Crisis and Critique:
Philosophical Analysis and Current Events

Contributions of the 42nd International
Wittgenstein Symposium
August 4–10, 2019
Kirchberg am Wechsel

Editors
Anne Siegetsleitner
Andreas Oberprantacher
Marie-Luisa Frick
Assisted by Aaron Tratter

Printed with the support of the
Department for Science and Research
of the Province of Lower Austria

Kirchberg am Wechsel, 2019
Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society
The Austere View of Nonsense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Arianna Longhi

Pavia, Italy

Abstract

In this paper, I try to analyze a particular reading of nonsense presented by a group of interpreters of the *Tractatus* and exposed in the essay entitled *The New Wittgenstein* (Cravy, Read 2000): the so-called austere interpretation. My intention is to analyze this reading by contrasting it with the more traditional interpretation of the *Tractatus*: the substantial reading. I will focus in particular on the concept of elucidation, being essential to understand the nonsense present in the text, as well as the difference between the two readings mentioned above. In this context Geach’s position will be fundamental because, according to him, the elucidation is not a novelty of the *Tractatus* but it was already present in the works of another philosopher: Frege. The elucidation takes on a positive value here: it shows something that could not be explained by a definition. According to the substantial interpretation, the propositions of the *Tractatus* have precisely this aim: to show (and not to say) something that would otherwise be unspeakable. According to the austere interpreters, Wittgenstein responded to this proposal with an austere reading of nonsense and elucidation: the propositions of the *Tractatus* do not express (cannot express) any thought. This proposal, however interesting, has, from my point of view, some contradictory elements that lead me to favor a substantial reading of nonsense over the austere one.

The singular logical structure of the *Tractatus* highlights how Wittgenstein wants to distance himself from the previous philosophical tradition. His work should not be read as a textbook; his philosophy is not a doctrine (Lehre), but an activity, the result of which are not therefore philosophical propositions, which tell us a philosophical knowledge of the world. The philosophical activity shows us the clarification of propositions. Philosophy delimits the sayable (sagbar) from the unsayable (unsagbar), the sense from nonsense.

The unsagbar propositions are not only the central argument of the *Tractatus* but it is with them that Wittgenstein was able to write the *Tractatus*, despite this the Austrian philosopher tells us that they are meaningless propositions, or in German *unsinnig*. This apparent contradiction cannot leave us indifferent. However, the *Tractatus* itself, to make us understand this, to make us assume this new point of view, cannot but use the same propositions he criticized so much. Once the reading of the *Tractatus* has been completed, therefore, if one has really understood it thoroughly, and indeed as a demonstration of having understood it, according to Wittgenstein we can do nothing but throw away the text, because, in fact, it is nothing more than a set of strings of senseless signs.

The problem at this point is to understand in what sense these are meaningless signs, and what it means to assume the awareness of senselessness. It is precisely the penultimate proposition (*Tractatus*, 6.54), as well as the preface to the *Tractatus*, which are at the center of a debate in which several authors clash: some of them support a more traditional reading of the *Tractatus*, otherwise called "irresolute reading", others support a new reading of the text, proposing a "resolute reading", presented in the essay *The New Wittgenstein*, a text published in 2000, written by Alice Crary and Rupert J. Read, containing a series of essays by different authors, including those written by J. Conant and C. Diamond. As the title itself predicts, the essay proposes to us a new rereading of the *Tractatus*, which tries to understand the nonsense present in the text (proper to the propositions of philosophy) in an austere way, or, to put it in other words, nonsense should be seen according to these interpreters as mere nonsense: "all nonsense is just nonsense". Among the propositions that they mostly take into account in support of their thesis, there are the propositions of the so-called text frame: the brief but intense preface and the final propositions of the *Tractatus*.

The elucidation (Eräuterung) is inevitably one of the fundamental themes for understanding the nonsense of the text, and therefore the propositions of the *Tractatus*; let us now see its declination starting from the theses of J. Conant. He tries to explain that the elucidations of the *Tractatus* are not intended to clarify the propositions, since they are unsayable. What they elucidate is rather the vision of the reader himself, as well as that of the author. The novelty of Conant’s thought is that, from his point of view, the concept of clarification is already present in Frege’s works. In fact, he takes up the concept of clarification present in the *Tractatus* and reworks it, starting from an interesting proposal made by Peter Geach. According to the latter, the theme of elucidation is not a novelty proper to the *Tractatus*, on the contrary it was already present in the works of another philosopher well known to Wittgenstein: Frege.

According to J. Conant, Geach’s intuition, however brilliant it may have been, makes the mistake of not understanding that the innovative element proper to the *Tractatus* was to resolve the opposition present in Frege’s works between a substantial conception of nonsense, and therefore of elucidation, and the austere one. For Conant, Wittgenstein was able to resolve this opposition in favor of the austere view. In the difference between the two views mentioned above lies the novelty of the reading of *The New Wittgenstein*, in addition to the difference between Wittgenstein and Frege, according to Conant.

The substantial conception of nonsense (and of elucidation) provides for the possibility of a discernment between a substantial nonsense and a mere nonsense, and at the basis of the possibility of such discernment there is precisely the elucidatory possibility of propositions that have the purpose of showing (and not saying) something that would be unspeakable.

On the contrary, the austere position argues that "all nonsense is just nonsense", nonsense is simply mere nonsense and the elucidation has the therapeutic purpose of dissolving the grammatical illusion that makes us believe that it means something with an utterance when in reality we do not mean anything.

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Fundamental in the attempt to understand the elucidatory conception of Frege (and therefore that of the *Tractatus*) is the distinction he makes between the definition and elucidation: they differ because the former deals with primitive elements, while the latter defines a theory. Even in a logically perfect language (in the formalized language of the *Begriffsschrift*, i.e. conceptual ideography), there are some terms that cannot be introduced by a definition and that therefore remain indefinable. The purpose of the elucidation is precisely to convey the meaning of these terms that could not be said otherwise. Carried out this task, the imprecise expressions of the elucidations can be thrown away, eliminated: “He [the reader] must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he used to reach the correct *Begriffsschrift*” (Conant 2000: 182). We will therefore have really understood the role of elucidation only by recognizing as senseless the elucidatory observations expressed in *On Concept and Object*. To better clarify this concept let us now see the following example: “Vienna is the capital of Austria” and “Trieste is not Vienna”. In both these propositions the same sign “Vienna” is present and, although it is common to both, it is evident that it signifies differently within the two propositions: in the first it stands for a proper name, in the second it indicates a concept, such as “metropolis”. The discernment of meaning is possible from the principle of context introduced by Frege himself, it shows and underlines the importance of reading the sign within the proposition, otherwise we fall into the ambiguity and linguistic misunderstanding, an error too common in the ordinary language. It is clear at this point how the possibility of judging Vienna as an object or as a concept comes to us from a clarification. The elucidation is therefore positive for Frege: it shows something that could not be explained by a definition.

What is significant for the question we are facing is that there is a parallelism between a possible reading of Frege (ineffable reading) and a standard reading of the *Tractatus*. In fact, a similar reading of Frege, based on the impossibility of asserting of a concept what can only be asserted of an object, implies attributing to Frege a substantial conception of nonsense (traditional interpretation), that is the conception of philosophically illuminating nonsense, traditionally thought as the novelty brought by the *Tractatus*. The positive role of Frege’s elucidations therefore corresponds to the central objective ascribed to the elucidations of the *Tractatus* by the exponents of the ineffable interpretation. However starting from Frege’s works it is also possible to find fertile ground and openness to an austere reading of nonsense in the *Tractatus*; and this is the position of J. Conant.

According to the austere conception, Wittgenstein did not understand the task of elucidation in the same terms as Frege. Faced with the latter’s proposal, Wittgenstein responded with an austere reading of nonsense and elucidation. Nonsense is, according to this interpretation, something unspeakable, therefore the proposition fails in the attempt to say everything: the elucidations of the *Tractatus* do not express (they cannot express) any thought. We are therefore all victims of an illusion, but to be able to get out of it, to dissolve it, we have to walk through it. get into it totally, only then the elucidation can succeed: we will recognize that the body of the text is absolutely meaningless: it is a gibberish, strings of senseless signs, and for this it is to be thrown away. In other words, the purpose of the elucidations of the *Tractatus* is to reveal (through the use of mere nonsense) that what appears as substantial nonsense is actually “mere nonsense”.

We can therefore say that nonsense, in an austere sense, is to be understood as a nonsense that has a specifically therapeutic value: it wants to cure the illusion that nonsense means something, it wants to solve the difficulties in which our intellect is entangled, giving us a knowledge of ourselves, or rather of our tendency to fall into illusions of meaning. Philosophy, in this perspective, draws our attention to the responsibility we have towards our words, that is, to understand what we say. This conception is therefore, for the aforementioned authors, already present in the *Tractatus*, it is indeed quite impossible to understand the *Tractatus* if a therapeutic conception of philosophy is not taken as a starting point.

This proposal, however interesting, has, from my point of view, some problematic elements that cannot be ignored. The most obvious certainly concerns the subdivision that Conant and Diamond seem to make of the *Tractatus* propositions. Indeed, as we have already said, the austere interpreters believe that what is to be thrown away are the propositions (Salzler) that belong to the corpus of the work, on the contrary those propositions that give us indications on how the text should be read are to be maintained, that is, the propositions that propose an austere reading of the *Tractatus*: the propositions of the frame. The problem, however, lies precisely in the possibility of discerning which propositions belong to the corpus and which to the frame, since the same austere interpreters insert, among the propositions of the frame, many other propositions that are inside the work: not only then the introduction and final proportions. To give some examples, the propositions to support the austere conception of nonsense (5.473, 5.4733), the 3.355 proposition concerning the context principle, the propositions that establish the role of the adequate logical symbolism, i.e. 3.322, 3.325, and finally, those propositions that describe the nature of philosophy 4.003, 4.111, 4.112. At this point it can be observed that the arbitrariness of the decision causes the system of austere theory to collapse.

Another fundamental point is that when we talk about nonsense we should refer to the theory of meaning, that is, to say, to those criteria for distinguishing nonsense from meaning. However, this distinction is exactly what is criticized by the austere theory according to which the nonsense present in the *Tractatus* is mere nonsense (without any distinction).

Finally, we cannot forget that Wittgenstein had written to a possible publisher of his text, L. von Ficker (Wittgenstein 1989: 72), that the meaning of the book is an ethical sense, and that the ethics in the text (which is what is not written in the text) is delimited from the inside. It seems obvious here that the text wants to communicate a series of contents that cannot be said but only shown (including the ethical one).

Although the austere reading has certainly interesting points, I do not think it can be the reading to favor in dealing with the *Tractatus*. I think that Wittgenstein’s reflection on language necessarily leads us to understand the nonsense present in the background of the text as a limit that opens us to a sensible world, and asks us to take a new point of view that allows us to “throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it”. Philosophy therefore has the task of delimiting, of clarifying. I consider more interesting the interpretation for which Wittgenstein intended to refer to a positive limit, which he calls Kantian “Grenze”, a limit that opens to the field of the sayable, delimits the saying from the show, the sense from nonsense. The delimitation that it operates is an ethical work on language, that is, philosophy has the (ethical) task of preserving the limits of language and knowing how to preserve the space of silence. A teaching that I believe has an ethical relevance.
Acknowledgments
I thank Professor Silvana Borutti for all the time and trust dedicated to me.

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