**Wittgenstein, Anscombe and the Need for Metaphysical Thinking**

**0. Introduction**[[1]](#footnote-1)

Metaphysicians are in the business of making and defending modal claims – claims about how things must beor cannot be. *The past cannot change*; *every event must have a cause*; *only I can know what I am feeling*; *he who sees must see something*. In a 1982 talk called ‘Wittgenstein’s “Two Cuts” in the History of Philosophy’, Anscombe considered why it was that professional philosophers had been so reluctant to engage with Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. She said that other than the ‘﻿the aficionados who want simply to imitate Wittgenstein’, there are few philosophers ‘who manifest in their way of going on that problems have changed their aspects’.[[2]](#footnote-2) She found herself puzzled by this, especially in light of many philosophers’ enthusiastic response to the *Tractatus*, earlier in the century. Here is her explanation:

Professional philosophy is to a great extend a huge factory for the manufacture of necessities – only necessities give us mental peace. It is no wonder that Wittgenstein arouses a certain hatred among us. He is out to deprive us of our factory jobs.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A little later in that talk Anscombe draws a distinction between ‘a harmless and a delusive concept of necessity’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Modal expressions like ‘must’, ‘have to’, ‘impossible’, ‘can’t’, occur context of our ordinary thought and talk. They appear in particular where we find linguistic practices involving rules, rights and promises (*you must drive on the left*; *children are prohibited*; *you have to vacate the premises by the end of the month*).[[5]](#footnote-5) In some areas of our linguistic practices, for example some parts of mathematics, our modal expressions carry with them an idea of all unobserved and future possible cases being already determined. For example, when a mathematical formula F(x) maps to a unique number for every x, we say that the formula necessitates the answer.[[6]](#footnote-6) These kinds of case are highly specialised, and belong to features that are special to the practices in which they occur.[[7]](#footnote-7) We might harmlessly borrow from this concept of necessity when we say that a promise creates a necessary constraint, or binds the promiser. Philosophers, Anscombe says, are however inclined to borrow this notion whenever they are after the idea of determination, even when the background practices that give modal concepts their application are not present. When they do so, she says, their use connects only to a ‘delusive concept of necessity’ and the determination is merely psychological. She gives as her example the philosophical search for criteria of personal identity. The metaphysician desires criteria that determine, for any unobserved and future possible case, an answer to the question ‘Is A *the same person* as B?’ Anscombe thinks that such criteria are illusory; for any contender – animal identity, spatio-temporal identity, psychological identity – it is always possible that we will confront a case that we did not expect and which does not fit our criteria, and the metaphysician’s desire to block this possibility should not be indulged. It is the production of necessities in this sort of way that she associates with our ‘factory jobs’ and which she sees as Wittgenstein’s (and indeed Hume’s) target.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The contrast between ‘a harmless and a delusive concept of necessity’ and the philosophical attraction that modal expressions have on our imagination are central themes in Anscombe’s own philosophical writing. If one was feeling bold, one might say: part of her brilliance as a philosopher lies in her knack for detecting and diagnosing cases in which the appearance of a ‘delusive’ concept of necessity is getting in the way of us forming a ‘true conception’ of the subject-matter with which we are concerned.[[9]](#footnote-9) The occurrence that will be most familiar to you is in her ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’. There she contrasts two ways of thinking about the word ‘ought’, as it appears in moral philosophy. On one side, there is the delusive concept of necessity that is (rightly) attacked by Hume – the ‘*moral* ought’ – which gets expressed in verdictive utterances like: ‘It is *morally prohibited* to harm the innocent’ or ‘You are *morally obliged* to do what justice demands’. This she describes this ‘*must*’ as ‘a word of mere mesmeric force’ with a ‘strong psychological effect, but which no longer signifies a real concept at all’.[[10]](#footnote-10)On the other side, is the harmless concept of necessity, the ‘ordinary “ought”, which, we ought to notice, is such an extremely frequent term of human language that it is difficult to imagine getting on without it’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Her thought there is that once the delusive ‘must’ makes its appearance, we will stop looking at the complex of practices and patterns that make up human life (human living) – and that it is there that we will find a ‘true conception’ of ethics. Once you start to look for it, you’ll find her concern with the ‘delusive concept’ of necessity throughout her writing, for example in *Intention* when she considers the idea of a necessary connection between an intention and the action that realises it, and the way in what that idea stops us from attending to the ‘character of the concept’ of *intention*. Or in ‘The First Person’ when she examines the way in which the idea that ‘I’ must be a referring expression (an idea that is connected to the felt need for criteria of personal identity) stops us from really looking at how the word ‘I’ is used. These are all illustrations of what Anscombe means when she says that a manufactured necessity is ‘an impediment to looking’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Wittgenstein’s opposition to manufactured necessities, along with his various negative remarks about ‘metaphysical’ uses of language, makes it seem almost a truism that Wittgenstein was opposed to metaphysics.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this paper I want to make a case for rejecting that apparent truism. My thesis in this paper is that it is illuminating to characterise what Wittgenstein and Anscombe are doing in their philosophical writing as *metaphysics without manufactured necessities*.[[14]](#footnote-14) Anscombe says: ‘﻿The things which Wittgenstein attacks—these are impediments to a true conception, or to true conceptions’.[[15]](#footnote-15) The fact that Wittgenstein (and Anscombe) convey their metaphysical insights using descriptive, rather than modal language is – I will argue – not a mark of their hostility to metaphysics, but rather a reflection of the sort of ‘true conception’ that metaphysical thinking can yield when it eschews the ersatz ‘mental peace’ offered by a delusive necessity. A description of what we say and do, I want to argue, can have the status of a metaphysical truth, even if it is not a description that would be helpfully couched in modal terms. Wittgenstein says ‘*Essence* is expressed by grammar’;[[16]](#footnote-16) we should, I want to claim, recognise in his work precisely the sort of insights about the essence that it has traditionally been the metaphysician’s business to uncover.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While I don’t want to get too hung up on the label ‘metaphysician’ – it is obviously open to us, philosophers, to define that word as we wish, and I would not argue with someone who wanted to stipulate a definition that would exclude Wittgenstein – I believe that characterising Wittgenstein as a metaphysician is productive along at least two dimensions. First, when Wittgenstein is caricatured as a therapist, concerned only with ‘rules of grammar’, whose therapy results not in insight but in silence, this makes it too easy to ignore him and too difficult to criticise him.[[18]](#footnote-18) Wittgenstein’s later work, I believe, contains a sharper, more interesting, critique of contemporary metaphysical practices than therapeutic or linguistic framings belie. As we begin to get clearer about the force of that critique, what emerges too is a new picture of what metaphysics, as a human practice, could – or more ambitiously should – be like. Second, understanding the particular sense in which Anscombe is a metaphysician allows us to place her in the context of a tradition of British metaphysics that emerged in the 1940s as an attempt to reverse the devastating impact on ethics of the new ‘analytical’ philosophy. I end this paper by saying a little about that tradition and how it relates to contemporary analytic metaphysics.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**1. The Propositions of Natural Science**

Anscombe draws attention to the delusive concept of necessity as part of a discussion of Wittgenstein’s later thought, but the best way to get at what *metaphysics without manufactured necessities* might be is to is to trace what she says there back to her distinctive reading of the *Tractatus*.[[20]](#footnote-20) Like contemporary ‘resolute’ readers of that book, Anscombe sees deep continuity in Wittgenstein’s philosophical method, regularly returning to the *Tractatus* to illuminate aspects of the later work.[[21]](#footnote-21) Looking at the *Tractatus*, rather than at the later work, is helpful for at least two connected reasons. First, Anscombe sees the transition from the early to the later work not as a repudiation, but as a progression from simplicity (or simplification) to complexity: ‘the more Wittgenstein worked … when he resumed philosophical investigation’, she writes, ‘the more he came to see: *It’s not as simple as that*’.[[22]](#footnote-22) What becomes very complicated in the later work is there is a simplified form, where it is easier to discern, in the *Tractatus*. Second – for a reason that will be clearer later – Wittgenstein’s growing interest in human practices involving rules, rights and promises may obscure the connection between grammar and essence in Wittgenstein’s thought that I want to foreground.

It will help us to see how Wittgenstein’s reasons for categorising ‘metaphysical’ propositions as ‘nonsense’ in the *Tractatus* holds a space for something we might usefully call ‘metaphysical truth’, by contrasting his reasons with those of the logical positivist. When Anscombe wrote her 1959 *Introduction to Wittgenstein’s* Tractatus, one of her main concerns was to distinguish Wittgenstein’s attitude toward metaphysics from that of the Vienna Circle, as popularised by A. J. Ayer in his 1936 *Language, Truth and Logic*. Ayer took himself to be, and was taken by many to be, restating Wittgenstein’s own position in the *Tractatus*. In her book, Anscombe wanted to show that this was a false impression; the logical positivists’ reasons for calling sentences that purport to express necessary truths ‘nonsense’ are not Wittgenstein’s.

Wittgenstein says:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said., i.e. the propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to his signs. (*TLP* 6.53)

This remark, Anscombe observes, suggested to Ayer a ‘quick and easy way of dealing with “metaphysical” propositions’. It goes like this: ask ‘What *sense-observations* would verify or falsify them?’; if none, ‘they are senseless’.[[23]](#footnote-23) This is precisely how we find Ayer arguing for ‘the elimination of metaphysics’: ‘No statement which refers to a “reality” transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience can possibly have any literal significance’, he writes, ‘from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense’.[[24]](#footnote-24) The only ‘necessary truths’, Ayer said, are analytic propositions, which ‘do not make any assertion about the empirical world’ but ‘simply record our determination to use words in a certain fashion’.[[25]](#footnote-25)

What makes this method ‘quick and easy’ is that it allows would-be metaphysical propositions to be rejected as a class, rather than on an individual basis*.* If a metaphysical proposition is defined as a proposition that ‘refers to a “reality” transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience’, and a proposition with sense is defined as a position that refers to a reality that can be sensibly observed, then it is an analytic truth that no metaphysical proposition has sense.[[26]](#footnote-26) So, the quick and easy method does not require it’s proponent to apply the test to particular propositions. Propositions purporting to express (non-analytic) necessary truths are known in advance to be senseless because no claim of necessity could be verified by observation: observation can reveal how things are and have been and can (perhaps) be used to make predictions about how things will be, but no amount of observation could reveal how things are *necessarily* or *must* be. As Ayer puts it ‘﻿No matter how often [an empirical proposition] is verified in practice, there still remains the possibility that it will be confuted on some future occasion’.[[27]](#footnote-27) You can’t get a ‘must’ from an ‘is’, we might say. On this picture a putative claim about essence – ‘Water is H2O’ – is either an empirical hypothesis, open to falsification by future observation, or a stipulation about the use of the terms ‘water’ and ‘H2O’.

One of the interpretative cornerstones of Anscombe’s book is that anyone who reads the *Tractatus* through the lens of empiricism has thereby missed the essential role that the picture-theory of the proposition plays in Wittgenstein’s attitude toward ‘metaphysical’ propositions.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is that theory, she says, and not the sense-verification theory, that is operative in his remarks on ‘metaphysical’ propositions and which leads him to say that propositions purporting to expressing (non-analytic) necessary truths are nonsense. This is because the picture-theory of propositions commits Wittgenstein to the view that any proposition that is capable of being true must, by the same stroke, be capable of being false.

The picture-theory, Anscombe says, emerges context of Wittgenstein’s concern with negation. She brings out what is puzzling about negation by reflecting on the way that it is defined in logic books:

‘Everyone is unwise’ is a negation of ‘everyone is wise’, but it is not what logicians call *the* negation of it; in logic books; when the sign for ‘not’ is introduced, we are told that ‘not p’ is ‘*the* proposition that is true when p is false and false when p is true’. ‘Everyone is unwise’ is not certainly true if ‘Everyone is wise’ is false; hence it is not *the* negation of ‘Everyone is wise’.[[29]](#footnote-29)

‘What right’, Anscombe asks, ‘has anyone to give such a definition’?

The definition states that *not-p* is the unique proposition that fulfils the condition of being true when *p* is false and false when *p* is true. But how does the logician know – what justifies him in saying – that there is one unique proposition? How can he be so sure that this holds, regardless of the internal structure of *p* – that is, regardless of whether *p* is ‘Pa’ or ‘aRb’ or ‘(*x*)W*x*’ or whatever? Such an assumption should strike us as epistemically extremely rash.

Anscombe explains that Wittgenstein’s concern is to secure the logician’s right to this definition without giving ‘an impression as it were of logical chemistry’.[[30]](#footnote-30) That is: the explanation should not be one that conceives of truth and falsehood as ‘two properties among other properties’ which happen to attach uniquely to propositions, and which can be transferred between them via logical operations, in the way that atoms transfer their oppositional negative and positive charges. If we conceive truth and falsehood in this way, ‘then it would look like a remarkable fact that everyone proposition possesses one of these properties’. Using Wittgenstein’s own example: ‘This [would] look no more a matter of course than the proposition “all roses are either red or yellow” would sound, even if it were true’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

As we all now know – thanks in large part to Anscombe’s influential book – the picture theory of the proposition is Wittgenstein’s answer to this puzzle. That theory gives us a way of thinking about what a proposition *is* that makes clear, without an impression of ‘logical chemistry’, the grounds for the logic book’s way of talking. Anscombe summarises the theory as follows: A proposition ‘in the positive sense says: “This is how things are” and in the negative sense says: “This is how things *aren’t*”— the “*this*” in both cases being the same’.[[32]](#footnote-32) The way in which the same *‘this*’ can be used to do these two things, corresponding to *p* and *~p*, is clear where an actual picture is used in the place of a sentence.

Anscombe provides a picture to illustrate this:

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*Fig. 1*

She says: ‘If I have correlated the right-hand figure with a man A, and the left-hand figure with a man B, then I can hold up the picture and say: “This is how things are”’.[[33]](#footnote-33) I can also hold up the picture and say: ‘This is how things are not’. When we move from pictures-as-pictures to propositions-as-pictures, the same holds. So long as the parts of my proposition that are names are correlated with the objects of which I wish to speak, I can use the proposition ‘A and B are fighting’ to say *this* is how things are or to say *this* is how things *are not*. The first use is equivalent to the judgment *p*; the second to the judgment *~p.* The first use says *p* is true; the second *p* is false*.*

The picture theory shows – displays – the grounds of our right to say that ‘“not p” is “*the* proposition that is true when p is false and false when p is true”’. To say that things are *not* as the picture shows (to say *not-p*), ‘one must convey *what* situation one is saying does not exist’, and this can only be done using a picture of that very situation: *this*.[[34]](#footnote-34) A picture of *A* and *B* not fighting would not do it, because this would have to be a picture of *A* and *B* doing some other thing. And just as ‘Everyone is unwise’ is not the negation of ‘Everyone is wise’, so too a picture of *A* and *B* dancing is not *the* negation of a picture of *A* and *B* fighting. A picture of *A* and *B* walking has equal claim to be its negation, because if I hold up either picture and say: *this* is how things are,

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*Fig. 2 Fig. 3*

then I cannot, without contradicting myself hold up the picture of *A* and *B* fighting and say: *and this* is also how things are. But if I want to say the negation of *figure 1* – that it shows how thing are not – my only option is to use *figure 1* itself.

Ayer took it that when Wittgenstein spoke of the ‘propositions of natural science’ (of TLP 6.53) he meant just those propositions that can be verified by sense observation. But what emerges from Anscombe’s reading is a view on which the limit of meaningful – non-metaphysical – discourse is not epistemological or psychological but formal. As we might put it, echoing Frege, Wittgenstein’s is not a limit on *thoughts* but a limit on *thought*.[[35]](#footnote-35) What leads Wittgenstein to characterise propositions with sense as ‘propositions of natural science’ is not, for Anscombe, that they have empirical subject-matter but rather that they have the form to be answers to the question, *p?*, where both *p* and ~*p* are ways that things could be. They can be ‘informatively said’, as Anscombe glosses it.[[36]](#footnote-36) As Wittgenstein’s thought – ‘*It’s not as simple as that*’– unfolds in his mature philosophy, his conception of *thought* also become more complex, but it remains central to his philosophy that the philosopher’s interest is in forms of thought and not in thinking, understood as an empirical or psychological phenomenon.

**2. The status of ‘metaphysical’ propositions**

We are now ready to considerthe status of ‘metaphysical’ propositions in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein says that the correct method in philosophy is ‘whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to his signs’. What difference will make to the way one characterises what is wrong with ‘metaphysical’ propositions, that one adopts the picture-theory of propositional sense, rather than the verification-theory? What difference will it make to how we understand the remarks about metaphysics in Wittgenstein’s later work if we see them emerging, through a process of *de-simplification*, out of Anscombe’s *Tractatus* rather than Ayer’s? In the remaining part of this paper I want to sketch an answer to these questions and show how the shift I have just described brings in its wake the possibility of *metaphysics without manufactured necessities*.

We have already seen that for Ayer, ‘metaphysical’ propositions can be categorised as a class as nonsense, on a priori grounds, using the ‘quick and simple’ method. Anscombe says in contrast that when the picture-theory, rather than the verification-theory, is operative the ‘criticism of sentences as expressing no real thought … could never be of any very simple general form; each criticism would be *ad hoc*, and fall within the subject-matter with which the sentence professed to deal’.[[37]](#footnote-37)

At first blush this is a puzzling remark. Recall Anscombe’s remark about *Figure 1*. She says, ‘If I have correlated the right-hand figure with a man A, and the left-hand figure with a man B, then I can hold up the picture and say: “This is how things are”’. Combined with Wittgenstein’s characterisation of ‘metaphysical’ propositions as those in which the speaker has ‘failed to give meaning to his signs’, this seems not to yield a set of *ad hoc*, subject-specific,criticisms but a single generic criticism: a sign in your proposition is masquerading as a referring term but has not been correlated with an object. A would-be ‘metaphysical’ proposition is, as it were, a picture in which one of the elements is a mere marks on the page. On this way of reading the method of the *Tractatus*, the subject matter with which the proposition purported to deal – time, personal identity, subjectivity, causation, the will, sensation – is of no relevance to the ‘method’, and no metaphysical insight into that subject matter could arise from the conversation in which the ‘demonstration’ took place. The only possible insight would be the recognition, on the part of the would-be metaphysician, that his words have failed to express a thought.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Anscombe’s rejection of this view is implicit in her claim that the criticism of ‘metaphysical’ propositions must proceed by reference to their subject-matter. She also rejects it explicitly when she writes elsewhere that ‘the elements being coordinated with objects is essential to the picture’s being a picture – you couldn’t have a picture and subsequently coordinate its element with objects’.[[39]](#footnote-39) So, you couldn’t have something that was a picture, but in which an element was – as on the above story – a mere, uncorrelated, mark. If we can understand why this is, we will see how it is that the method(s) for dealing with ‘metaphysical’ propositions might generate metaphysical truths.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein remarks: ‘it will often prove useful in philosophy to say to ourselves: naming something is like attaching a label to a thing’ (§15). But he notes too that that when ‘attaching a label [e.g. ‘A’] to a thing’ is an act of naming, there will be an answer to the the question ‘What *kind* of thing is *A*?’. If I attach a label inscribed ‘*Tove*’ to an object on my desk saying ‘*This* is“tove”’, for ‘tove’ to be correlated with an object we will need to know whether ‘tove’ is names *a utensil (pencil)*, *a shape (round), a material (wood), a numeral (one); a colour* *(blue)* and so on.[[40]](#footnote-40)Otherwise, the ceremony is an empty one. We give names ‘to human beings, to shapes, to colours, to pains, to moods, to numbers’, writes Wittgenstein. As Anscombe herself would later put it: the use of a name to refer to an object is not ‘conceptionless’.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The view that what goes wrong in a ‘metaphysical’ proposition is that it is a picture in which one of the elements is mere marks on the page goes with the view that the names of the *Tractatus* are ‘simple’ in the sense of making ‘conceptionless’ reference to their objects. This view of simplicity would imply that the only way in which a name can fail to be correlated to an object is for it to be, as it were, a mere scribble. Anscombe relays a conversation she had with Wittgenstein which led her away from this mistaken interpretation. They were, she says, discussing Proclus’s commentary on Plato’s *Parmenides*. Anscombe told Wittgenstein that according to Proclus ‘a name [is] a logical picture of its object’. Wittgenstein replied ‘I have so often had that thought’.[[42]](#footnote-42) This, she says this changed her view of the *Tractatus*: before then she had assumed ‘that the objects, the simples, spoken of in the *Tractatus* were uniform characterless atoms’ and that, as such, a name could not be a ‘logical picture’ of its object.[[43]](#footnote-43) But after that conversation she no longer thought this. Even the simple objects of the *Tractatus*, she came to think, are ‘diverse in logical form’. She notes, for example, Wittgenstein’s remark that ‘Space, time and colour are forms of objects’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Though the process of de-simplification led Wittgenstein to give up the idea of ‘simples’, Anscombe held that the view that names ‘had logical forms’ did ‘not simply die[…] in his later work’.[[45]](#footnote-45) This we have just seen in the discussion of naming in the *Philosophical Investigation*.

Correlating a name to a thing – ‘A’ to a John, ‘B’ to the Battle of Embabeh, ‘C’, to London – involves introducing a symbol that has a particular logical form, a logical form that reflects the *kind of thing* that A, B, and C *are*: a man, a battle, a place*.* Because of the logical form of the name reflects the kind of object it is correlated with, the object will fix the possibilities for using the name in a proposition with sense. Of this, Anscombe gives the following illustration. The sentence ‘Mount Everest chased Napoleon out of Cairo’ lacks sense – does not convey a possible thought – because ‘Mount Everest’ is the name of a mountain, and mountains, being the kinds of things that they are, do not chase. If ‘Mount Everest’ is the name of *a mountain*, then certain uses of the name are excluded; this is what it means to say that the name has the logical form of the object with which it is correlated.

The view that a ‘name is a logical picture of its object’ gives shape to the task of the ‘criticism of sentences expressing no real thought’ and explains why such a task must be *ad hoc*, and respond to the subject-matter at hand. The aim is not to show him that his sentence has, as it were, a blank space in it, a gap where an object should have been. Rather the form of the criticism will need to consider ‘whatever is doing duty as a name’, the conception that mediates the uses of that name, that expresses the object’s essence, and that constrains the names combinatorial possibilities. Far from allowing us to use a ‘quick and easy’ method, the task will now be that of coming to understand the nature of the specific failure, where to do so will be to reveal something about the kind of thing that the would-be metaphysician is trying to talk about, and the logical form of names of objects of that kind. To use our toy example: to show that someone who said ‘Mount Everest chased Napoleon out of Cairo’ had not expressed a thought, one would want to saying things like ‘“Mount Everest” is the name of a mountain’, ‘A mountain is not the kind of thing that can chase’, or ‘Mountains belong among the non-sentient objects in the world’. These would be remarks about the subject-matter of the proposition at hand and the direction that the conversation took would depend on the nature of the misunderstanding that lay behind the original utterance.

Now consider a proper example. Suppose I were to say, ‘I am not RW’, in the context of trying to say something metaphysical. Insofar as I am trying to say something metaphysical, my intention in saying such a thing is not to answer an open question ‘*p*?’ (‘Are you RW?’). I do not mean to say something the negation of which is ‘I *am* RW’. When I try to use ‘I am not RW’ to say something metaphysical, I do not mean to convey information (in this sense) but to give illumination about the nature of the self.[[46]](#footnote-46) I want to say, perhaps, something that I might also express by saying (non-informatively), ‘The human being RW is not *the subject of these experiences*’.To bring out my meaning, and to see where my thought has failed, would require us to look at the way in which ‘I’ and ‘RW’, and ‘subject’ and ‘experience’ function in propositions that *are* used to convey information. Propositions like ‘I am not RW’ and ‘I am RW’ and ‘I am having such-and-such experiences’ (where these are not attempts to say something metaphysical but ordinary propositions that can be answers to the question ‘*p?*’). This sort of looking is not a simple task, as we know well from Anscombe’s paper ‘The First Person’. Coming to see how it is that ‘RW’ functions in propositions where is it correlated to an object, would be coming to see, in the logical form of the name ‘RW’, the kind of object that ‘RW’ named and, through that, the way in which my ‘metaphysical’ use of ‘RW’ precluded such a correlation. This would be to come see the kind of confusion that I was trying to deny when I said: ‘I am not RW’. The propositions that emerge in the context of such a conversation are not of the sort that convey information, and this is why Wittgenstein says they can only be ‘shew’ and not said. Drawing on Wittgenstein’s famous metaphor at the end of the *Tractatus*, Anscombe says that ‘someone who had used them like steps’ would be ‘helped by them to “see the world” rightly’. That is, ‘he would see what is shewn rather than being down in a bog confusedly trying to propound and assert sometimes cases of what is “shewn”, sometimes would-be contradictions of these’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Anscombe describes the *Tractatus* as, ‘a high point of development of an historic line of thought’ that begins with the Ancients. ‘The idea that the proposition is an interweaving of simple names representing an interweaving of simple elements’, she observes, ‘is to be found in Plato’s *Theaetetus*’.[[48]](#footnote-48) But although the *Tractatus* represents the ‘high point of development’ of that idea, the idea itself is too simple – or, as Wittgenstein himself would later say, it is ‘a primitive idea of the way language functions’ or, equivalently, ‘it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours’.[[49]](#footnote-49) This simplicity, Anscombe says, is what prevents Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* from using the notion of truth in connection with the conversation we have described. That is, it prevents Wittgenstein from acknowledging that close attention, e.g., to the subject-matter of the ‘metaphysical’ proposition ‘I am not RW’, can help us to reach a ‘true conception’ of the sort of object that ‘RW’ names. Within the simplifying framework imposed by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, any true proposition has as it pair a false proposition which is its negation. Because the ‘insights’ generated by the *Tractatus’*s method are opposed not a falsehood but ‘only a piece of confusion’, Wittgenstein could say only that they showed ‘what stared you in the face, at any rate once you had taken a good look – but could not be *said*’.[[50]](#footnote-50) This, Anscombe says, gives a ‘comical’ air to those parts of the *Tractatus* in which Wittgenstein ‘says things and then say[s] that they cannot be said’.[[51]](#footnote-51)

**3. Anscombean & Wittgensteinian Metaphysics**

Metaphysics, I said at the start of this paper, is in the business of saying how things *must be* or *cannot be*. Anscombe said that Wittgenstein rejected manufactured necessities – which she connected with a ‘delusive’ concept – because they would stop us from engaging in the sort of looking that would yield a true conception.[[52]](#footnote-52) I have given as an examples of that looking, Anscombe’s investigations in ‘The First Person’*.*[[53]](#footnote-53)In doing so I have tried to illustrate, albeit briefly, how ‘bring[ing] words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (PI§116) might be the first move in a philosophical method that could usefully be characterised as *metaphysics*. To ‘bring words back’ is to resist the promise of insight that the manufacture of a necessity temporally provides, and to open up the possibility of a ‘true conception’ that comes from seeing words in use.

The idea that in rejecting ‘metaphysical’ propositions, Wittgenstein is rejecting everything we might call *metaphysics* -- everything, that is, that falls under the description, ‘discovering how things really are’ or ‘discovering the nature of a reality that transcends us’ – is, I am suggesting, a legacy of the bad way of thinking about the *Tractatus’s* opposition to metaphysics. That bad way is a result of reading the book’s animosity toward metaphysical speech as implying that the only kind of necessity is analyticity. Carried into the *Investigations*, this becomes the thought that grammatical rules are linguistic conventions. It is the simplicity of the *Tractatus* that helps to show up the extent to which Wittgenstein’s later characterisation of these sorts of propositions as ‘rules of grammar’ is different from the idea – which would be the descendent of Ayer’s picture – that they are ‘simply record our determination to use words in a certain fashion’.

In the introduction to her collected papers, *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*, Anscombe directs us to a great schism she sees between philosophy derived from the Ancients, and that which derives from the moderns. She writes that among ‘the moderns’ the trend has been ‘to deduce what could be from what could hold of thought, as we see Hume to have done’; but Wittgenstein had a better approach, one that he shared with Plato. ‘A thought was impossible because the thing was impossible, or, as the *Tractatus* puts it, “Was man nicht denken kann, das kann man nicht denken”: an *impossible* thought is an impossible *thought*’.[[54]](#footnote-54) In his later work, Anscombe says, Wittgenstein did come to see ‘that many concepts are of human invention’. This is the complication I referred to earlier when I said that Wittgenstein’s growing interest in human practices involving rules, rights and promises – one dimension of his ‘desimplification’ of the *Tractatus* – obscured the metaphysical character of his thinking. For these concepts, essence is not *expressed* by grammar, but *created* by it. And Wittgenstein’s interest in these concepts, along with his focus on human practice, can leave a reader with the impression that when Wittgenstein talks of ‘rules of grammar’, he means things that are ancestors of the rules of linguistic convention that we find in Ayer.

Metaphysical truths – facts about the nature of things – emerge from the method I have described, not as hypothetical or theoretical postulates, but as ‘true conceptions’ that are there to be seen when we do the work of looking at our language-using life – that ‘stare[…] you in the face, at any rate once you had taken a good look’. It will be tempting, when we are in the possession of these insights to couch them as necessity claims. *The past cannot change*; *every event must have a cause*; *only I can know what I am feeling*; *he who sees must see something*. This temptation is one that Anscombe, following Wittgenstein, urges us to resist; they couch their metaphysical insights as descriptions. The method does not lead us to ‘necessities of an absolutely a priori kind’ that once discovered, can be placed in the archive for future reference and nor does a ‘true conception’ rule out the possibility that a case might come up that renders us speechless. The task of careful attention to the subject-matter of these ‘metaphysical’ propositions – time, causation, subjectivity – is open-ended. If we stop looking and try to treat these formulations in a way that could provide the sort of ‘mental peace’ that a manufactured necessity might provide, the ‘cannots’ and ‘musts’ that appear in their formulation will no longer be a (misleading) way of marking the fact that these truths (if they are *true* conceptions) are opposed not to falsehood but to confusion. Rather it will be the appearance of the ‘delusive concept of necessity’, similar to the ‘moral must’ that does not connect to a human practice that would give it its logos.[[55]](#footnote-55) ‘I cannot be RW’ might, for example, be a harmless way of countering the sort of muddle that ensues if one is thinking of ‘I’ and ‘RW’ as co-referring names; but the delusive concept enters if we try treat it as the expression of a necessity of the sort that would help me to determine whether a particular object was *me*.

This brings me finally to a tradition in British metaphysics to which Anscombe belongs.[[56]](#footnote-56) In his 1945 Aristotelian Society Presidential Address, the philosopher of perception, H. H. Price, considered a question raised by the (then) new(ish) methods of ‘analytical philosophy’: is clarity enough? As A. J. Ayer and his supporters returned to Oxford from their wartime hiatus, Price considered ‘the present prospects of Philosophy in this country’. It is ‘psychologically impossible’, he told the society,

that we should just begin where we left off six years ago. And even if we could, I do not think we should wish to. For it is felt by quite a number of people, rightly or wrongly, that during the twenty years between the two wars Philosophy had somehow taken the wrong turning. It is even said sometimes that the wrong turning which it took was one of the main causes of the disasters which have befallen civilisation.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Though Price was doubtful of philosophy’s impact on world history, and broadly supporting the analysts demands for clarity, he shared with a number of Anscombe’s other Oxford tutors a feeling that the something important – philosophically but also ethically and politically – had been lost when Ayer declared metaphysics extinct and the ambitions of ‘analytical philosophy’ to understand language replaced speculative philosophy’s ambition to understand a transcendent reality. This was not a shallow critique of Ayer’s emotivism – one that could be met well enough by the utilitarian prescriptivism of R. M. Hare – but a deep disquiet about what it meant, and would mean, to remove metaphysical thinking from philosophical practice. Price’s address focussed on the societal harm. One of the jobs of philosophy, he said, is to provide ‘the public’ with ‘world views’ that might help them to connect and comprehend a disorientating world. This, Price argued, is what people are looking for when they come to philosophers seeking ‘wisdom’, and this is what metaphysics has traditionally delivered. But for some of Price’s colleagues it was not the demand for orienting visions from a bewildered public that was the central problem, but the way in which Ayer’s vision severed the connection between human reason and a true conception of reality. It is in this tradition that Anscombe – along with her contemporaries Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch and Mary Midgley – belongs.

Dorothy Emmett published *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking*, during the war. In it, she describes metaphysics as process of articulating a vision of what the metaphysician ‘judges to be especially significant or important’.[[58]](#footnote-58) She connects the task of saying what matters with the task of saying what is real. The ‘sheer sense of triviality is a paralysing form of scepticism. Hence it is often of unreality. If nothing really matters, then or at any rate … nothing is “really real”’, she writes.[[59]](#footnote-59) (And here I would note, is a form of realism that is very much not empiricism!). Donald MacKinnon, who had been Anscombe’s tutor for Plato, critiqued Ayer’s vision on the ground that it reduced the task of philosophical understanding to that of analysing the realm of conventionally constructed systems of symbolism. The philosopher’s question ‘Why?’, he noted, can on Ayer’s vision only be asked in relation to arbitrary linguistic norms that float free of the reality they organise.’[[60]](#footnote-60) MacKinnon argued that the proper vehicle for metaphysical truth was not a theory but a conversation, and gave as an exemplar of ‘metaphysics in action’ Wittgenstein’s conversation with Sraffa. In that conversation, as with those I have described in this paper, an attempt is made to ‘say something metaphysical’ – ‘A proposition is a picture of reality’. Sraffa responds with a Neopleonic gesture – an *ad hoc* method responsive to the subject-matter at hand. MacKinnon writes: ‘Now I would wish to claim that there is a sense, or even that there are senses, in which one could claim that this conversation, this dialogue, *was itself a [true] proposition*’*,* though hardly in any ordinary sense a picture of reality’.[[61]](#footnote-61) A metaphysical dialogue, he writes, is true if it ‘enables one to draw nearer to what is the case’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

In recognising in Anscombe – and in Wittgenstein – a form of metaphysical thinking that involves *looking* at the world, and finding there ‘enormously interesting’ facts, facts that are not ‘information’ but are about the essence of things, is to bring them into that tradition. What runs through that tradition, and links it, as Anscombe saw, with Plato, is the view that the opposite of having these facts in view is not having a mistaken theory about how things are, or must be, but being confusedly ‘down in the bog’.

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1. This paper is formed and informed through many years of conversation and collaboration with Clare Mac Cumhaill. Many of the ideas in it have emerged out of our conversations and are as much hers as mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anscombe, ‘Wittgenstein’s “Two Cuts” in the History of Philosophy’, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, p. 185. Thanks to Clare Mac Cumhaill for the insight that the notion of ‘delusiveness’ that Anscombe invokes here may well owe something to Hume (of whom we know she was an avid reader). For instance, see Hume’s discussion of the fictions of the mind, fictitious ideas and fictional imagining in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Anscombe, ‘The Question of Linguistic Idealism’, p. 118. In thinking about the character of these ‘non-delusive’ musts I have benefited greatly from Roger Teichmann’s, ‘Metaphysics and Modals’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anscombe, ‘Two Cuts’, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a discussion of this parallel see Teichmann, ‘Metaphysics and Modals’, pp. 174-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Anscombe, ‘Two Cuts’, p. 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For an especially clear statement of this common conception, see Oskari Kuusela, *The Struggle Against Dogmatism*; esp. pp. 97-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I am adding my voice here to Adrian Moore’s, when he urges us to think of Wittgenstein as a metaphysician, as someone situated within a tradition, and whose work is usefully placed in dialogue with that of other metaphysicians. Moore makes a place for Wittgenstein in his account of the history of metaphysical conversation, without having to attribute to him some sort of Realist or Anti-Realist or Constructivist thesis, by defining ‘metaphysics’ as ‘the most general attempt to make sense of things’ (p. 1). This strikes me, and has struck many, and an exceptionally productive aspect shift. However, though I self-consciously align myself with Moore’s interpretive project rather than, say, John W. Cook’s or Michael Dummett’s, nevertheless I do want to emphasise the importance not just of *sense-making* but *metaphysical truth* to the metaphysical project. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §371. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For a discussion of this slogan that, I think, fits with the position I develop in this paper, see Anscombe’s, ‘The Question of Linguistic Idealism’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The same year as Anscombe gave her ‘Two Cuts’ talk, Saul Kripke’s, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* was published. Though she thought Kripke quite wrong to attribute a sceptical attitude to Wittgenstein, she welcomed Kripke’s form of engagement with Wittgenstein’s work (see Anscombe’s ‘Review: Wittgenstein: on Rules and Private Language’, pp. 342-52). At the end of her review, Anscombe reports, ‘My friend Yorick Smythies once said to me that what was needed was an attack on Wittgenstein. Such as there have been are no use at all, as far as I have seen them. Kripke’s express intention was not to attack but to expound the argument which he, Kripke, got out of Wittgenstein. In my opinion it ought to be useful in the way Smythies thought a series attack would be’, p. 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a much more detailed treatment see Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It is obviously impossible in a short paper (or indeed, in a long paper) to do justice either to the *Tractatus* itself or to the detailed and extensive exegetical literature that now encases it. Even within my limited focus, it will be impossible to engage in exegetical dispute. To help situation the interpretative stance in this paper, it may help to say that among my targets are those who take the ‘resolute’ reading of the *Tractatus* to warrant the attribution to Wittgenstein of an extreme form of quietism, or who use it to paint him as a kind of specialist psychoanalyst. I should say that this is certainly not how Cora Diamond herself paints him. This paper is in large part inspired by the questions she has recently raised in her *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe.* In the interests of clarity, I will restrict direct remarks on Diamond’s reading to the footnotes. My focus is on how Anscombe understood the book and, more importantly, the understanding of *essence* that found in it. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cora Diamond, particularly in her recent work (i.e. Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe*), has underlined the importance of Anscombe’s interpretation of that book to her own understanding of Wittgenstein. However, she takes issue with Anscombe’s interpretation precisely at this point – that is, on her treatment of propositions that can only be true. Diamond’s discussion of these propositions is characteristically subtle, deep and illuminating – this paper engages with it only obliquely. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Anscombe, ‘The Simplicity of the *Tractatus’*, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Anscombe, *Introduction to Wittgenstein’s* Tractutus [henceforth *IWT*]], p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* [henceforth *LTL*], p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This, familiarly, is the point at which the charge is launched that the principle of verification is, by its own lights, nonsense. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ayer, *LTL,* p. 64. Familiarly, for the logical positivist only analytic propositions are ‘necessity’, but here we are not speaking of necessary truths but conventions of symbolism (ch. 4, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Anscombe points out that it is almost impossible to find evidence of an Ayer-type view in the *TLP.* Someone who goes looking for the ‘quick and easy method’ in the *Tractatus* will find herself frustrated. The principle of excluding *tout court* any proposition that is not verifiable by sense-observation is a radical one, and if we are to adopt it we will need a justification. In the logical positivists’ system, this justification comes from an empiricist theory of knowledge, but there are no remarks in the *Tractatus* about ‘sensible observation’, and very few about epistemology, so it is hard to see how Wittgenstein could possibly have taken himself to have given any reason for accepting such a principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Anscombe, *IWT*, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid,p. 53; this is exegesis of TLP 6.111. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid, p53; TLP 6.111. The impression that we are dealing with ‘remarkable facts’, Anscombe says, would then be compounded by the behaviour of propositions in truth tables. ‘On what grounds’, she asks, may we ‘use the same symbols [viz. ‘T’ and ‘F’] in all the columns on the truth table’? Or, to put it another way, what right would we have to assume that the ‘T’s and ‘F’s that we write in the columns under the propositional sign ‘*p*’ are signs for the same symbols when they are written under the operator ‘~’? [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Anscombe, *IWT*, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Anscombe, *IWT*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. C.f. Frege, ‘The Thought: A Logical Enquiry’. For more on the significance of this idea on Anscombe’s thought see my ‘Brute Facts and Human Affairs’. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Anscombe, *IWT*,p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. It seems to me that Diamond mistakenly attributes something like this ‘no insight’ reading of the *Tractatus.* Diamond criticises interpretations that contain the ‘everything else is nonsense’ view, which defines nonsense only negatively. Diamond writes: ‘The “everything else is nonsense” view can be seen at work whenever someone argues that the *Tractatus* supposedly excludes thus-and-such, just because the thus-and-such is not x and is not y. When I said that Anscombe’s reading of the *Tractatus* does not fully take into account its complicatedness, I had particularly in mind the way the “everything else is nonsense” view blocks out Wittgenstein’s treatment of a variety of kinds of indicative sentence that have “helpful” roles in language’ (164). This leads Diamond to link Anscombe’s approach to nonsense to Ayer’s, which does clearly contain this view (p. 176 and 206). I think Diamond is wrong to find this view in Anscombe, and this much is clear once we recognise why she holds that the ‘criticism of sentences as expressing no real thought … would be *ad hoc*, and fall within the subject-matter with which the sentence professed to deal’. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Anscombe, ‘Grammar, Structure and Essence’, p. 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See *Blue Book*, p. 2. Also *Philosophical Investigations*, esp. §§10-14, §26. (Note: ‘object’ here is equivalent to ‘object of thought’ rather than to ‘object’ in its modern use – colours, numbers and pains are ‘objects’ even though they are not material entities; see her ‘Intentionality of Sensation’ for this important distinction). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. ‘The use of a name for an object is connected with a conception of that object’ (Anscombe, ‘The First Person’, p. 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Anscombe, ‘Grammar, Structure, Essence’, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. TLP 2.0251, quoted by Anscombe in ‘Grammar, Structure, Essence’, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid, p. 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Anscombe, *IWT*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Anscombe, *IWT*, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid, p. 77-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §2. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid, p. 85-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Anscombe, *IWT*, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Anscombe takes an example from the *Philosophical Investigations* to illustrate how a ‘manufactured necessity’ can stand in the way of a ‘true conception’ –

    We say a picture is a picture of an old man climbing a hill with a stick. We may say we saw such a thing in a brief, a momentary, glimpse. In quite other surroundings the picture might be that of someone sliding downhill. How do we know what we see? […] If you say: ‘[…] There must be something else besides paint on canvas’—you are embarking on an illusory search. The vast number of things that we know and do and are concerned with are like the picture on the canvas. […] The things which Wittgenstein attacks—these are impediments to a true conception, or to true conceptions. It is an impediment to looking at the picture, if you are struck with the conviction that you must either extract the picture from the description of the colour of each colour patch in a fine grid laid upon it, or that you must have a theory of what the picture is apart from what that description describes. If you forswear both inclinations you may get to look at the picture, and doing so you may find yourself full of amazement. Or, as Wittgenstein once put it, you may find yourself ‘walking on a mountain of wonders’. (Anscombe, ‘Two Cuts’, p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. For a more detailed working out of this see my ‘What am I and What am I doing?’. The method I have described is found throughout Anscombe’s philosophy – indeed, I would say, it is Anscombe’s method. For example, her discussion: of ‘The past cannot change’ (in her ‘The Reality of the Past’); of ‘He who sees must see something’ (in her ‘The Intentionality of Sensation’), ‘Intentional actions are done for reasons’ (in *Intention*); of ‘A cause determines its effect’ (in her ‘Causality and Determination’). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Anscombe, *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*, p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Briefly, the use of a stopping modal (‘You mustn’t’, ‘You can’t’) is connected with a ‘logos’ – a form of justification. Examples are: ‘Because you promised’, ‘Because it belongs to him’, ‘Because it’s your turn’. But these logos are themselves internal to, and created by, the human linguistic practice in which they have their home. The ‘must’ that the modern moral philosopher is after is supposed to transcend any such particular logos, but this is incoherent without appeal to God. This is why the ‘moral must’ as ‘a word of mere mesmeric force’ with a ‘strong psychological effect, but which no longer signifies a real concept at all’. See Teichmann 2022 for discussion of ‘logos’ and stopping modals. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. This section is drawn from Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life.* In that book we set out this alterative tradition in detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Price, ‘Clarity is not Enough’, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Emmett, *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking*, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Emmett, ‘The Choice of a World Outlook’, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. MacKinnon, ‘And the Son of Man that Thou Visitest Him’, part 2, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)