Reviews

Beyond the 'Tractatus' Wars
Edited by Rupert Read and Matthew A. Lavery
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The opening shot of this war was fired by Cora Diamond in 1988. She derided 'standard' interpreters in general and Peter Hacker in particular for 'chickening out'. The alleged failure of courage consisted in crediting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* with the idea of 'illuminating nonsense', sentences that try to express ineffable truths (about the constitution of the world, the essence of representation, the nature of logic, ethics and aesthetics, etc.), truths that, by the book's own standards of sense, can only be *shown* but *not said*. These truths are on display when non-philosophical, empirical propositions are properly analysed; yet the attempt to express them through a priori philosophical propositions violates the conditions of sense that these propositions grope for. This account, Diamond proclaimed, fails to take literally and at face value a remark at the end of *Tractatus*. 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical… (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.). He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright' (6.54). According to Diamond, the *Tractatus* consists of 'plain nonsense', nonsense in the same drastic sense 'ab sur ah' or 'piggly tiggle wiggle'. The purpose of the exercise is therapeutic (Diamond) or ironic (Conant). By producing such alleged gibberish, Wittgenstein tries to unmask the absurd nature of philosophy and to wean us off the temptation to engage in it.

Hostilities started in earnest in 2000 with the publication of *The New Wittgenstein* (ed. Crary and Read). This collection featured contributions by the growing faction of so-called 'resolute' readers who treat the book as a collection of plain though therapeutic nonsense – subsequently also known as 'New Wittgensteinians'. But it also included a response by Hacker. Marshalling an impressive array of internal (concerning the *Tractatus* itself) and external (concerning material from before and after) arguments, Hacker argued that the resolute reading fails to render the book consistent and that

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Wittgenstein explicitly condoned the idea of truths that can be shown yet not said.

The book under review is a sequel to this eponymous anthology. It promises an even-handed account of the debate, 'showcasing one paper each from each camp' according to the backcloth. In fact, however, these pledges of even-handedness are misleading. This is not just because the collection starts with an unpaired essay by Goldfarb that provides a useful survey of the debate from a resolute perspective, highlighting both continuities and discontinuities with the earlier anti-realist interpretations of Ishiguro and McGuinness. It is also because the two editors are self-acknowledged proponents of a radical 'resolutism', which they label 'Jacobin'. As representatives of non-resolute readings they have chosen interpreters whom they describe as 'genuinely engaged' and 'constructive' – to wit, White, Sullivan and Moore. Their standing and the quality of their contributions is beyond doubt. But Sullivan and Moore engage in a debate that is at one remove at least from that between standard and resolute interpretations of the *Tractatus*. Whereas Sullivan detects transcendental idealism in the later but not the earlier work, Moore champions the more common (and, in my view, correct) view that the earlier Wittgenstein adopted a version of transcendental idealism that the later Wittgenstein criticized. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that more trenchant critics of resolute readings like Cheung, Hacker, Proops and Schroeder have not been included.

The editors blow their own trumpet very hard indeed. In the Introduction, they describe contributions by New Wittgensteinians variously as 'impressive', 'magisterial', and an 'extraordinary feat'; they testify to their collection setting out 'a healthy agenda for the years to come' and express their hope that it 'will promote more, and even more important thought'.

With respect to some of the contributions, there is indeed scope for work that is more important. The essays by the self-avowed Jacobins (Read, Dean, Lavery) are thin in both textual exegesis and philosophical argument. They make up for this through the severity of their resolutism, more or less candid hostility towards 'philosophy' – a term Lavery likes to put in scare quotes in order to indicate that the enterprise it denotes strikes him as profoundly despicable – and rousing calls that the therapeutic transcendence of philosophy should now result in 'action in the lived world' (113). Indeed, for Lavery the measure of success for an interpretation of the *Tractatus* is the degree to which it 'prompts action in the real world', rather than the degree to which it is faithful to the text or the intentions of its author (118). This is a bizarre interpretative strategy, one

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which makes even orthodox Marxist hermeneutics look sophisticated by comparison. It is equally bizarre that Lavery takes more thoughtful resolutists to task for committing the 'mistake' of feeling that 'a "justification" [another scare-quote indicating Lavery's opprobrium]' for their reading of Wittgenstein and their conception of nonsense 'needs to be given at all' (113, 116). This amounts to a straightforward and completely unwarranted refusal to engage with the two issues that his own collection purports to address, namely, respectively, the exegetical and substantive merits of resolutism. What really takes the biscuit, however, is two features of Lavery's piece. One is the breath-taking arrogance with which he poo-pooes the idea that there are truths or insights that defy linguistic expression and thereby the venerable though problematic traditions of mysticism (115). Wittgenstein himself would have been incandescent reading this passage. The other is Lavery's attempt to occupy the moral and intellectual high-ground. Instead of tackling 'abstract questions of truth-value [i.e. concerning what is true and what is false]' through 'more "philosophizing"' (the sin committed by standard readers and moderate resolutists alike), what he commends instead is 'applied critical thinking' to real life problems (113, 117). Make no mistake! To put 'therapists' indifferent to the contrast between true and false and openly antagonistic to philosophy and rational argument in charge of critical thinking is to put Dracula in charge of a blood-bank, or, for that matter, the Jacobins in charge of the judiciary. Analytic philosophy could do far worse than pursuing the project of critical thinking writ large. That project can profit immensely from Wittgenstein's thought. But only by taking up the dialectical tools explored and honed by 'old' non-therapeutic Wittgensteinians, i.e. by clarifying concepts, sharpening questions and exposing fallacies.

Let me now turn to some of the more sober resolutists. Both philosophically and exegetically their most interesting contention has been that Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense, both early and late, was 'austere' rather than 'substantial'. First, nonsense is always a matter of *privation*. Whereas a substantial conception of nonsense allows for 'positive nonsense', nonsense that results from combining meaningful expressions in illegitimate ways (as in Chomsky's famous example 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'), the austere view allows only for 'negative nonsense', nonsense which results from our not having assigned a meaning to expressions in a certain context. Secondly, the austere conception of nonsense is *monistic*. Whereas the substantial conception distinguishes between different types of nonsense, the austere view insists that from a philosophical

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or logical point of view there is only one kind of nonsense and hence no difference between the statements of metaphysicians and the babblings of a drunkard.

The austere conception of nonsense can appeal to the fact that Wittgenstein condoned a strong context-principle according to which

P_1 A word (name) has meaning only in the context of a proposition In combination with

P_2 A proposition is a sentence with a sense

this yields

C No component of a sequence of signs that lacks a sense can have a meaning

It follows that no part of a meaningless combination of signs could mean what it does in a meaningful proposition. However, as I have argued elsewhere, P_1 is wrong – the words on a list or the *explananda* in a dictionary are not used in a complete sentence, yet nonetheless meaningful. This point was already anticipated by Aristotle: words in isolation 'are neither true nor false', but they nonetheless 'signify something' (*De Interpretatione* 16a). Strong contextualism is also incompatible with the later Wittgenstein's insight that the meaning of a word is its use in the language. To be meaningful, a word need not *actually* occur in a proposition, it must only be *capable* of being used in such propositions in line with established rules. Such a weak conceptualism does not support a privation view: even in a combination that makes no sense overall like (1) 'The number 5 is blond', the term blond is meaningful, since there are rules for its employment in a combination that does, e.g. in (2) 'Hilary Clinton is blond'. It is just that these rules preclude meaningful application of the term to an abstract object.

In his thoughtful contribution, Bronzo attempts to block this line of reasoning. He proposes a 'semantic disjunctivism': '*either* words are used in a meaningful way by being employed for the expression of meaningful propositions [as in (2)], *or* they are not used in a meaningful way at all [as in (1)]'. (101) Even if such a strict dichotomy is tenable, however, it will not undermine my argument or provide succour to the privation view. That 'blond' is not *actually used* in a meaningful way in the specific context of (1) is no obstacle to it *having such a use* in sentential contexts like (2), and hence to its *having a meaning*, even when it occurs in a string that makes no sense overall. That is why competent speakers confronted with (1) can explain – in non-theoretical terms – not just what 'blond' means, but also why it is misplaced in its current context. Bronzo also suspects weak contextualists of harbouring reductionist motivations by seeking a bottom-up explanation of sentences from sub-

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sentential building blocks and by 'factorizing' our linguistic capacity: on the one hand we have knowledge of the meaning of words, on the other we have knowledge of how to employ them in sentences with a sense (101). Both charges are unfounded. Weak contextualism insists that to understand a word genuinely (e.g. not just by dint of knowing the meaning of a single expression from an otherwise unfamiliar tongue) requires knowing how to employ it in different types of sentences (that is why the Fodorian charge that a 'use theory' cannot account for compositionality fails). What is correct about factorizing is that understanding the meaning of the words of a language is compatible with lacking *certain* syntactic capacities, e.g. concerning niceties of flexion.

Finally a word on the illuminating exchange between White on the one hand, Conant and Dain on the other. White officially condones an austere conception of nonsense. But his austerity, unlike that of resolutists, boils down to rejecting the patently absurd idea that a nonsensical combination of signs has a sense after all, except that this sense is nonsensical. White valiantly tries to salvage the saying/showing distinction by explaining how a nonsensical combination of signs could nonetheless communicate something. But the examples he gives can be explained and are therefore intelligible, as Conant and Dain show. This leaves the saying/showing distinction with an apparently insuperable problem. Mind you, it is a problem for the *Tractatus*, *not* for standard interpreters prepared to admit that the *Tractatus* position is untenable.

To be sure, for Goldfarb the idea that the *Tractatus* is inconsistent is an 'astonishing… guide to interpretative practice' (14). But it is not a hermeneutic principle, it is a conclusion that one reaches on reading the text without blind allegiance to the principle of charity or veneration for its author. And to disparage that conclusion as astonishing is, well, flabbergasting! After all, Wittgenstein *himself* later criticized the *Tractatus* on compelling grounds. Among other things, he undermined the assumption which creates the pressure for a saying/showing distinction in the first place, namely that only empirical pictures of reality can make sense. The way forward is to relinquish once and for all the early Wittgenstein's hostility towards the idea of a priori, conceptual truths, while retaining his later insights into the special normative role that these truths play for our linguistic practice in general, and for philosophy in particular.

Hans-Johann Glock
glock@philos.uzh.ch
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