

The New Wittgenstein: Some Critical Remarks

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1. Introduction

The recently published collection of essays *The New Wittgenstein* advances a novel and provocative interpretation of Wittgenstein's work.¹ The aim of my paper² is a critical discussion of the Tractatus strand of this interpretation, with the main focus being put on Cora Diamond's article 'Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*'. A very brief summary runs as follows³: the *Tractatus* is not, as the traditional view claims, a collection of philosophical claims about the metaphysical essence of world and language. Wittgenstein knew very well that philosophy is an illusion and that its statements are pure, not illuminating nonsense (as the traditional view claims), since they are based on the chimerical conviction that we can view the world from an 'external point of view'. But a sophisticated therapy can free us from this illusion and the *Tractatus* offers an example for it. The book has a twofold structure: it is divided in the *frame* and the *body*. The frame consists of the preface and the concluding remarks (6.53-7) and the body is the rest, the text in-between. The frame defines the whole aim and meaning of the body as plain nonsense. In order to realize this the reader has to go through the book, experience the illusionary character of its philosophical statements and thus understand the utter nonsensicality of the Tractatus propositions, which are mere illustrations of philosophical nonsense. In other words: Wittgenstein is playing a twisted game with us. He pretends to be a traditional metaphysician, but by 'framing' his propositions he actually demonstrates that one cannot be one. We are freed from philosophy if we experience its nonsensicality, if we play the same game by *pretending* to read nonsense as sense, i.e. by *realising* that it actually is nonsense.

2. Discussion

My discussion will deal with both aspects of the new interpretation, Diamond's hermeneutics and her notion of nonsense.

2.1 Hermeneutics

1. First, it should be acknowledged that Wittgenstein never mentioned anything about the game he allegedly played in the *Tractatus* and that he did think to have advanced metaphysical claims such as the saying/showing distinction. Peter

Hacker has demonstrated this convincingly in his article "Was he trying to whistle it?"⁴

2. A careful reading of the preface and the last remarks fails to find support for the existence of the frame/body distinction. In the preface, which is not supposed to be twisted, it is clearly stated that one value of the book is that *thoughts* are expressed in it and also that their *truth* is unassailable. We should read the preface as what it is: a perfectly ordinary foreword which gives an overview of the book, anticipates some of its results and defines its aim and character. When Wittgenstein says that the *Tractatus* is not a textbook, this does not mean anything obscure, but just the fact that the book is to be taken as a condensed collection of theses and chapter titles rather than as an introduction for beginners or a complete monograph which spells out all connections and implications between those theses.
3. To count remarks 6.53-7 as part of the frame, but no previous sentence looks like an ad hoc decision, since they *do* result from the previous remarks, the discussion of the mystical, the ethical, solipsism, the nature of world and language, in short - from the whole *Tractatus* doctrine. Also, in her discussion of why propositions containing formal concepts are nonsense, Diamond relies not on what is defined in the frame, but actually on Wittgenstein's treatment of formal concepts in 4.126-4.1272 and on 5.473-5.4733. So these remarks are then not twisted either. But of course, they occur in the middle of the book ('the body') and as such are logically embedded in the rest of the text and make up a part of the picture drawn by the *Tractatus*. If they are meaningful (not twisted) in the sense in which the frame is, so is the rest of the *Tractatus*, whose interrelated doctrines are all supposed to flow from the nature of the proposition.
4. In Diamond's view, 6.53-7 determines that the previous text is plain nonsense. But the question is: why should this be so? The *Tractatus* notion of nonsense is not defined in the frame, but in the body. In other words: the whole theory of symbolism, including the bipolarity of the proposition, is presupposed for achieving the insight of the frame, for climbing up the ladder. Thus we cannot consider the body nonsensical if we do not accept the proper definition of nonsense, which is to be found in the body, as straightforward and not twisted. This is indeed a paradox of the *Tractatus*, which should be a hint that the book as a whole is misconceived, rather than encourage us to 'save' it by advancing obscure interpretations.
5. The idea of framing nonsense is useless. For it does not tell us anything about the nature of philosophical propositions in general. To hold the claim that

philosophical propositions are nonsense, we have to come up with a *general understanding* of the nature of these propositions, i.e. indicate criteria of meaningfulness. Whereas the frame, in Diamond's vein, can only dogmatically presuppose such an understanding, since it is semantically cut off from the body (in which the bounds of sense are actually determined). Paradoxically, the frame/body game would be pointless then: it would presuppose the insight that the body is nonsensical. And since the insight is supposed to be the result of the game, what would we still need the game for?

2.2 Nonsense

2.21 The notion of nonsense

1. Let us look at how Diamond defines nonsense. She relies on its determination in the *Tractatus*, which briefly occurs in 6.53, but more elaborately in 4.126-4.1272 and 5.473-5.4733. Her favourite example for a nonsensical proposition is 'Socrates is identical'. It is nonsensical because we have failed to assign meaning to one of its constituents, i.e. 'identical'.⁵ 'Socrates is identical' is as nonsensical as 'A is an object', and for the same reason. But to be sure, this is not why propositions containing formal concepts or ascribing formal properties are nonsensical in the *Tractatus*. 'Socrates is identical' does not try to express what can only be shown, a necessary, metaphysical truth, whereas 'A is an object' does. In the *notation of logical analysis* the application of the sign A in a proper proposition shows that it stands for an object, that it is a name, but this cannot be expressed. Such notation also shows that 'object' is a bound variable and that 'There is an (object) x, such that x is a table and x is an object' is misconstrued. What a proposition can express/say is whether a fact obtains or not, so that if the fact obtains it is *also* thinkable that it does not obtain, and vice versa. This is what characterises the bipolarity of a proposition, a feature which 'A is an object' lacks and for which reason it is nonsensical. In contrast, the issue whether 'Socrates is identical' is bipolar or not does not even arise. 'A is an object' is not nonsensical because we have failed to assign a predicative meaning to 'object'. We could do this any time, but this move would miss the fact that the nonsensicality arises from the metaphysical impossibility of expressing the logical form of an object, not because some word lacks some meaning. The neglect of the *Tractatus* metaphysical justification of sense and nonsense, of the logical form of the world and correspondingly the logical syntax of any symbolism explains why Diamond holds on to the relatively primitive notion of plain nonsense as it applies to 'Frabble not why', and why she mistakenly likens the sentences of the *Tractatus* to such plainly nonsensical sentences.

2. Furthermore, there are many examples of nonsense which is not brought about because a certain type of meaning has not been assigned to a word, namely in those cases in which the word *has* that type of meaning in our language. It is evident that 'red' has a predicative meaning, e.g. in 'This apple is red', and still it would be nonsense to say 'This sound is red'. This is why we should not content ourselves with any definition of nonsense unless we carefully analysed various examples of nonsense. Why a sentence makes no sense can have very different reasons. It is reasonable to say, as Diamond does, that there are no *kinds* or *degrees* of nonsense, but wrong to infer that no form of distinction applies to nonsense at all. Acknowledging the reason why the sentence 'I am my brain' is nonsense, i.e. providing a logical-linguistic analysis is very instructive indeed, whereas analysing nonsense such as 'Frabble is frabbly frabble' is useless. It is not only the case that there is illuminating nonsense as opposed to plain nonsense, but that its discovery is the foremost task of philosophy, at least according to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*.
3. Diamond's definition of nonsense seems to lead to self-contradiction. Nonsense is solely determined by lack of meaning of at least one constituent of 'p'. But then ' "p" is nonsense' is nonsense itself, since one of its constituents, "p" lacks meaning. So how are we supposed to understand the sentences in her article themselves? Such sentences as 'The propositions of the *Tractatus* are plain nonsense' or 'There is only one type of nonsense, plain nonsense' are surely nonsense themselves, and since nonsense is austere nonsense, there cannot be anything illuminating about Diamond's sentences. We could follow that she does not *really* advance a new reading of Wittgenstein, that there is nothing *really* wrong with the traditional view, that traditional philosophy is not *really* nonsense, etc. She does seem to come close to such a conclusion herself.⁶ But I don't think there can be any other way out of this dead-end other than by rejecting her approach.
4. In respect to his later work we should be aware that Wittgenstein would deny that 'A is an object' is meaningless. On grounds of us being able to infer from 'A and B and C are on the table' 'There are three objects on the table' he would regard 'A/B/C is an object' as a *rule of grammar* which justifies such inferential transitions. After all, we do perfectly well understand such a sentence and would not consider it as nonsense, unless we are highly attracted by the *Tractatus*' narrow understanding of nonsense. Diamond, it seems to me, uncritically takes over a story-relative *Tractatus* notion of nonsense (not even the right version) and disregards the much more adequate account of nonsense offered by the later Wittgenstein. But it is the latter which holds the key for understanding what

is wrong with the *Tractatus*, be it its notion of nonsense or various other doctrines.

2.22 Understanding nonsense

I now turn briefly to Diamond's theory of understanding nonsense as sense.

1. For Diamond understanding the philosophers' nonsense amounts to entering the same imaginative world and experiencing their illusion. But how do we *enter* the imaginative world of somebody else? More importantly, how can I be sure that I really entertain the same 'mental images', since otherwise I would not be able to understand this particular philosopher? Is not the whole point of making the distinction between the meaning of a word/its role in a sentence and the 'mental images' associated with it that the latter differ from person to person? This is what at least Frege had in mind, whom Diamond cites as an authority in this respect. Her method does not seem to make it possible to attain objective understanding of nonsense, of a certain type of nonsense or certain philosopher's nonsense.
2. It is a curious thing to say that we understand nonsense, whether ours or somebody else's. Diamond derives this from her analysis of understanding a person who makes sense.⁷ But it is superfluous to say 'who makes sense'. If we understand someone's utterances, then this is *because* they make sense, and this is why it is pointless to hold on to an understanding of utterances which *don't* make sense. One important reason why one can tell somebody 'I don't understand you' is because what she says makes no sense. Indeed, nonsense means: not understandable, unintelligible (against the background of a shared language).
3. There is such a phenomenon as *believing one understands* a sentence and then realising that it was nonsense. But this does not mean that we did understand that very nonsense, but rather *that and why* it is nonsense. My friend can understand my illusion that I might be my brain only if he understands the confusion of my thought. '*p* is nonsense because ...' is not nonsense itself, and since such an explanation is part of the task of philosophy, Diamond's dictum that philosophy itself is nonsense ('illusion of understanding') misses the point.
4. Does 'The letter e is green' look like a meaningful sentence because 'green' triggers the same associations ('mental images') it does in 'This tomato is green' or in 'Mr. Green is green'? First of all, it is not the case that 'mental images' pop up in our mind each time we utter a sentence. Second, not every expression

seems to have a corresponding 'mental image', e.g. 'is', 'and', 'by the way', etc. Thirdly, Diamond gives no reason why 'green', taken as a sound, should trigger the same association (or set of associations?) each time it is uttered. I can think about the wife of my neighbour Mr. Green and rather associate him with a body-builder than with 'green things'. Fourthly, and this is the essential point, we are sometimes misled by nonsensical sentences because they have a *Satzklang*, are similar to meaningful sentences and can be analysed on purely grammatical grounds. The temptation lies in the similarity between 'The letter e is green' and 'This tomato is green', not in the steady recurrence of a 'mental image' in different instances of the word 'green'. When asked why this sentence looks meaningful, we do not say: 'Oh, when I read it first, some mental images of a genuine sentence popped up in my mind and they deceived me', but rather indicate that the sentence contains an ambiguity regarding its subject; it could be taken to be a statement about a letter-token, and hence as meaningful as 'This tomato is green', or about a letter-type, and hence nonsensical.

3. Conclusion

Following are the results of my discussion:

1. Diamond's hermeneutics is deficient, since it lacks textual evidence and leads to self-contradictions.
2. Her notion of nonsense, which her interpretation relies on, is one-dimensional. It fails to capture the more complex *Tractatus* notion and even more so the later view on nonsense.
3. The theory of reading nonsense as sense, which allegedly leads to the right approach to the *Tractatus*, is seriously flawed.

The key for a proper understanding and evaluation of the *Tractatus* lies in the later work and its much more refined account of nonsense and philosophy. The later Wittgenstein would not have thrown away the ladder, like Diamond, but most doctrines of the *Tractatus* and with them the ladder analogy *itself*, in other words cease to believe that it is instructive at all.

References

- Crary, A. and Read, R.(eds) (2000) *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge
- Diamond, C (2000) "Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*", in Crary/Read (eds)
- Diamond, C. (1991) "Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus*", in Diamond, C., *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind*, Cambridge: MIT Press
- Hacker, P. M. S. (2000) "Was He Trying to Whistle It?", in Crary/Read (eds)

Endnotes

- 1 see *References*.
- 2 This is a shortened version of a more elaborate unpublished paper. Given the limited space, I shall not discuss Diamond's elaborations on ethics here.
- 3 A very useful overview is offered by Alice Crary's introduction in Crary/Read (eds) 2000.
- 4 cf. Hacker 2000.
- 5 Diamond 2000, p. 164, also Diamond 1991, p. 197.
- 6 Cf. Diamond pp. 151, 162, and especially 169.
- 7 Diamond 2000, p.156.