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0521809363 - Wittgenstein's Tractatus: A Dialectical Interpretation

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Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

## I

Wittgenstein, in conversation with Moritz Schlick, once characterized his fundamental goal in philosophy as follows: "Everything we do consists in trying to find the liberating word (*erloesende Wort*)" (VC 77). Similarly, we find in The Big Typescript: "The philosopher strives to find the liberating word, that is, the word that finally permits us to grasp what up until now has intangibly weighed down our consciousness" (PO 165).<sup>1</sup> Both remarks were made in the 1930s, years after the publication of the *Tractatus*: with their depiction of philosophy as the pathway out of psychic encumbrance, they quite naturally call to mind Wittgenstein's later, explicitly "therapeutic" thought (cf., e.g., PI 133). But, we might ask, could such claims be applied to Wittgenstein's early work as well? Would Wittgenstein have been willing to describe the *Tractatus* itself as an effort to find "the liberating word"? My fundamental contention in this book is that this is indeed the case, that, far from seeking to offer a new theory of logic, to continue the philosophical legacies of Frege and Russell, Wittgenstein from the start views all such endeavors as the ensnarement of thought. The *Tractatus*, I shall aim to show, is nothing but an attempt to set down in definitive fashion the way of release.

For those involved in writing and reflecting on early analytic philosophy, such an assertion is likely at once to locate this study in the grid of a familiar set of dichotomies. It would seem to herald a non-metaphysical interpretation of the *Tractatus* as opposed to a standard, metaphysical reading, an emphasis on the continuity of Wittgenstein's thought rather than the notion of a radical break from an earlier,

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more traditional philosophical stance, an insistence on the nonsensicality of the text's propositions as against the possibility that they might manage to communicate a kind of indirect truth.<sup>2</sup> And, in a very broad sense, those expectations will be met by what follows. But what animates this book is the belief that that "sense" is entirely *too* broad – that is, that the terms in which these standard oppositions are formulated are simply not adequate to the *Tractatus*. Do we really know in general just what it means for a proposition or set of propositions to be "metaphysical" rather than "nonmetaphysical"? Is the fundamental aim of a philosopher's thought so open to view that we can at once recognize when a given piece of writing does or does not cohere with it? Do we understand the claim that a work of philosophy is simply "nonsense"? It is not, of course, that Wittgenstein leaves us completely unequipped for such questions; on the contrary, I would suggest that, in one form or another, they lie at the heart of the *Tractatus*. But just this fact renders notions like "metaphysical," "nonsense," and so forth ill-suited to any sort of explanatory task in this context. They are, we might say, too much part of the problem to constitute a potential solution.

One might then imagine that what will here be proposed is an alternative vocabulary in terms of which our interpretation is to be conducted – our own set of privileged categories. But I shall argue shortly against any such strategy. Instead, what we must acknowledge at the start is just the *problem* that is posed by the attempt to interpret the *Tractatus*. If we grant that Wittgenstein's aim here is, in one way or another, to call into question the traditional language of philosophy, we must realize that this is not just the language of Frege, Russell, Moore, et al., but also *our* language: precisely the depth and comprehensiveness of this text's critique of philosophy deprives us of our, as it were, clinical distance as commentators on the text. What we find, I believe inevitably, is that we cannot insulate ourselves from the difficulties with which Wittgenstein is concerned, that the philosophical commitments that are revealed in our own manner of textual analysis are the very subject matter of the *Tractatus*. The *Tractatus* seeks to expose the extraordinary confusions inherent in the process of philosophical inquiry. To understand and write about that text, we must be willing to allow that these might be our confusions as well.

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## II

In order to get a preliminary view of the difficulties that we must confront, let us then return to the remark with which we began. What does it really mean to read the *Tractatus* in terms of a fundamental concern to “liberate” us from philosophical confusion? One might well grant something of this sort as the young Wittgenstein’s aim; he does, after all, already in the Preface portray his book as intending to show that “the problems of philosophy” rest on “the misunderstanding of the logic of our language” (TLP, p. 27).<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, one could quite naturally construe the basic form of the Tractarian critique, if not its details, in traditional philosophical terms, as an attempt to provide a *refutation* of the misunderstandings and errors of the past. On this reading, Wittgenstein proclaims various philosophical positions to be “nonsense” (see, e.g., TLP 4.003, 5.5351, 6.51) in the way that so many philosophers in the Western tradition have dismissed their predecessors’ claims – namely, as being patently false or absurd. Such a view has in fact been implicit in much of the literature on the *Tractatus*, beginning with Ramsey’s review<sup>4</sup> and the responses of the Vienna positivists, and continuing with the work of more contemporary commentators like Black,<sup>5</sup> Stenius,<sup>6</sup> Hintikka,<sup>7</sup> Hacker,<sup>8</sup> and Pears.<sup>9</sup> Characteristic of this approach – which would include a quite diverse set of interpretations – is the insistence on treating the Wittgensteinian attack as if it presented, in opposition to the tradition, a series of straightforward philosophical accounts: accounts of the proposition (the “picture theory”), the tautologous nature of logical truth, the ineffability of logical form, and so forth. These accounts are then criticized or modified by commentators in accordance with the demands that are presumably to be satisfied by a well-constructed philosophical theory.

One rather large obstacle to this approach to the *Tractatus* is represented by remark 6.54. Here Wittgenstein famously declares: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical (*unsinnig*), when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them.” If we take this remark seriously, it would appear difficult to treat its author as someone who has intended to present a straightforward theory, a series of claims to be evaluated in terms of their truth value. Still, the responses on the part of Tractarian commentators to this move have been varied. Perhaps

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most commonly the tendency has been to disregard this remark, or to ignore its consequences with respect to our understanding of the seemingly substantive details of the text. For such readers, this remark is regarded as striking, but not as a central feature to be accommodated within a satisfactory interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

A second type of response involves an attempt at softening the impact of the text's harsh self-assessment. One notable example of the latter strategy is Carnap's interpretation of the statements of the *Tractatus* as purely linguistic proposals.<sup>11</sup> For Carnap, while philosophical propositions of the sort espoused by Wittgenstein (and the Vienna positivists) make no claims about the world and thus are not true or false, they are not like many traditional metaphysical assertions in being entirely nonsensical. Instead, legitimate philosophy is to be understood as consisting of elucidations, purely formal assertions that serve to clarify the logical syntax of the language of science. In this sense, they can be seen as having the empty character that Wittgenstein ascribes to the tautologous propositions of logic.<sup>12</sup>

A second example of an explicit attempt at moderating the *Tractatus*' view of its own utterances is found in commentators like Anscombe,<sup>13</sup> Geach,<sup>14</sup> Hintikka,<sup>15</sup> and Hacker.<sup>16</sup> The strategy they employ is motivated by remarks such as TLP 5.62 ("In fact, what solipsism *means* is quite correct, only it cannot be said, but shows itself."), 4.115 ("[Philosophy] will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable.") and 4.1211 ("Thus a proposition 'fa' shows that in its sense the object *a* occurs, two propositions 'fa' and 'ga' that they are both about the same object."). In these remarks and elsewhere, Wittgenstein seems to suggest that, while the attempt to state what is properly to be *shown* results in what he calls "nonsense," something intelligible is nonetheless thereby expressed. We are then led to suppose that Wittgenstein's propositions – if not the propositions of all metaphysics – are nonsense only in a special sense. To be sure, so such commentators continue, they are not strictly utterable, according to the standards of significance established by the *Tractatus*. Still, they somehow manage to convey to us important philosophical truths: at the end of the book we "know" that, in reality, the world is composed of facts, not things, that a common logical form binds together language and the world, that value lies outside of the world, and so on. Except, of course, we cannot actually *say* these things, but must only *think* them, silently to ourselves; or perhaps we may repeat them –

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grudgingly – to another, but always with the acknowledgment that in so doing we have transgressed the strictly *proper* bounds of sense.

More recently, Cora Diamond, beginning with her important paper “Throwing Away the Ladder,” has presented a central challenge to this reading – and, indirectly, to the related interpretation offered by Carnap.<sup>17</sup> Diamond, in effect, attributes to Wittgenstein the position of Ramsey in his oft-quoted *criticism* of the *Tractatus*’ notion of showing: “But what we can’t say, we can’t say and we can’t whistle it either.”<sup>18</sup> That is, refusing to countenance the possibility of any sort of meaningful gesture toward the ineffable, she bites the bullet on Wittgenstein’s behalf and proclaims that, as far as the *Tractatus* is concerned, its own statements really are nonsense, plain and simple. There is no Tractarian counterpart to the Kantian *Ding an sich*, no deep features of reality that are somehow made manifest in Wittgenstein’s utterances. Instead, we must take Wittgenstein at his word at 6.54 and realize that, in the end, all the pronouncements of his text are just so much gibberish.

Now I have a good deal of sympathy with – and have been much influenced by – Diamond’s approach, and the elaboration of it provided by James Conant. Nonetheless, I think one must take care to be as clear as possible about what this position really comes to, as it can easily serve to mislead. Given the importance of the Conant/Diamond interpretation in framing the contemporary debate about the *Tractatus*, I want then to consider it in some detail (my focus will be on Diamond’s initial paper).

To begin with, Diamond suggests that Wittgenstein’s conception of nonsense and his concomitant show/say distinction have their roots in Frege’s so-called concept “horse” problem. Frege, in the article “Concept and Object,” dismisses as incoherent Benno Kerry’s contention that there can be concepts – like the concept “horse” – which also can function as objects. For Frege, the concept/object distinction is mutually exclusive: a concept by its very nature is predicative or, as he also puts it, “unsaturated”; conversely, the object, as a logical subject, serves necessarily to fill the gap left by the concept. In Kerry’s example, then – “the concept ‘horse’ is a concept easily attained” – the first three words do not designate a Fregean concept, but, as is indicated by the appearance there of the definite article, a Fregean object. The peculiarity of having to maintain that the concept “horse” is not a concept is dismissed by Frege as an “awkwardness of language” (CP 185) and, moreover, as Diamond reads him, one he believes will not

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be encountered in a logically perfect notation like his *Begriffsschrift*. Thus, in the *Begriffsschrift*, statements about concepts and objects of the sort represented by Kerry's example – indeed, the very claim that there *is* a fundamental distinction between concepts (or functions) and objects – will not be formulatable. Instead, *that* there is such a division will come out in the distinctive use of the signs of the notation.

Diamond then terms remarks like the one expressing the difference between concepts and objects “transitional”;<sup>19</sup> their purpose is solely to lead us *into* the *Begriffsschrift*, to begin operating within its parameters. But once we have effected this transition, these remarks are recognized as completely without sense and are in fact inexpressible. Here we begin to see how Diamond draws the connection with Wittgenstein. For her, Wittgenstein is fundamentally concerned to extend to the whole philosophical vocabulary Frege's way of excluding notions like “function” and “concept.” Toward that end, he is understood as having formulated a number of transitional statements – namely remarks 1–6.522 of the *Tractatus*. All these claims, as transitional, will then have to be given up by the close of the *Tractatus*. After we have read – and understood – the text, we cannot suppose ourselves to be left hinting at some important truth with a statement like “The world is the totality of facts, not things,” any more than we would suppose this about an attempt to state something about functions and objects from within the *Begriffsschrift*. Instead, 1.1, like every other remark of the *Tractatus*, is now seen as it really is – that is, as a claim completely on par with “Socrates is frabble”<sup>20</sup> or “’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe.”<sup>21</sup> To attempt to ascribe any further content to Wittgenstein's claims is, for her, to “chicken out.”

A quite natural first response to this approach focuses on the extraordinary expressive power it attributes to the supposed gibberish of the *Tractatus*. For clearly it is not at once obvious that this text's propositions are utter nonsense, any more than it is obvious that the traditional claims of metaphysics have such a character. If it were obvious, if the *Tractatus*, Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and so forth were plainly indistinguishable from Lewis Carroll's “Jabberwocky,” none of these works could ever have the power to mislead. (Why haven't any books been written claiming to have established the nonsensicality of the Carroll poem?) Wittgen-

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stein's claims are then assumed to be capable of *themselves* effecting the "transition" Diamond describes, of somehow *bringing us* to recognize the fact that they are, contrary to all appearances, absolutely devoid of sense. Indeed, in "What Nonsense Might Be,"<sup>22</sup> Diamond sketches in some detail Wittgenstein's account of the precise *way* in which philosophical nonsense is to be viewed, suggesting, in particular, that he rejects (what Diamond takes to be) Carnap's view that it consists of category errors.<sup>23</sup> But this is as much as to acknowledge the special character of the Tractarian propositions, their dissimilarity to pseudo-sentences like "Socrates is frabble."<sup>24</sup> The latter expression, after all, would seem to have none of the capacity for self-illumination that is thought to belong to the remarks of the *Tractatus*. We might say that it "shows us" that it does not make sense, but this is a result of our understanding the syntax of the English language; if we did not already know that syntax and were not therefore at once inclined to call the expression "meaningless," it surely could not itself *teach* us that (let alone why) this is the case. The point, in short, is that the more that Wittgenstein's claims are assimilated to ordinary nonsense sentences, the less easy it becomes to explain the possibility of our ever coming to recognize them as such.

Diamond, however, might seem to have developed a response to this sort of objection, one which she elaborates in a more recent article, "Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*."<sup>25</sup> Central to this part of her account is Wittgenstein's emphasis in 6.54 on himself as subject. For, she points out, this remark does not proclaim that he who understands my *propositions* "finally recognizes them as nonsensical," but rather that he who understands *me* so recognizes them.<sup>26</sup> This distinction between understanding the utterer of nonsense and understanding the nonsense itself is, for Diamond, crucial. For while the *Tractatus*' remarks, as devoid of sense, are incapable of being understood in themselves, we can still attempt to understand a *person* who would wish to proclaim such empty strings. This involves "a kind of imaginative activity, an exercise of the capacity to enter into the taking of nonsense for sense, of the capacity to share imaginatively the inclination to think that one is thinking something in it."<sup>27</sup> On this reading, the *Tractatus* is then seen as an attempt to, as it were, conjure up the state of mind of someone who has an inclination toward metaphysics. It does this, however, always with a therapeutic intent – that is, with the aim of helping the individual explode the illusion that

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fosters his metaphysical tendency. Diamond in this way believes she can account for the illuminating potential of the Tractarian remarks, locating this not in those remarks' "internal features," but rather in external features of their use;<sup>28</sup> what allows Wittgenstein's nonsensical utterances to be liberating is just their utterer's recognition of them *as* nonsense.

But while this account is suggestive and interesting, one still worries about its tendency to inflate the *Tractatus*' notion of nonsense, even while insisting on its ordinariness. What is it about Wittgenstein's supposed babbling that could so stimulate our imaginations, and direct them in such a particular manner? Or, alternatively, one might wonder whether we can really make sense of Diamond's notion of the "imagination" (a term, after all, that does not play much of a role in the *Tractatus*). One wonders how imagination could bring us to "understand" a person, if all we have at our disposal are his absolutely unintelligible strings of words.<sup>29</sup>

How would Diamond reply to these objections? I suspect she would view them as placing a kind of pressure on her interpretation that it was not intended to bear: we could be seen here as fastening on to what is for her only a kind of rhetorical move in a polemic against a confused reading of the *Tractatus*. In other words, her assimilation of metaphysical claims to "plain nonsense" is a means of denying the coherence of the notion of an ineffable content, but should not be viewed as saying anything *more* than that; Diamond's aim is not to provide a genuine characterization of Wittgenstein's remarks. To demand from her an explanation of precisely how the plain nonsense of the *Tractatus* is illuminating could thus be said to miss the point: rather than seeking to provide an account of the mechanism of the text, Diamond's purpose is simply to steer us away from supposing any role for its propositions – *after* that "mechanism" has (somehow) performed its function.

We now can begin to see the real question that is opened up by Diamond's work, especially "Throwing Away the Ladder" and its central idea of the *Tractatus* as a series of "transitional remarks." That question can be brought into full view by here asking ourselves: transitional to *what*? I certainly agree with Cora Diamond's premise that much of the original motivation for both the show/say distinction and the idea of "throwing away the ladder" comes from Frege's concept "horse" problem (as well as the related difficulty inherent in Russell's

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theory of types). But it would seem to be of paramount importance at this point not to push the parallel too far, to realize that Wittgenstein is shifting quite fundamentally the Fregean perspective. For let us grant for the moment that Frege has a full awareness of the implications of the idea of extra-Begriffsschrift “elucidations.” Still, it must be acknowledged that there exists for him a concrete means of avoiding the utterance of such statements – namely, by always working within the confines of his formal language. In other words, Frege’s (supposed) contention that certain prose judgments (the “elucidations”) can ultimately be transcended gains its force from the fact that one can operate perfectly well with his Begriffsschrift without ever making such judgments. So, for example, a statement like “There are functions and objects” cannot even be formulated within his “concept script” – “ $\exists f \ \& \ \exists x$ ” is not a well-formed formula – but the language nonetheless allows us to *use* these notions in the formalization of logical inferences. But what is the domain in which Wittgenstein would have us operate, once we have dispensed with the elucidations that constitute the *Tractatus*? There is, of course, a long tradition of Tractarian interpretation, going back to Russell’s Introduction to the book (TLP, p. 8), which views Wittgenstein as concerned with laying down conditions for an ideal language. But, while it is unquestionable that the notion of a canonical Begriffsschrift plays an important (if extremely unclear) role in the *Tractatus*, it is equally certain that Wittgenstein has not actually *provided* us with any such language. We cannot confuse what are, at best, indications of some of the elements of a proposed formalism – such as, for example, the absence of a sign for identity – with Frege’s systematic specifications in the *Begriffsschrift* and the *Grundgesetze*. The point, then, is that despite Wittgenstein’s talk of employing a symbolism that “excludes” the “errors” of traditional philosophy (see TLP 3.325), at the end of the *Tractatus* we remain very much within the context of our “ordinary” language, the same language in which the nonsensical propositions of metaphysics were originally formulated.<sup>30</sup>

The whole idea of an adequate notation can therefore only be part of Wittgenstein’s way of leading us to a new *perspective* on logic, as opposed to the adoption of an actual new language. One might then describe the central problem that Diamond and Conant’s work points us toward as one of becoming clear on the nature of this perspective, once we understand that it is not embodied, as it were, in a formal

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language, in a specifiable *method* for eliminating the metaphysical pseudo-sentences. How are we to characterize what the *Tractatus* brings us, in the end, to see? Given the difficulties that we saw above in the attempt to describe that insight in terms of the *literal* unintelligibility of the language of metaphysics, it may be tempting at this point to reach for a notion of “deep nonsense.” The propositions of the *Tractatus* really are nonsense, one will now maintain, except not in the plain, garden variety sense. They violate not ordinary syntax, but a deeper underlying structure – what the text refers to as *logical* syntax (see TLP 3.325, 3.33, 3.334, 6.124). We can then hold that it is just toward the recognition of the claims of all metaphysics as nonsense in this special sense that the text aims to bring us.

But this strategy is less promising than it may initially seem, as the appearance of the term “logical syntax” in the above purported exposition of the text’s central purpose should indicate. For the necessity of here bringing in the notions of the *Tractatus* itself – the very notions we have presumably “thrown away” at the book’s close – indicates the hollowness of supposing that we have, as yet, proffered any sort of explanation. Indeed, one now begins to wonder about the coherence of even *asking* for an explanation in this context. The problem now appears to lie not merely with how to characterize the text’s point – whether to describe it as the exposing of deep nonsense or plain nonsense – but with the very notion that we might “characterize” that point at all. The difficulty, we could say, is that we are from the start assuming that the statements proclaiming the nonsensicality of the *Tractatus*’ remarks could be *true*. What we are beginning to see, however, is that perhaps Wittgenstein is concerned precisely to deny the possibility of such a neutral assessment of the nature of the text’s propositions, of the nature of metaphysical claims generally. What we are beginning to see is that, for Wittgenstein, a sentence like “ ‘The world is everything that is the case’ is nonsense” is *itself* nonsense.

This may seem to leave the would-be reader of the *Tractatus* in a difficult, if not impossible, position. To some, the above claim will appear as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole attempt to read this text.<sup>31</sup> Still, while I by no means wish to downplay the peculiarity of the position in which we find ourselves, I would urge that the situation is perhaps not quite so dire. Let us then consider these three sentences: