

I begin my argument with a critical reading of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.[8] I follow resolute readers of Wittgenstein, such as such as Cora

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[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Diamond and Michael Kremer, and thus read the *Tractatus* as establishing the structure of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and not something that he wholly rejected. Consequently, understanding the proffered picture-theory of language and the conception of meaning that follows from the *Tractatus* is essential to understanding the meaning-as-use theory of the later *Philosophical Investigations*.[9] Most importantly, the *Tractatus*, in its aim of delimiting the bounds of sensical language, implies a framework for grasping the ethical function of language. That is, in distinguishing what language *says* from what it *shows*, Wittgenstein points to a major source of the philosophical confusion regarding the function of language in our lives.

It is this thread that motivates the movement of the *Investigations*, which, by meandering through a series of linguistic scenes, aims to clarify the relationship between language and the world. In the second chapter, I provide an exegesis of the *Investigations*, with particular attention to how the text, in both its form and content, is a deconstruction of traditional conceptions of meaning, a move which was rooted in the *Tractatus* but could only be brought out through the idiosyncratic style of the *Investigations*. Insofar as Wittgenstein produces a theory of meaning-as-use, I argue, he also figures language as a form of life, which dissolves the metaphysical idealism of linguistic meaning.

The third chapter aims at drawing out the full force of Wittgenstein's argument. I explore it through the lens of the famous private language argument,

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[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

which shows that the meaning-as-use theory logically precludes the possibility of a logically private language. The private language argument is read in many different ways, and I do my best to show why my reading is essential if we are to understand the impact of Wittgenstein's deconstruction of meaning. I argue that the impossibility of a private language is both a symptom and source of the Wittgensteinian holism, which grounds itself in the rough terrain of language as a form of life, and invalidates the slippery metaphysical models as the foundations of meaning.

In the fourth chapter, I expound on this point by connecting Wittgenstein more directly with Derrida, using the more explicit political and ethical arguments of the latter to bring out such implications in the former. I return, at last, to the question of censorship, particularly of hate speech, arguing that the efficacy of such action is undermined by the way that meaning operates in language, as articulated by Wittgenstein and elucidated through Derrida. I conclude, finally, that to understand meaning-as-use is to understand that empowerment and justice are attained through the necessary ambivalence of words, and demands of us an openness to that ambivalence. That is, in order to combat the evil of hate speech, we cannot depend on conscientious censorship, but must commit to working within the language itself to transform it for the good.

Chapter 1: the Sense in the Senseless

It may seem strange to approach the debate over the censorship of hate speech by looking back to the inspiration of a group of philosophers whose preoccupation with logic and science seemed to remove them from political discourse regarding value and ethics. That group was the Vienna Circle—formed in the early 1920s under the leadership of Moritz Schlick—and they took as their manifesto the work of a young philosopher named Ludwig Wittgenstein. The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was the first published work by this new figure on the scene, who had been a student of famed logician Bertrand Russell. It read to the Circle as a beautiful systematization of the logic of language, and provided a methodology for dispelling philosophical problems through the clarified understanding of this logic. This involved the narrowing of philosophical concerns to the spheres of science and mathematics— which could be analyzed through a strictly logical framework—and seemed to set aside the question of value as incidental and prone to causing misunderstanding.[10] In this light, we may reasonably be led to think of Wittgenstein as a logical positivist, and thus unlikely to have much to contribute to the realm of ethics.

But this would be a short-sighted reading of Wittgenstein. Although his early work did indeed capture the attention of eminent positivist thinkers, Wittgenstein fought to distance himself from this position. As a matter of fact, in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker, he wrote that his purpose in the *Tractatus* was essentially ethical, though it could not have been explicitly so. As he claimed:

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[10] See Brian McGuinness, "Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle," *Synthese* 64, no. 3 (1985): 351–58.

> I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now, but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key for you. What I meant to write then was this: my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. For the ethical gets its limit drawn from the inside, as it were, by my book; and I am convinced that this is the ONLY *rigorous* way of drawing that limit.[11]

As readers of the *Tractatus*, we should take Wittgenstein at his word here, and try to identify what the ethical point of the text is. In doing this, I think we will not only understand Wittgenstein more accurately, but also find the groundwork for reading his philosophy of language as a way out of the problem of censoring hate speech. Let us begin, then, by trying to understand what the *Tractatus* says.

In the Preface of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein makes his aims for the text quite explicit. By way of providing a sort of preliminary thesis, he writes:

> The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language. Its whole meaning could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.[12]

And he goes on to provide his methodology:

> The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).
> The limit, therefore, can only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.[13]

From these opening lines, it would not seem unreasonable for the reader to expect of the *Tractatus* precisely what the Vienna Circle made of it: an articulation of the

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[11] Quoted in Cora Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus," in *The New Wittgenstein*, eds. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 149–73.
[12] Wittgenstein, preface to *Tractatus*, 27.
[13] Ibid.

logical structure of language. And indeed, as we dive into the text, it would seem that this is exactly what it does. With great prowess, Wittgenstein takes a scrupulously analytic approach to the deepest philosophical questions, from metaphysics to epistemology to ethics, all the while showing how the apparent problems within these subjects can be dissolved through a logical analysis of their linguistic expression. All of these philosophical puzzles, Wittgenstein argues, come down to a misunderstanding of our language, confusions arising from the grammar. Therefore, a clarified sense of the logic will lead to the demystification of thought. So what exactly is this logic of language?

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein presents what is known as the picture-theory of meaning, so called because it figures language as our means of "mak[ing] to ourselves pictures of facts."[14] The world, according to Wittgenstein, is "the totality of facts, not of things," and as these facts relate to one another according to a definite and exhaustive possibility, they stand in *logical space*.[15] Within this realm, there is no accident, only the full potential of the object. That is, the world as a totality of facts is one that encompasses and accords with all logical possibility, and therefore involves a certain *form*.

It is by following this form, Wittgenstein might say, that "[we] make to ourselves pictures of facts."[16] Or rather, it is in virtue of the fact that they share a logical form that we can make a picture of fact. As he writes:

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[14] Ibid., §2.1
[15] Ibid., §1.1
[16] Ibid., §2.1

> 2.17   What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner—rightly or falsely—is its form of representation.
>
> 2.18   What every picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all—rightly or falsely—is the logical form, that is, the form of reality.

This point is extraordinary. The transformation from the first iteration of this proposition to the second is, for one, indicative of the surprising subtlety of Wittgenstein's style. The rigid, axiomatic method of the *Tractatus* does not lend itself easily to any substantial formal analysis, in the literary sense, yet we are here treated to a taste of the wonderful idiosyncrasy that is Wittgenstein. His careful employment of a parallel syntax in the two propositions adds drama, for one, to the *Tractatus*, and, perhaps inadvertently, reminds the reader of the very *human* hand behind the text, an important point that will be elaborated on later. But, more straightforwardly, it shows that the most basic, most fundamental commonality between the picture and the pictured is the logical form. This is the key fact about language that makes it possible for it to have a sense, for us to be able to say anything with it about the world.

It is not difficult to see why this picture-theory of meaning would be attractive to the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. The picture that Wittgenstein posits we make to ourselves is our thought. "The logical picture of the facts is the thought."[17] Because thought shares the logical form of the facts of reality, the two are logically linked; the picture "reaches up to [reality]" to model it, and it thus becomes possible to make meaning of it, to express it with sense. Of course, whether

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[17] Ibid., §3

or not we make the *right* meaning, that is, whether or not what we say of the world

is *true* depends on if the picture we have made is in accord with the world. Thus,

positivists attracted to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* could read it as comporting well

with their notion that rigorous scientific analysis could reveal the truths of the

world.

I have already made it clear that I take it the purely positivistic reading of the

Tractatus is a misunderstanding of it, but in order to understand why this is, it is

necessary to work through the theory of meaning that the *Tractatus* puts forth. And

while I think it is essential to distinguish Wittgenstein from the Vienna Circle, given

that *meaning* is the central point of inquiry throughout this entire project,

understanding Wittgenstein's picture-theory is a vital task for the purposes of

addressing the ethical question more broadly.

After establishing the logical relationship between the world and thought,

Wittgenstein dives into his analysis of the limits of meaningful language through a

discussion of the *proposition*. He writes:

> 3.1 In the proposition the thought is expressed perceptibly through the senses.

> 3.12 The sign through which we express the thought I call the propositional sign. And the proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.

This relatively straightforward definition of the proposition positions language as

the means by which thought is articulated in the world. In keeping with the picture

metaphor, we might think of language as the pen with which the doodler commits

her imagination to the paper during class. Of course, language is an arguably more

adept form of expression of thought than any spatial representation; the point, here, being simply that the proposition *projects* the thought into the world.

But the significance of Wittgenstein's picture-theory is not merely in its treatment of the relationship between language and the world, but also of the operation of meaning within language. Wittgenstein is clear that the proposition itself does not contain the sense, but "the possibility of expressing it."[18] That is, the proposition is the *form* through which meaning may be conveyed, though this meaning is not determined prior to its expression. The content of the proposition is supplied by way of the relations of the words with each other, and thus cannot be given except *in* the proposition. To understand this point, recall that the simplest element of the world, an atomic fact, is itself a relation between at least two things. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, "[an] atomic fact is a combination of objects (entities, things)."[19] Things alone cannot be facts, because taken in absolute isolation there is nothing significant about them. Likewise, to name an object is to point to an object, in a way, but in so doing, nothing significant is said about the object. As a consequence, the most basic proposition must be an expression of this *relation*, and more complex propositions must express more complex relations. Thus, Wittgenstein writes:

> 3.3   Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.

We might say, then, that meaning, on the Tractarian account, is the significance of the thing to which the proposition points, a significance that determined by its

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[18] Ibid., §3.13
[19] Ibid., §2.01

relation to other things, and made apparent in the sense of the proposition. By locating the sense of the proposition in the relations among its constitutive elements, we already see in the *Tractatus* the forerunner to the theory of meaning-as-use that Wittgenstein develops in his later work.

That meaning is already figured as operating according to its *use* in the *Tractatus* is perhaps the first hint that the Vienna Circle had misread the text. The positivist reading runs the risk of reducing the *Tractatus* to a kind of revision of Wittgenstein's predecessor, Bertrand Russell. In *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, published just four years prior to the *Tractatus*, Russell wrote:

> In a logically perfect language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact, with the exception of such words as 'or,' 'not,' 'if,' 'then,' which have a different function. In a logically perfect language, there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the words for the simple things that enter in, one word for each simple component. A language of that sort will be completely analytic, and will show at a glance the logical structure of the facts asserted or denied.[20]

Though Russell dreamed of this language, he realized it was not feasible. He was quick to make it explicitly clear that he did not believe such a language was possible or even worthwhile for the purposes of human communication. He therefore qualified his advocacy of a logically perfect language with the following:

> Actual languages are not logically perfect in this sense, and they cannot possibly be, if they are to serve the purposes of daily life. A logically perfect language, if it could be constructed, would not only be intolerably prolix, but, as regards its vocabulary, would be very largely private to one speaker. That is to say, all the names that it would use would be private to that speaker and

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[20] Bertrand Russell, "Logical Atomism," in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985), p. 58.

could not enter into the language of another speaker. … Altogether you would find that it would be a very inconvenient language indeed.[21]

Wittgenstein's great departure from Russell, which can read even through a positivist view—which is in fact *necessary* to the positivist view—is that language as it stands is already logically perfect, or at the very least bears the possibility of perfectly logical expression already in it. However, in taking the *Tractatus* to be offering only a way by which Russell's dream can be achieved, the Vienna Circle sells the text short.

We may recall that the purpose of the *Tractatus*, as Wittgenstein wrote in the Preface, is to delimit what can be expressed in language. What may be the most significant consequence of the picture-theory of meaning, therefore, is precisely that it draws that line between what can and cannot be said. The limit of language, according to the picture-theory, is set at the articulation of the logic of language. That is, in figuring language as a picture, and moreover a picture *of logical relations*, Wittgenstein argues that there can be no meta-language to speak of the logic, because language must always be made sense of *within* the logic. However, by virtue of being a picture, language is able to show the logical relations. Thus, Wittgenstein writes:

> 4.022   The proposition *shows* its sense.
>   The proposition *shows* how things stand, *if* it is true. And it *says*, that they do stand.

> 4.121   Propositions cannot represent the logical form: this mirrors itself in the propositions.
>   That which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent.

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[21] Ibid., 59

> That which expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by language.
> The propositions *show* the logical form of reality.
> They exhibit it.

The logic of language, simply put, can be shown, but not said. If we take seriously the implication that logic is, in a way, ineffable, then we must come to the realization that all that the *Tractatus* has been trying to tell us must be strictly senseless. And indeed, this is the conclusion that Wittgenstein himself reaches, declaring in the penultimate proposition:

> 6.54   My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

By trying to articulate the logic of language, Wittgenstein has apparently been engaging in the impossible task of putting into words that which is unspeakable. How could Wittgenstein so blatantly undermine his own work? Or, as it would seem that Wittgenstein did so with full self-awareness, *why* would he write such senselessness?

Wittgenstein has already provided an answer to this question, although we may have previously overlooked it. With a certain amount of subtlety, he directs us to it in his final proposition:

> 7   Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

This elegant conclusion is an echo of the claim made in the Preface, and the astute reader should therefore go back to the beginning to understand the full implications of this connection. In the Preface, we will recall, Wittgenstein declared, "[the] book

… *shows*, as I believe that the method of formulating [philosophical] problems rests on a misunderstanding of the logic of our language" (my emphasis).[22] Returning to this with knowing eyes, we can see now that the Preface foreshadows what is to come in the book, shrewdly hinting to the reader that the true value of the text will not be in what it *says*, but what it *shows*.

Cora Diamond argues that the Preface and concluding propositions thus constitute the *frame* of the *Tractatus*, which disclose the "aim of the book and the kind of reading it requires."[23] If the aim of the *Tractatus* is to show that the usual approach to philosophical problems is essentially confused, its method is to take this conventional approach to its logical end, showing that it must, on its own terms, be senseless. According to Diamond, to read the *Tractatus* is to partake in "a kind of imaginative activity," wherein we suppose that the propositions actually do have a sense *in order to* realize that they are necessarily senseless.[24] The *Tractatus* poses itself as a ladder, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor, leading us rung by rung out of the depths of philosophical confusion, only to show us, in the end, that we have always been standing on our own two feet. We therefore throw away the ladder.

This is a revelation, and as such, it necessarily leaves the reader *changed*. Before working through the *Tractatus*, we were under the impression, the *illusion*, that the world presented to us all kinds of philosophical problems. To work through them, we needed to make the right sense of the world, and to do this, we needed to

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[22] Wittgenstein, preface to *Tractatus*, 27.
[23] Cora Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's Tractatus," in *The New Wittgenstein*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 149.
[24] Ibid., 157.

properly understand the logic of our language. Only in this way could we see the truth that lay hidden behind our questions. The project of making sense of our language, or articulating its logic, necessitated that we imagine ourselves able to get *outside* language, in order to explain it. Such a metaphysical leap was impossible, senseless. But recognizing the absurdity of this effort does accomplish something; it *reorients* us to the world and shows us that in it, we are free. Michael Kremer beautifully puts it as follows:

> It is a mistake to think that we climb "up" the ladder of the *Tractatus'* propositions to a position 'above' the world, from which we can view the world "*sub specie aeterni.*" Rather we "climb out through them, on them, over them." My image is this: we are in a pit of our own making. The "ladder" of the *Tractatus* leads us not higher and higher above the ground, but out of the pit *into* the world, in which we are now free to live.[25]

The positivism of the Vienna Circle did not understand Wittgenstein on this point. Although they did indeed turn to the world for answers, their philosophical attitude was still that the world stood in need of *explanation*, of *justification*. Endeavors of this type would always be misguided, because they attempted to do precisely what Wittgenstein showed us was senseless, namely, get outside of language.

This was perhaps the deepest point of the *Tractatus*, and one which was not, to Wittgenstein's dismay, easily drawn out. What we find is that Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* was to show the reader a way of living well—which is to say, philosophically untroubled—by pointing to the senselessness in presuming that philosophical problems stood in the way. The *Tractatus*, then, is profoundly ethical. Its fundamental doctrine, which is not really a doctrine at all, is the remark that

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[25] Michael Kremer, "The Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense," *Nous* 35, no. 1 (2001): 60.

opens and closes the text, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[26]

Though phrased as a proscription, this demand is impotent in its prohibitive power,

because the call for silence applies only in cases where it is already impossible to

speak. Wittgenstein therefore *shows* that the aim of limiting the powers of our

language to that which is sensical is itself senseless. As Kremer writes:

> The point of the *Tractatus*, as I see it, is not to stop us from producing
> nonsense, as if Wittgenstein wanted to eliminate the Ogden Nash's and Lewis
> Carroll's of the world. The point is to change our relationship to nonsense, to
> get us to stop wanting certain kinds of things of nonsense in certain kinds of
> ways and for certain kinds of reasons.[27]

We are changed, in this way, from seeking external justifications for the world to

understanding language within itself, as showing *from the inside* its sense.

Of course, this was not the argument that people, especially those in the

Vienna Circle, understood Wittgenstein to be making. Because of these

misinterpretations, Wittgenstein was drawn back into the foray of philosophical

discourse many years after the publication of the *Tractatus*. With the hope that he

could at last reorient his readers, Wittgenstein strove, through a very different

method, to reformulate the *Tractatus* in a new, much longer, collection of remarks:

the *Philosophical Investigations*. Because of the radical shift in style, and especially to

those who did not read the irony accorded to the *Tractatus* by its frame, the

Investigations appear to be largely a critique of the earlier work. However, I have

argued, and will continue to show, that there is a strong continuity between the two

texts. What the latter does quite successfully, in any case, is make much more

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[26] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §7.
[27] Kremer, "Tractarian Nonsense," 57.

explicit the way by which meaning operates in Wittgenstein's philosophy, and the implications that follow thereof. It is to the *Investigations*, therefore, that we will now turn to discuss the ethical consequences of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning.

Chapter 2: a Philosophy of Language as a Philosophy of Life

The account of the *Tractatus* that I presented in the previous chapter is, in general, aligned with what is known as the *resolute* reading of Wittgenstein's work. It emphasizes the continuities between Wittgenstein's earlier and later works, and tries to understand the former in such a way that the latter does not appear as wholly revisionary. I have drawn on Cora Diamond's reading of the Preface and concluding remarks as constituting the frame of the *Tractatus* in order to draw out its implied ethical attitude. This attitude, which I derive from Michael Kremer's work, is one that changes our expectations of language from being externally justificatory to internally revelatory. The *Tractatus*, read in this way, should liberate the reader to live freely in the world, unburdened by philosophical dilemmas.

However, as I pointed out, this reading of the *Tractatus* is not necessarily easy to draw out from the text, and it would have been especially difficult without the context of Wittgenstein's later work. The resolute reading is indeed an attempt to reconcile the *Tractatus* with the philosophy that Wittgenstein proffered after its publication, which much more obviously exposes his approach to language and to life and, in fact, makes explicit critiques of the *Tractatus*. Standard readers of Wittgenstein, to which the resolute readers are opposed, point to these critiques as damning evidence that the later Wittgenstein was largely concerned with revising his earlier, more naive philosophy. Comments found in the various letters, lectures, and remarks of the "middle Wittgenstein" and the obvious objections to the *Tractatus* found in the *Investigations* would seem to show that the latter is largely revisionary.

Although not a standard reader himself, James Conant offers a nice summary

of their argument as follows:

> The *Tractatus* and the *Investigations* are both trying to answer the same
> philosophical questions, but in each case in which early Wittgenstein aimed
> to show that the answer to a given philosophical question was *p*, later
> Wittgenstein aims to refute his earlier self and show instead that the answer
> to the question is really not *p*.[28]

In arguing that Wittgenstein's later efforts generally *negate* the propositions of the

Tractatus, the standard reading characterizes the dispute as regarding first and

foremost the *content* of that early philosophy. Some of topics on which Wittgenstein

apparently wavers might include (though not exhaustively so):

- the conception of the task of logical analysis
- the relationship between the world and thought
- the role that elementary propositions can play in the analysis of non-elementary propositions
- the possibility itself of fully analyzing any proposition to its elementary form[29]

These, of course, are key features of the *Tractatus*, so the kind of radical self-

criticism that standard readers argue Wittgenstein undertook would be quite

remarkable; but that is perhaps part of what makes Wittgenstein such an intriguing

personality.

There is a great deal of evidence within the *Investigations* themselves that

would suggest that this reading is correct. In addition to a number of propositions in

which Wittgenstein does indeed seem to offer an implicit revision of the elements of

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[28] James Conant, "Wittgenstein's Later Criticism of the Tractatus," in *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and His Works*, eds. A. Pichler and S. Säätelä (Frankfurt: ontos verlag, 2006), 173.

[29] This list is a paraphrasing of that provided by Ian Proops in his essay, "The New Wittgenstein: A Critique," in the *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2001): 275-404.

his past philosophy, there are a few times where he explicitly names the error of the

Tractatus:

> For since I began to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago, I could not but recognize the grave mistakes in what I set out in that first book.[30]
>
> [It] is impossible to give an explanatory account of any primary element, since for it, there is nothing other than mere naming; after all, its name is all it has. … Both Russell's "individuals" and my "objects" (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) were likewise such primary elements. … To the *philosophical* question "Is the visual image of this tree composite, and what are its constituent parts?" the correct answer is "That depends on what you understand by 'composite.'" (And that, of course, is not an answer to, but a rejection of, the question.)[31]
>
> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (4.5): "The general form of propositions is: This is how things are." — That is the kind of proposition one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.[32]
>
> A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.[33]

What these criticisms hold in common is, at the very least, a rejection of the hidden

metaphysical structure on which the force of the *Tractatus* is staked. Even in that

early work, Wittgenstein was clear that his intent was to forward a method of

philosophy that did not attempt to say anything about metaphysics.[34] And yet, by

the standard reading, the *Tractatus* pointed to certain "intrinsic features of an

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[30] Wittgenstein, preface to *Philosophical Investigations*.
[31] Ibid., §§46-47.
[32] Ibid., §114.
[33] Ibid., §115.
[34] See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §6.53.

independent reality … which cannot be described, but which our language shows."[35]

It is important to note here that while in the last chapter I argued that

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* does indeed show us something, the text remains

resolutely anti-metaphysical. In contrast to standard readers, I maintain that what is

shown is *not* some hidden, ideal world of pure logic. What we see through the

Tractatus, on my reading, is the world, plainly as it is. One could think of it like this:

standard readers see Wittgenstein's ladder as elevating us onto an ideal

metaphysical plane, while resolute readers see the ladder as leading us nowhere

except to the actual ground.

Given that the standard readers view the *Tractatus* as being ultimately

caught up in this insidious metaphysics—presenting a philosophical picture that

Wittgenstein desperately wanted to avoid— it is unsurprising, they claim, that

Wittgenstein eventually concluded the book was as dogmatic as the traditional

philosophy it was meant to undermine.[36] The *Investigations*, then, were essentially

tasked with undoing the promises of the *Tractatus*.

How might a resolute reader, in the face of this evidence of Wittgenstein's

revisionism, comport the *Investigations* with the *Tractatus*? I would suggest that the

apparent conversions in Wittgenstein's thought might be responding to the common

*mis*reading of the *Tractatus*. That is, Wittgenstein saw how he had been

misunderstood, and rather than trying to explicate that error to his readers, he took

up the position of critic of his own work, and determined to reformulate it in a more

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[35] Marie McGinn, "Between Metaphysics and Nonsense: Elucidation in Wittgenstein's Tractatus," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49, no. 197 (1999): 493.
[36] See Conant, "Wittgenstein's Later Criticism."

accessible way. As Wittgenstein scholar Warren Goldfarb puts it, Wittgenstein takes

on a kind of "intentional naiveté" in order to bring out the strength and versatility of

ordinary language in showing us our world.[37] In this light, we might take the

Investigations to be that which Wittgenstein told von Ficker, we will recall, he had

left unwritten. That is, the ethical point of the *Tractatus*, which Wittgenstein had

previously passed over in silence, is in the *Investigations* given a more recognizable

voice.[38] Approaching the *Investigations* with this attitude, the criticisms of the

Tractatus are not to be taken as disingenuous, but as addressing a certain

philosophical impetus that is indeed to be found in that early work, but which is *also*

refuted by the *Tractatus*. The two texts, then, are indeed trying to answer the same

philosophical questions, but their most essential difference is in *form*, not content.

As Conant writes:

> The task of the later philosophy lies in seeking a way to retain these early
> original aspirations to perspicuity and completeness while purging them of
> the metaphysical spirit with which they are unwittingly imbued in the early
> work.[39]

With this change in style, the later Wittgenstein can thus escape the apparent

dogmatism of his prior work.

If we set aside, for a moment, the implications of the frame structure of the

Tractatus, then the book is written very much in accord with the form of a

traditional philosophical argument. It proposes seven basic propositions, which

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[37] Warren D. Goldfarb, "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab: Remarks on the Opening Sections of the 'Philosophical Investigations,'" *Synthese* 56, no. 3 (1983): 269.
[38] I here refer to that important moment when Wittgenstein wrote, "my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. ... In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it," as quoted in Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and Method," 149.
[39] Conant, "Wittgenstein's Later Criticism," 194.

build on each other to culminate in the final remark: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."[40] All of these propositions except the last are expanded by auxiliary propositions, which are explanatory in nature, and guide the reader to the next turn in the argument. The *Tractatus*, in this sense, presents a beautifully linear argument that does not seem to do much to invalidate the traditional method of philosophical inquiry. Quite to the contrary it seems to fall neatly in line with tradition.

Of course, we, as resolute readers, know why Wittgenstein produced the *Tractatus* in this form, and the irony with which the Tractarian argument is delivered is made apparent by reading it within its frame. But what is overlooked by those who do not take seriously the frame structure, also becomes clear in the radical rambling form of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which stages and plays in linguistic scenes; these episodes become the substance of Wittgenstein's philosophical study. In the Preface to the text, Wittgenstein introduces us to this new style, writing:

> I have written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, sometimes in longer chains about the same subject, sometimes jumping, in a sudden change from one area to another. … And this was, of course, connected to the very nature of the investigation. For it compels us to travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought.[41]

Conant expounds on this seemingly innocuous observation, revealing that this is in fact precisely Wittgenstein's way out of the seeming dogmatism of the *Tractatus*.

> An elucidatory procedure whose steps are arranged in the form of a ladder is no longer up to this task: the procedure must be able to crisscross in such a

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[40] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §7.
[41] Wittgenstein, preface to *Investigations*.

way as to allow each step in the investigation devoted to exorcising a philosophical demon to itself be pondered, reassessed, and purged, in turn, of the possible latent forms of overstepping or overstatement that may unwittingly have insinuated themselves in the course of the elucidation of the original misconception.[42]

This is to say, the radicality of the *Investigations* is in its undoing of the linear argumentation of the *Tractatus*. What Wittgenstein's new form provides for his philosophy is, then, not a series of propositions that rest one on top of the other, but a web of propositions and arguments that interweave, and together form what one is tempted to call the *terrain*—as ground seems to suggest that we are somehow above this land, while *this* expression embeds us in it. This arrangement of the argument in the *Investigations* breaks down the linear structure of the *Tractatus* and rebuilds it according to the "long and meandering journeys" that its reconfiguration inspires.[43] In a sense, where the *Tractatus* hoped to get us to let go of the ladder, the *Investigations* show us that the ladder is not at all necessary; the illusion that we needed to climb up to anything is dissolved, and we instead realize ourselves to be climbing through, on, and over the ground itself.

That we are embedded in the terrain of Wittgenstein's philosophy in the *Investigations* is exemplified by the description of meaning that he now offers. As noted in the previous chapter, the positioning of meaning that located by the picture-theory of the *Tractatus* anticipates what is known as the meaning-as-use theory of the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein presents the idea relatively early on, as a remark in §43:

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[42] Conant, "Wittgenstein's Later Criticism," 196.
[43] Wittgenstein, preface to *Investigations*.

> For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'—though not for *all*—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

In my discussion of the picture-theory of meaning, I argued that we might understand Wittgenstein as suggesting that the meaning of a word was determined only in the context of the proposition; the word *means* something in only in its relation to other words in the sentence. A possible problem, as I have shown, with this sketch of the mechanics of meaning is that it is vulnerable to an insidiously metaphysical reading. Although the necessity of context that the picture-theory emphasizes points to the corresponding rootedness of meaning in the ground of our actual lives, the formulation of such a theory as a kind of positive meta-explanation of linguistic meaning can lead us to the confused pursuit of an ideal justificatory logic. Like many of the remarks in the *Investigations*, §43 approaches the same point that the picture-theory tried to show, but avoids slipping into metaphysically-oriented language. A close examination of this claim, and the broader argument in which it is situated, will not only help us to see how Wittgenstein's method has shifted since the *Tractatus*, but also the deep and ethical significance of the meaning-as-use theory.

The first thing that we might notice about the remark in §43 is that Wittgenstein apparently limits the propriety of this description of meaning to a "*large* class of cases." Already, then, we see that Wittgenstein is operating at a very different register, one in which there is space permitted for exception, for difference. For whatever can be said about what "meaning" *means*, Wittgenstein is now careful to specify that it cannot be said for *all* employments of the word. In most cases, then,

when we ask for the meaning of a word, what we are seeking is how that word is being used in the sentence—something we can see is very close to meaning according to the picture theory. But in *some* cases, we will find that the meaning of a name is best given by "pointing to its *bearer*."[44] On these occasions, explaining the meaning of a word looks more like giving its ostensive definition.

It is significant that Wittgenstein should admit a place for ostensive definition in his later philosophy, because he is so often taken to be writing doggedly in opposition to such a conception of meaning. The opening of the text would seem to be evidence of just this reading. Wittgenstein cites Augustine, who recounts how he came to understand what people meant by connecting—with the help of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice—their words with what they intended to point out.[45] This does indeed illustrate a long process of ostensive definition, which Wittgenstein goes so far as to call a "primitive" picture of language.[46] Taking such an inadequate account as its starting place, the *Investigations* would seem, then, to be written as the exact counterpoint to this picture. And the alternative notion of meaning that the *Investigations* offer, of course, is the theory of meaning-as-use.

However, the problem with the Augustinian account of meaning is not that figures meaning as ostensive definition, but that it figures meaning as *only* ostensive definition. Wittgenstein takes the first step toward this critique by noting that "Augustine does not mention any difference between kinds of word."[47] That he goes

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[44] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §43.
[45] See Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §1.
[46] Ibid., §2.
[47] Ibid., §1.

on to suggest the differences between parts of speech—nouns, adjectives, verbs, and the rest—might lead us to think that Wittgenstein's objection is merely this: the account of meaning as ostensive definition is insufficient because it can only deal with the names of *things*. But to hold our doubts here would be, I think, a rather superficial reading of Wittgenstein. The deep challenge that Wittgenstein raises against ostensive definition is that the Augustinian formulation of how meaning operates in language limits the account of what language can *do.* As Wittgenstein writes:

> 3   Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in several cases where the question arises "Will that description do or not?" The answer is: "Yes, it will, but only for this narrowly circumscribed area, not for the whole of what you were purporting to describe."

Here, Wittgenstein exposes for us the fact that not only does ostensive definition miss the variety of parts of speech, but also restricts the power of language, the movement and flexibility of language. That is, a language that truly accords with the Augustinian picture—such as the one used by the builders of §2 that Wittgenstein describes—would be limited quite obviously in its vocabulary, but would be even more severely deprived in that it could only be used for one activity: building. As Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein's close friend and literary executor, interprets it:

> The trouble is not to imagine a people with a language of such a limited vocabulary. The trouble is to imagine that they spoke the language only to give these special orders on this job and otherwise never spoke at all. I do not think it would be speaking a language.[48]

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[48] Rush Rhees, "Wittgenstein's Builders," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 60 (1960): 177.

A language must be much richer than that of the builders, because what people *do* with language is so much more varied.

This brings me to the second thing that we might notice about Wittgenstein's new formulation of the theory of meaning. In the *Tractatus*, meaning was situated within the context of the proposition, which constituted a kind of picture to ourselves. This imagery presented a rather static notion of meaning, although one could infer that the meaning must change according to the proposition. In the *Investigations*, on the contrary, Wittgenstein locates meaning within the highly active context of *use*. With this, Wittgenstein orients our attention away from the misguided imaginations of a traditional philosophical method, and toward imaginable scenes, instances in which people actually engage in the activity of language. It is through this consideration of language as an activity that we come to truly understand Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and the way that meaning operates within it.

Wittgenstein often compares the use of language to playing a game, and the *Investigations* can be read as presenting a variety of these *language-games* as a way of illustrating their roles in our lives. As Wittgenstein notes, "[the] word 'language-game* is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[49] We might be surprised, though, to find that when Wittgenstein provides examples of these language games, he does not include languages from around the world such as German, English, French, Japanese, etc. Wittgenstein does not deny that these are languages, but he wants to point to the

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[49] Ibid., §23.

things we accomplish *within* each of these as the games we play. So, he lists things

such as giving and receiving orders, speculating about something, telling a story,

telling a joke, "requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying."[50] What this shows is

that for Wittgenstein, language is not something that stands apart from the scenes of

life, but is constitutive of them. Language is lively, and cannot be detached from the

very human situations in which it is employed.

When Wittgenstein writes, then, that the meaning of a word can often be

explained by its use in the language, what he shows is that meaning is, in many

cases, that activity of climbing through, on, and over the terrain of language. As

Conant argues, Wittgenstein is leading us away from the temptation that meaning is

a *property* of the sentence, "which it then carries with it—like an atmosphere

accompanying it—into each specific occasion of use."[51] The attempt to peer into this

atmosphere to discover meaning is the futile task of traditional philosophy that

imagines a metaphysics that can provide it with answers. Wittgenstein's description

of language-games, on the contrary, calls our attention simply to seeing what the

language does, how it works in the world. As Conant explains:

> What constitutes your meaning thus-and-so by uttering a sentence is not
> your engaging in a psychological act … but in your employing the sentence in
> a context in which the sentence is able to do the … work of meaning thus-and-
> so.[52]

To some, this may sound rather unhelpfully tautological: the word means what it

means in its use. This does not seem to tell us at a deeper level *how* the word means

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use," *Philosophical Investigations* 21, no. 3 (1998): 241.
[52] Ibid., 239.

this, or how we *know* that it does mean this. Wittgenstein's point, however, is

precisely to show us that it is precisely this philosophical assumption that we stand

in need of assurance of meaning in this regard that is misguided and leads us to

confusion. Such questions make themselves appear impossible to answer with

certainty, but they are not questions that we need to answer in order to understand

the meaning of language. We play language-games, and we show our meaning by

how we use our language. As Wittgenstein says, "This is simply what I do."[53]

In this way, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language is also a philosophy of life.

Its anti-metaphysical, non-linear form can be read as a kind of *deconstruction* of

traditional methods of philosophy. It prioritizes the ordinary, rough ground of life

over the supposed purity of logic, providing us the traction we need to walk. The

project of philosophy is no longer to justify how we speak of life, but examine what

our use of language can tell us about our way of living. As Wittgenstein insightfully

notes:

> What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that
> human beings agree. This is an agreement not in opinions, but rather in form
> of life.[54]

By showing that language is immanent to life, Wittgenstein anticipates the

deconstructive method introduced by Jacques Derrida, who only came onto the

scene a few decades after Wittgenstein's death. Henry Staten, who picks up on this

connection in his book *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, expounds on the deconstructive

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[53] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §217.
[54] Ibid., §241.

tone we find in the *Investigations*.[55] He argues that Wittgenstein's method of doing philosophy through scenes of linguistic encounters takes seriously the power of our ordinary language and shows that the limits of expressible thought, originally sought in the *Tractatus*, are set by the landscape of everyday life.

The nature of the reorientation toward life—which Wittgenstein hoped to bring out in the *Tractatus*, and which is more obviously brought out in the *Investigations*—could be captured by the new aim of philosophy that it ushers in. This aim is that philosophy should be essentially therapeutic. But Wittgenstein does not propose that philosophy is a one-size-fits-all endeavor. "There is not a single philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, different therapies, as it were."[56] Wittgenstein resists dogmatism in his philosophy, suggesting instead that the method, as well as the subject, should essentially arise from the life of the philosopher.[57] Through this kind of philosophy, we can learn how to liberate ourselves. "What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."[58] Wittgenstein says that this free life, relieved of the entrapments of traditional philosophy, is one that no longer expects of language the ability to convey "the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable," which is to say, Ethics.[59] To do so is to try to force language beyond itself, to ask it for its own justification, to forget that "all propositions stand on the same level ...

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[55] Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.
[56] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §133d.
[57] See Wittgenstein, *Investigations* §133.
[58] Ibid., §309.
[59] Wittgenstein, "I: A Lecture on Ethics." *The Philosophical Review* 74, no. 1 (1965): 12.

[none of which] in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial."[60] Ethical language, in short, slips easily into nonsense. Ethics is not a science; there is not something absolute for us to learn in Ethics, and we cannot hope to know what is the Good through language.

However, that Ethical language is nonsense does not mean that Ethics itself must be entirely done away with. It *cannot* be done away with because of the very human desire to say something about it. What can be changed is our attitude toward Ethics. Wittgenstein's philosophy of language as life changes our understanding of Ethics as something to be wondered at and decided to something that is lived. It is internal to the language; shown, in a sense, not said. To a certain extent, it would not be entirely wrong to call Ethics transcendental in this regard. The incredible aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy is that through this conception of linguistic meaning that he has developed, the transcendentality of Ethics is still never something outside of our world. It is, on the contrary, from deep within our world that Ethics shows itself in our language. This means that the Good is not something to be governed, but something to be done.

The political ramifications of this new attitude toward Ethics are intense. To understand them, especially in regard to the censorship of hate speech, we must now turn to a discussion of the famous private language argument of the *Investigations*. In realizing the impossibility of a truly private language, we will come to see the essential aspect of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning: that meaning is

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[60] Ibid., 6.

never absolutely impenetrable. From this, it follows that although we may not be

able to put Ethics into words, the Ethical may yet be understood.

Chapter 3: From Private Language to Public Good

In the last chapter, I defended a reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* that appreciates his philosophy of language as a philosophy of life. By conducting his investigations from within the linguistic scenes that he illustrates, Wittgenstein shows that meaning cannot be entirely divorced from the instance of use. Meaning does not exist on some metaphysical level, only to be ushered in through the word. It is, rather, something that we make to ourselves as we walk, run, and stumble over the landscape of the world. The upshot of this is that Wittgenstein's philosophy, rather than leading us—as traditional methods have the tendency to do—into the confused misunderstandings, presents us with an opportunity for real philosophical liberation. We might, so to speak, find our way out of the fly bottle. But this would seem to come at a hefty price, for while this reorientation to the world dissolves our impossible demand for its justification, we are also required to let go of the possibility of a strictly sensical language of Ethics. Our endeavors to put into words the absolute Good are futile attempts at making logical sense of what is logically senseless.

However, as we have seen, Wittgenstein's brilliance is that even as he points to the difference between sense and senseless, he does not demand that we give up entirely on the latter. He understands that what is named senseless by strict logical analysis is not worthless for human life. Quite the opposite, in the "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein says that Ethics deserves a deep respect, for it is "a document

of a tendency in the human mind" to discover the Good.[61] The respectability of this

effort, however does not mean that the task of writing or talking Ethics is any less

impossible; Wittgenstein maintains that "[this] running against the walls of our cage

is perfectly, absolutely hopeless."[62] What changes is how we approach Ethics, how

we conceive of our relationship to the Good.

Traditional philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, tries to treat the Good as a

kind of fact, something that can be discovered and put into words, through a

language-game that we might call Ethical discourse. The trouble is that the Good, as

an absolute value, must be a fact that transcends the rough and conditional quality

of the world. Language, being meaningful only insofar as it deals in the world, can

therefore have no hope of accessing the supposed fact of the Good, and Ethical

discourse becomes muddled and hopeless. But if the Good is not a fact, if it is not

something that can be only asymptotically approached, but rather, following the

pattern of Wittgensteinian deconstruction we have been seeing, if the Good is

something that can be *shown* in ordinary language, then we might as yet find our

peace with Ethics.

The question must then be asked, what does it mean to *show* the Good? Or,

perhaps more urgently, what does it mean to understand the Good when it is shown

to us? This is the question that will drive this chapter. To begin to see its answer, we

must first have a better sense of what it means to understand anything according to

Wittgenstein. And to do this, we must walk through his famous private language

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[61] Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," 12.
[62] Ibid.

argument, which is truly an argument against the possibility of such a language. Through this process, we will develop a new relationship to the Good, one in which it can be seen even if it cannot be said.

The private language argument is open to question on more than one front—including even its *location* in the *Investigations*—not least of all because of Wittgenstein's enigmatic style. In order to grasp some of these disputes, it might be best to break the argument down into its key elements.

First, what is a private language? On the face of it, this question does not have a very surprising answer: a private language is one that can be understood by only one individual. One way to imagine a private language might be as a kind of code, whose inventor is so brilliant that none are able to crack it. This master cryptographer could use the private language to keep special, secret notes for herself, which would be exclusively available for her personal use. But this scenario is complicated when we begin to query what exactly is meant by saying that only one person *can* understand the private language. Is this the *can* of logical possibility, that is, or is it contingent on the circumstances?

It is not all that difficult to imagine several possible cases of a language that is private according to the latter criteria. The linguistic invention of an especially innovative child, for example, could be counted as a private language, so long as he does not share his genius with anyone else. Languages on the brink of extinction, which have only one surviving user, too, could be considered as private. For his own purposes, Wittgenstein points to the kind of language we might use to talk to ourselves as an illustration of this sort of private language. "A human being can

encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it."[63] In these kinds of cases, it is true that the privacy of the language depends on the fact that only one individual *can* use the language, but this is only because it just so happens that it is just this person that *does*; there is nothing that necessarily stands in the way of others learning the language. The sense in which these languages are *private*, therefore, is the same in which a person might consider their locked diary private. Given the right key, it remains possible that the diary could be read by anyone.

This circumstantially "private" language is not the kind to which Wittgenstein directs our attention. For one, they do not present any deep philosophical puzzles about the nature of language. Even when he takes the case of private soliloquy to its extreme by positing a society in which "human beings spoke *only* in monologue, who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves," Wittgenstein writes that this use of language, and its potential for translation, is still within our reasonable imagination (my emphasis).[64] Given Wittgenstein's philosophical purposes, such an untroubling conception of a private language could hardly be his target for investigation. What he is concerned with, on the contrary, is the possibility of a *logically* private language, one for which the exclusionary power of *can* is rooted in the nature of the language itself, not merely the occasion of its use. This is the kind of private language posited by traditional philosophy.

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[63] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §243.
[64] Ibid.

Our second question regarding Wittgenstein's private language argument might be this: what exactly is the philosophical problem posed by this logically private language? To understand this, we can return to Wittgenstein's case of the everyday monologist. While imagining a group of people who spend all day talking to themselves, narrating their activities for their sole benefit, we could reasonably assume that this monologue would include details not only about their outward actions, but also their inner experiences, expressed through "resolutions and decisions."[65] Pushing this toward its logical end, the interlocutor of the *Investigations* then asks Wittgenstein:

> But isn't it also conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences—his feelings, mods, and so on—for his own use? … The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know—to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.[66]

What is here suggested is that the language of inner experience, which is apparently accessible to only one person, would seem to be necessarily private. This would be true if the meaning of the words was given by their reference to some object, which in this case would be some inner sensation. The problem, of course, is that as no other person can *get inside my head*, it would seem that I can have no confidence that the words I use to describe my feelings are the *right* words.

Barry Stroud writes against this formulation of private language by insisting on the very ordinary way in which we assess the efficacy of our language. That is, when we speak of external sense-data, that which is publicly available, we can make

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

use of a certain criterion of correctness for our language. If a child is learning how to

use the word *blue*, the parent can present several things that are all blue but which

vary in all other kinds of ways. Over time and with practice, the child can learn that

blue refers to the color, and not the shape, size, location, etc. It is easy to think of

language-acquisition in these terms, and it might frequently look something like

this, although perhaps not quite so formally structured. As Stroud argues, language,

like many skills, is learned through this kind of trial-and-error practice.

> With many skills, there is nothing but practice to help you. The only 'test' of
> successful performance is the extent to which you succeed in doing what you
> are trying to do. ... A person can learn to speak correctly and mean something
> by what he says without knowing how to check to find out whether he is
> speaking correctly or meaning what he says. Correct applications of his
> words, intentionally produced, are enough for his saying and meaning what
> he does by his utterances.[67]

Stroud's argument for correct language use might thus call to mind Augustine's

narrative of learning a language through ostensive definition, which opens the

Investigations (and against which Wittgenstein builds his later philosophy). On this

account, the trouble with an apparently private language, one that refers to inner

sense data, is that "with words for such sensations there could be no decisive

check—no 'independent criterion'—of the correctness of their application.[68] Barring

access to the inner object, our audience could hardly be expected to know what we

meant, so that there could be no assessment whatsoever of the success or failure of

the statement.

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[67] Barry Stroud, "Private Objects, Physical Objects, and Ostension," in *Meaning, Understanding, and Practice: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 218.
[68] Ibid.

Stroud argues that this line of thought falls into precisely the kind of artificial dilemma that plagues philosophy, and that Wittgenstein hopes to guide us out of. Even considering the apparent problem here, it may be clear to the reader how strange it is to think of inner sensation language that necessarily fails to effect the recipient, simply because the very same object is not present to them. When we exclaim, "Ouch! I am in pain!" our friend does not respond by doubting what exactly we could mean by *pain* (unless perhaps they suspect us to be faking it, but this would be a different *kind* of response). A good friend would ask what is wrong, or how they could help alleviate the pain. And it would be in provoking this response that the expression of my inner sensation of pain could be judged as successful. That is, the criterion of correctness for the use of this language would not be our agreement about the object of the language, but "of a person's application of a word in conformity with a practice of using words in that way, with that kind of meaning."[69]

The cause of our philosophical confusion is rooted in the grammar of the expressions we use to think about inner experiences. If we think of pain as a private *object* that we can have but not share with anyone else, analogous to but essentially different from the objects of the external world, then of course there appears this impossible private language. That is to say, we only think of sensations as truly private when we consider that it is only that individual to whom they belong who can *know* what they are. As the interlocutor of the *Investigations* claims, "Well, only I

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[69] Ibid., 227.

can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it."[70] It is *here* that we find the nonsense, for "I cannot be said to learn of [my sensations]. I *have* them."[71] This kind of meta-awareness of one's own feelings does not happen except in malformed philosophical language, which leads us unwittingly astray. But recognizing that the language of inner sensations is incommensurate with that of outer stimuli—though the success of either can be judged by the success in eliciting the intended kind of response—lifts us out of the abyss and back onto firm ground.

Although Stroud is right to pursue a line of argument that finds philosophical relief in grammatical clarification, his final objection to the possibility of a private language remains tied to the circumstances of any particular language-user, and more specifically, their incidental place within a language community. That is, if the success of someone using language is dependent on the way another person responds to it, then the preclusion of a private language remains contingent not on the logical nature of language, but its situation within a community. This is not to say that the linguistic community plays no role in founding the meaning of words. It is, as we shall see, a crucial insight of the Wittgenstein's private language argument that does occur within the context of how the community *uses* the words. Still, Wittgenstein's argument against privacy is one in the strongest possible terms.

This is the objection that David Pears holds up against Stroud. He argues that while Stroud points to a very important aspect of Wittgenstein's consideration of how meaning in language develops, he fails to halt the occasion of a private language

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[70] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, §246.
[71] Ibid.

early enough in its tracks. Pears therefore goes on to present the deeper objection to the notion of a private language.

He understands Wittgenstein's argument against a private language as grounded in the impossibility of anyone *learning* such a language. As he sees it, Wittgenstein's critique is aimed at the notion that human beings might begin their lives in a kind of "original position" in which they have not yet developed the connections between their inner sensations and the outside world.[72] We could think of this in terms of Locke's *tabula rasa*, which stands in need of engraving through the process of ostensive definition, the repeated association of a word with an object, until the meaning of the word became clear. Stroud rightly points to the more superficial problems of this meaning through ostensive definition schema, which Pears expounds upon:

> Now an ostensive definition pins a word onto a particular object—in this case, a particular sense-datum—but it does not tell us what it is about the object that makes the word applicable. That would emerge only if the speaker went on to apply the word to further objects. Then and only then it might become clear whether it was a word for the colour, or for the shape, or for some other property of the object. A single application settles nothing, not even for the speaker himself. What is needed is a prolonged sequence of applications.[73]

What Pears would like to show, however, is that even before the skeptic could doubt the criterion of correctness, be it in the success of the language or otherwise, a more profound problem for private language presents itself.

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[72] David Pears, "Literalism and Imagination: Wittgenstein's Deconstruction of Traditional Philosophy," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002): 9.
[73] Ibid., 10.

Pears argues that regardless of the difficulties in learning a language from *others* involved in privacy, there would, from the very outset, be an impossibility of developing language at all to connect the physical world with our sensations of it. Were we truly born into the original position of the *tabula rasa*, that is, there would be no initial connection between our sense-data and the external world whatsoever. Insofar as the prospect of a necessarily private original position undermines this connection, it also deprives us of the possibility of developing any language, regardless of the efficacy of that language in communicating with others. The *tabula rasa*, smooth and unmarked as it must be, offers no foothold for language, and dispossessed of any tools to chisel in our own, the possibility of developing one is voided. The problem with a logically private language, then, would be that its logical detachment from the world impedes its capacity for meaning anything at all.

This argument gets us one more step closer to feeling the full force of Wittgenstein's private language argument, but it still relies on a central misunderstanding. That is, although Pears establishes what looks like a logically private language, by situating the failures of this impossible language in its inability to connect with sensation, even inner sensation, he opens his argument up to the critique that it relies on somewhat verificationist tropes. It is true that the private language of strictly inner experience would be logically impotent, but this shortcoming would be the result of something even more damning than that "it would lack the connections with the physical world which provide for us the only

way for one person to teach another his language."[74] According to Pears, meaning is

still grounded by the connection between a word and its object of reference.

Wittgenstein's genius, however, is to dislocate meaning from object and set it rather

within the context of *use*. That is, it is the logic by which the sentences themselves

operate and relate to one another, hang together, that forestalls the privacy of a

language.

Cora Diamond, in tracing the origins of Wittgenstein's private language

argument back to the *Tractatus*, explains this point very nicely:

> The *Tractatus* view is that, if one sentence follows from another, then they
> are both *within* the space of constructible sentences of my language; they are
> both *in logical space*. Any grasp which I have of their logical relations is
> inseparable from my grasp of the sentences themselves, of each as a sentence
> saying that such-and-such is the case. ... *If I can take a sentence to stand in
> logical relations to other sentences, then I can understand that sentence. Logic*
> is precisely what joins together the sentences of *the* language which I do
> understand. ... A logical relation going outside *the* space of possible inference
> is an incoherent idea[.][75]

This is to say that if I am able to understand a sentence, regardless of whether it is

about inner or outer experiences, it is because that sentence stands in logical

relation to other sentences that I also understand, and not (only) because I am

connecting the words of the sentence to some object available for my reference. To a

certain extent, then, Stroud is right. He correctly shows that the illusion of a private

language is borne of a misunderstanding of the grammar of inner sensation; the

words in sensation language are not meaningful because of their reference to

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[74] Ibid., 9.

[75] Diamond, "Does Bismarck Have a Beetle in His Box?" in *The New Wittgenstein*, eds. Alice Crary and Rupert Read, (London: Routledge, 2000), 273.

"private" objects, but because of how those words relate to the others of their

context, including those inspired in the audience. Likewise, in fact, for the meaning

of language that is much more obviously public. And in this regard, Pears is also

correct, insofar as his argument reveals the absurdity of an inner experience that is

inexpressible on terms that can be understood by others. We might regard this as an

aspect, at least, of Wittgenstein's holism; the apparent rift opened up by the dualism

of inner and outer experience can be sutured with the appropriate analysis of the

grammars of each.

As Rush Rhees is careful to note, this holism is not one that centers the

possibility of understanding merely in the customs established by the community,

as Saul Kripke infamously suggested.[76] Instead, Rhees writes:

> And when I speak of a common understanding I do not mean simply what
> Wittgenstein used to call an "agreement in reactions" which makes it possible
> to talk about using the world in the same way or using it correctly. It has to
> do rather with what is taken to make sense, or with what can be understood:
> with what it is possible to say to people: with what anyone else who speaks
> the language might try to say.[77]

Language, in other words, is not the externalization of some private mental process,

and this is why understanding is not essentially about an agreement on the

meaning. The agreement is in the life, and the language is simply the presentation of

the world through the word. Understanding language, then, comes down to an

understanding of what language can do, in what ways language traverses the

landscape; insofar as the form of life is shared, the meaning is understandable. Or, as

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[76] Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press, 1982).
[77] Rhees, "Wittgenstein's Builders," 186.

Goldfarb puts it, Wittgenstein's private language argument is a rejection of a "mentalistic theory" of meaning:[78]

> [Wittgenstein's] pointing to the lack of introspectible phenomena of the appropriate sorts is a way to show that an unwarranted step has been taken. In this step—rather than any specifically mentalistic theory—that wishes to undercut. To use his term of art, it is a question of the grammar of crucial notions like meaning. Given certain misunderstandings of that grammar, a naive philosopher might attempt a mentalistic account. But reactions to mentalism seek only to replace one explanans with another, and hence rely on the same presuppositions about the explanadum.[79]

What it means for something to be *meant*, in this sense, is not at all like pointing to a fact as a reason why we have said such-and-such is the case. Rather, the meaning rests in how the language is employed within the context of its use.

Wittgenstein's private language argument, taken in the strong sense I have just argued for, changes our relationship with fact. For if the possibility of understanding is dependent on fitting whatever proposition within the linguistic context of a person's sense of the world, then the necessity of the truth-determining fact of the world is diminished. Insofar as we consider our treatment of Ethics then, not only does traditional philosophy mistakenly suppose that the subject is a body of facts that can be scientifically understood, it also mistakenly takes the existence of facts to be the determiners of linguistic meaning. It is, however, the play of language within the linguistic scene that makes it publicly understandable and detachable from the fact of the matter.

Avoiding this double error is the aim of Wittgenstein's revision of Ethics. Instead of suggesting the the Good is something that we can sensically talk about,

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[78] Goldfarb, "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab," 280.
[79] Ibid.

Wittgenstein shows that Ethics is present in all of language, that the Good is "an attitude to the world and life."[80] The Good is, in fact, precisely that liberation from philosophical doubt that Wittgenstein wants to promote. A concern for Ethics is therefore a concern for showing people how to live freely, how to live without the misunderstandings incurred by traditional philosophy.

This conception of the Good as an attitude is a radical shift, and one that is all the more astounding given the time in which Wittgenstein wrote. It has much more the tone of the postmodern philosophers who would sweep in after Wittgenstein's era and flip so many of the narratives of traditional philosophy. Of course, had they been able to see Wittgenstein the way I have been arguing we should read him, they would have known that he was hard at work in this effort for years already. The Good as an attitude that Wittgenstein thus implicitly conceives in his philosophy is one that inspires in us not a knowledge of absolute truth, but an appreciation of the ambivalence from which truth and falsity emerge. That is, this Good sees the ground for what it is, and understands that in traversing it, we will make meaning of it, but it will always be neutral ground. And, of course, the ground of which I speak is language itself, the word.

This is a true deconstruction of traditional philosophy, and although Derrida does not make much use of Wittgenstein in his writing, we can see the latter's influence in abundance. Derrida, a much more overtly political philosopher, tackled some of the same issues that Wittgenstein raised, only decades later and with a very different kind of flourish. As the father of deconstruction, though, his analysis of the

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[80] Diamond, "Ethics, Imagination and Method," 153.

Ethical attitude that must be adopted from this regard toward meaning will be very useful for our understanding of the politics embedded in Wittgenstein's philosophy. It is to Derrida, then, that we turn.

Chapter 4: Ambivalence and the Good

By now, it will hopefully be clear to the reader that Wittgenstein's method in the *Investigations* is truly deconstructive in nature, and in this way anticipates the imaginative style of Derrida. Befitting of the name, the method of deconstruction is concerned with undoing the hierarchical structures upon which traditional philosophy is built, which, at least for Derrida, forced us into thinking that only the dominant, substantial entities were contributive to our understanding of the truth. Such a "truth," Derrida might say, could only ever be a half-truth at best, for although the powers of the principal element captured our attentions, they were delimited, perhaps even founded upon the supplemental. Derrida's method, then, is one of revealing the necessity of the accident, and consequently exposing the illusion of a true hierarchy.

Wittgenstein, though employing quite a different vocabulary, was, in many ways, doing the same job. His *Investigations* are quite literally a deconstruction of the *Tractatus*, insofar as they approach the same philosophical concepts through a long, non-linear journey through life, rather than the more rigid, impersonal, seemingly upward movement of tradition. In the traditional, hierarchical picture of language, "the meaningfulness of language [is] founded on a direct and rather mysterious connection between names and things."[81] With the same stroke that Wittgenstein eliminates the possibility of a private language, in the *Investigations* he also collapses the relationship between the world and the word. The philosophy of

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[81] Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, 18.

language as life, entailed by the theory of meaning as use, is an expression of Wittgenstein's holism, and shifts our relationship with Ethics. From this perspective, we do not aim to *know* the Good, because to do so would be to treat it as a fact that can be discovered. On the contrary, the Good is something that is shown through language, from the inside.

Derrida's work, although it plays a rather different game, so to speak, will help us understand what this Ethics in deconstruction might be. What we have the occasion to learn from Derrida is precisely that the contextual difference that opens up a space for meaning is itself produced by the *movement*, the *play*, the *deferral* of language to itself. It is in order to capture the double productivity of language that Derrida coins the word différance. And it is the spirit of différance that Wittgenstein anticipated by showing—both in the form and content of the *Investigations*—that language is an activity, a form of life. To understand the political consequences of that spirit, we will now examine Derrida's argument for deconstruction.

Derrida's deconstruction of traditional philosophy centers on what he calls logocentrism, the privileging of speech over the written word. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida breaks open his critique of logocentrism, arguing that the hierarchical binaries that plague traditional philosophy—such as "good/evil, true/false, essence/appearance, inside/outside" and, we might add, speech/writing—can only be derived from the essential ambivalence of of their ground.[82] This ambivalence, Derrida argues, is precisely that of the word, which he characterizes as the

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[82] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 103.

pharmakon, the Greek word for drug. This is in reference to the characterization of the word as a drug that we find in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which depicts Socrates and Phaedrus debating over the nature of good speech.[83] Phaedrus at first seems to advocate the sophist argument that a good speech requires only rhetorical expertise, for its success depends only on whether it aligns with what the audience "might *take* to be right."[84] Given that even Socrates would agree that any case can be argued from opposing sides, it would seem Phaedrus is right, and the most successful argument will be the one that most skillfully employs rhetorical expertise. However, Socrates insists that a good speech requires that "the mind of the speaker must know the truth of the matter to be addressed."[85] This is because, he argues, merely knowing the tools of effective speech and what they can do is like knowing the drugs required for medical treatment, but remaining ignorant of to whom, when, and how they should be administered. Rhetorical expertise is only the preliminary to being a good speaker, just as pharmaceutical expertise is only the preliminary to being a doctor. To say otherwise would be not only mad, but dangerous.

What, then, is required to elevate one from having mere book knowledge to actually skillful prowess? Socrates argues that it is knowledge of the true nature of being. "In both cases you have to determine the nature of something – the body in medicine and the soul in rhetoric – if you're going to be an expert practitioner,

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[83] Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[84] Ibid., 259e.
[85] Ibid., 259e.

rather than relying merely on an experimental knack."[86] This is the essence of

Plato's critique of rhetoric. Knowing and using the tools of the trade is not enough to

constitute good speech, because one must also be able to fit these tools to the type of

soul in question, just as a doctor must be able to fit the treatment to the particular of

body under examination.

It is for this same reason that Socrates denigrates the written word as the

bastard child of the knowledgeable man. Disembodied from its author, writing

catapults rhetoric at an unknown audience, but stands defenseless to retaliation.

> Once any account has been written down, you find it all over the place,
> hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people no less than with those
> who understand it, and completely failing to know who it should and
> shouldn't talk to. And faced with rudeness and unfair abuse it always needs
> its father to come to its assistance, since it is incapable of defending or
> helping itself.[87]

In short, the written word *is* the drug in isolation; it is the *pharmakon*, to use the

Greek. Standing alone, it has no means of participating in the *conversation* that leads

to education, because it sits inanimate, "[maintaining] an aloof silence" just like a

painting.[88]

Thus, while we can conclude that good speech consists in knowledge of the

truth and rhetorical expertise, the question of virtue is dissolved as it pertains to

writing. Detached from the living author, the written word has no soul, and

therefore falls short of such an evaluation. Listless and indifferent, writing can never

truly be determined as good or bad.

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[86] Ibid., 270b.
[87] Ibid., 275e.
[88] Ibid., 275d.

Derrida's critique of this picture should not be read as a wholesale rejection

of the dualist metaphysics. His point is not that such binaries do not exist. On the

contrary, he plays *within* the logocentric system of oppositions to reveal that their

condition of possibility is, in fact, the *pharmakon*, the written word. The crucial point

is this: where Plato exiled writing from the realm of meaning and value, Derrida

holds that the text, the *pharmakon*, is the necessary *prior condition* for any

difference to exist.

> If the *pharmakon* is 'ambivalent,' it is because it constitutes the medium in
> which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them
> among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the
> other ... The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the
> production of) difference.[89]

In a sense, Derrida is arguing that writing it itself the ground for meaningful,

powerful language. Or, perhaps it is better to consider the logic by which writing

operates. This logic is what Derrida calls *différance*, a term he coined to capture the

notion that the word is the "production of differing/deferring."[90] That is to say that

the significance of the word is in its difference from and deferral to other signs. It is,

of course, easily recognized, even (or especially) from a logocentric perspective, that

writing is this productive *différance*, given that it is the second-order of signification;

the written word is the signifier of the first sign, the spoken word. Derrida's point is

that *all language*, whether or not it is ostensively textual, operates by the logic of

writing. And, returning for a moment to Wittgenstein, as we see language as

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[89] Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 127.
[90] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 23.

immanent to human life, we might at last be able to understand Derrida when he says: "There is nothing outside of the text."[91]

Derrida, hailed as the father of deconstruction, is not (nor was he at the time the "Pharmacy" was published), the lone defender of this analysis of linguistic force. His argument was in many ways anticipated by I.A. Richards, who illustrated the detachment of the word from the present moment that is necessary for its production of meaning. In his *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards claims that the meaning of a word is "the missing parts of the contexts from which it draws its delegated efficacy."[92] This highly technical definition depends on his particular use of the word *context*. He acknowledges that it shares some sense with the familiar literary context – whereby he derives the license to use the word – insofar as they both regard "the governing conditions of an interpretation."[93] Richards' *context* is distinguished, however, by its referral to "the whole cluster of events that recur together,"[94] that is, to the simultaneous existence of the past and present. Richards thus seems to offer a kind of hyper-fullness of the present, because it is saturated not only by its own events, the "required conditions," but also those past, the "causes."[95]

However, we must remember that Richards is defining meaning as that which is *missing* from the context. The force of a word, its delegated efficacy, is said to come from something which is not present in the context. Richards argues that

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[91] Ibid., 158.
[92] I.A. Richards, "Lecture II: The Aims of Discourse and Types of Context," in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 35.
[93] Ibid., 33.
[94] Ibid., 34.
[95] Ibid.

this missing thing, this absence, is the causal recurrence (i.e. the series of past events) for which a word stands. "In these contexts one item – typically a word – takes over the duties of parts which can then be omitted from the recurrence."[96] The absence of the past may seem to be a blatant contradiction of the definition of context Richards previously gave, which is the *inclusion* of the past in the present. But by tying the operation of the delegated efficacy to an act of sorting, Richards manages to escape the conflict. He argues that simplest form of thinking, perception, is the recognition of a present stimulus being more or less similar to stimuli of the past. "Effects from more or less similar happenings in the past would come in to give our response its character and this as far as it went would be meaning."[97] This process of sorting, then, is how the past is brought into the present to form the context. And it is by this sorting that the past event delegates or consigns its efficacy or power to the present. Thus, a present event is only a perception insofar as it bears the delegated efficacy of the past. Furthermore, in having consigned its power to the present, the past drops out of the perception. Or, to return to our interrogation of linguistic meaning, the word bearing the delegated efficacy of the perceived event, is thus able to do the work of the past events, which it renders essentially empty of content. As Richards says, the virtue of words is in that they are "substitutes exerting the powers of what is not there."[98]

This theory of linguistic meaning may at first seem to be at odds with that developed by Derrida, whose argument entails the radical conclusion that words are

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 30.
[98] Ibid., 32.

above all *not* a substitute or representation of something. Although Derrida

similarly relies on notions of context and absence, he aggressively rejects that the

meaning of a word is its force as a substitute for an idea or object in the world, and

instead insists that the possibility of meaning is *primarily* characterized by absence.

It is vital to note here that Derrida's use of *context* differs from Richards', in that he

does not mean strictly the context of *events*, but rather the context of producers and

recipients of the word, those who *mean* and *make meaning of* words. Thus, the

written word is supposed to be a tool for "*extending* enormously, if not infinitely, the

domain of oral or gestural communication."[99] That is, the written word expands the

context of the author and addressee in their absence. We see then, that according to

this alternate definition of context, the written word exists only in absentia of its

context. It is this capacity for meaning in absence that Derrida means by the word's

iterability. "In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature [or any word]

must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from

the present and singular intention of its production."[100] Thus, the meaning of a word

must be not in its referral to something that is no longer there, as Richards

apparently suggests, but in its actual emergence from the absence.

But the conclusion that Richards draws is not simply that the world is a

collection of things that are represented by words. On the contrary, he resolves that

the content of the world is not determined by objects, but by the "instances of

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[99] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 3.
[100] Ibid., 20.

laws,"[101] or recurrences. Every experience, linguistic or not, is meaningful because of past iterations of that experience, which the present moment now cites. Thus, we can see that the disagreement between him and Derrida should not be regarded as wholly intractable; in fact, a distinct congruence of their arguments becomes visible. Framing the recurrence as an instance of law reveals, in very Derridian terms, that the meaning of the event in question is not its referral or object of substitution, but its necessary potential existence. A law exists only in the "general space of [the] possibility" to do otherwise,[102] and thus, meaning and the world only exist in the possibility of their absence. Using Richards to illuminate Derrida, then, if we trace the historical iterations of a word we can expose the moments of its potential subversion.

What, then, are the implications for Derrida's deconstruction of Plato's classical metaphysical picture of language? What does it mean for the meaning of a word to be, at its very core, emergent from a necessary absence? It would perhaps suggest that all evaluation is arbitrary, that the sophists were right and the division between good and evil (and all other binaries) is simply a matter of playing to the audience. Derrida, however, refuses to align himself with this position. Instead, he provides the metaphysical structure required to explain the fact that the meaning of a thing must come from its possible non-meaning. The vitality of speech, of the good, comes from its possibility of being listless, of being bad writing. And this necessary possibility *is* the playground of the *pharmakon*, the space of absence. Understanding

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[101] Richards, "Discourse and Context," 36.
[102] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 19.

this picture does not result in the absolute destruction of the apparent binaries of our natural world. It instead enlightens us as to their source, revealing that they are not the facts of reality. They are the consequence of the real nature of the *pharmakon.*

But this does not yet address the political ramifications of taking this philosophy of language seriously. While it was Richards' hope that recognizing the delegated efficacy of words could facilitate their transformation from "swords of dispute...into plough shares,"[103] the actual consequences of the word as *pharmakon* are not so easily settled. As Judith Butler notes in *Excitable Speech*, the citationality of speech tempts us to doubt whether an individual can be held responsible for their utterance.[104] For, the essential ambivalence of a word indicates that "speech is always in some ways out of our control".[105] We are therefore led to ask: "Can one say that someone else made up this speech that one simply finds oneself using and thereby absolve oneself of all responsibility?"[106] Are we ultimately unjustified in holding anyone accountable, as we do through hate speech regulation, for their speech?

Following this line of thought is fraught with danger, especially if we consider its implications for hate speech; it would be a great disservice to those derogated by hate speech if we concluded that speakers could never be culpable. This is the objection raised by Jeremy Waldron, in his book, *The Harm in Hate*

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[103] Richards, "Discourse and Context," 39.
[104] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1977).
[105] Ibid., 15.
[106] Ibid., 27.

Speech.[107] He argues against the liberal prioritization of the First Amendment over

the rights of all to a sense of inclusive security and to dignity. Staunch defenders of

the freedom of speech, Waldron says, endorse the argument that "people who are

targeted [by hate speech] should just learn to live with it."[108] But this is the willful

inhabitation of a poisonous environment, one in which discrimination, violence, and

exclusion are allowed to seep into society under the guise of the protection of

liberty. It is the acceptance of a society that denies the "fundamentals of justice: that

all are equally human, and have the dignity of humanity, that all have an elementary

entitlement to justice, and that all deserve protection from the most egregious forms

of violence, exclusion, indignity, and subordination."[109] Insofar as a democratic

republic such as the United States is concerned with defending this fundamental

justice, hate speech can be understood as an "attack on public order" and thus

within the jurisdiction of the state.[110]

      However, Butler, whose argument echoes the logic of Derrida and Richards,

claims that hate speech regulation, rather than eliminating injurious words from our

language, "will also reiterate and restage those slurs, reproduce them this time as

state-sanctioned speech."[111] Put differently, by identifying certain words as being

unspeakable, "*the state produces hate speech*."[112] It creates a category of words that

are supposed not to be capable of anything except injury and derogation. Yet, the

production of hate speech is paradoxical, for as it ascribes the singular meaning of

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[107] Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
[108] Ibid., 3.
[109] Ibid., 83.
[110] Ibid., 46.
[111] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 101.
[112] Ibid., 77.

these words, it uses them, it *cites* them, it *iterates* them without injuring or

derogating. In outlawing hate speech because of its supposed absolutely harmful

effects, regulations take advantage of the necessary possibility that these words

could fail to harm. Thus, in regulating hate speech, the state simultaneously

demarcates and violates the line between acceptable and unacceptable speech,

calling into question the legitimacy of such a boundary.

It should be noted that Butler's aim is not to deny that words have the

potential to do harm. Like Waldron, she in fact figures the violence of an insult –

hate speech being the ultimate insult – as its exclusion of the subject from society.

"Exposed at the moment of such a shattering is precisely the volatility of one's

'place' within the community of speakers; one can be 'put in one's place' by such

speech, but such a place may be no place."[113] Her point here is that the power of a

word to injure lies in its concurrent and indispensable power *not* to injure. Thus,

while the insult may veritably be a poison as Waldron notes, it may also be its own

remedy.

This should not be an altogether surprising conclusion. The reappropriation

of invective may well be considered part of the natural progression of meaning in

the lifecycle of a word. If we look at the evolution of the word *queer* for example, we

can see clearly its transformation from a relatively neutral word synonymous to

odd, to a slanderous epithet hurled at those perceived to be gay, and then to a

defiant claim of identity by those it was once meant to victimize. Just as any other

vitriolic phrase, *queer* has undoubtedly been used to subordinate individuals

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[113] Ibid., 4.

belonging or presumed to belong to certain groups. It is therefore *not* unlike any other word in its multiplicity of potential meaning; it is not invulnerable to being transformed. As a matter of fact, it is this very vulnerability that makes possible the self-empowerment of oppressed groups.

The abrogation of hate speech is therefore doubly paradoxical. Not only does it engage the non-injurious use of a word that it purports to be impossible, it also impedes a means of reclaiming one's dignity, the very dignity that hate speech regulation is supposed to guarantee.

The question, then, is why, in the face of this deep paradox, are we "tempted" to hold a speaker responsible for the injury inflicted by speech.[114] Butler argues this desire indicates our nostalgia for a sovereign speaker, whose speech was unfailingly efficacious, and who could, as such, be understood as the cause of the state of affairs. In the pre-secular era, that speaker was God, whose divinity ensured that His Word was true, and moreover, that his His Word was *done*; the sovereignty of God guaranteed the efficacy of His Word. Thus, Luther preached that faith did not require any puzzlement over the miracle of God's flesh being the bread. "Christ, as I have said, does all these things through the Word, just as the wonders which he daily performs are countless. Should he not through the same power know how to do these things also here in the sacrament? He has put himself into the Word, and through the Word he puts himself into the bread also."[115] God's Word, as sovereign speech, is absolutely efficacious.

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[114] Ibid., preface, 27.
[115] Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ – Against the Fanatics," in *Word and Sacrament*, trans. Frederick C. Ahrens (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959) 343.

In the secular era, however, the "sovereign organization of power [is lost]" such that there is no "single subject" who can be identified as the originator of performative speech; power becomes diffuse, "emanating from a number of possible sites."[116] And yet, insofar as a derogatory word is able to effect real harm, insofar as "it does what it says and it does what it says it will do to the one addressed by the speech,"[117] it continues to be figured as sovereign speech. Thus, the contemporary political climate permits a sovereign speech without a sovereign subject, and we are forced to "compensate for the [resulting] difficulties and anxieties" by paradoxically attributing responsibility to the speaker.[118]

It should be clear, however, that this treatment cannot be successful in alleviating the tension between acknowledging the efficacy of some speech and maintaining the diffusion of power. It cannot be ethically advantageous to demarcate certain words as hate speech, because it requires a phantasmatic resurrection of a sovereign power that stands antithetical to the contemporary configuration of subjectivity. Moreover, it is at odds with the recognition of the logic of the word as *pharmakon*, as insubordinate to the laws that a sovereign power is supposed to dictate.

Admitting that the structure of hate speech is paradoxical, however, does little to address the unease that provokes its regulation. We want to avoid the objection that accepting the citationality of the word is to drink the poison. However, following the logic I have here tried to explicate, we should immediately

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[116] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 78.
[117] Ibid., 77.
[118] Ibid., 80.

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recognize the error in presuming that the toxicity of a word will always remain as potent. To do so is to forget that, while citationality *admits* that the word may do harm, it also *permits* the word to be transformed to do good. The question, therefore, is not *What words should be banned so that they cannot harm me?* but rather, *How can I understand the power of words so that they do not devalue me?* The reformulation of this ethical question regarding words is, of course, not intended to deny that words can concretely affect a person. It offers, instead, a means of developing an ethics that is consistent with the logic of the word as *pharmakon* and is consequently in a position to see the *pharmakon* as a potential catalyst for change.

What does this new ethics look like? And more specifically, what is it to be *good* in this new ethics? If our understanding of the power of words is an understanding of them as prior to value, then where is the good located? It is found in our selves, and moreover, in the relation of our selves to the word. To be good, according to this new ethic, is to open oneself up to the *pharmakon*. It is to admit the same vulnerability in one's own constitution as that which structures the power of words. In so doing, one may indeed feel the pain of an insult. For while we have pointed to a central paradox in the notion of hate speech as a governable object, we still cannot deny that some speech is cruel, unjust, and violent. But this malice is predicated on the possibility that the very same word could heal, redeem, and pacify. When the state is allotted the power to regulate hate speech, we are trapped in the brutality of the word. Exposing ourselves to the *pharmakon* may, by contrast, reveal to us the dynamism of our own position, without which we can have no hope of changing the effect of the word. It is better, then, to stand waiting for this

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revelation than to preclude its possibility.

This is the attitude of the Good that Wittgenstein was pointing to. This openness to the world is what allows the Good to be shown in language. This is not to suggest that such a life will be without conflict, without pain, even. The terrain is rough, and we are likely to trip over on more than one occasion. It is also filled with other people, who come from a vast range of other places, and who might say something with the intention of hurting us. However, the hope of protecting ourselves from these assaults by restricting what people can say, which is to restrict how they can move in the world, will be unsuccessful and ultimately detrimental to the cause. Though the aim is to encourage people to use Good speech, the impulse to censor is founded on a basic misunderstanding of how meaning operates in language. The word itself cannot be regulated, because the word is essentially ambivalent. It is this ambivalence that provides for the possibility of *meaning* anything with words, Good or Evil. To censor the word is to inadvertently ascribe to the word only one possible meaning, trapping it in a cage that will never be able to contain it.

Conclusion

Wittgenstein contributed a great deal to the philosophy of the twentieth century, and his influence lingers on even today. He wrote with unique style, which sometimes obscured the ideas that I think he was trying to communicate. What I hope to have done with this essay is show that the philosophy of language that he put forth over the course of his lifetime, and especially the theory of meaning that it was founded on, was Wittgenstein's attempt to develop a philosophy that truly was therapeutic. His aim was to redirect our attentions from the confused and impossible questions of traditional philosophy, ones that made use imagine ourselves to be trapped in a desperate and hopeless situation of uncertainty. By reorienting us to the world, however, Wittgenstein shows us that the dilemmas and misunderstandings are of our own making, and that all we need to be able to move freely through the world is the recognition that we are certainly able to do so.

Finding our footing involves realizing that linguistic meaning does not exist on some ideal, metaphysical plane, only to be brought down to our level through the word. It is, on the contrary, the word that word that serves as the linguistic ground, with meaning emerging from our movement through the terrain, through the scenes of language. But for the word to be figured as such is to recognize it as the *pharmakon* of which Derrida spoke, that necessary ambivalence from which value can be decided. In this light, we see that the word cannot be governed, it cannot be restrained by law, without presuming a contradictory understanding of how meaning operates in language. This assumption leads us to task ourselves with the

impossible, and consequently to shut out the possibility of showing the Good. For that Good is an openness to the world. We must be open to the chance of being hurt, offended, intimidated, or otherwise, because we know that it from that very linguistic ground that arises the possibility of our empowerment; to draw boundaries within our language is to relinquish our own strength for the Good of no one. Meaning is like a spirit that exists in between the words, in their difference. And it is our duty to realize that the spirit will always escape whatever cage we try to trap the word in. What we should do, instead, is engage with that spirit in the scene from which it shows itself, wrestle with it, and work to understand its role in our lives. But we resign ourselves to hopelessness if our method is to try to restrain it.

To return, at last, to the Middlebury incident, it should be clear now that the students protesting Charles Murray did not help their cause by preemptively declaring his talk hate speech and refusing to let him deliver it. In doing so, they actually ascribed to the lecture more power than it could have had otherwise; in a sense, they overdetermined the talk as hate speech. In their response to unjust power dynamics, they tried to control the language. But it is not the language that decides the power, but how the language is used, the context in which it is used. And in not every case does silencing a person take away their power, nor does it empower the silencer. What can be empowering, on the contrary, is to take the words of the unjustly powerful and play on their essential ambiguity to make them undermine the power of the oppressor. This shows, from within the word itself, that the power is never absolute, and that the Good can always be brought out, so long as we are also always open to that ambiguity.

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