

THE GOOD SENSE OF NONSENSE: A NONSELF-REPUDIATING READING OF WITTGENSTEIN'S TRACTATUS

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to clarify Wittgenstein's view of nonsense, and show that it allows for a consistent and nonself-repudiating reading of the *Tractatus*. This new reading rejects the two main Therapeutic (or resolute) and the Metaphysical (or ineffabilist) readings. I suggest that Tractarian propositions are precursors of grammatical propositions; they do not transgress the bounds of sense; they demarcate it. Their being characterised as nonsense by Wittgenstein, far from precluding their regulatory function, confirms it. I conclude by suggesting that inasmuch as sayability is internally linked to sense in the *Tractatus*, it is the grammatical, and therefore nonsensical, nature of Tractarian sentences that makes them technically unsayable. That Tractarian sentences cannot technically be said, however, does not mean they cannot be spoken. Once we distinguish between saying and speaking, the author of the *Tractatus* can no longer be taxed with inconsistency in articulating the ineffable.

Keywords

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, nonsense, ineffable, grammar

I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings. (CV 7)

In this paper, I attempt to clarify Wittgenstein's view of nonsense, and show that it allows for a consistent and nonself-repudiating reading of the *Tractatus*. I begin by suggesting that neither Cora Diamond nor Peter Hacker manages a cogent interpretation of the *Tractatus* view of nonsense, *and therefore* of the *Tractatus*. I contend that this is due to their making a value-judgment on nonsense, to their not taking nonsense to be the neutral term Wittgenstein meant it to be.

Nonsense is neither uniformly *gibberish*, as Diamond thinks, nor uniformly a *violation of sense*, as Hacker thinks. Nonsense can be what violates, or what straightforwardly lacks sense; but it can also be what *demarcates* sense.

1. The two main interpretations of nonsense

If, as Wittgenstein unequivocally says, Tractarian sentences are nonsense (6.54), it remains for us either to throw out the book, or attempt to understand what Wittgenstein *really* means by 'nonsense'. Attempts have been made to do the latter, generally resulting, in one way or another, in urging us to do the former. On the so-called *Therapeutic* or *resolute* reading of the *Tractatus*, by 'nonsense', Wittgenstein means nothing but plain nonsense, but plain nonsense that can *pass* for sense and in so doing, have a therapeutic effect: it cures us from engaging in the kind of Tractarian babble which, though it looks like sense, has none. On the *Metaphysical* or *ineffabilist* reading, by 'nonsense', Wittgenstein means: that which violates the bounds of sense. But there is a difference between plain nonsense and illuminating nonsense; the latter at least helps us see what cannot be said. The remarks of the *Tractatus* are said to be illuminating nonsense in that, although ill-formed, they are rungs on the ladder leading to the apprehension of what cannot be said: ineffable necessary truths. Hacker's negotiating, as it were, the value of nonsense to an illuminating nonsense is what the Therapeutic Circle have dubbed an "irresolute" reading (Goldfarb 1997, 64), or "chickening out" (Diamond, 1984-5, 194). It does, however, redeem the *Tractatus* in a manner similar to the Therapeutic redemption, for Hacker also believes the *Tractatus* is *therapeutic* in that its failure cures us from metaphysical temptation (1989, 27). The essential difference, then, between the Therapeutic and the Metaphysical readings of the *Tractatus* is that the first makes it a contrived masquerade and the latter an unsuspected trap for its author. Both readings see Wittgenstein as repudiating the *Tractatus*, or (most of) its remarks, *at the time he wrote it*. I don't believe he did. That Wittgenstein was *later* to repudiate the *Tractatus* as altogether expounding a view he no longer espoused is, I believe, unquestionable¹. But this means that, *at the time he wrote it*, Wittgenstein fully endorsed the *Tractatus* – Preface, frame, and contents. The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* was neither deceiver nor deceived. The key to the melodious orchestration of the *Tractatus* is to think of nonsense in a non-derogatory way. If we can make good sense of nonsense, we will no longer be faced with the desperate alternative that "[i]f the *Tractatus* is important, it cannot be nonsensical. If it is nonsensical it cannot be important" (Worthington 1988, 64). That its remarks are pronounced nonsensical by their author is precisely what gives them their (genuine) importance.

2. Nonsense for Wittgenstein

In reaction to metaphysical interpretations of Tractarian nonsense, Cora Diamond stresses that Wittgenstein held what she calls an "austere view of nonsense", whereby: "... the *Tractatus* does not recognize any category of nonsense, good nonsense and bad, illuminating nonsense and dark murky muddle"; "Nonsense is nonsense; there is no division of nonsense" (1991, 160; 153). I agree with this attribution to Wittgenstein of an *austere* view of nonsense in its insistence that "[t]here are no nonsense-sentences that are as it were closer to being true than others" (1991, 158), but *not* in its implication that nonsense is used uniformly by Wittgenstein. According to Diamond: "For Wittgenstein, a sentence is nonsensical if it contains a word or words to which no meaning has been given" (1991, 163). This is as narrow an appreciation of Wittgenstein's view of nonsense as

¹ For substantially documented arguments, see Hacker (2000), 360-382 and Proops (2001).

Peter Hacker's, for whom, as we shall see, nonsense always amounts to a *violation* of sense. As Wittgenstein says in the Ambrose lectures (and later in the *Investigations*: cf. PI 499-500): "the word 'nonsense' is used to exclude certain things ... *for different reasons*" (AWL 64; my emphasis).

Although in the *Tractatus*, what is said to be *nonsense* is differentiated from what is said to be *senseless*, these come down to the single idea of: *lacking sense*. I consider Wittgenstein's approach to nonsense as *austere* in that he levels *nonsense*, all nonsense – and indeed, all expressions which he refers to as *lacking sense* in one way or another – to the level of *non-use* – that is: either *non-currency* or *idleness* – in *ordinary language*². Indeed, the distinction between *unsinnig* and *sinnlos* gradually loses its importance and is completely dissolved by the time of the *Investigations*³, where Wittgenstein uses the terms 'nonsense', 'senseless', 'has no sense' *indiscriminately* to refer to combinations of words that are excluded from the language, "withdrawn from circulation" (PI 500), but he insists that this exclusion may be for different reasons:

To say "This combination of words makes no sense (*hat keinen Sinn*)" excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for *various kinds of reason*. (PI 499; my emphasis)

So that one can hold a view of nonsense as (austerely or unilaterally) something that lacks sense or use within ordinary language, without thereby giving up the idea that there are *different reasons* for something to lack sense, or indeed be nonsensical. The *Tractatus* explicitly describes these different ways of lacking sense.

3. The different ways of 'lacking sense' in the Tractatus

In the *Tractatus*, tautologies and contradictions are said to 'lack sense'; they are not nonsensical [*unsinnig*] (4.4611), but *senseless* [*sinnlos*] (4.461). They say nothing about the world, but "show the logic of the world"; they are "part of the symbolism" (4.4611). The propositions of logic are all tautologies (6.1); they display the logical form inherent in ordinary language, and so "represent" the "scaffolding of the world" (6.124).

Nonsense, however, is said to occur when, for example, sense is transgressed; when categorial boundaries are misread and allowed to overlap, as in evident grammatical infelicities such as appear in the question: "Is the good more or less identical than the beautiful?" Nonsense also results from the philosophical error *par excellence* – the most misleading categorial confusion of all – the confusion of rules with empirical propositions. This confusion is what Wittgenstein describes in 4.1272: whenever formal concept words or properties are used as material concept-words or properties, the result is a nonsensical pseudo-proposition, such as when one says: 'There are objects' as one might say "There are books" (4.1272). But not all nonsensical propositions are said to violate sense; some expressions are nonsensical in that their constituents have simply never been given sense (5.473). This is the case of some metaphysical statements (6.53) and therefore, (presumably), of most propositions and questions in philosophical works (4.003).

To which class of nonsense, then, do Tractarian *sentences* – as I will henceforth call them, for they cannot, strictly speaking, be 'propositions'⁴ – belong? Are they nonsensical because they are violations of sense, because they straightforwardly lack sense, or for some other reason? In-

² As opposed to what we might call heuristic language: e.g. the expression of grammatical rules or the expression of some sentences for philosophical or conceptual analysis. More on this in section 6 ('saying versus speaking').

³ See, for example, PI 247 & pp. 175, 221 for cases where *sinnlos* is used for reasons which would have, according to the *Tractatus*, required the use of *unsinnig*. But this indiscriminate use of the terms is already present in *Philosophical Grammar* (1931-1934), e.g. PG 129.

⁴ On Wittgenstein's bipolar view of the proposition, only statements that are susceptible of truth and falsity; that is, the *Sätze* of natural science (6.53) are strictly speaking 'propositions'.

deed, Wittgenstein's attribution of nonsense to Tractarian sentences has been the main hurdle in understanding the *Tractatus*, for, how can propositions that are *nonsensical* serve as *elucidations*? And how can a book which is said to consist of nonsensical propositions succeed in drawing a limit to the expression of thought?

The answer to both these questions is that nonsense can be what violates, or what straightforwardly lacks sense; but it can also be what *demarcates* sense – that is, what marks or delineates the limits of sense; what expresses the *conditions* or *method* of sense. These two terms: “conditions” and “method” will later be used by Wittgenstein to define what belongs to grammar⁵. I suggest, then, that Tractarian sentences are precursors of grammatical rules, and that Wittgenstein viewed them as such – though not by name – *at the time he wrote the Tractatus*. That is, he did *not* consider Tractarian sentences to be ill-formed sentences or violations of the bounds of sense or metaphysical propositions, but full-fledged, legitimate, philosophical or conceptual elucidations – and his calling them ‘nonsensical’, far from precluding this, only confirms it.

In order to make this clear, it will help to go forward in time – to a time when Wittgenstein is slightly more explicit about this than he is in the *Tractatus*. In what follows, I will concentrate on repudiating the Metaphysical, not the Therapeutic, reading of the *Tractatus* in that I think it the more serious adversary. But insofar as the Therapeutic reading, like the Metaphysical one, gets its impetus from a restricted view of nonsense, unsettling that view will unsettle that reading as well.

4. The good sense of nonsense: nonsense as grammatical

*“This body has extension.” To this we might reply: “Nonsense!”
[Unsinn!]- but are inclined to reply “Of course!” – Why is this? (PI 252)*

The unilateral conception of nonsense as *uniquely* something that *violates* sense, or that is *ill-formed*, pervades Peter Hacker's reading of Wittgenstein. And I shall take Hacker here as representative of the Metaphysical or ineffabilist reading. According to Hacker, sentences such as ‘A is red all over and also green all over’ “are nonsense, for they violate grammatical rules” (1989, 197). But for Hacker, only the violation or negation of a grammatical rule is nonsense, not the expression of the rule itself. I quote from *Insight and Illusion*:

‘White is darker than black’ is not a false empirical proposition, but it is not a grammatical truth either. ... it is best dismissed as nonsense. And its apparent negation ‘White is lighter than black’ is best viewed not as a *truth*, but as a *rule*. (1989, 197-8)

So that for Hacker, a rule is a rule, and the violation of a rule is nonsense; but not for Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, nonsense often comes in innocuous guises⁶. ‘Red is a colour’ is, on Wittgenstein's view, as nonsensical as: ‘Red is not a colour’. The latter is nonsense in that it contravenes a rule of grammar, the other in that it is a rule of grammar. *Philosophical Grammar* 129:

... when we hear the two propositions, “This rod has a length” and its negation “This rod has no length”, we take sides and favour the first sentence, *instead of declaring them both*

⁵ “What belongs to grammar are all the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. That is, all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense)” (PG, p. 88)

⁶ I am not suggesting that Hacker did not see that grammatical rules are devoid of sense, and indeed Hacker goes as far as to recognize that “Wittgenstein had argued that arithmetic propositions are, technically speaking, nonsense” (1996, 48; my emphasis), but he is loathe to envisage that Wittgenstein would call them nonsense, and believes, rather, that Wittgenstein would “deny” that a grammatical proposition, a rule, is nonsense (2000, 364). As for Hacker himself, he consistently associates nonsense unilaterally with violations of grammar; often using the epithet ‘violations of the bounds of sense’ to define ‘nonsense’: e.g. “These sentences are nonsense, for they violate grammatical rules” (1989, 197); “nonsense, violations of the bounds of sense” (1996a, 100).

nonsense [*Unsinn*]. But this partiality is based on a confusion: we regard the first proposition as verified (and the second as falsified) by the fact “that the rod has a length of 4 meters”. (PG 129; my emphasis)

Hacker is guilty of partiality when, “instead of declaring them both nonsense”, he *takes sides and favours* ‘White is lighter than black’ as a true grammatical proposition, while relegating its negation to nonsense. Twice in a letter to Ramsey, Wittgenstein writes: “*the negation of nonsense is nonsense*” (CL 2.7.1927). Here, Wittgenstein explicitly corrects the erroneous unilateral view of nonsense typified by Hacker, which holds that ‘White is darker than black’ is nonsense, but not its negation. And so, Hacker’s assertion that Wittgenstein would not call a rule ‘nonsense’ (“To be sure, the later Wittgenstein would deny that ‘A is an object’ is nonsense at all – it is a grammatical proposition, a rule” (2000, 364)) is unwarranted.

On Wittgenstein’s bipolar view of the proposition, sense is internally linked to bipolarity. For a proposition to have sense, it must be open to verification *and* falsification. So that only genuine propositions – that is, the propositions of natural science – have sense. The later Wittgenstein will extend the scope of what has sense, but *not* to the point of including rules. As Jacques Bouveresse notes:

[Wittgenstein] never went back on his idea that propositions which express grammatical or conceptual necessities really have no sense, because they have no meaningful negation. (1981, 93; my translation)

Indeed, according to G.E. Moore:

[Wittgenstein] certainly held that “blue is primary” is a “necessary proposition” – that we can’t imagine its not being true – and that therefore, as he said, it “has no sense”. (MWL 109)

And Moore also notes, to his own puzzlement, that Wittgenstein referred to sentences which express necessary propositions as both ‘nonsensical’ *and* as ‘rules of grammar’:

... about sentences, which would commonly be said to express necessary propositions ... [Wittgenstein’s] view was, if I am right, one which he expressed by the use of the expressions, ‘without sense’, as equivalent to which he often used the expressions ‘nonsense’, ‘meaningless’, and even ‘useless’ and ‘rules of grammar’. (MWL 65).

For Wittgenstein, nonsense is then not only what violates sense, but also what defines it, demarcates it, elucidates it. This begins to shed light on his attribution of nonsense to Tractarian sentences. He calls them nonsensical because they function like what he will later call conceptual or grammatical rules. Hacker rejects Max Black’s suggestion that Tractarian sentences are formal (1964, 381), on the grounds that Wittgenstein calls propositions of logic *senseless* not *nonsensical*. But Hacker does not do justice to the spirit of Black’s suggestion here. Black is not saying that some Tractarian sentences are to be identified with what the *Tractatus* calls “propositions of logic”, but that those remarks that draw attention “to an important feature of the grammar (or the ‘logic’)” of a word are formal. Moreover, propositions of logic do not have a monopoly on formality in the *Tractatus*; nonsense, too, can be a sign of formality. I suggest that just as *senseless* expressions reflect the logical scaffolding that supports or enables the construction of propositions (4.023), some *nonsensical* expressions are *also* considered by Wittgenstein to play a formal role in the *Tractatus* – and these include *all* Tractarian sentences. However – and this is crucial – the formal role *nonsensical* Tractarian sentences play is not the same as the formal role played

⁷ Hacker: “Wittgenstein’s propositions about the essences of things consist, Black suggested, in a priori sentences belonging to logical syntax. These are formal statements which show things that can be shown, and they are no worse than logical propositions, which do not transgress the rules of logical syntax. But this is mistaken. The propositions of logic are senseless, not nonsense” (2000, 356).

by *senseless* expressions. Tractarian sentences are not like “propositions of logic” in that they are not “part of the symbolism”; they are not features of conceptual notation, but rather *elucidations*; *logical clarifications of thoughts* (4.112). I am not suggesting, then, that Tractarian sentences are what the *Tractatus* calls and takes to be “propositions of logic” (or even “rules of logical syntax”), but that they are instances of what the *post-Tractatus* Wittgenstein will call logical (or grammatical) rules – and these range from straight-forward instructions for our use of words (e.g. “This is what we call ‘a hand’”, “A rod has a length”) to broader conceptual elucidations, such as reminders of *the kind of statement* we are making (cf. PI 90)⁸.

The formality of Tractarian sentences resides in their producing what Wittgenstein will later call a *perspicuous presentation*: the kind of conceptual clarification or elucidation that gives us a clear view of the use of our words (PI 122). Indeed, the link between “elucidations” and “rules of grammar” is made in a passage from the Waismann notes: “You cannot discover anything in grammar, you can only elucidate” (WVC, 78). Tractarian sentences are formal in that they express and elucidate the conditions of sense⁹: they “signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said” (4.115). They are genuine elucidations – they do not violate sense.

Now, let us examine the *Tractatus* for textual evidence of the grammatical nature of Tractarian sentences. This is not to say, of course, that Wittgenstein speaks of them as grammatical, but that he speaks of them in terms that he will later identify as ‘grammatical’.

5. Tractarian ‘propositions’ as bounds of sense

Both the Metaphysical and Therapeutic readings of the *Tractatus* assume that Wittgenstein considered Tractarian sentences to be metaphysical. On the Metaphysical reading, he saw them as the *unfortunate* result of his failure to adhere to the “only strictly correct” method of doing philosophy (6.53); on the Therapeutic reading, he contrived Tractarian sentences as a *deliberate* rendition of metaphysical philosophizing. But in fact Wittgenstein did *not* consider Tractarian sentences to be metaphysical, and nowhere does he suggest they are. Indeed, he suggests rather the opposite: in a 1919 letter to von Ficker, Wittgenstein writes about the *Tractatus* that it “is strictly philosophical and at the same time literary: but there is no gassing [or babbling] in it”¹⁰.

⁸ It is important to note, then, that the function Wittgenstein will accord to a rule of grammar is not only the narrow one of instructing us in the use of individual words (e.g. ‘A rod has (what we call) a length’ or ‘This ~~is~~ is a hand’); but more generally that of being a *condition* for making sense: “What belongs to grammar are all the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. That is, all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense)” (PG, p. 88). These ‘conditions’ include not only straight-forward *definitions*, or expressions of rules ‘used to explain the use of certain symbols’ (LFM 282); precise *prescriptions* and *proscriptions* (e.g. ‘The truth is: it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself’ (PI 246); ‘Certainly it makes no sense to say that the colour red is torn up or pounded to bits’ (PI 57)); *conceptual elucidations* – that is, reminders of the kinds of statement we are making (e.g. ‘We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena. ... Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one’. (PI 90)); and anything that is ‘a preparation for a description’ (MWL 72): this includes samples, tables, and any other ‘object’ or ‘instrument of the language’ (cf. PI 16). In *On Certainty* (e.g. OC 53, 57-9, 136, 151), Wittgenstein considers our basic beliefs – because they underpin our making sense – to be rules of grammar.

⁹ Which is not to say that Tractarian sentences are normative. They elucidate, point out, clarify these conditions for those who haven’t already grasped them; they provide a more perspicuous presentation of something that lies there, already open to view, but not very conspicuously. Tractarian sentences clarify the logical form of meaningful discourse, and in so doing, point out the mistakes made by earlier attempts to do this. I am grateful to Eric Loomis for prompting me to underline this point.

¹⁰ PT 14; cf. also 16. The word rendered as gassing, and sometimes as babbling (cf. Luckhardt 1979, 94) is *Schwefeln*. Both Norman Malcolm (1986, 32-3) and Rush Rhees (1966, 41) are of the opinion that Wittgenstein did not think Tractarian propositions were metaphysical. As they both remark, this does not imply that Wittgenstein did not *later* recognize features of the *Tractatus* to be metaphysical; and as Malcolm remarks, this does not imply that they are not metaphysical, and indeed Malcolm believes they are.

The reason both readings take Wittgenstein to imply his Tractarian sentences are metaphysical is that these readings make the same unwarranted leap from Wittgenstein's pronouncing them to be *nonsensical* to his believing they are *metaphysical*. And that leap is made because the idea that nonsense can also refer to (something akin to) the grammatical is not envisaged.

Let us now briefly see how the grammaticality of Tractarian sentences transpires in the *Tractatus* itself. First, the task of philosophy is described in terms of conceptual clarification, or what we can anachronistically call, *grammatical* terms:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. [...]

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions', but in the clarification of propositions.

Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries. (4.112)

When Wittgenstein contrasts "philosophical propositions" with "the clarification of propositions", he is contrasting philosophy as practised by the metaphysician with philosophy as practised by himself in the *Tractatus*; that is, as essentially an activity of conceptual clarification or elucidation. And indeed, to say that "[a] philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations" (4.112), and then go on to refer to his own Tractarian sentences as "elucidations" (6.54), implies that Wittgenstein thinks the *Tractatus* is a *successful* philosophical work, one that has followed the *correct method* in philosophy – in other words, it has *said* nothing. It has not said what *can* be said: i.e. empirical propositions, for that is not its business; nor has it attempted to *say* what *cannot* be said: something metaphysical, for that would be to follow the *incorrect* method in philosophy; it has only formulated elucidations, which does not amount to *saying* anything, for elucidations are not empirical propositions:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science – i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – *this* method would be the only strictly correct one. (6.53)

Both Tractarian sentences and the sentences of the metaphysical philosopher are nonsense in that they are not propositions of natural science, but we must distinguish between Wittgenstein's nonsense and that of the metaphysical philosopher. Philosophical nonsense can be elucidatory as opposed to the confused pronouncements of that 'other person', the metaphysical philosopher, who needs to be set straight; be shown he has failed to give a meaning to some of his signs (6.53) – whereas giving meaning to *his* signs is precisely what Wittgenstein had been doing all along in the *Tractatus*. And although conceptual elucidation would not seem "satisfying" to the metaphysical philosopher, that is, he would not have the feeling that he was being taught philosophy – so accustomed is he to the traditional, metaphysical mode of philosophizing, with its grandiose pronouncements – *it is*, nevertheless, the only correct method. Wittgenstein's awareness of how non-philosophical and unimpressive the conceptual elucidation method of doing philosophy might seem to traditional philosophers, is also what prompts him to write, in the Preface, that one of the things "which the value of this work consists in is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved" (Preface 4).

Unlike "philosophical propositions", then, Tractarian sentences, do *precisely* what it is the task of philosophy to do: they give a perspicuous presentation of – *they elucidate or signify* [*bedeuten*] – what cannot be said, by presenting clearly [*klar darstellen*], or *showing*, what can be said (cf. 4.1.15)¹¹.

These elucidations of the conditions of sense are often expressed in the form of *definitions* of words or concepts – e.g. “A picture is a model of reality” (2.12); or prescriptions as to the proper use of the concepts defined – e.g. “Objects can only be *named*” (3.221); as well as *proscriptions* – e.g. “one cannot say ... ‘There are objects’ as one might say, ‘There are books’” (4.1272). But all Tractarian sentences are meant, in one way or another, to elucidate the conditions of sensical discourse¹². They are elucidations in that they do not provide any new information, but *enable the perspicuous view of what is already there*: like rungs of a ladder which once ascended enable us to see – not a new world – but the world aright. But why, then, does Wittgenstein insist that we throw away the ladder?

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical [*unsinnig*], when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (6.54)

The ladder must be thrown away in the same way that all grammatical rules including the so-called ‘hinge propositions’ of *On Certainty* must be “shunted onto an unused siding”. They do not belong to the main stream; they are “fixed and ... removed from the traffic” (OC 210). For, to leave them in the traffic – that is, to attempt to *use* them *in* language – would be an attempt to *say* them. But only propositions of natural science, can be said (OC 6.53), so that attempting to *say* Tractarian sentences would be attempting to turn them into the wrong kind of nonsense – that “produced by trying to express by the use of language what ought to be embodied in the grammar” (MWL 103). It would be to use the *incorrect* method of doing philosophy. Tractarian sentences are nonsense; that is, they are useless *in* language; their only use is to delineate and elucidate the correct use of language. Outside this heuristic use, Tractarian sentences are to be cast out for, like all rules of grammar, using them within ordinary discourse would only arrest its meaningful flow. If, for instance, in the middle of a conversation with the shopkeeper who is giving me advice about which colour to paint my room, I were to utter the words: ‘Red is darker than pink’, she would be stopped in her tracks and look at me perplexed. What exactly is the information that my words are supposed to be offering her? In fact, though words were pronounced, nothing was *said*, for what I intimated *went without saying*. Our mastery of a grammatical rule can only *show* itself *in* our language-games involving colours and *in* our dealings with colours, it does not meaningfully bear *saying*. Yet if Tractarian sentences, like all rules, cannot be *said*, how is it that we are *hearing* them? Indeed, there is no silence here, but a very articulate and precise series of elucidations.

6. Saying vs. Speaking

When Wittgenstein writes that all that can be *said* are the propositions of natural science (6.53), this forges a logical link between sayability and bipolarity. We can only say what is bipolar; whatever is essential or necessary – such as rules of grammar – does not bear saying:

What belongs to the essence of the world cannot be expressed by language. For this reason, it cannot say [Wittgenstein’s emphasis] that everything flows. Language can only say those things that we can also imagine otherwise. (PR I, 54, p. 84 (1929-30))

¹¹ Note that Wittgenstein does not write that philosophy says what cannot be said – and this is not because this would be contradictory or nonsensical, for it needn’t be (e.g. “... one cannot say ... ‘There are objects’” (4.1272), but because he is reserving the term ‘saying’ for what we do with propositions of natural science (6.53).

¹² Whether they in fact do or not is not the point here, but that Wittgenstein believed they did. I am grateful to Dan Hutto for suggesting that the difference needs pointing out. It might also be worth pointing out that Wittgenstein believed they did at the time; that he was later, in *Philosophical Investigations* and elsewhere, to be critical of many of these ‘elucidations’ does not make the *Tractatus* less of an elucidatory project at the time.

To be sure, I can say that this suit is darker than the other one. But I *cannot say* that one colour is darker than the other one. For this is of the essence of a colour; without it, after all, a colour cannot be thought. (WVC 55; my emphasis)

Our point is: the liar knows that he is telling an untruth. But *we are not going to say it. It means nothing at all. The statement is grammatical.* (LPE 196; my emphasis)

In Wittgenstein's technical vocabulary, to say means to make sense, and so rules of grammar, or rules that demarcate or underpin or elucidate sense, cannot be *said*, but they can, however, be articulated or voiced – which is what Wittgenstein does when he writes or pronounces the words: “*I cannot say* that one colour is darker than the other one”. So that when he writes in the *Tractatus*: “one cannot say ... ‘There are objects’” (4.1272), Wittgenstein does not mean that the sentence cannot be *voiced*, but that it cannot be *negated*, and so that it *goes without saying* (in a way similar, but not identical, to a tautology).

If we acknowledge, then, that Wittgenstein often uses *saying* in a specialized, technical sense, and if we make a distinction between Wittgenstein's technical use of *saying*, and his nontechnical use – for which we might substitute the verbs: speaking, or *articulating*, we can then read the *Tractatus* consistently without having to mystify or reject its contents. To say then that something is *unsayable* or *ineffable* (in Wittgenstein's technical sense) is not to say that it cannot be *spoken*. We can use words; indeed, sentences; indeed, perfectly well-formed sentences, and yet not be *saying* anything, not be making sense. Once we distinguish these two ways of pronouncing sentences: saying versus *articulating* or *speaking*¹³, Wittgenstein can no longer be taxed with inconsistency in articulating Tractarian sentences whilst claiming that they cannot be *said*; that they are *ineffable*.

That words are used does not mean something is *said*. According to the *Tractatus*, nothing is *said* when the words used do not describe the world in some factual way. Tautologies and contradictions certainly provide no information about the world; they have no sense (4.461) and say nothing (6.11). Mathematical sentences also say nothing about the world; they are only equations which can themselves not be *said* (6.2341). Neither do propositions of ethics, aesthetics, religion and metaphysics describe the world, and so they too cannot be *said* (6.421, 6.522, 6.53). And nor do Tractarian sentences; they only elucidate our making sense. Only the propositions of natural science can be *said* (6.53). Wittgenstein, as announced in the Preface, aimed to demarcate the sayable from the ineffable. He did just that. What cannot be said cannot be said for one reason: it has no sense. But there are many *different ways* of not having sense¹⁴, and the grammatical (or formal) is one of them. We can now read the *Tractatus* without eliminating the possibility that Tractarian sentences, in spite of their being nonsensical and ineffable, have successfully completed the task of demarcating sense from nonsense. This *grammatical* reading of the *Tractatus* allows us to rehabilitate it, to restore to it the integrity with which it was conceived, and to understand that when Wittgenstein refers to its thoughts as “unassailable and definitive” (Preface 4), he is not referring to thoughts that repudiate it. Wittgenstein did not succumb to the metaphysical style of thought in the *Tractatus*, nor did he caricature it; he took it head on and showed it – firmly and, he thought, definitively – the way out.

¹³ For a more elaborate discussion of the saying/speaking distinction, cf. Moyal-Sharrock (2004).

¹⁴ Wittgenstein's at times reverential attitude towards the ineffable – as Paul Engelmann writes: “Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about” (EL 97) – is certainly not belittled or neglected in this reading. What one cannot say is heterogeneous. It includes the ethical, the aesthetic, the religious, the mystical, the Existential (cf. Wittgenstein's ‘Lecture on Ethics’), as well as the metaphysical and the grammatical.

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AWL *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935*, from the notes of A. Ambrose and M. MacDonald. A. Ambrose (ed.), Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.

CL *Cambridge Letters: Correspondence with Russell, Keynes, Moore, Ramsey and Sraffa*, eds Brian McGuinness & G.H. von Wright, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.

EL *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a memoir* by Paul Engelmann, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.

LPE "Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experience' and 'Sense Data'", in PO, 202-367.

MWL *Moore's Wittgenstein Lectures in 1930-1933*, in PO, 46-114.

OC *On Certainty*, eds G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe. Amended 1st Ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

P "Philosophy" (sections 86-93 of the Big Typescript), in PO, 160-199.

PG *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. R. Rhees, tr. A. Kenny, Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.

PI *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd Ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

PO *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, eds J.C. Klagge and A. Nordman., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993.

PT *Prototractatus*, ed. B.F. McGuinness, T. Nyberg and G.H. von Wright, tr. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, with an introduction by G.H. von Wright, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971.

TLP *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.

WVC *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle [1929-32]*, shorthand notes recorded by F. Waismann, ed. B.F. McGuinness, Oxford: Blackwell, 1979.
