

CARTESIAN SKEPTICISM, KANTIAN SKEPTICISM, AND THE DREAMING HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract. Based on the distinction drawn by James Conant between Cartesian skepticism and Kantian skepticism, I intend to show that Wittgenstein’s remarks on dreaming should not be understood as a direct attack on the former, as commonly held, but as an indirect attack on it, for Wittgenstein approaches Descartes’ dreaming hypothesis by changing the very problematic at stake. Wittgenstein’s attack on skepticism takes one step back from a question about how to distinguish between dreaming that one is experiencing something and actually experiencing it, for this attack focuses on the linguistic conditions of the possibility of something that the Cartesian problematic takes for granted, that is, the very possibility of saying “I am dreaming.” I also intend to show that Wittgenstein’s remarks on dreaming should be read in light of his claim that skepticism is nonsensical put forward in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* as well in his last writings. More specifically, I intend to show that the words “I am dreaming” are nonsensical in the same sense as the alleged proposition “There are physical objects” and the expression of doubt about the existence of physical objects or the external world.

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1. Introduction

In his fairly recent paper “Two Varieties of Skepticism,” James Conant draws a distinction between two kinds of skepticism: Cartesian skepticism and Kantian skepticism. Even though these two kinds of skepticism correspond to mere imaginary philosophers (a Cartesian skeptic and a Kantian skeptic), they both constitute serious threats to the possibility of knowledge and so raise the question of how knowledge is possible. As Conant puts it, the most familiar way of formulating the contrast between the problematics related to each kind of skepticism is as one of *knowledge vs. the conditions of knowledge*. According to the widespread view, the Cartesian wants to arrive at knowledge, the Kantian wants to arrive at the ground of the possibility of knowledge. Accordingly, while Cartesian skepticism calls into question the veridicality of one’s experience, Kantian skepticism calls into question the intelligibility of experience. While the Cartesian problematic is concerned with the question “How can I



know that things are as they seem?”, the Kantian problematic is concerned with the question “How can things so much as seem to be a certain way?”. Conant (2012, p.5) points out that the worry in the Kantian problematic focuses on the conditions of the possibility of the kind of *unity* presupposed by the Cartesian. In his very recent comment on Conant’s paper, Arata Hamawaki rephrases this point as follows: Kantian skepticism begins one step back from a question about whether one has knowledge. This is particularly true if we think about the so-called dreaming hypothesis. In its Cartesian version it says that at any given moment in one’s experience of the world, it is possible that one is dreaming, for if “a dream can perfectly and undetectably mimic waking experience (...) there would seem to be no way of ruling out the possibility that I am dreaming right now, for any attempt to do so would seem to be condemned to crippling circularity” (Hamawaki 2020, p.145). Both Conant and Hamawaki refer to the well-known passage in the First Meditation where Descartes says the following:

How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events — that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire — when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! (...) As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep (...) Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars — that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands — are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all. (Descartes 1984, p.13)

By comparing this passage with a passage of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant declares that, without the categories, perceptions “would be nothing but a blind play of representations, i.e., less than a dream” (Kant 1998, p.235), Conant (2012, p. 4) remarks that the problematic in Descartes’s quotation centers on how to distinguish between dreaming that one is experiencing something and actually experiencing it, while the problematic in Kant centers on what it takes to be able to dream that one is experiencing something, i.e. it focuses on the conditions of the possibility of something that the first problematic takes for granted. Hamawaki summarizes this difference in the following way:

Cartesian skepticism begins from an understanding of the difference between waking and dreaming, an understanding of what it is to be awake and what it is to dream, and what implications our being in one state rather than the other has with respect to our capacity to know. What is at issue is whether we are ever in a position to tell which one of these states we are in at any given time. By contrast, Kantian skepticism raises the question of what it is for an experience to be, in Kant’s words, a “representation”: what it is for it to represent something for me, for it to constitute a thought of an object (...) even if I could be wrong about the representational content of a particular experience, it is hard to conceive of the possibility of my being wrong about

my experiences representing anything for me at all. (Hamawaki 2020, p.149-50)

Conant also points out that Kantian skepticism has different variants. Regarding the philosophy of language, the skeptic is preoccupied by the following question: How can a sequence of marks or noises so much as seem to mean something? The paradox here has to do with the mystery of how a mere sequence of dead signs could so much as appear to be alive with significance. It is not difficult to see that this paradox bears a very close relation to a Wittgensteinian problematic that can be formulated as follows: What has to be added to dead signs to give them life? What breathes life into dead signs?¹ Given this parallel, the well-known paradox in section 201 of *Philosophical Investigations* can be understood as a particular version of the Kantian sceptical paradox.

Even though Conant recognizes that “the scope of the term ‘skepticism’ as employed by Wittgenstein is sufficiently capacious so as to encompass both Cartesian and Kantian varieties of skepticism” (Conant 2012, p.62), I intend to show in the following that Wittgenstein’s remarks on dreaming in *On Certainty* (§383 and §676) should not be understood as a direct attack on Cartesian skepticism, as commonly held, but as an indirect attack on it, for Wittgenstein approaches Descartes’ dreaming hypothesis by changing the very problematic at stake. In this sense, Wittgenstein’s attack on skepticism takes one step back from a question about how to distinguish between dreaming that one is experiencing something and actually experiencing it, for this attack focuses on the linguistic conditions of the possibility of something that the Cartesian problematic takes for granted, that is, the very possibility of saying “I am dreaming.” I also want to show that Wittgenstein’s remarks on dreaming should be read in light of his claim that skepticism is nonsensical put forward in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* as well in his last writings, more specifically, in §§35-7 of *On Certainty*. I want to show that the words “I am dreaming” are nonsensical in the same sense as the alleged proposition “There are physical objects” and the expression of doubt about the existence of physical objects or the external world. Similarly, Wittgenstein’s attack on skepticism about the external world (as well as on Russell’s answer to this form of skepticism) takes one step back from a question about whether one has knowledge of the external world by showing that the very expression of doubt would lack sense. In what follows, I will first show the continuity between early and later Wittgenstein’s criticism of skepticism. I will then present a reading of §383 and §676 of *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein addresses the dreaming hypothesis in order to show why it is senseless or, more precisely, nonsensical.²

2. Wittgenstein on Skepticism and Nonsense

Despite the many changes in Wittgenstein's philosophy from the *Tractatus* to his last writings, there are some significant continuities. One of these continuities is his austere conception of nonsense.³ Even though Wittgenstein abandons the ladder metaphor and the method practiced by the *Tractatus*, in his last writings he addresses skepticism about the external world from a perspective very similar to the one we find in his earlier period. In MS 172, dated from 1949, Wittgenstein explicitly mentions skepticism by discussing the sentence "There are physical objects":

But can't it be imagined that there should be no physical objects? I don't know. And yet "There are physical objects" is nonsense. Is it supposed to be an empirical proposition? —

And is *this* an empirical proposition: "There seem to be physical objects"?

"A is a physical object" is a piece of instruction which we give only to someone who doesn't yet understand either what "A" means, or what "physical object" means. Thus it is instruction about the use of words, and "physical object" is a logical concept. (Like colour, quantity, ...) And that is why no such proposition as: "There are physical objects" can be formulated.

Yet we encounter such unsuccessful shots at every turn.

But is it an adequate answer to the skepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that "There are physical objects" is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shewn; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an investigation is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic. (OC §§35-7)

Standard accounts of these sections understand the words "There are physical objects" simultaneously as a piece of instruction about the use of words, that is, a rule of grammar, and a piece of nonsense. According to Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, Wittgenstein does not use "nonsense" as a derogatory term, for "it is a technical term applied to strings of words that stand outside the bounds of sense — be they expressions of violations of rules, or *expressions of the rules themselves*" (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p.90). Grammatical rules are nonsense in that they cannot be false or, to put it in Moyal-Sharrock's words, "they are unfalsifiable." Despite the differences, these grammatical rules are conceived of as surrogates of the Tractarian rules of logical syntax. Despite the fact that both "Red is a color" and "Red is not a color" are nonsense, the first is nonsense as it is a rule of grammar and the latter is nonsense as it violates a rule of

grammar. The different reasons why both sentences are nonsense indicate that they are different kinds of nonsense, namely: substantial nonsense and mere nonsense.⁴ In another passage, Moyal-Sharrock calls “There are physical objects” a hinge, for it is supposedly the expression of a rule of grammar. Like all hinges, it cannot be said, but it “shows itself in our *reaching out* to pick a flower” (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p.99). Finally, it cannot be doubted for it is not an empirical proposition. The philosophers’ mistake lies in the fact that they believe they can meaningfully doubt such a sentence and then “embark on elaborate metaphysical investigations to uncover some hidden proof, where they should have recognized the track laid down by ourselves” (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p.167).

Moyal-Sharrock’s interpretation is illustrative of the standard account of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. Nevertheless, it is subject to a devastating charge pointed out by James Conant. In the case of the *Tractatus*, the charge can be formulated as follows:

The procedure of the book as a whole, insofar as it allows itself to talk of how logical form is ‘shown’, presupposes the possibility of just the sort of language that it seeks to show is impossible. And, indeed, such a charge is difficult to forestall as soon as the difficulty posed by the following question comes into focus: is the ‘thought’ that ‘an illogical language is impossible’ itself a thought or not? Is it something thinkable? (Conant 2004, p.170)

The purported solution to the problem is to relocate it to the realm of the unsayable. Even though ineffable fact-like quasi-truths cannot be said, they can be hinted at. In other words, “the difficulty is thus transformed from one concerning what we can think and say into one concerning whether certain sorts of ineffable content can be ‘shown’ and ‘grasped’” (Conant 2004, p.170). Moyal-Sharrock intends to dissolve this problem by introducing a distinction between *saying* and *speaking*. Even though Tractarian sentences are technically *unsayable*, for one can only say what makes sense, it does not mean that they cannot be *spoken*.⁵ The appearance that the difficulty has been surmounted is generated by introducing an artificial distinction. Given the “grammatical, and therefore nonsensical, nature of Tractarian sentences,” they make no sense. But given that these sentences demarcate the bounds of sense, they are what make senseful propositions possible. Now, the immediate question one can raise is this: What does speaking but not saying anything mean? Any string of words can be spoken, for any string of words is a sign, to put it in the Tractarian vocabulary. But strings of words that are *mere* signs – philosophical pseudo-propositions, including Tractarian pseudo-propositions, skeptical doubts, etc. — are not, for this very reason, symbols. This is the point Wittgenstein is making in the *Tractatus*: Tractarian pseudo-propositions do not make sense because we have not given — and we are not able to give — any meaning to their constituents. Instead of solving the

problem, Moyal-Sharrock's distinction between *saying* and *speaking* only puts it in other terms. She goes even further by saying that the same distinction can be found in Wittgenstein's last writings. One of the main contentions of *On Certainty*, Moyal-Sharrock argues, is telling Moore that he cannot *say* what he thought he had said. The example given by her in this context is the sentence "There are physical objects," even though Wittgenstein himself says that it cannot be formulated. In the *Tractatus* as well as in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein considers *saying* as internally related to *use*. One can *speak*, but not *say*, things like "Ab sur ah" and "I am here" either because it has no recognizable use in any language-game, as is the case in the first example, or because it is devoid of use in the language-game in which it is articulated: "I can *formulate* (speak) grammatical rules (in order to transmit them to a child or foreign speaker; or, as a philosopher, for conceptual investigation), but I cannot *say* them (that is: articulate them in a language-game as if they were informative or descriptive propositions)" (Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p.46). Yet one can point out the same difficulty mentioned above. What does it mean to say that there are things that cannot be said, for they are mere signs, but that can be spoken? Is there a difference between *speaking* — i.e., *voicing*, *pronouncing* — mere gibberish and *speaking* rules of grammar? Is there a difference between these two kinds of nonsense? James Conant is very acute in characterizing this kind of reading:

Wittgenstein's aim is taken to be one of showing the philosopher that he is speaking nonsense because he has violated certain conditions. The integrity of Wittgenstein's method of philosophical criticism thereby comes to apparently require that he first be able to specify what the conditions in question are. This requirement, in turn, gives rise to the appearance that he must be committed to the existence of a set of quasi-truths — whether they be called the principles of logical syntax, the rules of grammar, or the judgments that constitute the framework of our practice — that mark the bounds of sense and reveal the exact point at which the philosopher has strayed beyond them. These quasi-truths must lie outside the realm of merely empirical truths, while lying just inside the limit beyond which the realm of impermissible philosophical nonsense begins. (Conant 2004, p.182)

The problem with this reading is that the propositions expressing the conditions of sense, that demarcate the bounds of sense, according to Moyal-Sharrock, are senseless, just as the statements they seek to condemn as senseless. Nonetheless, they somehow communicate that which cannot be said, even though it is not clear how they do that. Once again, Moyal-Sharrock's distinction between *saying* and *speaking* is not a way of solving the problem, but only a way of rephrasing it. It does not explain if and why nonsensical rules of grammar are in a better position than mere gibberish.

Having said this, we can go back to Wittgenstein's claim that "There are phys-

ical objects” is nonsense. First of all, it should be noted that he never claims that this sentence is nonsensical because it is a rule of grammar or a hinge. If there is no distinction between a purported substantial kind of nonsense — for example, rules of grammar or hinges — and mere nonsense, the sentence “There are physical objects” is just as nonsensical as any other piece of nonsense. Despite the differences between the *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein’s last writings, the nonsensicality of this sentence must be understood in an analogous way in both periods of his philosophy. Analogous but not identical, because the later Wittgenstein generalizes the context principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use).⁶ According to the *Tractatus*, the sentence “There are physical objects” is to be taken as nonsense because we are tempted to keep the role that the sign “objects” has in contexts like “There are 2 objects which...”, where it signifies a formal concept, and to project it in contexts like “There are (physical) objects.” Remember that Wittgenstein introduced the pseudo-notion of a formal concept in order “to exhibit the source of the confusion” generated when one employs a term such as “object” as if it were a genuine concept. The confusion is made explicit by Wittgenstein’s own examples in 4.1272:

Wherever the word ‘object’ (‘thing’, etc.) is correctly used, it is expressed in conceptual notation by a variable name.

For example, in the proposition, ‘There are 2 objects which...’, it is expressed by ‘ $(\exists x, y)...$ ’.

Wherever it is used in a different way, that is as a proper concept-word, nonsensical pseudo-propositions are the result.

So one cannot say, for example, ‘There are objects’, as one might say, ‘There are books’. (TLP 4.1272)

The apparent similarity between “There are 2 objects which...” and “There are objects” must not deceive us. In fact, Wittgenstein wants to show that, despite the similarity, both sentences do not share a common logical form. The fact that “objects” in a context like “There are 2 objects which...” signifies a formal concept doesn’t carry over to its use in “There are objects.” These contexts have only the sign, not the symbol, in common. The point of 4.1272 is to make us realize our temptation to keep the role that the sign “objects” has in contexts in which it signifies a formal concept and to project it in contexts like “There are objects.” We must recognize “There are objects” as nonsense not because “objects” signifies a “formal concept”, i.e., because it says something that cannot be said or because it expresses an “ineffable truth” and, for that reason, it cannot be false; it is nonsense because we have given no meaning to “objects” as a concept.

In 4.126 Wittgenstein says that “the expression for a formal concept is a propositional variable in which this distinctive feature alone is constant.” According to Wittgenstein’s version of the context principle, “an expression has meaning only in a proposition. All variables can be construed as propositional variables. (Even variable names.)” (TLP 3.314). Thus, the variable, which is the sign for a formal concept, is always a propositional variable. This means we cannot understand “There are objects” as a combination of “There are. . .” (as when one says that “There are books”) and “objects” (as when one says “Smith saw an object on the windowsill, about three inches high”).⁷ If this were the case, in order to make sense of this piece of nonsense, we would have to construe it as substantial nonsense: as substantial *nonsense* it would fail to symbolize, but as *substantial* nonsense it would be a combination of symbols rather than mere signs. Treating “There are objects” as substantial nonsense would involve hovering between two feasible but incompatible ways of treating the string of words, one that understands “There are. . .” as an existential quantifier binding variables and one that takes “object” as a singular term or, in a logical notation, an individual constant.⁸ It would require identifying sentential parts where no parts can be identified. The very possibility of identifying meaningful parts in a piece of nonsense is excluded by Wittgenstein’s version of the context principle and the idea that the expression for a formal concept is a *propositional* variable.

The claim that skepticism is obviously nonsensical, for “it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked” (TLP 6.51) may be understood in comparison to what Wittgenstein says in 4.1274: “To ask whether a formal concept exists is nonsensical. For no proposition can be the answer to such a question.” In other words, neither the question nor the answer make sense, for both employ words such as “object,” “thing,” etc.⁹ In the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein makes a similar point by mentioning the question about the existence of simple things: “It keeps on looking as if the question ‘Are there simple things?’ made sense. And surely this question must be nonsense! — It would be vain to try and express the pseudo-sentence ‘Are there simple things?’ in symbolic notation” (NB, p.45). The skeptic’s question would have to be formulated in an analogous way: “Are there physical objects?” Both questions are obviously nonsensical for the very same reason: both employ words such as “things” and “objects” in contexts where no meaning has been given to them as concepts. The confusion mentioned above concerning the way “objects” signifies is shown by a conceptual notation that “simply makes perspicuous the kind of role that the ordinary language word has when it is used unconfusedly to signify a formal concept” (Diamond 2019, p.140).¹⁰

Wittgenstein’s claim that skepticism is not irrefutable is a reply to Russell’s claim that “universal skepticism, though logically irrefutable, is practically barren” (Russell 1952, p. 74) While Russell has Cartesian skepticism in view, for the problematic he is concerned with has to do with the question whether one has knowledge of the

external world, Wittgenstein's riposte to Russell takes one step back from a question about whether one has knowledge of the external world by showing that the very expression of a doubt would lack sense. When saying that skepticism is *not* irrefutable, Wittgenstein is not stating that it can be refuted. Rather, Wittgenstein denies Russell's claim by changing the Cartesian problematic for the Kantian problematic: How can the skeptical doubt so much as seem to mean something (when in fact it means nothing)?

In §§35-7 of *On Certainty*, the nonsensicality of "There are physical objects" is due to the fact that the expression "physical objects" does not have the meaning it has in a piece of instruction such as "A is a physical object." The fact that in other contexts the expression signifies a logical concept doesn't carry over to its use in "There are physical objects," which has only the sign, not the symbol, in common with such other sentential contexts.¹¹ In the specific context Wittgenstein is thinking about, i.e., uttering the words "There are physical objects" as an answer to the skeptic or the idealist, no meaning has been given to "physical objects" as a logical concept. As a matter of fact, no meaning has been given to "physical objects" at all. One might think that uttering these words or trying to deny them, as a skeptic would do, is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed. If this were so, Moyal-Sharrock's reading would be correct. But Wittgenstein adds that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty – the skeptical doubt — or of its solution — the assertion — may as yet not be correctly expressed *at all*, i.e., the difficulty or its solution are not the assertion or the negation of a rule of grammar, but the utterance of a piece of mere nonsense. The words "There are physical objects" are nonsensical not because they are uttered in the wrong context; they are nonsense because in the context imagined by Wittgenstein no meaning has been determined. As we shall see, this is the same reason why the dreaming hypothesis is senseless or, more precisely, nonsensical.

3. Wittgenstein on Dreaming

In the last year and a half of his life, Wittgenstein wrote in his notebooks a series of remarks, posthumously published in *On Certainty*, that address notions such as certainty, knowledge, and doubt. As is well known, these notions have been at the center of philosophers' concerns at least since Descartes' philosophical enterprise. On April 27, 1951, Wittgenstein wrote his very last philosophical remark, which seems to be a *direct* attack on Descartes' dreaming hypothesis:

I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming. Someone who, dreaming, says "I am dreaming", even if he speaks audibly in doing so, is no more right than if he said in his dream "it is raining", while it was in fact raining. Even if his dream were actually connected with the noise of the rain. (OC §676)

Despite the widespread view that this remark is in fact a *direct* attack on Descartes' dreaming hypothesis, commentators have interpreted differently the claim that "I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming." From Norman Malcolm's pioneering essay on dreaming to a recent reading of Wittgenstein's quoted remark by Avrum Stroll, the interpreters have understood the sentence "I am dreaming" as self-contradictory or senseless.

Even though Malcolm does not mention Wittgenstein's remarks on dreaming in his paper "Dreaming and Skepticism" as well as in his book *Dreaming* — for they were published a decade before *On Certainty* was — he aims to analyze the very sentence "I am sound asleep" from a Wittgensteinian point of view. Malcolm considers the use of this sentence as an "absurdity" as well as a "self-contradiction" because "if a person claims that he is sound asleep then he is not sound asleep." There is an implicit distinction here between saying and claiming, for "to claim" is a stronger verb here than "to say." The absurdity lies in my claiming or asserting that I am sound asleep. Malcolm also says that the absurdity is due to the fact that "the assertion 'I am sound asleep' would be, in a certain sense, self-contradictory" (Malcolm 1956, p.19). This is not a contradiction in the usual sense, for it does not entail a proposition of the form "p and not-p." Malcolm speaks of a kind of self-contradiction, for asserting "I am sound asleep" would be "an assertion of such a nature that making the assertion would contradict the truth of the assertion" (Malcolm 1956, p.19). In other words, it is not a contradiction between the alleged proposition "I am sound asleep" and the proposition "I am not sound asleep"; it is a contradiction between asserting that I am sound asleep and the circumstance that I am not sound asleep.

In *Dreaming*, Malcolm adds that one cannot verify the sentence "I am asleep," because if a man said this sentence out loud in his sleep this would not count either for or against his understanding of the sentence since he is not aware of what he is saying. In other words, in order to know that "I am asleep" I would have to know that I said it while I was asleep and that I was aware of saying it. While the sentence "He is asleep" is governed by criteria, namely, the body of the person in question is relaxed, her eyes are closed, her breathing steady, etc., the sentence "I am asleep" cannot be supposed to be governed by the same criteria. It would be absurd to say of myself that I am asleep because my eyes are closed, my body is inert, and it does react to various sounds in the vicinity, etc.:

Neither I nor anyone else can find out whether the state id myself that I claim to describe by the sentence "I am asleep" really is the state of being asleep. The possibility of finding this out must be rejected as a conceptual absurdity. There could be nothing whatever that would tend to show that I employ that sentence correctly. (Malcolm 1959, p.13)

When interpreting Wittgenstein's remarks on dreaming in *On Certainty*, Avrum Stroll reaches a similar conclusion to Malcolm's. He also claims that Wittgenstein's

point in these remarks is that a person who says “I am dreaming” is not talking and thinking and hence not making an assertion:

This idea rests on a familiar thesis in all of Wittgenstein’s later writings, namely, that certain background and contextual conditions have to be satisfied if an utterance is to count as a statement. And one of these conditions is that the person must be awake if his utterances are to be significant. The condition is obviously unfilled if the person is asleep and dreaming. Wittgenstein’s way of formulating this condition is to say that a sleeping person is neither talking nor thinking. (Stroll 2009, p.684)

This particular reading is based on a general assumption about Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, namely: “it is only when the context is appropriate that a particular remark, even if well-formed grammatically, will count as significant” (Stroll 2009, p.684). As a matter of fact, the point Wittgenstein is making in §676 of *On Certainty* is that dreaming can in no circumstances be an appropriate context if an utterance is to count as a statement. This conclusion is valid for any sentence whatsoever, even if someone said in his dream “It is raining,” while it was in fact raining. The underlying argument is very similar to Malcolm’s argument: if someone did mean what he said when dreaming his utterance would be self-defeating, for it would entail that he was awake at the time he spoke: “This is thus a case in which the necessary contextual circumstances for significance would have been absent, and nothing sensible (*sinnvoll*) would have been said” (Stroll 2009, p.685). In another place, Stroll also comments on §383 of *On Certainty*, where Wittgenstein explicitly says that the dream argument is senseless: “The argument ‘I may be dreaming’ is senseless for this reason: if I am dreaming, this utterance is being dreamed as well – and indeed it is also being dreamed that these words have any meaning” (OC §383, translation modified). Stroll (2005, p.759) notes that “senseless” (*sinnlos*) in this passage is equivalent to “nonsensical” (*unsinnig*) as used in §6.51 of the *Tractatus*, but he adds that the reasons advanced here differ from those in the earlier work. He summarizes his reading in the following words:

Insofar as X, a radical sceptic such as Descartes, wishes to make a certain kind of conceptual point, the utterance that X uses to make it must be a genuine statement. Suppose X utters the sentence, “I may be dreaming.” If X is in fact asleep and dreaming, the requirement of genuine statement-making is violated. For if X is in fact asleep and dreaming, his remark occurs as part of his dream. In that case, X is not really intending to make a claim about his present state of mind (or as Wittgenstein puts it, is not talking or thinking) and therefore his utterance is not a genuine assertion. It is not a genuine assertion because the background conditions for statement-making have not been satisfied. These conditions are that X be awake, be fully aware of what his words mean, and intend them to make an assertion. But if X is asleep,

these criteria remain unfulfilled. Therefore, X's words are senseless when uttered in those circumstances; and because that is so, X's attempt to state, in the Dream Hypothesis, a radical form of skepticism lacks conceptual force. This does not mean that the same words, uttered in different circumstances, may not have an application. They can, but they cannot be used, with sense, by a person who is fully awake, to claim that he might at that very moment be asleep and dreaming. (Stroll 2009, p.689-90)

Malcolm's understanding of the sentence "I am asleep" and Stroll's reading of Wittgenstein's remarks on dreaming illustrate a standard account of Wittgenstein's philosophy: "I am asleep" or "I am dreaming," said while sleeping or dreaming, are nonsense¹² because the situation is an *unsuitable* one for its use, where *unsuitable* means that the situation somehow does not "fit" the sentence – or, alternatively, the sentence somehow does not fit into this context of use.¹³ The nonsensicality is due to the incompatibility between the sentences mentioned above and the particular context of use. Here an immediate difficulty arises: in order to be a contradiction between asserting that I am dreaming and the circumstance that I cannot be dreaming, the words "I am dreaming" must be taken as something more than mere dead signs. For Malcolm as well as for Stroll the problem arises when one *claims* or *asserts* that one is asleep or that one is dreaming. There is nothing wrong with the sentence itself, but with its utterance in the wrong situation. Malcolm explicitly makes a distinction between saying and claiming (Malcolm 1956, p.18). Stroll in turn distinguishes, in the passage quoted above, between meaning and asserting. So, the words "I am asleep" or "I am dreaming" say or mean something in the sense they describe a fact that cannot be verified by the speaker. In short, according to this reading, Wittgenstein's aim is not to point out the unintelligibility of what is said, but to show the unintelligibility of the attempt to assert it on such an unsuitable occasion.

According to the standard readings, the movement from the early to the later Wittgenstein is taken as progress from an account of nonsense as the incompatibility of the components of a proposition to an account of nonsense as the incompatibility of the components of a speech-situation. This goes against Wittgenstein's aforementioned generalization of the context principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use). If we take this generalization into account, we should understand Wittgenstein's claims that "the argument 'I may be dreaming' is senseless" or that "I cannot seriously suppose that I am at this moment dreaming" in light of §348 of *On Certainty* where Wittgenstein says that the meaning of the words "I am here," said to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly, is not *determined* by the situation. The meaning of the words stands in need of determination. This means that it is not clear what determinate thing it is that the sentence "I am here" means. And this is not because of the unsuitable character of

its context of use. Wittgenstein acknowledges that these words “have a meaning only in certain contexts”. The word “only” reminds the Tractarian version of the context principle: “only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning.” (TLP 3.3), with the difference, I repeat, that the later Wittgenstein generalizes the context principle. We could in fact imagine a situation where these words have a meaning, for example, an occasion where my wife can’t find me at home. She shouts “Where are you?” and I say “I am here.” Given Wittgenstein’s adherence to the context principle, “it is a mistake to think that the words themselves possess a meaning apart from their capacity to mean what they do in the various contexts of use in which they can be put to work to say.” (Conant 2004, p. 188) The same goes for the dreaming hypothesis. One could imagine a context where the words “I am dreaming” had sense. Consider, for example, a context where they express one’s intense joy of receiving good news. In this case, the meaning of the words would be determined by the context, provided that in this context the speaker is awake.¹⁴ The point of Wittgenstein’s remark is that the words “I am dreaming” are nonsense when said by someone who is dreaming. And this is not because the words supposedly refer to the very situation where they are uttered. Even if someone said in her dream “It is raining,” while it was in fact raining, the meaning of her words could not possibly be determined. This example shows why the standard reading is wrong, for in this case there is no contradiction or incompatibility between the words and the particular context of use. More precisely, if the words “I am dreaming,” said by someone while dreaming, were nonsensical because they would not fit into this context of use, it would be impossible to explain why the words “It is raining,” said by someone in the same situation, are also nonsensical and, hence, not true, for in this case there is no supposed contradiction or incompatibility between the words and their context. As Duncan Richter says, “the context in which doubts exist is not something wholly separable from or prior to particular doubts themselves.” (Richter 2001, p. 357) The standard reading does not pay attention to this point when interpreting Wittgenstein’s claim that “I am dreaming” is nonsensical, for it disregards the fact that doubts about the external world, such as the one expressed by the dreaming hypothesis, are always doubts in context.

In the remarks on skepticism from the *Tractatus* to his last writings, Wittgenstein is not attacking directly what one might call Cartesian Skepticism, for he does not intend to rule out the possibility that I am dreaming right now, but to reject the very intelligibility of the skeptical doubt. The same goes for his last writings. Descartes’ well-known dreaming hypothesis centers on how to distinguish between dreaming that one is experiencing something and actually experiencing it. Wittgenstein’s remarks on the dream hypothesis should be understood as a supplementation of the Kantian way with skepticism, because they focus on the conditions of the possibility of something that Descartes takes for granted, namely, that the skeptic’s words mean something.¹⁵ Wittgenstein’s point in his remarks on the dreaming hypothesis is that

what the skeptic supposedly means by his hypothesis cannot be said, for it is mere nonsense.

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Notes

¹The first question is due to Hamawaki (2020, p.147) and the second is due to Conant (2020, p.943).

²Wittgenstein says that the dream argument is senseless in §383 of *On Certainty*. Even though he does not say that the argument is nonsensical, my interpretation relies on the assumption that senseless is being used here as synonym for nonsensical. In fact, various readers point out that in Wittgenstein's later writings the Tractarian distinction between senselessness and nonsense is abandoned. Duncan Richter, for instance, says the following: "No distinction between nonsense and mere senselessness appears in the *Philosophical Investigations*, so the debate about nonsense is also a debate about continuity in Wittgenstein's work (...) *Philosophical Investigations* §500 says that a sentence is called senseless when it is withdrawn from the language, not when its sense is senseless. This suggests that being senseless (*sinnlos*) really is the same thing as being nonsensical or meaningless (*unsinnig* or *bedeutungslos*)." (Richter 2014, p. 151-2). Moyal-Sharrock, in turn, says the following: "The distinction between *unsinnig* and *sinnlos* gradually loses its importance and is completely dissolved by the time of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein uses the terms 'nonsense', 'senseless', 'has no sense' *indiscriminately* to refer to combinations of words that are excluded from the language, 'withdrawn from circulation' (PI 500)." (Moyal-Sharrock 2007, p. 156). This does not mean that Wittgenstein's notion of nonsense evolves during his lifetime. On the contrary, I want to show that perhaps the major continuity in Wittgenstein's thought lies in his espousal of the austere conception of nonsense, according to which "a sentence is nonsensical, on a particular occasion of use, if and *only* if we have failed, on that occasion, to give a meaning to its constituent words" (Conant and Bronzo 2017, p. 180). The difference between his early and later conception lies in the generalization of the context principle so that it applies not only to words (and their role within the context of a significant proposition) but to sentences (and their role within the context of circumstances of significant use). Given the continuity in Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense, there is a strong continuity in his criticism of skepticism as nonsensical.

³In his prolegomena to the reading of later Wittgenstein, Conant says the following: "I take the continuity in Wittgenstein's thought to lie in his espousal of the austere conception of nonsense" (Conant 2001, p. 121).

⁴About this difference, see Conant (2000, p.191).

⁵See Moyal-Sharrock (2007, p.148 and p.171-2).

⁶See Conant (1998, p.233).

⁷This example is borrowed from Conant (2000, p.207-8) and Diamond (1997, p.79).

⁸I owe this point to Mulhall (2007, p.3-4).

⁹Dean Proessel (2005, p.328) makes a similar point, but he does not explain in detail why a question such as “Are there physical objects?” is nonsensical.

¹⁰Although I share Diamond’s resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, I do not follow her interpretation of Wittgenstein’s early thought about skepticism. See Diamond (2014).

¹¹Here I am paraphrasing Diamond’s phrasing on the *Tractatus* on formal concepts. See Diamond (2019, p.137-8).

¹²In *Dreaming*, Malcolm (1959, p.6) says that the sentence “I am asleep” is “playful nonsense”.

¹³This is an adaptation of Conant’s general characterization of standard accounts of *On Certainty*. The next few paragraphs are inspired by Conant’s reading.

¹⁴I borrow this example from Annalisa Coliva (2010, p. 123), even though I do not agree with her interpretation of §383 and §676 of *On Certainty*.

¹⁵This point is made explicit in the following passage of *On Certainty*: “If, therefore, I doubt or am uncertain about this being my hand (in whatever sense), why not in that case about the meaning of these words as well?” (OC §456).