

## *The Bounds of Sense*

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### I.

My title is, of course, a direct echo of the title that P. F. Strawson gave to his famous study of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>1</sup> Strawson's title, as he pointed out in his preface, was in turn a partial echo of a title that Kant himself had considered for the *Critique*, or at any rate for an embryonic version of the *Critique*.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Marcus Herz, written in 1771, Kant had told Herz that he was busy on a work which he called *The Bounds of Sensibility and Reason*.<sup>3</sup> Not that this was Strawson's only reason for his choice of title. The title also, he claimed, "[alluded] compendiously to the three main strands in [Kant's] thought."<sup>4</sup> As he went on to amplify this claim, he indicated how, among other things, his title played on the ambiguity of the word "sense", with its connotations of both experience and meaning. He wrote:

In two ways [Kant] draws the bounds of sense, and in a third he traverses them. He argues, on the one hand, that a certain minimal structure is essential to any conception of experience which we can make truly intelligible to ourselves; on the other, that the attempt to extend beyond the limits of experience the use of structural concepts, or of any other concepts, leads only to claims empty of meaning. . . . [But Kant] seeks to draw the bounds of sense from a point outside them, a point which, if they are rightly drawn, cannot exist.<sup>5</sup>

That Strawson managed to accomplish so much in the mere naming of his book prompted one reviewer to write, "The title itself is a roguish stroke of genius."<sup>6</sup>

My aim in this essay is to explore some of the resonances of that book's wonderful Kantian title, and to relate these to some key moments in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, one of whose defining features has been the aspiration to draw the bounds of sense. Both experience and meaning have been of fundamental concern to twentieth-century analytic philosophy, but the latter quintessentially so, and my chief concern in this essay will be with the bounds, in particular, of meaning. Henceforth I shall accordingly use "sense" only in that sense.

This aspiration of twentieth-century philosophy to draw the bounds of sense has in turn been dogged by the very threat of self-stultification to which Strawson saw Kant fall prey. That threat, at a highly schematic level, is clear. Any attempt to draw the bounds of sense by dividing some metaphorical space into two, that whereof one can make sense and that whereof one cannot, looks as if it must fall foul of the fact that one cannot make sense of the divide itself unless one can make sense of both sides. As Wittgenstein famously says, in his preface to the book whose contribution to this dialectic has arguably been more significant than any other and whose own echoes will have been clear in what I have said so far, "in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to be able to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e., we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)."<sup>7</sup> There are various episodes in the history of analytic philosophy in the last century that have been, in effect, more or less self-conscious attempts to work around this aporia, either by drawing the bounds of sense in some entirely different way, or by drawing them in this way and denying that doing so is self-stultifying, or by drawing them in this way, acknowledging that doing so is self-stultifying, and learning to live with the self-stultification.

## II.

Let us begin with the *Tractatus*. Among the countless exegetical problems posed by that extraordinary and perplexing book, perhaps the deepest are problems about where it stands in relation to this aporia. All three of the ways just mentioned of trying to work around the aporia have been read into the book. The two extremes, whereby on the one hand Wittgenstein is read as attempting some quite different way of demarcating sense, and whereby on the other hand he is read as attempting to live with self-stultification, are emblematic of what I shall call "new" readings of the book and "traditional" readings of it.<sup>8</sup>

New readings of the *Tractatus* hold the following:

The limit to be drawn is the straightforward limit that separates those signs to which, as a matter of brute historical fact, meanings have been assigned from those signs to which, as a matter of brute historical fact, no meanings have been assigned; and there is not the least self-stultification in characterizing what lies on the latter side of the limit in precisely that way. What gives the project the interest it has, as a philosophical rather

than a merely lexicographical exercise, is in part its generality. But its chief interest lies in the fact that there are temptations of a distinctively “philosophical” kind to see meaning where it is lacking. Wittgenstein’s aim in the *Tractatus* is to eliminate such temptations. And the way in which he tries to achieve this aim is by producing signs to which such temptations attach; then indulging the temptations to such an extent that they eventually become unsustainable and disappear. Again, there is not the least self-stultification in this.

Traditional readings of the *Tractatus*, by contrast, hold the following:

There are, in Wittgenstein’s view, things that cannot be put into words. And what divides these things from the things that can be put into words is something that itself cannot be put into words. Any attempt to say what divides them must therefore issue in nonsense. If this means that any attempt to say what divides them must be self-stultifying, so be it. It does not follow that any such attempt must be a failure. For there may be a *special kind* of nonsense that is able to serve the very function required here. And indeed Wittgenstein thinks there is. Such nonsense is precisely what he takes the bulk of the *Tractatus* to consist in. He thinks that the nonsense that he himself produces can help us to apprehend some of the things that cannot be put into words. In particular, it can help us to apprehend what divides the things that cannot be put into words from the things that can. The self-stultification is benign.

It is not my purpose here to arbitrate in this exegetical debate. But I do want to highlight one advantage that new readings certainly have over their more traditional rivals, namely that they chime well with that section in the preface from which I quoted earlier. Significantly, my quotation, though relevant to the structure of the aporia that I was using it to illustrate, was concerned with drawing a limit to *thought*, not with drawing a limit to sense (= meaning). But it is the latter that is currently of concern to us. And precisely Wittgenstein’s point, in the larger context from which I quoted, is that, although the former is impossible—for the very reason given in the quotation—the latter, where attention turns from the object of thought to the expression of thought, and where the limit to be drawn is the limit that separates those signs that are used to express thoughts from those signs that are not, is perfectly possible. For there is no suggestion in this latter case that the limit to be drawn is a limit between what has one kind of subject matter and what has another. It is a limit, rather, between what has any kind of subject matter and what has none. And we can certainly say what constitutes *this* limit—without having to say anything about a subject matter about which, in the nature of the case, nothing can be said. Whatever lies on the “wrong” side of this limit “will simply be,” as Wittgenstein says, “nonsense.”<sup>9</sup>

Here is another way of approaching these issues—in terms of different kinds of possibility. Intuitively, some kinds of possibility are strictly subsumed by others. Thus whatever is technologically possible is physically possible, but not vice versa; whatever is physically possible is mathematically possible, but not vice versa. The natural picture here is that of a series of concentric circles, in which larger circles

include possibilities that smaller circles exclude. To be sure, there are some kinds of possibility, notably those that have a cognitive element, that may not fit this picture. These kinds of possibility may cut across the others. For instance, a given physical possibility may qualify as such for reasons that are too complex or subtle for us fully to grasp and may thereby count as an impossibility of another, cognitive kind that in other cases extends beyond the physical: say, the imaginable.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it may be that none of these kinds of possibility admits of a precise characterization and that what separates any two is always contestable. But still, the picture of a series of concentric circles, applicable in at least some central cases, is an intuitively compelling one. And it is often the means we use to indicate what a given kind of possibility excludes, or at least some of what it excludes: we say that certain things are not possibilities of that kind, by first identifying them as possibilities of some more inclusive kind. Thus a politician may say, adverting to what is technologically possible, “There are *some* ways of improving the safety of our railways that are unaffordable.” A botanist may say, adverting to what is physically possible, “There are *some* temperatures below which plant life is unsustainable.” (The politician is not vindicated by the technological impossibility of a completely failsafe automated signaling system; nor the botanist by the physical impossibility of any temperature below absolute zero.)

Now it is natural to suppose, further, that there is one kind of possibility that subsumes all the rest. We might call this “ultimate” possibility, or “logical” possibility. True, there are various reasons why this idea of an all-inclusive kind of possibility is not as straightforward as it appears, even when complications concerning possibilities of a more or less cognitive kind are set aside. Thus consider the fact that the impossibility of something’s being both green all over and red all over, though logical in a loose sense, does not turn on the meanings of what would standardly be recognized as logical constants.<sup>11</sup> But, to the extent that we are entitled to think in terms of one all-inclusive kind of possibility, we have a further compelling illustration of the aporia that afflicts the drawing of the bounds of sense. For we obviously cannot say, except as a kind of joke, that what this all-inclusive kind of possibility excludes are possibilities of such and such another kind, as it may be the “illogical” possibility that grass both is and is not green. This all-inclusive kind of possibility is not just another circle in the space we have been considering. It *is* the space we have been considering. To delimit it requires something of an altogether different kind. It requires an ascent, however indirect, to the metalanguage, whereby certain combinations of words can be said not to represent possibilities at all. They can be said, in one good sense of the phrase, *not to make sense*. This accords with Wittgenstein’s shift of attention in the preface to the *Tractatus* away from thought to the expression of thought. It also accords with various remarks in his later work. At one point, in *Philosophical Grammar*, commenting on the infinitude of the sequence of cardinal numbers, Wittgenstein insists that we should not say, “There is no last cardinal number”—as though we were excluding some possibility—but should rather say, “The expression ‘last cardinal number’ makes no sense.”<sup>12</sup>

And in *Philosophical Investigations*, having remarked that “essence is expressed by grammar,” he says of a puzzle that he is wrestling with there, “The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if *there were something one couldn't do*.”<sup>13</sup>

This shift of attention from the object of thought to the expression of thought, or from possibilities to the representation of possibilities, does seem to provide a non-self-stultifying way of drawing the bounds of sense. (Of course, there remains the exegetical puzzle of why Wittgenstein should nevertheless have stepped beyond those bounds when trying to execute this project in the *Tractatus*; but we have already seen how new readings of the *Tractatus* address this puzzle.) The basic procedure of drawing the bounds of sense by distinguishing, not between that of which sense can be made and that of which it cannot, but between that which has sense and that which does not, appears unimpeachable. But is it?

I alluded earlier to the fact that the project is supposed to be a philosophical project, not a merely lexicographical one. It will of course count as a philosophical project in so far as it provides for a general account of *what it is* to have sense and does not merely, and literally, issue in a combined lexicon and grammar for some particular language. Nevertheless, if it is to have the kind of philosophical point that drawing the bounds of sense had for Kant, it must do more than that. For one thing, it must combat various illusions of sense.

According to new readings of the *Tractatus*, that is precisely what the project, as executed there, does do; or at least, that is precisely what Wittgenstein intends it to do. The way in which Wittgenstein tries to realize this intention, according to new readings, is by so presenting various illusions of sense that they eventually disappear. But is there not more to it than that? *Should* there not be more to it than that? Surely our philosophical aspirations are not going to be satisfied except in so far as we have some sort of diagnosis—some sort of explanation for why various assignments of meanings to signs appear to confer sense where they do not—and, more generally and more significantly, except in so far as we have some general philosophical understanding of what assignments of meanings to signs can achieve and what, despite appearances, they cannot.<sup>14</sup> How clear is it that we can attain and express *such* an understanding, itself a project in drawing the bounds of sense, without self-stultification? How clear is it, for instance, that we can attain and express such an understanding without identifying various things which cannot be expressed, and which cannot therefore be suitably identified, no matter what assignments of meanings to signs we make? How clear is it, for that matter, that this is not Wittgenstein's project in the *Tractatus*?<sup>15</sup>

At the very beginning of his book Wittgenstein writes, “The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.”<sup>16</sup> This is connected to his subsequent remark that “propositions can only say *how* things are, not *what* they are.”<sup>17</sup> Thus although we can *name* things, and thereby speak *about* them, we cannot put them into words, or express them by means of propositions, in the way we can facts. These remarks help to combat the temptation, real enough in my view, to express what one understands in knowing the meaning of a word by casting it in

propositional form, as though what one knew were *that* something is the case. Such remarks also have the kind of diagnostic generality to which I was referring in the previous paragraph. Yet the claim that the world consists of facts, not of things, stands in direct violation of something that Wittgenstein says later in the book, echoing his admonishment in the preface against drawing the limits of thought:

[We] cannot say in logic, "The world has this in it, and this, but not that."

For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.<sup>18</sup>

So Wittgenstein has found himself falling prey to the very threat of self-stultification that he highlighted in the preface.<sup>19</sup> Nor is it clear that he has any other way of conveying his insights into the nature of language. True, he might urge upon us a distinction between effable states of knowledge, such as someone's knowledge that grass is green, and ineffable states of knowledge, such as someone's knowledge of the meaning of the word "green"; and he might insist, without any obvious self-stultification, that only knowledge of the former kind can be expressed by what has sense, or in other words can be expressed at all. But if he did thereby manage to avoid self-stultification, then he would do so only at the price of vacuity. He would still not have done justice to his own insights into what an abortive attempt to express knowledge of the latter kind would be an abortive attempt to do—insights, that is, into what would *motivate* the attempt. It remains unclear whether he has any way of conveying these insights without himself making that same abortive attempt. The aporia remains stubbornly in his way, still to be negotiated.

### III.

Let us return to the very idea of demarcating that of which one can make sense by dividing some metaphorical territory into that of which one can make sense and that of which one cannot. In taking for granted that there is something incoherent about this, we are taking for granted a relatively undemanding conception of what it is to make sense of something. For the thought, presumably, is that

(1) in order to effect such a divide, one must make sense of it,

and

(2) in order to make sense of such a divide, one must make sense of what lies on both sides of it.

But there are more demanding conceptions of what it is to make sense of something which allow us to resist either (1) or (2). Thus on a conception whereby one does not make sense of something unless one's understanding of that thing has a

suitable grounding in experience, we can resist (1): one might be able to effect such a divide by arriving at an understanding of it which is not in any relevant sense experiential. Again, on a conception whereby one does not make sense of something unless one attains a significant amount of knowledge about that thing, we can resist (2): one might be able to attain a significant amount of knowledge about such a divide without knowing anything, or anything substantial, about what lies on its “far” side. We need to consider ways of working around the aporia which are variations on one or other of these two themes.

It is instructive, first, to ask whether Kant himself might be exonerated in these terms. Consider the opening section of John McDowell’s *Mind and World*.<sup>20</sup> In that section McDowell refers to the famous passage in the *Critique* where Kant argues that we need both intuitions and concepts in order to know anything and insists that the former in the absence of the latter are “blind” while the latter in the absence of the former issue in thoughts that are “empty”.<sup>21</sup> “For a thought to be empty,” McDowell comments, “. . . would be for it not really to be a thought at all, and that is surely Kant’s point; he is not, absurdly, drawing our attention to a special kind of thoughts, the empty ones.”<sup>22</sup> But it seems to me that that is precisely what Kant is doing, or at least what he takes himself to be doing. This is why, elsewhere in the *Critique*, he insists on the distinction between what we can think and what we can know. What we can think outstrips what we can know precisely because it includes what we can think without intuitions: it includes our “empty” thoughts.<sup>23</sup> Granted this distinction, the distinction between what we can think and what we can know, it is entirely reasonable to equate the bounds of sense that Kant wishes to draw with the bounds of what we can know. It is entirely reasonable, in other words, to accredit Kant with a relatively demanding conception of what it is to make sense of things, whereby we can make sense only of what we can be given in intuition.<sup>24</sup> This in turn allows him to work around the aporia in the first of the two ways suggested in the previous paragraph. Kant can freely admit that the distinction he has drawn between that of which we can make sense and that of which we cannot—between how things appear to us and how they are in themselves, basically—is not itself something of which we can make sense but, along with other things of which we cannot make sense, is something that we can quite legitimately *think*. Thus Kant writes:

That we can . . . have no knowledge of any object as thing in itself, but only in so far as it is an object of sensible intuition, that is, an appearance . . . is proved in the analytical part of the Critique. Thus it does indeed follow that all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of *experience*. But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to *think* them as things in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears.<sup>25</sup>

Does this show that Kant does after all have a satisfactory way of drawing the bounds of sense? Well, no; that conclusion would be precipitate, not least because there is reason to doubt his distinction between what we can think and what we can know.<sup>26</sup> And even if we grant Kant that distinction, there is reason to doubt whether his handling of it is as careful as it should be. For example, he claims to have “proved” that we can have no knowledge of things in themselves. But would such a proof not issue in knowledge of the very sort it is meant to preclude?<sup>27</sup> (Or is there some contrast between the “negative” knowledge in which it would issue and the “positive” knowledge with which it would implicitly be concerned?<sup>28</sup>) However that may be, we are not yet in a position to say that Kant has a satisfactory way of drawing the bounds of sense. But we *can* say that he avoids the immediate structural threat of self-stultification that constitutes the aporia with which we have been concerned.

#### IV.

Let us now return to twentieth-century analytic philosophy, where there is a notable attempt to draw the bounds of sense which looks as though it might retain this very advantage. Indeed it looks as though it might retain the advantages of *both* the principal attempts to draw the bounds of sense that we have considered so far while avoiding the defects of either. It shares with what we found in Wittgenstein a metalinguistic focus on the distinction between that which has sense and that which does not. But it also ventures a general philosophical account of why this distinction needs to be drawn where it does, and here it shares with what we have just found in Kant a relatively demanding conception of what it is to make sense of something. Each of these can, in ways that we have seen, serve to keep self-stultification safely at arm’s length.

The position I am thinking of is the logical positivism that finds popular and forthright expression in A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*.<sup>29</sup> The principle of verification enunciated in that book, whereby a statement has “literal meaning” if and only if it is either analytic or, in some suitably refined sense, empirically verifiable,<sup>30</sup> is a way of distinguishing between that which has a kind of sense and that which lacks it—which provides one sort of protection against the threat of self-stultification. But the principle allows for all sorts of meaningful statements that lack this kind of sense. Most notably, it allows for statements of value, whose meaning is of an altogether different kind, namely to express feelings and/or to prescribe courses of action.<sup>31</sup> To this extent such positivism works with a relatively demanding conception of what it is to make sense of something—which provides a different sort of protection against the threat of self-stultification.

But how exactly is this latter sort of protection to be implemented? We saw two models in the previous section: drawing the boundary around sense in a way that does not involve making sense of that boundary, *contra* (1); and drawing the bound-



ary around sense in a way that does involve making sense of that boundary but does not involve making sense of what is on the “wrong” side of it, *contra* (2). Which of these do advocates of such positivism profess to be doing? This choice is, in effect, a choice about how to answer the question, “What status does the principle of verification itself have?”, a question that is often posed as a challenge to such positivism. Both alternatives are reckoned to be unattractive. But actually both alternatives are (*prima facie*) attractive; and advocates of such positivism, if they experience any embarrassment with the question at all, are liable to experience the embarrassment of riches. The first alternative, whereby drawing the boundary around sense does not involve making sense of that boundary, is to regard the principle as a literally meaningless *prescription* about how to use the expression “literal meaning”. The second alternative, whereby drawing the boundary around sense does involve making sense of it, but in a way that is innocuous, is to regard the principle as an analytic truth validated by how the expression “literal meaning” is already used, at least by philosophers party to the relevant disputes. In *Language, Truth and Logic* it is unclear which of these tactics Ayer takes himself to be adopting. He calls the principle a “definition”, but insists that “it is not supposed to be arbitrary.”<sup>32</sup> Later he makes clear that he took himself to be adopting the first alternative. He says that he was never tempted to regard the principle as either empirically verifiable *or* analytic, then continues:

Happily not everything that the verification principle failed to license was cast by me on the pyre of metaphysics. In my treatment of ethics, I made provision for prescriptive statements . . . . Accordingly, in . . . *Language, Truth and Logic*, I treated the verification principle as a prescriptive definition.<sup>33</sup>

So far, one might think, so good. However, as Ayer also goes on to remark, there remains the question of why the prescription should be obeyed. “I evaded this awkward question,” he writes, “by defying my critics to come up with anything better.”<sup>34</sup> But why is the question awkward? More particularly, why is it awkward for Ayer? Not because he has nothing to say in answer to it. There is plenty that he might say, and that would be consonant with his overall view of these matters, most pertinently that only when a statement has what he calls “literal meaning” is there any such thing as determining its truth or falsity; indeed, only then that it is either true or false. What makes the question awkward for him is something that Michael Dummett forcefully argues in the essay to which Ayer is replying when he makes these remarks: namely, that no answer he gives will be fully satisfactory unless and until it is placed in the context of some general semantic theory that is of just the kind that he wants to cast “on the pyre of metaphysics.”<sup>35</sup> Any such theory must include a philosophical account of what, if anything, enables the truth or falsity of statements of various kinds to be determined, and of how this in turn relates to whether statements of those kinds are true or false. If, for instance, the presence of an evaluative element in a statement prevents its truth or falsity from being determined, and thereby ultimately prevents it from being true or false, then the theory

must indicate why—which is as much as to say that it must engage with the “metaphysics” of value. This is enough to constitute a significant *ad hominem* point against Ayer. More importantly, when combined with the worries expressed above in §2 about the project of attaining and expressing a general philosophical understanding of what any assignment of meanings to signs can achieve, it indicates that there is *still* a threat of self-stultification to be negotiated. Logical positivism may not provide us with the best of both the Wittgensteinian world and the Kantian world after all.

## V.

In §3 I voiced a worry about Kant’s own way of drawing the bounds of sense. This is a worry about his distinction between what we can think and what we can know. The “empty” thoughts that Kant sanctions seem to me (just as they seemed to Strawson<sup>36</sup>) to be too “empty” to do the work that he requires of them. Still, at least in drawing such a distinction Kant indicated one way to avoid the immediate structural threat of self-stultification that afflicted his project. It was something of this same general sort, specifically a distinction of meaning between statements of different kinds, which, momentarily at least, seemed to provide logical positivism with protection against its own equivalent threat.

In the work of Quine there is a descendant of logical positivism which is as hostile as its forebear to the excesses of metaphysics and as deeply committed to the links between sense, verification, and experience, but which is also utterly impatient with any such distinctions of meaning. On Quine’s view, if a statement has meaning at all, then it is either true or false, and there is such a thing as determining its truth or falsity. “Suppose,” Quine writes,

we think of truth in terms of Tarski’s paradigm. The paradigm works for evaluations . . . as well as for statements of fact. And it works equally well for performatives. “Slander is evil” is true if and only if slander is evil, and “I bid you good morning” is true of us on a given occasion if and only if, on that occasion, I bid you good morning . . . There are good reasons for contrasting and comparing performatives and statements of fact, but an animus against the true/false fetish is not one of them.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, whatever else might distinguish determining that one statement is true from determining that another is, there is a holistic interdependence between such things which means that there is never any answer to the question, “What empirical evidence is required to verify just *this* statement?”<sup>38</sup> In particular, there is no statement for which the answer is “None”—no statement which can be verified irrespective of what empirical evidence there is. That is, there is no such thing as an analytic statement. Hence even the distinction of meaning that Quine’s positivist predecessors wanted to draw *within* the range of statements that have sense is

uncongenial to him. Indeed, it is his hostility to *this* distinction which is as emblematic as anything of his own brand of positivism.<sup>39</sup>

*Prima facie*, then, Quine is in trouble. He is espousing a kind of positivism which involves him in drawing the bounds of sense, but which lacks the very resource which looked as though it might enable someone in his position to draw those bounds non-self-stultifyingly. In fact, however, as I indicated in the previous section, what really carries the threat of self-stultification is the attempt to attain and express some general philosophical understanding of why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should. But Quine's refusal to recognize various distinctions of meaning between statements goes hand in glove with a refusal to recognize various distinctions of aim and methodology between explanatory projects: in particular, the distinction between trying to attain and express such a general philosophical understanding and trying to account, in broadly scientific terms, for how, as a result of interactions between us and our environment, some things come to have sense while others do not. As long as understanding why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should is seen as part of this scientific enterprise, and not as some philosophical propaedeutic to it, then it is not at all clear that it carries any threat of self-stultification. And as long as it is *not* seen in this way, then it is not at all clear either that Quine will want anything to do with it or that he should.

To be sure, Quine may find it harder than he supposes to keep some of his predecessors' distinctions at bay. There is a revealing section in *Pursuit of Truth*<sup>40</sup> where Quine addresses the question whether the empiricism that underpins his semantic views is itself empirical. Unsurprisingly, he insists that it is. He writes that "it is a finding of natural science itself, however fallible, that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors."<sup>41</sup> And he later adds, "It would take some extraordinary evidence to [testify to either telepathy or clairvoyance] . . . , but, if that were to happen, then empiricism itself . . . would go by the board."<sup>42</sup> Yet he also seems to acknowledge, as an issue quite different in kind from the empirical issue of what elicits or is used to justify any given scientific statement, the issue of why the statement *counts* as a scientific statement (and thereby counts as having sense). He writes:

When I cite predictions [that is, predictions of sensory input] as the checkpoints of science, . . . I see [that] as defining a particular language game, in Wittgenstein's phrase: the game of science . . . A [statement's] claim to scientific status rests on what it contributes to a theory whose checkpoints are in prediction.<sup>43</sup>

Given the context, this last statement can readily be heard as a prescription, such as Ayer took the verification principle to be; or, worse still for Quine, as an analytic truth.<sup>44</sup>

The important point, however, is that Quine's drawing of the bounds of sense is to be seen as part of a scientific enterprise and, seen as such, it does not appear to be under any special threat of self-stultification. His semantics is informed by his

general worldview and is proffered from a point of immersion within that worldview. Thus just as he couches his empiricism in terms of impacts on sensory receptors, ocular irradiation, and the like, so too he couches his positivist conception of meaning in those same terms.<sup>45</sup>

There is much here to give pause however. I shall mention two worries in particular that Quine's critics have had. First, there is a worry to which McDowell has given celebrated expression, a worry in which we can hear muffled echoes of Wittgenstein's insistence that the world is the totality of facts, not of things.<sup>46</sup> This is the worry that, by construing our evidence for our worldview as a matter of impacts on our sensory receptors, ocular irradiation, and suchlike, Quine is casting entities that are external to our worldview in a role that ought to be filled by entities that are already part of our worldview, namely experiences we have of things being thus and so; and, by the same token, he is representing what ought to be a logical or rational relation, namely the relation between our evidence and the rest of our worldview, as a merely causal relation.<sup>47</sup>

The second worry suggests, conversely as it may appear (but see further below), that Quine has represented the relation between our evidence and our worldview as something *too* intimate. This is a worry that John Campbell has expressed very forcibly.<sup>48</sup> It is the worry that, by construing our evidence for our worldview in terms that depend so heavily on that very worldview, Quine has negated an important principle whose importance, indeed, he himself would be the first to emphasize, namely that our worldview is underdetermined by our evidence. "[Given that] the patterns of ocular irradiation have to be described in terms of the physics of the day," writes Campbell, "how . . . could they be consistent with some rival to the physics of the day?"<sup>49</sup>

Now one might think that Quine has a perfectly satisfactory riposte to Campbell's rhetorical question. What matters, one might think, is not how the patterns of ocular irradiation are to be described, but what their *content* is. Here is an analogy. Imagine a brain in a vat, in a classical skeptical scenario,<sup>50</sup> whose subject thinks that he is living the life of a medieval monk. And suppose we have to draw on various principles of computerized neurotechnology to describe what is happening to the brain. It simply does not follow that what is happening to the brain is enough to refute the subject's impression of what kind of life he is living. Again, suppose we have to use some realist theory about middle-sized dry goods to describe the impact of Samuel Johnson's foot on a stone. It simply does not follow that this impact is enough to refute Berkeleyan idealism.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, if we have to use the physics of the day to describe certain patterns of ocular irradiation, it simply does not follow that these patterns are enough to refute each and every rival to that physics. If there were people who, on broadly the same evidence as ours, accepted such a rival, then they could not acknowledge any such phenomenon as ocular irradiation (which of course would be a deficiency by our lights). They would have to tell their own rival story about what empirical evidence they had for their theory. Yet, for all that, their evidence would in fact (by our lights) involve

ocular irradiation. There is nothing incoherent in this. Such is how the underdetermination of theory by evidence is bound to be described from a point of immersion in one of the underdetermined theories—the only kind of point, in Quine’s view, from which it *can* be described.<sup>52</sup> Nor does this mean that various pragmatic forces cannot eventually bring us to a point of immersion in one of the rivals to the physics of the day. Campbell suggests that, without an Archimedean point, Quine’s view leads to an unacceptable conservatism.<sup>53</sup> But the image of Neurath to which Quine famously appeals is precisely meant to show that this is not so: we can entirely rebuild our boat even while staying afloat in it, provided that we rebuild it plank by plank.<sup>54</sup>

Is this a legitimate reply on Quine’s behalf to Campbell’s rhetorical question? Only on one absolutely fundamental assumption: that it makes sense *in Quine’s terms* to talk about the “content” of our evidence. If it does not, the question whether our evidence refutes this or that theory cannot so much as arise for Quine. But this now brings us back to McDowell’s worry. For McDowell’s worry is precisely that it does *not* make sense, in Quine’s terms, to talk about the content of our evidence; that Quine has construed evidence as a matter of events and episodes which can enter into causal relations but not into logical relations. This is why McDowell thinks that Quine needs a fundamentally new and more commonsensical conception of our evidence whereby our evidence is a matter of how we experience things as being. But really that is Campbell’s point too. “Scientific theorizing,” Campbell writes, “can never let go of the idea that it is ultimately our experiences [as of macroscopic physical objects] that have to be explained.”<sup>55</sup> The two worries, despite an initial impression of disparity, are of a piece.

And they cut deep. For they suggest that there is after all room for some kind of philosophical propaedeutic to science. They suggest that we can legitimately seek a general philosophical understanding of what science is answerable to. Moreover, when this idea is combined with the broadly positivist conception of meaning that Quine favors, with its perceived link between what science is answerable to and what makes sense, then it leads down the very path that I have already identified as the main route to self-stultification: the path of trying to attain and express a general philosophical understanding of why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should. So it seems that Quine has become yet another example of how *not* to evade the threat of self-stultification.

## VI.

I have suggested more than once that, when drawing the bounds of sense is construed as a philosophical enterprise, or in other words when the aim of the enterprise is to attain and express some general philosophical understanding of why the bounds are to be drawn where they are, then self-stultification looms. There is evidence for

this in the *Tractatus*. And we have seen evidence in the work of various positivists for how hard it is to keep a suitable distance from just such a philosophical enterprise, even given the firmest of resolves.

That there are links here with Kant should be evident to anyone familiar with the accusation of self-stultification levelled against him by Strawson (see above, §1). But the links are more profound than that. It is not just that attempts by twentieth-century analytic philosophers to draw the bounds of sense share certain structural defects with Kant's attempts to do something analogous. They actually lead in the direction of transcendental idealism. When Wittgenstein declares in the *Tractatus* that the world is the totality of facts, not of things, he is setting the limits of the world as the limits of what can be thought or said.<sup>56</sup> That grass is green is part of the world, because it is possible to think and to say that grass is green; but neither grass nor greenness is part of the world, because there is no such thing as either thinking or saying either grass or greenness.<sup>57</sup> This is a kind of transcendental idealism.

The worry, of course, is that, in as much as a construction such as “thinks greenness” is nonsense, then so too is a sentence such as, “There is no such thing as thinking greenness.” Or, to put the worry somewhat less accurately but with greater rhetorical force, if there is no such thing as either thinking or saying something, then neither is there any such thing as either thinking or saying that there is no such thing as either thinking or saying that thing. Transcendental idealism itself is nonsense.<sup>58</sup>

If these suggestions are even broadly correct, then it is impossible to attain and express any general philosophical understanding of why the bounds of sense should be drawn where they should. It is impossible, on that ambitious construal of drawing the bounds of sense, to draw the bounds of sense; and any attempt to do so will issue in nonsense. But what follows? Each time that I have referred to what it is impossible to do, I have quite deliberately used the phrase “attain and express”: it is impossible to *attain and express* such a general philosophical understanding. What follows, then—or at least, one thing that follows—is that *either* it is impossible to attain such an understanding *or* it is possible to do that, but it is not possible at the same time to express the understanding, in other words the understanding is ineffable. My own view is that twentieth-century analytic philosophy provides the resources to accommodate the latter alternative, and indeed to accede to it. But that is a story for another occasion.<sup>59</sup>

## NOTES

1. Strawson (1966), a study of Kant (1933). (I have specified Kemp Smith's translation of the *Critique*, even though, on the whole, I prefer the translation by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). I have done so because Kemp Smith's translation of one crucial passage that I shall be citing later is clearer for my current purposes: see below, note 25 and accompanying text.)
2. Strawson (1966), 11.

3. Kant (1999), 10:123, p. 127. Cf. another letter to Herz, written the following year, *ibid.*, 10:129, p. 132, where he said that he had been “making plans for a work that might perhaps have the title, *The Limits of Sensibility and Reason*.” Although Zweig translates the title differently in the two cases, the original German is the same: the word that is rendered first *Bounds* and then *Limits* is *Grenzen*.
4. Strawson (1966), 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 11–12.
6. Cerf (1972), 601.
7. Wittgenstein (1961), 3.
8. I use these labels because they usefully signal two exegetical tendencies. I do not mean to suggest that there is a simple polarization in the secondary literature. Cf. in this connection Sullivan (2003), footnote 2 and 214–15. For a traditional reading, see Hacker (1986), esp. ch. 1; and for new readings, see Diamond (1991) and Conant (1989). For an intermediate reading, see McGinn (1999). And for a quite different reading, see Moyal-Sharrock (2007). I myself try to provide something that is not readily classifiable as either a traditional reading or a new reading (or perhaps rather that *is* classifiable, with suitable qualifications, as both): see Moore (2003).
9. Wittgenstein (1961), 3. Cf. Sullivan (2003), esp. 209–11, to which I am much indebted.
10. Kripke (1980) is a classic discussion of a variation on this theme. See also Edgington (2004): but note her footnote 12, where she says that, although the metaphysically possible and the epistemically possible cut across each other, “one has to search hard for examples, which are rather contrived and on the whole not very important or interesting, of the metaphysically possible which is not epistemically possible.”
11. *Contra* Wittgenstein: see Wittgenstein (1961), 6.3751.
12. Wittgenstein (1974a), 465.
13. Wittgenstein (1974b), Pt. I, §§371 and 374, first and third emphasis his, second emphasis mine. Cf. in this connection Wittgenstein (1961), 4.113–4.116, and Williams (1981), 159–60—where in each case there is an image of working outward from within the space of sense toward its “edge”, which, if it means anything at all, surely means (something like) producing combinations of words that make sense with a view to registering the point at which similar combinations of words fail to make sense. Note: the failures to make sense that are of concern here may quite properly be distinguished from other failures to make sense. Thus, even in Wittgenstein (1961), where Wittgenstein is impatient with various attempts to discriminate between ways of failing to make sense (see 5.473 and 5.4733), he himself distinguishes between lacking sense and being nonsensical (see 4.461–4.4611). This observation may in turn help Wittgenstein to treat as an ally someone who is *prima facie* a foe: I am thinking of Deleuze and his comments in Deleuze (1990), 35.
14. Cf. Sullivan (2003), 211–12.
15. This paragraph is a summary allusion to ideas that I have expressed elsewhere. See Moore (2003), esp. 189–90, where similar questions are posed.
16. Wittgenstein (1961), 1 and 1.1.
17. *Ibid.*, 3.221, his emphasis.
18. *Ibid.*, 5.61. An obvious reply on Wittgenstein’s behalf is that he does not in fact say anything in 1.1 that he proscribes saying in 5.61, since he uses the word “world” differently in the two cases: in the former, to refer to the realm of the actual; and in the latter, to refer to the realm of the possible. I incline to the view that he uses it to refer to the realm of the actual throughout the *Tractatus*; and that what enables him to refer to the realm of the possible in 5.61 is his use of other words and phrases, notably “limits” and “in logic”. But even if I am wrong about that—even if Wittgenstein’s use of “world” is ambiguous in the way proposed—what he says in 1.1, with its clearly implied application to any other possible world, is still surely offensive to the spirit of what he says in 5.61.
19. And, for reasons that I shall sketch in §VI, he has found himself endorsing a species of transcendental idealism to boot. The links with Kant are profound.
20. McDowell (1994).
21. Kant (1933), A50–51/B74–75.
22. McDowell (1994), 3–4.

23. E.g., Kant (1933), Bxxvi, footnote; B146; B166, footnote; and A771–72/B799–800.
24. Cf. *ibid.*, B148–49; A239–40/B298–99; A247/B304; A696/B724.
25. *Ibid.*, Bxxvi, his emphasis. (This is the passage to which I referred in note 1.)
26. Cf. Moore (1997), 139–40. See also *ibid.*, 250–51.
27. If Williamson (1996) is right, then there is even a question about whether Kant is entitled to make assertions about what we can know nothing about: Williamson argues that, in asserting something, one represents oneself as knowing it.
28. Cf. Kant (1933), B307 ff.
29. Ayer (1971).
30. See *ibid.*, Introduction.
31. *Ibid.*, ch. 6, *passim*.
32. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
33. Ayer (1992), 149.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Dummett (1992), esp. 133–34. Ayer partially concedes this point in Ayer (1992), 150.
36. Strawson (1966), e.g., 264–65.
37. Quine (1981), 90.
38. Or hardly ever. Quine does acknowledge some rare and artificial exceptions: see Quine (1986), 620.
39. The *locus classicus* is Quine (1961).
40. Quine (1992), §8.
41. *Ibid.*, 19.
42. *Ibid.*, 21.
43. *Ibid.*, 20. There are three things to note here. First, my gloss on “predictions” in the first pair of square brackets is taken from *ibid.*, 21. Second, my replacement of “sentence” by “statement” in the third pair of square brackets is simply to bring the quotation into line with my usage elsewhere in this essay: I hope it does not do violence to Quine’s intentions. Third, in the second ellipsis Quine writes, “in contrast to other good language games such as fiction and poetry,” which indicates that he is not impatient with all distinctions of usage between statements.
44. But perhaps Quine manages to stop it from sounding like the latter when he subsequently observes that, given evidence for the falsity of empiricism, “it might indeed be well to modify the game itself,” *ibid.*, 21. For the significance of this observation, and its relevance to whether his own earlier statement is analytic, see Moore (2002), §I.
45. It is largely on this basis that he famously draws the conclusion that, if a question about meaning cannot be answered by adducing empirical evidence, then there is no fact of the matter concerning what its answer is: e.g. Quine (1960), ch. 2, and Quine (1992), ch. 3.
46. For McDowell’s own explicit reference to Wittgenstein in this connection, see McDowell (1994), 27.
47. See esp. *ibid.*, Afterword, Pt. I, §3. It is interesting to note in this connection how evasive much of Quine’s language is. In Quine (1992) he speaks of “the flow of evidence from the triggering of the senses to the pronouncements of science,” 41. The word “flow” here nicely straddles the very divide that McDowell is trying to get Quine to recognize.
48. Campbell (2002), ch. 11, §5.
49. *Ibid.*, 233.
50. See Putnam (1981), 5–6.
51. Johnson famously thought it was enough: see Boswell (1887), vol. 1, 471.
52. See e.g. Quine (1960), ch. 1, *passim*.
53. Campbell (2002), 234.
54. Quine (1960), 3.
55. Campbell (2002), 234. Cf. also Stroud (1984), ch. 6, esp. 250–54.



56. I do not mean to deny that he is doing the converse as well. There may be reciprocal dependence here.
57. This is connected with the fact, as I see it, that there is no such thing as saying what it is for something to be green, where this means saying what it is, *in essence*, for something to be green (cf. Moore [1997], 134–35, 163–64, and 184). But surely there is such a thing as *knowing* what it is for something to be green? Perhaps there is. But see in this connection Wittgenstein (1974b), Pt. I, §78. (There is also a connection with the remarks made toward the end of §II above about the ineffability of knowing the meaning of the word “green”.)
58. Cf. Wittgenstein (1961), 5.6 ff. The links between Wittgenstein’s early work and transcendental idealism, and other related links, including the link between his later work and transcendental idealism, have been a preoccupation of mine for some time. See e.g., Moore (1985); Moore (1997), esp. chs. 6–9; Moore (2003), which deals in particular with the threat that accompanies any attempt to categorize something as nonsense, namely the threat of uttering further nonsense (see esp. §VIII); and Moore (2007). The inspiration for much of this is Williams (1981).
59. See again the material cited in the previous footnote.

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