

PART II

THE STANDARD INTERPRETATIONS:  
LANGUAGE AND WORLD

## THE STANDARD INTERPRETATIONS

This story, the mainline story, begins in 1922 with Russell's introduction to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Russell set the stage for all that was to come, for all that transpired in the following eighty years, interpreting and re-interpreting Wittgenstein. So influential was Russell's setting of the stage, so prohibitive, so unequivocal and so formative that, in a perplexing sense, Russell is not usually perceived as an "interpreter" of Wittgenstein at all. Indeed, Russell's introduction is (almost) always included in any publication of the *Tractatus* in so automatic a manner that it is naturally seen as a part of the *Tractatus* rather than as an interpretation, one among many, of it. By beginning our story with Russell, and by voicing the (for us, perfectly unobjectionable) stand that Russell's is an interpretation like all others, we posit not only a chronological starting point but also a thematic, interpretive springboard from which the whole story can then be told and understood.

The theme which will run like a silk-thread throughout this part of the story, the standard mainline part, was formulated by Russell as "the relations which are necessary between words and things in any language." It is the excavation, the explication, the analysis, and the differential emphasis on parts of these relations (between words and things, or between language and world) that characterize both the interpreters and the issues up for interpretation in this standard story. In other words, and in no uncertain terms, we view the grand story of Wittgenstein interpretation as revolving around the core question: what is the relationship between language and the world? This core question is so central, and, at the same time, so wide-ranging that it permits us to include in our story interpretations that address a large number of related questions: What do words mean? What do words refer to? What do propositions refer to? What is meaning? What is truth? What is the world made up of? What are objects? What are facts? What are the relationships between all the above terms (words, propositions, meaning, truth, objects, facts)? And onwards to no less important, though perhaps less immediate questions: What is logic? Is language logical? Is the world? What is the meaning of philosophical propositions? Scientific propositions? What can be said meaningfully? What cannot? And finally, to derived questions that are no less prominent in the *Tractatus*, and that still adhere, albeit perhaps less

clearly, to the encompassing theme of the relationship between language and the world that rules our story: What are the limits of language? Of the world? Is solipsism true? Is realism? And what is the status of this book itself, given its adamant attempt to draw these limits?

Notice, though, that these questions, even while seeming to be so naturally connected to readings of the *Tractatus*, will go on to vex us in expounding those interpretations which do not deal specifically with the *Tractatus*, which treat of other Wittgensteinian texts, or which do not talk of texts at all. Still, all the interpretations presented in this standard story will adhere to the original Russellian characterization (true, of the *Tractatus* only) of Wittgenstein as asking questions about the relations between language and the world. However, our move to interpretations of the later Wittgenstein – he of the *Philosophical Investigations* – will remain within the confines of standard readings not by insisting on these relations, but rather by talking, more generally, about questions having to do with language (but not necessarily language *and* the world). In other words, our moves from the early to the later Wittgenstein and from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* will still be carried out under the auspices of what can be generally termed “the philosophy of language,” and with our concomitant insistence on this being the main, the mainline, and definitely the standard, reading of Wittgenstein in the twentieth century.

Notice also that many questions now believed to be Wittgensteinian questions – about mathematics, about ethics, about society, about aesthetics, about religion – do not naturally make it into the pantheon of mainline Wittgenstein readings, simply by not being directly related to the question of language. We waver here, however: when questions having to do with mathematics, with ethics, with society, with aesthetics, or with religion, *do* seem intimately related to Wittgenstein’s thoughts on language – do they still merit inclusion in the standard part of the story? Indeed, some may say that in no context do these questions *not* connect with language. We will say, however, that contexts will tell; when a necessary link between Wittgenstein’s views on non-linguistic matters to his view on language rears its head, these matters will make their way into our standard story. Otherwise they will be put off to later chapters.

Five (and a half) stations make up the standard story. They are not necessarily chronological stations – although, naturally enough, there are developmental ties between them. And they do begin at the historical beginning – with Russell’s introduction to the *Tractatus*. This first station is what we term the metaphysical *and* anti-metaphysical interpretation – that group of interpretations (which roughly includes interpretations by Russell, Ramsey, the Vienna Circle at large, Carnap in particular) that address the language-world question from a metaphysical *or* anti-metaphysical perspec-

tive; i.e., by imputing to Wittgenstein a straightforward metaphysical or anti-metaphysical answer to the language-world question. The second station (wherein reside Anscombe, Malcolm, Hintikka) is still colored by the metaphysical angle but obsesses in more sophisticated a manner; i.e., by realizing that the linguistic perspective gives all and any tinges to the metaphysical questions via questions on language. And the third station – reasonable meta-readings – is still on the same general track connecting language and world. It merits the “reasonable” label by the finely tuned balance it accords the two protagonists, metaphysics and philosophy of language. It is the fourth station which inserts a substantial turn in the tracks – by leaving behind the metaphysical temperament and focusing on the distinction between meaning and nonsense as giving the essence of both content and structure of the *Tractatus*. This turn to a fundamentally different emphasis in the reading of the early Wittgenstein has consistent parallelisms concerning the later Wittgenstein as well; both in the sense of reading the later Wittgenstein very differently than was read before and in the relationship between the two Wittgensteins. That is to say, taking nonsense so seriously makes the traditionally clear dichotomy between the early and the later Wittgenstein far less clear; indeed, the two Wittgensteins are now seen in a naturally developmental, rather than in a contradictory or contrarian, relationship. But on to the fifth station – where the concept of nonsense becomes all pervading and supplies readings of Wittgenstein that have been (self-)described as ethical, and even nihilistic. Not wanting to go to such extremes, but being fully cognizant of the implications of taking nonsense so seriously, some interpreters (the fifth-and-a-half station) eclipse this climax of the mainline of interpretive travel by turning, finally, to that old companion, common sense.

Finally, there could have been a sixth station traveling the way of the continent, the European continent; a station that provided interpretations of Wittgenstein so different from the standard analytic readings that have developed incrementally over three-quarters of a century that its place at the end of a numbered series of stations is questionable. We attest to hesitation here in order to make clear: we are not convinced that this could-have-been sixth station, the spot at which (much of) Wittgensteinian interpretation stands today, can even be called a “standard” interpretation. Although it comes out of the line of standard interpretations naturally enough – in the chronological sense of naturally – is it standard in the sense of dealing with the language-world relation? A negative answer to this hesitation has moved (the group we will call) “continental” readings to a different section of our storytelling.