

No Nonsense Wittgenstein

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Some rough theses may help to place myself in the debates that I am addressing:

1. Some philosophers (including Wittgenstein) think it is bound to be difficult for most contemporary philosophers to receive Wittgenstein's work. If we want to understand this idea the question of how, to what extent and with what consequence form and content are connected in Wittgenstein's work is important.
2. When we address that question it is helpful to look at the development of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, especially on how his early ambitions to solve the foundational problems in philosophy by transcendental means, in the so called *Proto-Tractatus*, gets radicalised and transformed as he develops his more original therapeutic, grammatical and, finally, polyphonic method. (See Wallgren 2006.)
3. At the core of the therapeutic (or "resolute") readings of Wittgenstein, as proposed by Cora Diamond, James Conant and others are the ideas that Wittgenstein did not want to advance theses in philosophy, that Wittgenstein's philosophy is designed to dissolve problems rather than to solve them and that, to those ends, Wittgenstein developed a radical conception of nonsense already in the *Tractatus*.
4. The no theses idea (NTI) has proven "sociologically" problematic: scholars who think it is central to philosophy that we argue about and try to solve problems tend to get alienated from Wittgenstein generally and from NTI views especially before any debate about NTI can get off the ground. Hence, therapeutic interpreters tend to become an isolated sect.
5. NTI is also problematic intrinsically because the paradoxes involved in "the thesis that we should have no theses" as also in the notion that there is only one kind of nonsense present real, not merely technical and superficial, problems.
6. More specifically, therapeutic interpretations of Wittgenstein suffer from the following defect: Their claims build on a distinction between sense and nonsense that is similar to the distinction between truth and falsehood in the following sense. According to therapeutic interpretations Wittgensteinian philosophy elucidates (truths about) where sense can and cannot be found. When we comprehend (or know) where (true) sense is, we have dissolved (or solved?) our problems. My contention is that in the end the problem facing the resolute readings is not that they are too radical, they are too conventional. (I cannot here explain my reasons for considering this proposal valid even in the light of e.g. the joint article by Diamond and Conant from 2004 or some of Gordon Baker's last essays.)

In this context I turn to some elements of Cora Diamond's work on Wittgenstein. Arguably, the emphasis on NTI in therapeutic interpretations owes much to Diamond's article "Throwing Away the Ladder" (in Diamond 1991). Another seminal suggestion by Diamond is that central in Wittgenstein's philosophy is the philosophy of logic, in particular

his idea that philosophy of logic and ethics, philosophy of mind and self, are one and the same.

The first idea bears on how we understand the purpose and measure of success in philosophy. The second bears on what we need to understand, where we need to direct our attention in philosophy, in order to get to what is deep and important in it. Together these ideas allow Diamond a fertile ground for developing her notion that the specific form of emancipation through enlightenment that philosophy enables is therapeutic liberation from the spell of illusory problems that are due to misunderstandings about the logic of our concepts.

It is characteristic of Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein that she claims that those two ideas are central to Wittgenstein's work already in the *Tractatus*. This claim is the backdrop of her discussion of continuity and rupture in Wittgenstein's philosophy.

On continuity Diamond maintains that Wittgenstein through his career followed Frege and ultimately Kant in upholding a distinction between "an empirical or psychological approach to the mind and one that is not psychological." (1991: 4.) On her view this distinction is "fundamental." (1991: 1)

This notion of continuity is closely connected to one of Diamond's main ideas about rupture in Wittgenstein's thinking as we pass from the *Tractatus* to his later philosophy. The rupture consists in the later Wittgenstein's rejection of what Diamond in one place calls the mythology of the distinction between a psychological approach to the mind and one that is not psychological. (1991: 4.) The key idea here is that Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* sticks to certain presuppositions of how thought and language are related to logic (or, of how the mind is related to logic). These presuppositions are not metaphysical in the sense that they are concerned with features of reality (as assumed in what has been called the "standard" reading of the *Tractatus*). But they are "metaphysical" in another sense; they lay down, as Diamond puts it, "a requirement of logical analysis" (1991: 19).

Diamond's claim is that Wittgenstein's later work overcomes this early shortcoming by introducing a "dramatic shift" in our notion of "what it is for logic to be rigorous", thereby achieving a new conception of how philosophy can fulfill its promise of liberation. According to Diamond Wittgenstein now "turns around" and invites us to find answers to the questions that bother us about "the rigour of logic, the bindingness of ethics, the necessity of mathematics" not in dazzling ideals the nature of which escape us, but in "our thready, knotty lives", in "what we do." He also invites us to consider this realm, the realm of the "spatial, temporal phenomenon of language" as the realm where we can find logic, *not* as the realm where it would be impossible to find it. (This paragraph builds especially on Diamond 1991: 4-6 and 31-36. Quotes from pages 32, 5, 6, 33 and 36.)

This is, if you like, a therapy of a new kind: a therapy that liberates us from a preconceived idea of method in philosophy, from a preconceived idea of what the results of philosophy ought to look like and from preconceived ideas

about the relation in philosophy between high and low, depth and surface, necessity and contingency.

All this is of deep interest, and yet, not radical enough. Strikingly, the difference between the monological form of presentation in the *Tractatus* and the polyphonic form in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1 plays no role here. (For discussion of the special status of *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1 in Wittgenstein's *Nachlass* see e.g. Stern 2004, Pichler 2004.) Diamond writes:

D(1): Logic cannot be *there*, in what we do. Well, the argument of 'Realism and the Realistic Spirit' is that it *can* be there. (1991: 6)

What happens here with Diamond's leading idea about Wittgenstein that "it is only through some confusion that one is in about what one is doing that one could take oneself to be putting forward philosophical doctrines or theses at all"? (1991: 179.)

Is there not a claim, a thesis, involved in D(1)? The thesis is that logic can be there, in what we do.

You may say: the only thing that my comment shows is that we need to refine our discussion of NTI, for instance by differentiating between therapeutic results (or theses) and standard results (or theses), or, by saying that liberation from illusion is key while NTI is only an intermediate step on the therapeutic ladder.

Now, this kind of reaction clearly allows for consistency. Nevertheless, it saves the notion of Wittgenstein's philosophy as therapeutic at a high price. First, it becomes difficult to see what could count as a valid criticism of the therapeutic interpretation. Second, the reaction takes a lot of the provocative flair off Diamond's programmatic claim that the "no theses -idea" is fundamental to Wittgenstein's philosophy. More importantly, it makes it hard to see how the emancipatory ideals in Wittgensteinian philosophy are in any interesting way different from those that dominate in contemporary philosophy. In consequence, some of the most pertinent issues concerning the difficulty of receiving Wittgenstein get lost. (Baker 2004 presents a reading of Wittgenstein similar to that of Diamond in some respects without facing the last problem.) Here is a second quote from Diamond:

(D2): The central paper in this collection . . . shows how Wittgenstein's attention to what we do is compatible with respect for Frege's distinction between what empirical psychology might show us of people's minds and what belongs to *the* mind, and in fact enables us to look in a realistic spirit at thought. (1991: 5.)

My point of criticism is that Diamond does not only want compatibility with "respect for Frege's distinction", she *wants to keep* the distinction.

What Diamond says here in a subtle way echoes the more common and more general claim that the idea that a clear distinction can be made between empirical and conceptual investigations belongs to Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy.

The question is how this fits her idea that we should not lay down requirements in philosophy. Does Diamond require of us as philosophers that we do not travel down the road suggested by Quine when he wanted to recreate philosophy in the image of science?

It seems to me that she does lay down this requirement, if already because science, as Quine had it and as he proposed as a model for philosophy, is very much involved in the business of establishing and refuting theses.

It appears that the problem in Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein that we have now identified is quite general. The question is how efforts of reading Wittgenstein as a philosopher who has no theses, lays down no requirements and who opposes a metaphysical spirit in philosophy can address the problem that at a "metalevel" such philosophy will put forward theses, lay down requirements and propose a new kind of metaphysical spirit? I turn to a third quote from Diamond:

(D3): If we do not see him /Wittgenstein/ as drawing attention to the face of necessity, the face of life with logic (logic that penetrates all thought just as much as ever it did in the *Tractatus*), we shall see him instead as repudiating the hardness of the logical 'must' and giving up Frege's distinction between logic and psychology. (1991: 6-7.)

Here I wish to focus on Diamond's expression that logic according to the later Wittgenstein penetrates *all* thought just as much as ever it did in the *Tractatus*. How is that — this thesis concerning a remarkable continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophical career — to be understood?

One could say that Diamond wants to have it both ways. She wants to have a Wittgenstein, early and late, who shows us a way of doing philosophy that is not trapped by false ideals about higher knowledge or absolute standards or metaphysical truths that we feel we have to reach but that also seem impossible to reach. She also wants us to maintain "attention" to a logic that is a custodian of ideals and ambitions that are qualitatively distinct from anything that can be studied in an empirical, scientific psychology.

Now, I agree with Diamond that we cannot understand anything important about how Wittgenstein is interesting and radical if we understand him as a philosopher who cares less about rigour, reason and the highest possible standards of clarity and rationality in the philosophy of logic than any philosopher before him.

My concern with Diamond is when she writes as if we can fulfil the highest ambitions in philosophy by *insisting* on (or requiring?) this or that, for instance that we develop a view of logic which is a view of logic as *penetrating* all thought, or, to put the emphasis at a different place, a view of logic as penetrating *all* thought. This, it seems to me, is right about the *Tractatus* but not about the polyphonic Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the latter case, the focus is on what we can say in favour of this view, how it can be made sense of, but not in order to prove or insist on anything. (I suggest not reading supreme authority into any of the many voices in the *Investigations*, e.g. at 89-109.) Wittgenstein once wrote:

Wir dürfen überhaupt keine Tendenz haben . . . sondern (wir) müssen alles anerkennen, was jeder Mensch darüber je gesagt hat . . .

The first record of this passage is from 16th July 1931 when Wittgenstein had not yet fully developed the polyphonic style characteristic of the *Philosophical Investigations*. When the latter style (or method) gradually is invented it becomes a key feature of Wittgenstein's philosophy that philosophical work consists in exploring different arguments and positions that we are drawn to (or disturbed by), their presuppositions and implications and other such (classical) things. The driving force in these investigations will often be the (moral) interests of the one(s) who is (are) conducting the investigation. The investigation is our investigation of what concepts can mean to us, what role we can assign to them in our lives. In this we are searching for

agreement with ourselves, as Socrates sometimes put it. The important thing is what we may believe ourselves in the sense that we can risk living by the judgement we make. Offering our findings as truths to others is of little help unless we commit ourselves. (Cf. Vlastos 1991.)

Concepts are important to us. Our understanding of them give shape to our lives. But philosophy does not come with a guarantee that concepts are (or that they are not) such that we will come to agreement with ourselves (or others) about their meaning or there lack of meaning – about what to make of them. Nevertheless, we can endeavour to clarify different viewpoints, possibilities and aspects. This work is a form of caring for ourselves and others. It may lead us to take stands. We may accept *this* as a solution and *that* as a dissolution. We may suspend judgement in some case. But these are things we do. Hence, even when we agree on every step in an investigation we may not agree on the result or conclusion.

When Wittgenstein writes that his work is “only an album” (1953, Preface) and gives to it a polyphonic form where there is no clearly identifiable author's voice, no Olympic narrator and many more questions than answers the advantage of this mode of presentation as compared with the style conducive to the therapy as practised in the *Tractatus* or the grammatical, language-game method pursued in the *Brown Book* is the following. Now there is no longer a suggestion that there is a “point” to be deciphered (cf. Diamond ed. 1976, p. 95) . In this sense there are no theses about sense and nonsense to arrive at in philosophy. But there is also no suggestion that such a “no nonsense Wittgenstein” would not on the basis of his investigations hold views or draw conclusions, for instance about sense and nonsense, that he believes to be true. It would, however, hardly have added to the value of the *Philosophical Investigations* had Wittgenstein written a postscript including his report on what his own views and positions are on various issues he has investigated or on questions concerning sense and nonsense that he has elucidated. Such theses drop out of the picture as irrelevant to the philosophical work (completed text). It does not follow that they drop out of the lives of philosophers.

Literature

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