

## 6

## Sense and Nonsense

In this chapter we trace the connections between *TLP*'s account of semantic content and some of its other doctrines, particularly the showing/saying distinction, the idea that the propositions of logic and mathematics are senseless ('sinnlos'), and the consignment of the propositions of philosophy to the category of nonsense ('unsinnig').

## 6.1 SHOWING AND SAYING

Perhaps the most startling and paradoxical doctrine in *TLP* is the claim that all of its propositions (including, presumably, this very claim itself) are nonsensical – as are, indeed, all philosophical and metaphysical propositions (6.53–6.54). In Wittgenstein's view we cannot make assertions or entertain thoughts about logic or logical form, nor about the essence of reality. These things can, however, be shown or made manifest, in a number of different ways. Symbols (signs together with their mode of application) and internal relations between symbols can show us something, either about themselves or about the logical nature of reality (3.262, 4.1211, 4.125, 6.1–6.12); the existence of different ways of symbolizing the same *Bedeutung* can reveal something about the essence of the world (3.3421, 3.3441), and what the philosopher tries to say can sometimes be shown by the construction of a logically perpicuous notation (4.1272, 5.53–5.534). Rather more obscurely, a piece of nonsense can show something (though perhaps in quite a different sense of 'show'), since Wittgenstein thinks that the nonsensical propositions in a philosophical work can help us to see the world aright (6.54).

Undoubtedly the showing/saying doctrine has at least some of its historical roots in Frege, who frequently has to resort to metaphor in trying to express his views on logic, most famously in the

metaphor of the 'incompleteness' of concepts and functions.<sup>1</sup> Frege often has to beg his readers to 'meet him half-way', claiming that he cannot give literal expression to his ideas.<sup>2</sup> Moreover his writings are riddled with sentences which are, by his own lights, nonsensical. For example, he says at one point that an object is anything which is not a function.<sup>3</sup> But what is he quantifying over here? The universal quantifier in this statement must be taken to range over both objects and functions, yet there is no provision for such a quantifier in his own semantic system. He allows for quantification over objects, and also for second-level quantification over functions (properties, relations, etc.); but there is no room for both kinds of quantification to take place at once.

Wittgenstein was also greatly influenced by Frege's idea of a conceptual notation ('Begriffsschrift'), in which logical structure would be reflected in surface syntax. (See 3.325.) For this holds out the possibility that what a philosopher attempts (but fails) to say, would be made manifest by the construction of some appropriate piece of conceptual notation. Thus what we attempt to express by saying 'Existence is not a property' – which is, for both Frege and Wittgenstein, strictly nonsensical – would be shown by the notation of the first-order predicate calculus, in which the sign for existence has not the slightest similarity to a predicate, and indeed in which there is no grammatically permissible way of formulating a sentence in which that sign takes a predicative role. When Wittgenstein says that the goal of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts, to be achieved by presenting clearly what can be said (4.112, 4.115), at least part of what he has in mind is the construction of a conceptual notation modelled on Frege's. Having created such a notation we should be able to 'pass over in silence' what previously had caused us puzzlement and confusion. (See 3.323–3.325, 4.003, 6.53–7.)

Nevertheless something, somewhere, has surely gone wrong with the showing/saying doctrine. We can allow that there are many things which can be shown rather than said; perhaps even that there are some things which can only be shown. (We shall consider a number of examples of alternative, and conceptual, notations, both in later chapters and in *MT*.) But it must be wholly unacceptable to claim that all of philosophy is nonsense. For either a nonsensical sentence can show us something or it cannot. If it cannot, then Wittgenstein's claim at 6.54 that anyone understanding

*TLP* would be led to see the world aright must be unfounded; indeed there can be no such subject as philosophy. But if, on the other hand, a piece of nonsense can show us something, then there must somehow be a distinction to be drawn between illuminating and unilluminating nonsense. There are two possible ways in which this might be attempted. Firstly, the distinction might be said to consist in the different causal properties of sentences, our psychology being such that some nonsense is capable of causing a sort of 'Gestalt switch' in us.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is surely clear that the actual effect of philosophical speech and writing is not of this purely causal, contentless, sort. Secondly, it might be said that illuminating nonsense gets us to see what the speaker means or intends but cannot say.<sup>5</sup> But this presupposes a distinction between thought and language which I shall argue in chapter 8 to be quite foreign to Wittgenstein.

Any release from these difficulties would be welcome. Somehow we must make room for the idea that the propositions of *TLP* – and philosophical propositions generally – have a kind of sense. For it is evident that they do. So our most urgent task must be to try to understand how Wittgenstein could have argued himself into such a position, in order that we may see how best to argue him out again.

## 6.2 SENSE WITHOUT SINN

At 4.461 Wittgenstein tells us that tautologies and contradictions lack Sinn and say nothing. But then in the very next remark (4.4611) he denies that they are nonsensical (*unsinnig*). The first part of this doctrine is easy to understand in the light of the discussion of previous chapters. For the idea of what it is for a proposition to say something is intimately connected with its having Sinn (4.022). A proposition with Sinn locates our world within a subset of the set of all possible worlds: directing us towards this subset and away from the remainder (4.463). And what the proposition says (its Sinn) may be equated with the directed division which it makes within the set of all possible worlds. But tautologies and contradictions effect no such division. A tautology, being true in all worlds, merely locates our world somewhere within the set of all possible worlds; which is to say nothing about what our world is in fact like. A contradiction, being true in no worlds, attempts to represent our world as falling outside the set of

all possible worlds; which again says nothing about what our world is like. (See 4.461–4.463.) So neither sort of sentence has Sinn, nor tells us anything.

It might be said that all of this, so far, is merely a matter of moving around definitions, the terms 'saying' and 'Sinn' having been defined in such a way as to give the desired result. It might further be said (since tautologies can, manifestly, be informative and useful): so much the worse for the definitions. But this would be to miss the thrust of the essential/inessential contrast which we expounded in the last chapter. Wittgenstein will of course concede that there are many tautologies which we cannot immediately recognize as such, so that to be told of the truth of what is in fact a tautology may be informative (6.1262). He also concedes that they have a use, enabling us to pass validly between contingent propositions (6.1264, 6.211). But he would insist that this is merely an inessential matter of human psychology. (See 6.125–6.127.) All that matters in communication, and in the activities of saying and thinking generally, is the state of the world represented: the Sinn. And from the point of view of what matters, all propositions which effect the same division within the set of all possible worlds say the very same thing. So the definitions are by no means arbitrary, but reflect what is of fundamental importance in thinking and communicating.

Recall from the last chapter claim that all logically equivalent propositions are, essentially, the same proposition. Since it is obvious that simple tautologies and contradictions can tell me nothing about the world (as Wittgenstein remarks at 4.461, I learn nothing about the weather if I am told that it is either raining or not), and since all tautologies are logically equivalent to simple ones, it must follow that they all say nothing. For all are, essentially, the same proposition.

There is thus no particular difficulty in understanding why tautologies and contradictions should be characterized as saying nothing: this flows from Wittgenstein's conception of what is essential in communication. But what does he have in mind by denying that they are nonsensical (*unsinnig*)? This, too, is easy to understand: it is because they consist of perfectly legitimate symbols combined in perfectly legitimate ways (4.46, 4.4611). Thus a tautology of the form ' $P \vee \neg P$ ' consists of signs which have sense and Bedeutung: the sentences ' $P$ ' and ' $\neg P$ ' will express propositions

which signify (opposite) Sinn, and the sign 'v', too, will have both cognitive and semantic content. Moreover the signs themselves are combined quite legitimately: the rule of syntax for 'v' will tell us merely that it may be combined with any propositional sign on its left and any propositional sign on its right. So 'P v -P' is a proposition, being well-formed and expressing a sense. It is merely that the component symbols have been combined in such a way that the resulting sentence says nothing (lacks Sinn).

It might be objected against this account of Wittgenstein's views that he says at 4.466 that tautologies and contradictions are not really combinations of signs at all, thus suggesting something much more radical than that such sentences merely lack semantic content.<sup>6</sup> But in fact there are two things which he means by this, each consistent with our account. The first is that the semantic contents (Bedeutungen) of the signs employed in a tautology do not figure in the content of the end-product: the tautology itself. (Obviously they cannot do so, since the end-product is wholly lacking in semantic content.) Although each of the signs in a tautology does have semantic content, they are combined in such a way that the resulting sentence is without such content. So a tautology is not a 'real combination of signs' in the sense that it does not serve to combine the Bedeutungen of its parts into a determinate whole.

The second thing he means is that it is no part of the essence, or purpose, of the signs involved in a tautology that they should yield a tautology when so combined. For at 4.4661, having conceded that the signs are after all combined with one another in tautologies and contradictions, he says that these combinations are not essential to the symbol. Now he cannot have meant by this that it is a contingent feature of the symbols involved that they can be combined into a tautology or a contradiction. For on the contrary, any signs with the semantic content of 'v' and '-' must be such that they will yield a sentence which is true come what may when combined in the form 'P v -P'. The idea must rather be that tautologies and contradictions are an unintended (but nevertheless inevitable) spin-off from the semantic contents assigned to their component parts. As Wittgenstein says at the end of 4.466, tautologies and contradictions are the limiting cases of the combination of signs. I take this to mean that although their existence is an inevitable consequence of the existence of a symbolic system, they form no part of our purpose in introducing such a system, and do not contribute to its content.

Not only have we uncovered the basis of the doctrine that tautologies, contradictions and propositions of mathematics lack Sinn, but we have also found hints towards the proper understanding of the doctrine that philosophical propositions are nonsensical. If the idea is that for a sentence to *fail* to be nonsensical is for it to consist of meaningful symbols combined in a legitimate manner, then presumably for a sentence to *be* nonsensical is for it either to contain a sign which lacks semantic content ('Snarks are dangerous'), or for it to consist of signs combined in ways to which no significance has been attached ('Lion tiger stag').

This suggestion may be partly confirmed by considering 3.24, where it is implied that a sentence containing a simple name would be nonsensical (unsinnig) if (*per impossibile*) the bearer of that name were to fail to exist. This is easily understood if we recall our suggestion in chapter 3 that the semantic content of a proper name is exhausted by its bearer. For then a name which lacks a bearer will lack semantic content, and all sentences containing it will lack semantic content as well. Yet it is entirely consistent with this that such sentences may nevertheless possess determinate senses (cognitive contents) in the idiolects of particular speakers, as we shall suggest in chapter 13. For to say that a sentence lacks semantic content by virtue of containing a word which lacks such content (to say that a sentence is unsinnig) is not at all to say that it might not express a determinate mode of thinking of the world within the idiolect of any given speaker.

### 6.3 PHILOSOPHY AS NONSENSE

We turn now to consider why philosophical propositions should be thought to fall into the category of nonsense (understood as above). Philosophy, on Wittgenstein's conception of it, is the attempt to study the essence of thought, the essence of reality, and the relationship between them.<sup>7</sup> Now at a number of points in *TLP* he apparently argues thus: Suppose we are attempting to describe logical form, either of language or the world.<sup>8</sup> Then either the sentences which we use in this attempt themselves possess logical form or they do not. If they do not, they will be nonsensical (like 'is bald is wise'). But if they do possess logical form, then they will presuppose a knowledge of precisely what they are trying to describe. (See 2.172–2.18.) For example, suppose we attempt to say

that the sentence 'Fb' is about the object b. In fact this sentence is itself of the form 'Øb', and is about the object b. So we have presupposed a knowledge of what we were attempting to say. And how, on the other hand, could we say that 'Fb' is about the object b *without* talking about b?<sup>9</sup> (See 4.1211.)

There are a number of assumptions implicit in this argument. One is that there is something called 'logical form' which is common both to thought and to reality (2.18). Another seems to be that logical form is somehow all-of-a-piece, so that one could not use a proposition with one sort of form to describe another without taking for granted the logical form of the other. (Or perhaps the assumption is only the weaker claim, involved in the example from 4.1211 above, that in order to describe a given form one would have to employ that very form.)<sup>10</sup> But the most basic presupposition may be brought out by asking why we cannot rely upon an *implicit* grasp of logical form in order to render out knowledge *explicit*. Since ordinary language disguises logical form, as Wittgenstein himself insists at 4.002, what could be wrong with using ordinary language – thus relying on our inchoate, implicit, grasp of logical form – in order to render those very same forms explicit and articulate? Part of Wittgenstein's reply is predictable: sentences used in the attempt to characterize logical form must either be necessarily true or necessarily false, and such sentences say nothing (lack Sinn).

Now so far this is only to place the propositions of philosophy in the same category as those of mathematics and logic. He could allow that such propositions have sense (cognitive content) and could allow that they can have an heuristic or inference-guiding use for us, but would deny that they have Sinn, or tell us anything about the world. Yet the position he actually adopts is much more radical: it is that the 'propositions' of philosophy are in fact nonsensical (which then of course makes it problematic how they can have any kind of elucidatory role). Why is this? Why are the propositions of philosophy treated differently from those of logic?

The answer to these questions is simple. It is that the symbols in a tautology are used in precisely the same sort of way as they are when they occur in a contingent proposition, the use of 'v' in 'P v – P' being no different from its use in 'P v Q'. But in philosophy, on the other hand, words have to be used quite differently. Words whose primary purpose in ordinary language consists in their contributions to the content of contingent propositions have to be turned

in on themselves somehow, and used in quite new senses, to talk about essential features of propositions or of the world. And Wittgenstein's claim is that these (philosophical) senses can receive no coherent explanation.

The idea is easiest to explain in connection with the discussion of formal concepts in the 4.12s, though the point is really quite general. Wittgenstein believes that a word such as 'object', in its ordinary language use, functions as a kind of variable. In English we say 'There are two objects which . . .' where in logic we would write ' $\exists x \exists y . . .$ ' (4.1272). But when we do philosophy we attempt to use the word as a predicate, as when we say that numbers are (or are not) objects. Yet such a predicate can, in the terms of Wittgenstein's semantic theory, be given neither sense nor Bedeutung. For recall that a symbol (sign together with its sense) is said to be any sign which contributes to the Sinn (truth-conditions) of sentences in which it occurs (3.31). And it might be felt that the peculiarity of a predicate like 'object', is that it can never occur in sentences which have Sinn, and so cannot count as a genuine symbol. For it might be said that all sentences predicating 'object' of something will either be necessarily true or necessarily false – if, that is, these sentences were really fit to be true or false at all. And we have seen how, in Wittgenstein's view, such sentences say nothing (lack Sinn).

In fact this exposition is slightly too simple, unless we help ourselves to the *TLP* doctrine that all (genuine) objects have necessary existence. For if Mary can count as an object, then 'Mary is an object' will be contingent because Mary's existence is contingent. Even so, the basic point can be allowed to stand. For anyone capable of understanding 'Mary is an object' must already know the various features of the use of the word 'Mary' by virtue of which the sentence is true. So the predicate 'is an object' can make no contribution to the semantic content of the sentence which has not already been made by the name 'Mary' alone. Although that predicate might figure in contingent sentences, it can make no distinctive contribution to their semantic contents.

All of the terms which we characteristically use in doing philosophy, when not employed merely to mark a style of variable, suffer from the same defect. (Examples would be: 'Mary is an object', 'Being red is a concept', 'Seven is a number', 'It is necessary that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ', 'It is impossible that  $2 + 2 = 6$ ', and 'It is possible that

Mary has freckles'.) They are all such that either they can only ever occur in sentences which are necessary truths or necessary falsehoods, or they at any rate fail to contribute to the content of any contingent sentences in which they might occur. So there can be no fixing of *Bedeutung* for these terms, since to fix the semantic content of an expression is determine its contribution to the *Sinn* of sentences. Yet none of these terms can ever – in their philosophical use – make any such contribution. In which case it seems that their senses cannot even be coherently explained.

#### 6.4 SENSE WITHOUT BEDEUTUNG

It might be objected against the argument I have been attributing to Wittgenstein that the doctrine of philosophy as nonsense does not strictly follow, even given his characterization of philosophy and of the use of terms in philosophy. For if I have been correct in arguing that the *TLP* notion of a symbol is that of a sign together with its cognitive content (sense), then there should be no reason in principle why some perfectly genuine symbols might not happen to lack *Bedeutung* – and this despite the fact that 3.31 appears to imply that only signs with *Bedeutung* are real symbols (we might regard this as merely a piece of stipulative definition). We could then concede that 'Seven is a number' lacks *Sinn*, and does so by virtue of containing a term which (in such a use) is lacking in semantic content; but we could insist that the sentence nevertheless has a sense, and expresses an intelligible proposition.

It is clear how Wittgenstein would respond to this objection, if I have been reading him correctly: he would reiterate that the possession of *Sinn* is of the very essence of statement-making. Since it is the *Sinn* of a sentence which is communicated by it (whether used in one's own thoughts or in public statements), a sentence without *Sinn* will lack anything to communicate. And a term without semantic content, too, must be wholly empty as a vehicle for communication. So he could concede that the philosophical use of 'is a number' might have cognitive content within the idiolect of any given speaker. (It is a further advantage of the fact that we have attributed both the notions of sense and of semantic content to Wittgenstein, that it enables us to find at least this much place for the propositions of philosophy.) But such content would merely be

a matter of the subject's particular psychology. It would not be communicable, nor could the predicate 'is a number' ever be used to say anything.

A similar point can be made in connection with the idea of philosophical analysis. Consider for example Frege's proposal that statements of the form 'The number of F's = the number of G's' should be analysed as saying that the concepts F and G are one-to-one correlated with one another. (See *FA* 63.) On the *TLP* account of semantic content, there is no difficulty in explaining how such an analysis can both be correct and enlightening for a given individual. For an analysis is correct, we may suppose, just so long as *Sinn* is preserved, the two sentences being logically equivalent. Yet a speaker may, through attaching different cognitive contents to them both, have failed to realize that this is so. The difficulty is rather to explain how such informativeness can be communicable. For on the *TLP* account of semantic (that is, communicable) content, there is nothing that can be communicated by presenting any one such sentence as an analysis of another, since both will say the very same thing. Moreover, since differences in cognitive content which do not emerge at the level of *Sinn* are said to belong to the realm of the inessential in thought and language, even the information conveyed to a particular individual can have no bearing on the essence of what is said. The fact that they learn something on realizing that the one sentence is equivalent to the other is merely an inessential feature of their psychology. In short: on the *TLP* account analysis is possible, but is solipsistic and of merely psychological significance.

#### SUMMARY

The propositions of logic and mathematics are without semantic content (*sinnlos*), in that they fail to effect a directed division within the set of all possible worlds. But they are nevertheless composed of signs which have semantic content combined in syntactically legitimate ways. The propositions of philosophy and metaphysics, on the other hand, are contentless in an even stronger sense, since they contain terms lacking in semantic content. They are therefore said to be nonsensical (*unsinnig*).

- here is not especially cognitive, being characterizable rather in truth-conditional terms.
- 11 This may be taken as a criticism of the simple one-word imperative language-games of the early sections of *PI* if, as seems plausible, Wittgenstein's intention is that these are the only uses of signs in which the players engage.
  - 12 See the account of opacity which Frege provides in 'On Sense and Reference'. (See for example Frege, 1984.)
  - 13 In fact there are yet other perspectives on descriptions of propositional attitudes not relevant to the present issue, such as the one I characterize in my (1987b) as 'The Practical Reasoner's Perspective'.
  - 14 I intend to take no particular stance here on the semantics (or lack of semantics) for live metaphors, since this metaphor would appear to be dead.
  - 15 This is an idea which plays an important part in Wittgenstein's later philosophy of mathematics. See the discussion of surveyability in Wright (1980).

## CHAPTER 6 SENSE AND NONSENSE

- 1 See his 'Function and Concept' in Frege (1984).
- 2 See for example Frege (1984), p. 193.
- 3 See Frege (1984), p. 147. Roger White first pointed this remark out to me.
- 4 Although I originally owe this suggestion to Tim Williamson, I have since found just such a purely-causal account in Favrholt (1964), p. 142, in the course of which he likens philosophical propositions to bird-song!
- 5 This suggestion is made by Hacker in his (1986), p. 26.
- 6 Just such a view is taken by McDonough, who argues that the tautology ' $P \vee \neg P$ ' does not really contain the symbols for negation or disjunction, nor the proposition  $P$ , at all. See his (1986), pp. 81–9. This goes too far, making it difficult to keep track of the distinction between nonsense and senselessness. McDonough is correct in attributing to Wittgenstein the view that the signs in a tautology are in one respect not performing their usual role. For that role is to contribute to the semantic content of sentences in which they occur; but since a tautology is lacking in such content, there is nothing for the component expressions to contribute to. This in itself is sufficient to explain Wittgenstein's remarks about the 'disintegration of signs'. Yet it does not follow that the signs in a tautology do not constitute their usual symbols (do not express their usual senses). Nor does it follow that they do not serve to introduce their usual semantic contents (that they are not about anything). Rather, the symbols in a tautology are 'combined' in such a way that their contents fail to be combined into the sort of semantic content that significant sentences have – a Sinn.

- 7 I here rely upon the general tenor and subject-matter of *TLP* rather than upon specific remarks. But see 3.3421 and 5.641.
- 8 That Wittgenstein speaks of 'logical form' of both pictures (propositions) and reality, might seem to count against the suggestion canvassed in ch. 4, that the form of a proposition is in effect the predicative element in a sentence (see also in ch.11). But in fact a form is a possibility. The form of reality is the set of possible truths about the world; the form of an object is the set of its possible combinations with other objects; and the form of a sentence is a possible mode of combining proper names, realized in the structure of the sentence (each such mode of combination providing a mode of comparison with reality – i.e. the semantic content of a predicate, as we shall see in chs. 15 and 16). In the exposition which follows I employ a restricted (Fregean) notion of logical form for the sake of simplicity.
- 9 See Anscombe (1959), p. 164 for further examples of this sort.
- 10 An argument for such a view is given by Pears (1987), p. 143, in the course of his exposition of the Picture Theory.

## CHAPTER 7 UNITY OF CONTENT

- 1 Since both formal argument and mathematical calculation occur frequently in science, it might be argued that we do after all have sufficient reason for insisting on mutual knowledge of cognitive content as the condition for communication in scientific discourse. Yet it can be replied, with some plausibility, that the matter is merely one of convenience. What is important is that our respective interpretations of scientific theories and of the statements of the evidence which support them should be logically equivalent. How easy it proves to be to get one another to follow the course of our calculations is an inessential matter of psychology.  
But what of simplicity-considerations in science? On any adequate account of the scientific enterprise these must surely play an essential role. Yet do not they too presuppose mutual knowledge of cognitive content? I think not. Since appeals to simplicity are introduced into accounts of scientific method in order to explain how we may rationally choose between empirically equivalent but logically non-equivalent theories, the notion at issue is not an especially cognitive one. It will rather involve, for example, such things as the postulation of fewer types of theoretical entity.
- 2 It is then no accident that Frege proposes to take mutual knowledge of cognitive content as the condition for communication, since his main interest is in logical and mathematical knowledge.
- 3 The allusion to the ideas of the later Wittgenstein here is intentional. For it is one of the themes of the early sections of *PI* that understanding is a family resemblance (and hence fragmentary) concept. See *PI* 65, 108 and 164.