Is Wittgenstein’s method “transcendental” or “resolute”?

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This paper involves the most “theoretical” part of my research project where I explore ideas on what it would mean to have a critical perspective on the ongoing debate between two modes of understanding Wittgenstein’s philosophical method. This debate has been focused on the so-called continuity that “nonsense” plays in his philosophical procedure in both his early and later work. On the one hand, there are those who belong to the transcendental camp who portray this continuity in terms of how Wittgenstein used forms of nonsense to gesture at inexpressible insights about the limits of thought. And on the other hand, there are those who belong to the resolute camp who consider Wittgenstein’s use of “nonsense” to be criticizing the idea of a limit as a consequence of being firm on the exclusive application of the context principle. This debate originally began as a dispute between the “standard reading” of PMS Hacker (1972) and the “resolute reading” of Cora Diamond and James Conant (2004), which focused mainly on the Tractatus (TLP). Since, both camps argue that their views have implications for understanding Wittgenstein’s later thought, I now rearticulate their debate in the context of the Investigations (PI), i.e., through a contrast between Johnathan Lear (1982, 1986, 1989) and Stephen Mulhall (2007).

My position in this debate attempts to find a middle way between the two camps. I consider how the essentially dialectical nature of Wittgenstein’s writing also relates to a “non-dogmatic solution” that is capable of accepting the varying methods of philosophical clarification found in the transcendental reading and the resolute reading of the later Wittgenstein.

I. Lear’s “Transcendental Negation Method”¹

The idea of a transcendental negation method I associate with Lear responds to the problem of expression that originates from a transcendental idealist reading of Wittgenstein’s early and later

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¹ This is term I coin and associate with Lear.
work. This transcendental idealism consists in how philosophy seeks knowledge of a “thinking
subject” which “conditions” all the judgments we make about our language and world. However, in
the case of Wittgenstein, knowledge of this “thinking subject” cannot be expressed in language. This
problem was raised earlier by Bernard Williams (1974: 76) as he pays attention to what Wittgenstein
says in TLP 5.62, “what the solipsist means is quite correct; only it cannot be said but makes itself
manifest.”

For Williams (1974), the solipsism expressed in TLP extends to PI: Whereas TLP holds the
view that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” PI holds the view that “the limits
of our language mean the limits of our world” (Ibid:82). Thus, TLP investigates the singular form of
the thinking subject called the “Transcendental ‘I’” while PI investigates the plural form of the
thinking subject called “Transcendental ‘We’.” (Ibid). In both cases, the “thinking subject” and
whatever truth we say about “it” is inexpressible. It is in this context that we can understand
Williams (Ibid.) consistently emphasis on how the limits Wittgenstein refers to are limits that
essentially involve a “first-person immediate” experience of ourselves. This experience comes with a
“language of thought” we are unable to explain to others (“a language which I alone understand”
TLP 5.62). In using a language to explain that “language” it is inescapable that we fall back within the
limits of our own thought. We express “something” other than what we intended to express, and
end up talking “nonsense.” For Williams (Ibid: 78, 95), this is a problem that continues through
Wittgenstein’s early and later thought. Philosophy seeks knowledge about the metaphysical subject,
but this knowledge can only be expressed by means nonsense. So the question is how do we expect
someone to understand anything at all in our “nonsense” talk?

A. Lear’s “Transcendental Negation Method”

The term “transcendental negation method” I associated with Lear comes from how he
portrays Wittgenstein to be responding to the problem of inexpressibility raised above by Williams. I
take Lear’s response to consist mainly in the amplification of the role of “showing” in Wittgenstein’s philosophical method.

If the truths of philosophy cannot be said, then one cannot say that they cannot be said, for one cannot say what it is that cannot be said. This is the self-conscious incoherence of the *Tractatus*. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not discuss how philosophy can, after all, be said: he passes over that subject in silence. **The *Investigations* should, I think, be seen as an act of pointing.** (Lear 1982: 385, emphasis added)

In the above passage, we can find Lear’s response to Williams’ question of how it becomes possible for inexpressible truths (about the “thinking subject”) becomes communicated. And this is through how the use of nonsense in early and later Wittgenstein functions as kind of pointing. As I understand it, this “pointing” is unique because of how it becomes both “perceptive” and “modest.”

**A. Perceptiveness**

The idea of transcendental negation in Lear is “perceptive” because of how it develops William’s claims on the connection between Wittgenstein’s unconventional writing and the transcendental content of his philosophy. That kind of writing seems to embody an important form of nonsense which conveys “truths” about the limits of thought, and hence of ourselves as thinking subjects. For example, Wittgenstein wrote, “in an important sense, there is no [thinking] subject” (**TLP** 5.631 as cited in Williams Ibid:78). Like Williams, Lear can be taken to emphasize an inconsistency: Why does Wittgenstein “deny” the presence of a thinking subject and yet also claim that such absence is “important.”? Here, we might think of Wittgenstein’s qualification “in an important sense” to be a **cue** that he is **not** endorsing some kind of empiricism in his denial of the thinking subject. On the contrary, as Lear says above, such kind of writing becomes Wittgenstein’s “self-conscious incoherence.” That incoherence is Wittgenstein’s way of pointing to a “truth” that cannot be expressed by language. Wittgenstein’s ambivalent form of writing is his *intentional*
nonsense so that a special gesture towards transcendental insights becomes possible. These self-refuting remarks transgress the limits of sense so that the reader may experience an absurdity which directs his attention to the very “conditions” of his own consciousness. Thus, for Lear, Wittgenstein uses forms of nonsense as “transcendental negations” which serve as pointing gestures toward inexpressible insights about the limits of thought. This kind of “negation” enables a philosopher to influence (if only indirectly) the first-person experience of his interlocutor as a thinking subject.

When applied to Wittgenstein’s later work, Lear says that this is the same kind of nonsense Wittgenstein employed in *PI*. This becomes evident as we see in *PI* a similar kind of vagueness and ambivalence; e.g., when Wittgenstein uses the term “form of life.” As Lear later explains, the idea of a form of life is essentially a living concept that “emerges” or makes itself “manifest” through its absence (Lear 1989). Similar to the treatment of the “thinking subject” in TLP 5.631, Lear portrays Wittgenstein to be implying that “form of life” can only be understood via negativa. This via negativa approach (which I have called transcendental negation) now comes through a dialectic between the subjective and objective aspects of what it means to understand a form of life and “follow a rule”. In one sense, for example, the idea of a form of life consists of actions determined by an individual’s judgment alone, like in cases where we understand a rule in simply terms of it “strikes” us (*PI* 217). But, this “judgment based conception” seems to be constantly challenged by the view that following a rule can involves public criteria, and that our agreement in those criteria is not mere “agreement in opinion but (agreement) in form of life.” (*PI* 241). Such public criteria might in turn be challenged by a sense of judgment that is more responsive to variant examples like when a person draws the correct application of a rule only “as a matter of course” (*PI* 238). In this dialectic, there is no finality or conclusion. And Lear (1986) takes this lack of finality to be a parallel to the “unfinished” nature of *PI*. That unfinished nature is also a gesture towards the philosophical self-

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2 This is more famously found in *TLP* 6.54 where Wittgenstein says that whoever understands him also recognizes that all the philosophical propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical.

3 Here, I take Lear to also be following Williams’ (1974) earlier attention to how Wittgenstein and the philosophers that write about end up making “preposterous” claims when describing the idea of form of life.
consciousness of the reader. So for Lear, Wittgenstein’s use of forms of “nonsense” in TLP and PI functions as a pointing gesture so that the reader can mirror the transcendental insights he also has in himself as a thinking subject capable of self-conscious use of language. The idea of a transcendental negation is modest in its view that it can only function as a mirror that prods the reader onto a “personal” journey towards self-knowledge.

B. Modesty

The idea of transcendental negation in Lear is modest because of how it portrays philosophical understanding to be a two way process where an interlocutor must also do his part of inward reflection. Philosophy is concerned with some kind of self-understanding which the philosopher can only point to or hint at. Wittgenstein does this “pointing” through his conflicting and repetitive remarks. This seems to be alluded to in the PI preface as he says that his philosophical remarks “criss-cross in every direction” where “the same points were always being approached from afresh from different directions.” This kind of repetition seems to be his way of paying attention to relevant uses of words that can give the reader some form of transcendental insight. These forms of nonsense in Wittgenstein’s writing style functions as useful invitations for the reader to engage in some kind of reflection about the philosophical consciousness that surrounds his use of language. But it is the reader himself who has to experience and respond to such an invitation by mirroring the very limits of thought that the philosopher seeks to convey through “language-games.” As Wittgenstein himself describe, the term language game is meant to highlight the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity (PI 23), and this activity is something that is essentially shared in some kind of life (or cooperative activity) that we have with others. In this sense, the philosopher’s interlocutor must meet the philosopher half-way. Otherwise, no philosophical insights will be understood or communicated at all.
II. Mulhall’s “resolute method”

A. Problem: failure of therapy

A major problem in Lear is that he fails to give justice to the therapeutic aspect of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. This therapeutic aspect is found in Wittgenstein’s remarks on how philosophy does not endorse any kind of thesis (PI 128) and on how it is concerned only with a “clarity” that dissolves philosophical problems (PI 133). This “clarity” brings the philosopher back to the “rough ground” of ordinary language (PI 107) and makes him avoid theorizing about language. In light of these remarks, Lear’s claims on how Wittgenstein sought to articulate “truths” about the thinking subject unwittingly becomes a thesis. That such a thesis becomes phrased in the language of “inexpressibility” and “showing” makes it all the more theoretical. This appeal to “showing” becomes a kind of “elitism” when philosophers with their so-called “deep and specialized insights” refuse to modify their language-use in a way that responds to the clarity needed by their interlocutors. For Mulhall, it is the need that emerges in these contexts of discourse which determines which kinds of language-use will be effective. 4

B. Mulhall’s “resolute method”

So one way of understanding why the method Mulhall attributes to Wittgenstein came to be called “resolute” is because of how it becomes firm in not associating Wittgenstein’s philosophy with the endorsement of any kind of thesis. This non-endorsement of theses becomes importantly paired with their view of how the “context of use” is the only thing relevant in philosophical clarification. As I understand Mulhall, this exclusive emphasis on “context of use” has a therapeutic and practical function because: 1) it undermines the idea of limits of thought and 2) it leads to the discovery of “words” that give our thoughts clear expression. Let me clarify these two points by explaining how

4 See Mulhall’s introduction to WPL (2007) as he explains the significance of the context principle in coming up with the so-called logical point of view of philosophical clarification. This “point of view of logic” (Ibid:2) seems to be what guides the imaginative activity that Mulhall takes Wittgenstein to endorse “resolutely” in recognizing the nonsense that comes with the idea of a private language. The idea of “non-elitism” which Mulhall explicitly calls as “non-elitist model of perfectionism” (Ibid:15) also comes from how Mulhall takes Cavell’s Wittgenstein to endorse a self-critical approach to linguistic clarification as he pays attention to our expressions’ context of significant use in ordinary language.
Mulhall might describe the “nonsense” found in the expression “Socrates is identical” (TLP 5.473).

This expression is found in one among Wittgenstein’s remarks which Conant and Diamond (2004:56) mentioned in support of their “resolute reading” of the Tractatus. I now use it to clarify Mulhall’s resolute reading of the Investigations given how he presents his position to be in agreement with the austere conception of nonsense of Conant and Diamond. Let me quote TLP 5.473 below:

Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a meaning to some of its constituents. (Even if we think we have done so)

Thus, the reason why ‘Socrates is identical’ says nothing is that we have not given any adjectival meaning to the word ‘identical.’

In the passage above, Wittgenstein seems to criticize Frege for failing to be firm in considering only the context of “use” in our analysis of an expression. Likewise, we can understand the resolute reading of Mulhall in terms of how Wittgenstein treated nonsensical expressions as a case where there is merely a “failure of meaning or use” According to the resolute reading, both early and later Wittgenstein aims at giving emphasis on an analysis of language that is focused only on the expressions context of use. In this light, both TLP and PI “refashions Frege’s context principle” so that it can fully acknowledge possibilities in meaning that come with our everyday use of language. Thus, one way of interpreting the above remark is in terms of how Lear takes a position similar to Frege: he does not become “resolute” in trusting the imaginative activity that comes with the clarification of context to either to articulate the “symbol” expressed by our use of “signs” or to treat those “signs” as empty. It is in this latter sense of taking the perspective of “use” that the

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5 See in particular Mulhall (Ibid: 10-12) as Mulhall talks about “a properly resolute reading of the Investigations”, how he is in essential agreement with Conant’s reading of the nonsense found in Wittgenstein’s Remarks on Private Language, and how he is concerned with transferring the “originally Tractarian distinction between resolute and substantial readings to the context of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy.”

6 This view has been criticized by Meredith Williams as a kind of “radical continuity thesis” that makes no distinction between the early and later Wittgenstein. It is a debate I take for granted to focus on clarifying the philosophical method endorsed by the later Wittgenstein. To say the least, the proponents of the resolute reading defends its view by citing remarks in the Tractatus that shows how early Wittgenstein aimed to give emphasis on the context of use in ordinary language. Among these are: 1) TLP 3.3 “Only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning” and 2) TLP 5.5563 “In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand are in perfect logical order.” See also Conant’s “The Method of the Tractatus” (TMTT, 2002)

7 By “Frege,” I refer mainly to the ineffabilist interpretation of Frege that was described by Conant (Ibid.)
nonsensical expressions we encounter in philosophy becomes indistinguishable from “plain nonsense.”

This plain nonsense might be understood when we distinguish between two ways from we can proceed with analyzing the nonsensical expression “Socrates is identical”: one like that of a child and one like that of a philosopher. The child and conventional philosopher is likely to understand that expression differently. The philosopher is somewhat like an adult who has been habituated to the individual “meanings” of the sign that make up the whole expression. He is likely to interpret the expression as nonsensical because of a misuse of the sign “identical.” It is as if the term identical cannot be used without some other object to which it is having an identical relation with. This “cannot” which is not expressed but merely “gestured at” is the idea of a limit that Mulhall criticizes. This resolute criticism consists in being able to consider how there is no such “misuse” of the nonsensical expression like for example how a child unaccustomed with philosophical concepts and logical categories of Frege would simply be open to acknowledging possibilities in meaning in a given circumstance. Either the child projects that expression into a context of significant use. Or, the child understands a failure of meaning that is global; he is not even able to identify a meaning for the constituent signs that make up the expression. This “child’s perspective” seems to be what Wittgenstein himself endorses as he also says in TLP 5.473 that “the reason why ‘Socrates is identical’ says nothing is that we have not given any adjectival meaning to the word ‘identical.’”

A parallel passage to TLP 5.473 which Mulhall (Ibid:9) cites in the Investigations is PI 500:

When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.

8 In this case, the expression “Socrates is identical” might now be understood similar to the expression “Socrates is a philosopher” where the “philosopher” is taken to be the “adjectival meaning” which the sign “identical” symbolizes. This “translation” of our expressions into more variant but intelligible uses of words comes in light of a certain play with words that avoids a merely private association of meaning. This is because the idea of language-games involves a method of philosophical clarification in the context of a “dialectic” (or “literary exchange”) between the philosopher and the interlocutor.
This remark can be understood as a criticism of Lear’s portrayal of a Wittgenstein who is concerned with forms of nonsense which gestures at inexpressible truths. From the perspective of Mulhall’s resolute reading those forms of nonsense are to be considered as part of elucidatory uses of words that Wittgenstein employs to be able to clarify the “symbol” which we find logically basic in relation to the use of a “sign.” Those forms of nonsense may indeed be considered as pointing at “something.” But once that “something” is given a context of use in ordinary language, that “something” will cease to be inexpressible and our nonsensical expressions can now be recognized as empty. In this case, the nonsensicality of the sign in the expression “Socrates is identical” becomes identical to the nonsense found in the gibberish “blah, blah, blah.” Both are occurrences of signs where there is a simply a failure of meaning or a failure of use. For the resolute reading, the main aim of Wittgenstein is not to endorse some kind of inexpressible truth about the limits of thought, and of ourselves as “thinking subjects.” Rather, Wittgenstein’s aim is to endorse a method of clarification which enables us to understand what those “truths” might mean in everyday language. In this resolute view, the dialectical nature of Wittgenstein’s writing does not really function as a pointing gesture to that which is inexpressible, but a tool for finding uses of words which helps overcome his struggle for expression.

I. My stand

I currently have two reservations on why I am not a full-blown resolute reader. My first reservation comes from how I have yet to understand how the resolute reading might explain Wittgenstein’s remark in 1931 on how the “limit of language” might require a certain Kantian solution.

The limit of language manifests itself in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to (is the translation of) a sentence without simply repeating the sentence. We are involved here with the Kantian solution of the problem of philosophy’. (CV, p.13)

While this remark is not found in PI (1953) it is also written after TLP (1922). So, it may be understood to have a bearing on the so-called continuity in Wittgenstein’s philosophical method. The
above remark describes a “limit of language” that cannot be described without ending in some kind
of redundant claim fares very well with the reading of Lear and the supposed vagueness of that
comes with Wittgenstein’s claims about “form of life”. That vagueness may very well be the pointing
gestures to the limits of our thought that language fails to describe. Hence, this remark can be taken
to support Lear’s views on how Wittgenstein practiced a philosophical method that employs forms of
nonsense that points at inexpressible transcendental insights.

Indeed, we cannot accept this remark for its face value since Wittgenstein also describes PI II
that we can invent new words to find a way to describe the indescribable. Similar to how a talented
painter might find a way to portray the difference between a “genuinely loving look” and one that is
merely feigned, the philosopher may reinvent a word for a given context of discourse and find a way
to express the “indescribable.”

Because of this contrast, I find it useful to remember how Wittgenstein wrote in a dialectical
manner similar to Kant’s antinomies of pure reason. As Cahill (2005) suggests, the point of such
writing is not really to endorse one conclusion over another, but to demonstrate the “skeptical
impasse” that comes from endorsing a dogmatic solution to philosophical problems. This impasse
might also apply to my current dilemma on deciding which philosophical method Wittgenstein used.
Is it that of Lear which portrays Wittgenstein to be using forms of nonsense to gesture at
transcendental insights? Or, is it that of Mulhall which portrays Wittgenstein to be using “nonsense”
as a call to exercise creativity in language so we can overcome our struggle for expression.

For my part, it seems that the nondogmatic nature of Wittgenstein’s writing style suggests
the possibility of including both. There are cases where the transcendental reading is right: gestures
can be appropriate in clarifying how certain kinds of concepts, like how a clarinet sounds or how a
game is played (PI 78). At the same time, there are cases where the resolute reading is right:

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9 The remark goes: “I may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one…. But I may be quite
incapable of describing the difference. And this not because the languages I know have no words for it. For why not
introduce new words? - If I were a very talented painter I might conceivably represent the genuine and the simulated
glance in pictures. (PI II,xi)
gestures may end up as a kind of obscurity, and we have to exercise creativity and perseverance in finding the right words and contexts that can help us overcome our struggle for expression. Here, the artful employment of words (not just gestures) may prove useful. Thus, as I see it, there need not be any dichotomy between the “transcendental showing” of Lear and the “creative saying” of Mulhall.

Wittgenstein himself seems to endorse this kind of “solution” as he compares the multiplicity that characterize our language use to the multiplicity that characterize our use of tools (PI 23). Like tools, our words have different uses, and those uses themselves might evolve in the hands of a philosopher whose need for expressing difficult thoughts turns him into a craftsman of ordinary language.

References:


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