

Is the Resolute Reading Really Inconsistent?: Trying to Get Clear on Hacker vs. Diamond/Conant

Michael Maurer, Vienna, Austria

pascalwitt@hotmail.com

For over two decades the Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus* has attempted to create an awareness of the fact that readings which traditionally focus on the topic of ineffability are methodologically inconsistent and do not truly reveal the dialectical movement of Wittgenstein's early masterpiece. In what follows my intention is to shed light on the question of whether the Resolute Reading is methodologically inconsistent in itself, as is held by Peter Hacker, the most influential opponent of this position.

Two Paradigms for Reading the Tractatus

Ineffability Readers share a transcendental approach to Wittgenstein's early masterpiece: the philosophical critique of the *Tractatus* draws the limits of language by leading its reader into grasping an "ineffable metaphysics" (Hacker, 1998, 13) that lays bare the necessary conditions of possibility of meaningful discourse, i.e. the logical syntax of language. On their account, the *stricto sensu* nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* manage to echo ('whistle') the metaphysical melody of what cannot be uttered for an insightful reader. To be able to walk this baffling tightrope, the sentences of the *Tractatus* are categorised as "illuminating nonsense" (Hacker, 1997, 18) which – although strictly speaking nonsensical – is able to convey insights into the hidden nature of reality. In ineffability interpretations, the notion of important nonsense represents the fundamental paradox of the book's self-destructive mode of announcing the nonsensicality of its own sentences, and these very sentences have established the limit between 'sense' and 'nonsense'.

Resolute Readers strongly reject this interpretation, given that it is based on a hermeneutics that takes "the target of the work for its doctrine" (Conant, 2002, 381). In accordance with their account, the author of the *Tractatus* was not (indirectly) in favor of any philosophical doctrines or theses, because philosophy for him is an activity that essentially consists of an elucidative process whose aim is the "logical clarification of thoughts" (TLP 4.112). Perceiving the early Wittgenstein as someone who is trying to *show* what cannot be *said*, for the Resolute Readers evokes an incapacity to understand the subtle method of the work. The hermeneutic strategy of Ineffability Readers seems to be "constantly at odds with [their] interpretation of the work" (Conant, 1991, 339): while preaching the unsayability of the *Tractatus*' doctrines, they have written lengthy and in-depth texts, extensively explaining such doctrines. In Cora Diamond's words they "pretend to throw away the [Tractarian] ladder, while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it" (Diamond, 1991a, 194). Sticking to the intelligibility of an inexpressible 'something' (*shown* in the *Tractatus*' nonsensical sentences), implies an irresolute "*chickening out*" (Diamond, 1991a, 181) before the challenges encountered by any serious reader of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein's verdict that anyone who understands him eventually recognizes his propositions as nonsensical (TLP 6.54) must be taken seriously (i.e., resolutely). Consequently, the exegesis of the so-called New Wittgensteinians denies the existence of different kinds of nonsense: "All the nonsense there is[,] is old-fashioned,

straightforward, garden variety, completely incomprehensible gibberish." (Conant, 1989, 253) Therefore they have a completely different picture of the philosophical activity to which the author of the *Tractatus* was profoundly committed in his work: his aim is not to show inexpressible deep truths that represent the metaphysical features of reality, but to free the philosophically inclined reader from the illusory meaningfulness of such obsessive pictures. Throwing away the Tractarian ladder – after having undergone the dialectical process of climbing it – means to have fully dissolved the philosophical problems produced by the logic of our language from within. Being able to read the *Tractatus* with understanding "supposes a particular kind of imaginative activity, the imaginative taking of what is nonsense for sense" (Diamond, 2000, 158). The answer at the top of the Tractarian ladder does not lie in the clouds of a metaphysical realm outside of language, but in the reader's awareness that "[h]e was prone to an illusion of meaning something when [h]e mean[t] nothing" (Conant, 2002, 381). The reader eventually recognizes the sentences of the *Tractatus* as plain nonsense and is, thereby, freed from the obsessive seductiveness of the metaphysical statements the book contains. The solution of the problems then lies in their disappearance. The goal achieved after leaving behind the last rung of the Tractarian ladder is not the (silent) appropriation of ineffable metaphysical truths, but the ethical transformation of the reader who has undergone the process of a philosophical therapy.

After this incomplete sketch of the two interpretative factions in recent *Tractatus* research, I will now go straight to the main point of the present paper. In order to keep them from sweeping the philosophical inconsistency of their interpretation under the carpet, Ineffability Readers of the *Tractatus* like Peter Hacker, have chosen to address this inconsistency in the early Wittgenstein by drawing from his later criticism of his early work. Hacker holds that the *Tractatus* is a philosophically interesting but misguided attempt which cannot be interpreted coherently. Consequently, Hacker has tried to show that the resolute account suffers from the same aporetic fate (Hacker, 2000, 360–370) as does the traditional reading he has contributed to in the past.

Hacker on Tractarian Nonsense

In his article "Was He Trying to Whistle It?", it is argued that the "post-modernist defence" (Hacker, 2000, 356) of the New Wittgensteinians is itself an unsustainable attempt to give coherence to the paradox inherent in Wittgenstein's early endeavors. This recent defence suffers from embarrassing exegetical faults – internal as well as external – which, to date, Resolute Readers have only been able to cover up by resolutely ignoring them. In what follows I will not try to debilitate his admittedly well argued criticism in all of its facets, but to concentrate on analyzing his claim that Cora Diamond's interpretation of the *Tractatus* unconsciously reintroduces the notion of 'important nonsense' through the back-door.

To get me right: my aim is not to strengthen the thesis that the Resolute Reading is the *right* interpretation, but to visit the scene of a battle-field of metaphysics on which two hermeneutically incommensurable schools of interpretations have been at war with each other. Hacker claims that Diamond's account of Tractarian nonsense – against her previous conviction that there is only one kind of nonsense, i.e. plain nonsense – can not be sustained without resorting to the paradoxical notion of 'important nonsense'. According to this view, Diamond *herself* can not keep from 'chickening out' and, thus, her interpretation does not save "Wittgenstein from the embarrassment of sawing off the branch upon which he is sitting" (Hacker, 2000, 362). These are his words:

"Finally, those among them [the Resolute Readers, M. M.] who contend that some of the propositions of the *Tractatus* are 'transitional ways of talking' in a 'dialectic' in effect distinguish between two kinds of nonsense: plain nonsense and transitional nonsense. Assuming that it is important that we come to realize that apparent sentences that we think make sense are actually nonsense, then transitional nonsense is important nonsense, unlike plain nonsense." (Hacker, 2000, 361)

Hacker's account here is undoubtedly motivated by his own earlier contribution to the understanding of the illuminative character of Tractarian nonsense. Let us, for the sake of clarification, take a closer look at what he wrote some time ago:

"Within the domain of nonsense we may distinguish overt from covert nonsense. Overt nonsense can be seen to be nonsense immediately. (...) But most of philosophy does not obviously violate the bounds of sense. It is covert nonsense for, in a way that is not perspicuous in ordinary language to the untutored mind, it violates the principles of the logical syntax of language. (...) Nevertheless, even within the range of philosophical, covert nonsense can we distinguish (...) between what might (somewhat confusingly) be called illuminating nonsense, and misleading nonsense. Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy." (Hacker, 1997, 18–19)

In order to make sense of the paradoxical setting that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical and, at the same time, must be understood by their reader, Hacker invents a complete ontology of various kinds of nonsense, reserving the contradictory category of 'illuminating nonsense' for the *Tractatus*' sentences. The confusions characteristic of traditional philosophy are supposedly examples of 'misleading nonsense', whereas the *Tractatus*, "the swansong of metaphysics" (Hacker, 1997, 27), contains a different kind of nonsense that mystically ushers its reader into the correct logical point of view. What is happening here, I think, is that the grammatical categories of Hackerian language generate the imaginary existence of ontological ones. Hacker's approach, as I read it, disregards the first fundamental principle of Frege's *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, which Resolute Readers are deeply committed to in their interpretation of the *Tractatus*. Hacker commingles the logical with the psychological when he classifies different kinds of nonsense as 'overt', 'covert', 'misleading' or 'illuminating'. The mental accompaniments a hypothetical reader of nonsensical sentences might have, are to be distinguished from the logical status of those very sentences.

I furthermore think that Hacker is wrong when he accuses Diamond of secretly using a variant of 'important nonsense' in her reading of the *Tractatus*. Trapped within the internal structure of his own approach, he misunderstands the way in which the dynamic relationship between the logical and the psychological, shapes Diamond's description of the method in the *Tractatus*.¹ He is projecting his characteristically categorizing style of thought onto Diamond's view of the Tractarian method, which lies at the heart of the Resolute Reading. As a result, Hacker becomes prey to his own confusions as he misunderstands the surface grammar in Diamond's use of language.

Let me further clarify what I wish to convey: As mentioned above, the Resolute account broaches the issue of how the reader's language usage enters into a relatedness with the sentences of the *Tractatus*. The book operates on the basis of a self-destructive pedagogy: the reader has to fully enter the illusory meaningfulness of the metaphysical statements until their deceptive character has become fully visible and effective to him. The Tractarian sentences are – seen from a logical point of view – plainly nonsensical; it's *the reader* who fails to be aware of this fact since he is confused by the logic of his own language. The sentences in question can not be classified as 'illuminating nonsense', although they are made of nonsense, a nonsense which for the reader of insight becomes visible in the transitional process of climbing the Tractarian ladder. The logical structure of Hacker's final phrase in the first quote above illustrates how he fails to trace the *New Wittgensteinians*' style of thought. The Resolute Reading strictly follows the Fregean spirit which sharply separates the domain of the psychological from that of the logical, whereas Hacker ends up mingling both spheres, thus melting everything down to what he calls 'important nonsense'. The (psychological) fact that metaphysical nonsense is *important* for those who are philosophically inclined, does not imply the existence of a (logical) category for '*important nonsense*' within which the sentences of the *Tractatus* can be standardly classified. The *illumination* or *elucidation* that the early Wittgenstein strove to promote in his reader, can not, regarding the sentences of the *Tractatus*, be statically institutionalized. This is so because the Tractarian method is actually based on a dynamic and dialectical interaction between the book and its reader's consciousness.² The responsibility for becoming aware of the nonsensicality, which our attempts to transcend the limits of language lead to, can not be forced into imaginary (categories of) linguistic signs.

Cora Diamond's thesis that climbing the Tractarian ladder requires the reader's imaginative activity of transitionally taking nonsense for sense, does not at all mean that she is using the notion of 'important nonsense'. The fact that metaphysical nonsense is temporarily important, for both author and reader of the work, by no means implies that the book's sentences fit into the peculiar and paradoxical notion referred to as 'important nonsense'. Hacker's misunderstanding of how the dynamics of the resolute approach works, as I have tried to show, allows him to claim that this approach suffers from exactly the same methodological inconsistency as do the standard interpretations. Despite all of the criticism that the herme-

¹ There are various kinds of misunderstandings regarding how the relationship between the logical and the psychological shapes the way Resolute Readers describe the deconstructive dialectics of the *Tractatus*. Such misunderstandings are highly relevant when critics address the uncertainty of the frame-body distinction or the seemingly self-contradictory fact that the argumentation of Resolute Readers is evidently based on argumentation taken from sentences of the *Tractatus* they previously judged to be nonsensical.

² CV, 77: „Anything your reader can do for himself leave to him.“

neutics of the Resolute Reading can be subjected to, it has in fact solved the fundamental paradox voiced in TLP 6.54 (i.e., that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, while at the same time it is possible to gain insights from reading the book). It has done so by producing a shift in paradigm from a static point of view to an understanding of the book's method as a piece of dialectical therapeutics.

Transcendental Ineffabilists versus Wittgensteinian Therapists

The "Hacker versus Diamond and Conant controversy" (Wallgren, 2006) is not a mere discussion of differing approaches within the history of *Tractatus* research: it is indeed the arena in which two conceptions of philosophy have come into conflict with each other in current philosophical culture. I believe that the exegetical conflict at stake is subcutaneously bound to the transitional process from analytical to post-analytical philosophy. The main point revolves around the question of the extent to which elements linked to the psychological dimension of the human mind (metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) are negotiable through philosophical argumentation. The Ineffability Reading strikes me as the final and ultimate way of defending the paradigms of enlightenment Modernity. This defensive positioning subconsciously holds on to the idea that theoretical enquiry can provide substantive answers to philosophical problems by transferring metaphysical answers into a mute realm which lies beyond the limits of language.

In contrast, the Resolute Reading is willing to radically deconstruct such attempts as hopelessly confused, thus opting for a shift from knowledge to self-knowledge. Whether one thinks that the complexity of the Resolute Reading reveals the genius of the early Wittgenstein, or is an imaginary construction of consistency for a work which, conventionally interpreted, falls victim to a *reductio ad absurdum*, does not only depend on the perceived degree of continuity in Wittgenstein's writings, but also on one's understanding of what it means to be a philosopher. Regardless of the validity one may attribute to the two interpretations addressed in this paper, discussing the tension between elements in the *Tractatus* that express some sort of transcendental mysticism and those that allude to a deconstructive dialectics, will amount to a clearer understanding of the task and nature of philosophy.

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