

Ethics and the *Tractatus*

1919 letter to *Der Brenner* publisher Ludwig von Ficker:

You see, I am quite sure that you won't get all that much out of reading it. Because you won't understand it; its subject-matter will seem quite alien to you. But it isn't really alien to you, because the book's point [*der Sinn des Buches*] is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the **ONLY** *rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it.

Wittgenstein adds,

“I would recommend you to read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, because they contain the most direct expression of the point of the book.”

In the preface to the *Tractatus* we read

If this work has any value, it consists in two things: the first is that thoughts are expressed in it, and on this score the better the thoughts are expressed—the more the nail has been hit on the head—the greater will be its value.—Here I am conscious of having fallen a long way short of what is possible. Simply because my powers are too slight for the accomplishment of the task.—May others come and do it better.

On the other hand the *truth* of the thoughts that are here set forth seems to me unassailable and definitive. I therefore believe myself to have found, on all essential points, the final solution of the problems. And if I am not mistaken in this belief, then the second thing in which the value of the work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved.

The concluding three remarks of the *Tractatus*

§6.53 The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. 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 a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.

§6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must overcome these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

§7 What we cannot talk about we must remain silent about.

A formidable exegetical challenge: Wittgenstein tells us that his book has an ethical point, that the truth of the thoughts expressed in it is definitive, and that anyone who understands him will recognize the propositions of the book as nonsense.

Three lines of interpretation

1) Proceed as though most of the passages that Wittgenstein calls nonsensical are intelligible philosophical claims about such topics as semantics and logic.

Wittgenstein's claim that these sentences are nonsense fails to anticipate subsequent developments in logic. Or, it is related to his hostility towards philosophy and perhaps a result of his inclination towards mysticism.

He is right that philosophical ethics *is* nonsense, but we can turn it into a subject for psychology and sociology.

This avoids paradox and makes the book available as a source of insights into logic and language. It also opens up the substantive claims of the book to philosophical criticism.

But it is a poor attempt at interpretation; such total disregard for the author's intentions on such a crucial issue can hardly be a promising interpretative starting point.

2) The second line (the so-called “Standard View”) relies on a particular way of understanding the distinction between saying and showing in the *Tractatus*. For example:

§4.12 Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it —logical form.

In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world.

§4.121 Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.

What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.

What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language.

Propositions *show* the logical form of reality. They display it.

§4.1212 What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said.

§4.122 In a certain sense we can talk of formal properties of objects and states of affairs, or, in the case of facts, about structural properties: and in the same sense about formal relations and structural relations....

It is impossible, however, to assert by means of propositions that such internal properties and relations exist: rather, they make themselves manifest in the propositions that represent the relevant states of affairs and are concerned with the relevant objects.

§4.124 The existence of an internal property of a possible situation is not expressed by means of a proposition: rather it expresses itself in the proposition representing the situation, by means of an internal property of that proposition.

It would be just as nonsensical to assert that a proposition had a formal property as to deny it.

It appears that the conclusion we are to draw from these passages is that trying to say *with* a proposition what can only be shown *by* a proposition produces nonsense.

Russell expressed ‘some hesitation in accepting Mr. Wittgenstein’s position....What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said...’

Wittgenstein seems to argue for certain conclusions about what can and cannot be said with propositions. But his arguments imply that these very conclusions are themselves nonsensical. The upshot is that we appear to be left with the paradox that these conclusions are somehow true but inexpressible.

The Standard View

Some commentators have attempted to deal with the question of the nonsense in the book by introducing a distinction into the very idea of nonsense itself.

They argue that nonsensical sentences such as §4.122 serve as guides to truths about what one can say through the quite particular ways in which they themselves fail to say anything.

Elizabeth Anscombe: [A]n important part is played in the *Tractatus* by the things which, though they cannot be ‘said’, are yet ‘shown’ or ‘displayed’. That is to say: it would be right to call them ‘true’ if, *per impossibile*, they could be said; in fact they cannot be called true, since they cannot be said, but ‘can be shewn’, or ‘are exhibited’, in the propositions saying the various things that can be said.

P.M.S. Hacker: ‘Wittgenstein did think, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, that there were ineffable metaphysical necessities.’

Hacker on TLP

Philosophers try to say what can only be shown, and what they say, being nonsense, does not even show what they try to say. Nevertheless, even within the range of philosophical...nonsense we can distinguish, as we shall see, between what might (somewhat confusedly) be called illuminating nonsense, and misleading nonsense. Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover, it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy.

The source of the error of past philosophy lies in its failure to understand the [unstatable]) principles of the logical syntax of language which are obscured by grammatical forms.

Wittgenstein was quite correct and consistent; the *Tractatus* does indeed consist largely of pseudo-propositions. Of course, what Wittgenstein meant by these remarks...is, in his view, quite correct, only it cannot be said. Apparently what someone means or intends by a remark can be grasped even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense.

The discussion as framed thus far has touched only on the nature of the world, logic, and language. What about ethics, aesthetics, and the mystical?

§6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value.

If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *within* the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.

It must lie outside the world.

Interlude: Remember, “the only necessity is **logical necessity**”. Any proposition that is true could also be false (that’s why it has sense). Props. of logic are *sinnlos*.

Statements of “relative value” can be analyzed into statements of facts.

“The best way to Stavanger” vs. “The best way to live”

§6.42 and §6.421 continue in a similar vein:

And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words....

§6.522. There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

All of this would appear to entail that ethics concerns some *thing* which lies *outside* the world, beyond what can be said. How is this possible?

“There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.”

Schopenhauer's influence?

Anscombe : “If we look for Wittgenstein's philosophical ancestry, we should rather look to Schopenhauer; specifically, his 'solipsism', his conception of 'the limit', and his ideas on value will be better understood in the light of Schopenhauer than any other philosopher.”

Hacker : Schopenhauer “moulded [Wittgenstein's] conception of the metaphysical self and his notion of the mystical.”

The *Notebooks* do occasionally read like meditations on *The World as Will and Representation*.

In the *Tractatus* itself, we find what sound like echoes of Schopenhauer's mystical monism: “To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.”

These remarks could indicate something like the following interpretation:

In the remarks on the will, solipsism, value, ethics, aesthetics, and the mystical, Wittgenstein employs nonsense in order to *gesture* to his reader that the totality of storable facts comprises a limited world whole. In thus gesturing at the limit of this world whole, he is also conveying something about what lies beyond it, a noumenal domain of value (“what is higher”) that is in some way graspable by us through mystical insight, but about which we can *say* nothing, on pain of speaking nonsense.

One thus ends up with an interpretation of the *Tractatus* in which Wittgenstein is combining important parts of Schopenhauer's ethics and ontology with a more rigorous logical theory.

Wittgenstein's more rigorous logical standards will lead his reader to a knowing silence.

3) “Resolute” readers, esp. Cora Diamond and James Conant : Throw Away the Ladder!

Don’t “Chicken Out!”

Anscombe and Hacker force an incoherent position onto Wittgenstein without any compelling textual or other interpretative justification for doing so.

The incoherence lies in the idea that there are *different kinds* of nonsensical utterances, and that one of these kinds can be identified by *internal* features of the pseudo-propositions that are used to make them. Resolute readers take the Context Principle very seriously. Cf. TLP 3.3

Take “Socrates is identical” as an example.

Conant has termed the kind of view just described a “substantial” conception of nonsense.

Against this view, they have argued for an “austere” view of nonsense in the *Tractatus*.

They dispense with the idea that Wittgenstein believed that nonsense could be divided into a deep variety which gestures at sublime truths, and garden variety nonsense.

After we throw away Wittgenstein’s nonsensical elucidations, the only sentences remaining are those that can be used to say something: *ordinary* sentences.

Nonsense does not arise from a violation of the “principles of logical syntax”, but simply from someone’s failing “to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions”(*TLP* §6.53).

There is no independently identifiable and inherently “important nonsense” that Wittgenstein employs to somehow convey or gesture at ineffable truths of logic, metaphysics, or anything else.

How can the *Tractatus* have an ethical point?

James Conant:

The guiding assumption of the *Tractatus* is that the philosopher typically suffers from an illusion of understanding, from the projection of an illusory sense onto a (pseudo-) proposition which has not yet been given a clear sense. The task, therefore, is not to disagree with what he thinks, but to undo his illusion that there is something which he is thinking -- to show that what he imagines himself to be thinking fails to amount to a thought (that there isn't a “what” there for him to think). The method of the *Tractatus* relies upon the thought that under such circumstances the only procedure that will prove genuinely elucidatory is one that attempts to enter into the philosopher's illusion of understanding and explode it from within.

On the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* this activity of entering into the philosopher's illusion is called "elucidation" (*Erläuterung*).

The illusory point of view out of which the *Tractatus* tries to lead us is one from which we imagine that we can, so to speak, objectively consider the limits of thought and the nature of the world as a whole.

Three attitudes (or "uses") of nonsense:

- Traditional philosophy (both metaphysics and theoretical ethics)
- The therapeutic elucidations of the *Tractatus* (including its "ethical" remarks)
- "ethical utterances" as understood by Wittgenstein

Cora Diamond: “The intention of the would-be engager in ethics is not therapeutic. So ‘ethical sentences’ are distinguishable from those of the *Tractatus* by the intention with which they are uttered or written. They are distinguishable from philosophical nonsense-sentences by their relation to the self-understanding towards which the *Tractatus* aims to lead us.”

Diamond: “as Wittgenstein saw traditional philosophical activity, it would not survive recognition that the intentions in it were incompatible with making sense”, for the self-conscious speaker of ethical nonsense, the imaginative appeal of sentences like “The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy.” would not necessarily suffer from this recognition.

“Lecture on Ethics” (Delivered to the Heretics Society in Cambridge on Nov 17, 1929)

I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language.

The lecture ends with this remark:

Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute value, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.

“I think it is definitely important to put an end to all the claptrap about ethics—whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable”? 1929
(with Schlick)

“Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.” 1931