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Unsinnig: A Reply to Hutto*

Phil Hutchinson

Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, dass sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als **unsinnig** erkennt, wenn er durch sie – auf ihnen – über sie hinausgestiegen ist. (Er muss sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist.)

Er muss diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig.

(L-PA (TL-P) 6.54)

Not unsurprisingly, in his reply to the critique of his reading offered by myself and Rupert Read (Hutchinson & Read, 2006), Dan Hutto focuses on how one should understand Wittgenstein's closing insistence that his propositions are *unsinnig*. Though, while one might expect his reply to have this as its focus, in doing so he also claims not to think that 6.54 should be accorded the (interpretive/exegetical) weight that Read and I had insisted on in our original paper.¹ The reason for this latter thought pertains to his insistence on any exegesis taking account of context and others of Wittgenstein's writings, and not merely being focused on the text *per se*. In this reply I show that Hutto's insistence is based on his own prejudice when reading *TL-P*.

This reply will take the following form: I begin, in section 1, with a discussion of Wittgenstein's own use of *unsinnig*. This, I hope, will help Hutto get to grips with something he has hitherto struggled to grasp: i.e. how the propositions of the *Tractatus* can be *unsinnig* (in the strict sense, not serving to elucidate anything) while also working on their reader. I then progress to a discussion of *Tractarian* objects. I do so because again this is something about which Hutto seems somewhat confused.

Hutto writes that at the time of writing *TL-P* Wittgenstein thought that his propositions were nonsense in the 'weak sense'; he then progresses to discuss remark 2.021. Hutto writes that there is an irony here. The irony, for Hutto, is as follows: while Wittgenstein's motive for writing 6.54 was that his remarks were nonsense in the 'weak sense', remarks such as 2.021 are genuinely nonsense – they are nonsense in the strong sense; only on Hutto's account Wittgenstein was not in a position to recognize this at the time he wrote the *Tractatus*. Hutto provides no support for his claims as to what Wittgenstein was and was not in a position to recognize as nonsense at the

time he wrote *TL-P*; rather, his own theory about how to read *TL-P* is, explicitly, based on speculation as to what Wittgenstein thought at the time.²

Hutto's speculation concerning what Wittgenstein thought at the time leads him to another thought regarding the motives for a resolute reading. Hutto suggests that resolute readers are misled to their commitments regarding the *unsinnig* nature of the *Tractarian* propositions by somewhat anachronistically reading remarks such as 2.021 from the perspective of Wittgenstein's later insights. Then, Hutto's thought seems to be that resolute readers progress to generalize this anachronism, thus insisting that the entire text (give or take the preface and one or two other remarks) is non-elucidatory nonsense.

Hutto's thoughts here are based on a prejudicial reading of *TL-P* and are simply incorrect as a history of the steps taken towards a resolute reading. Hutto's claims are based on an assumption that *Tractarian* objects are/must be conceived of in a realist manner. Section 2 of the present paper shows Hutto why he is not obliged to make this error simply from a reading of *TL-P*.

Resolute readings have their origins in two, not wholly unconnected, lines of thought:

- I a critique of the thought that the discussion of *Tractarian* objects entails realism and an underlying ontology in *TL-P* (e.g. Goldfarb); and
- II a reflection upon Wittgenstein's employment (critically following Frege) of the context principle and use of the term *unsinnig* in 6.54 (e.g. Diamond).

1 *Unsinnig*

Der Sinn in the context in which it appears in Wittgenstein's writings is correctly translated into English as 'sense'. However, there is a connotation carried by some of its uses in German which is not captured by its English counterpart. I propose that this connotation is crucial to understanding Wittgenstein's employment of the term, as it is also to Frege's. The meaning of *der Sinn*, as used in *TL-P* and as used by Frege, invokes a notion of directionality; to put it another way, *der Sinn*, as Frege and Wittgenstein use that term, implies that something having sense enables us to know what direction to go in, where to look, or 'how to go on'.³ Now, when something is *unsinnig* it means that it no longer has this ability, or has lost the ability, to show us anything: we are thus stuck like flies in a fly-bottle, buzzing against the glass in the direction of the sun, while all along the opening and exit to the bottle is there below us. The loss of sense is the loss of direction, or being simply lost.⁴

The question then is: why do the propositions of the *Tractatus* seem to have sense only for us to be told by the author that they do not do so by the

time we reach the concluding remarks? A key to understanding here is two remarks from the second paragraph of the preface:

The book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language.

The problems of philosophy are formulated by us, and are so owing to our misunderstanding the logic of our language. The *Tractarian* ladder (see remark 6.54) enables us to climb out of the pothole into which we had fallen owing to our own confusion. I suggest here the metaphor of the pothole into which we fall owing to our own confusion regarding the logic of our language so as to guard against an alternative interpretation of the ladder metaphor in 6.54, whereby one understands it in a somewhat Platonic manner: climbing the ladder affords us a vantage point on high from which to look down – rather like Greek gods – on the world below.⁵ This, I submit, is not Wittgenstein's intention in his employment of the ladder metaphor, and the second paragraph of the preface should, at the least, suggest that it is not so.

If the problems of philosophy are of our own making, and made through a misunderstanding of the logic of our language, then we have created the trap in which we as philosophers find ourselves stuck. The apparent sense of the propositions of the *Tractatus* will enable us both to extricate ourselves from this prison and to see the world aright: see that there is no necessity for the pothole/trap to exist; that it was rather of our own making, or better, it was a mirage or fantasy brought on by confusion.⁶ The propositions of the *Tractatus*, therefore, have sense inasmuch as they show us the way out of the pothole by showing us that there really is no pothole other than that which our initial confusion had led us to believe there was.⁷ This is captured far more clearly by the directional connotations of the German *der Sinn*, as Wittgenstein uses that term, though it is lost somewhat by the, otherwise correct, translation 'sense'.

So how do these ultimately *unsinnig* propositions have sense and do the work that Wittgenstein hopes of them? Well, *we* (philosophers) have created these philosophical problems, and the propositions of the *Tractatus* work upon us in a manner which will facilitate our recognition of this. It is the problems which give those propositions their sense, in that they are what give them their purpose and provide their context. When we have climbed the ladder (those (pseudo-) propositions), we see that the problems of philosophy were really pseudo-problems and hence the propositions designed by Wittgenstein to show us to this vantage point, to show us the way out of the self-made pothole, are ultimately – in a context where we recognize the problems to be pseudo-problems – pseudo-propositions. They play a role akin to that served by a map of a fantasy realm which we had

taken to actually exist. Only this map, if we follow it, shows us that there is no such realm outside our own fantasies. It is, if you like, a therapeutic (pseudo-) map.

It is, therefore, only legitimate to talk of the sense (*der Sinn*) of the Tractarian propositions inasmuch as they facilitate in one the ultimate realization that they and the problems they initially appear to be addressing are problems created by our own confusion about the logic of our language. They direct us, though in a strictly purpose-relative way, only because we are already confused into thinking that the problems are genuine problems, i.e. not a result of our own misunderstandings of the logic of our language. Once the purpose has been realized, we see the fantasy that was both the problem and the solution to the problem. For the solution is also a pseudo-solution: it doesn't tell us or show us anything, but merely facilitates in us the realization that we had all along been misled by our misunderstandings. Once the purpose has been realized, we throw away the *unsinnig* propositions.

2 Being Led Astray by One's Prejudice: The Case of *TL-P* 2.021

On p. 586 of his reply, Hutto writes the following:

Remark 2.021 and others of its ilk are in genuine tension with the spirit of the work and the approach it otherwise sought to engender: not only do they sound like metaphysical proclamations – they are such.

Hutto's line here surprises me. There is a wealth of literature on Tractarian objects. The best of it shows that 2.021 does not stand in any tension with the rest of the text (other readings, such as Peter Hacker's, run in to grave difficulty). Hutto assumes that (a) the (alleged) metaphysical realism of 2.021 stands in tension with the spirit of the work and (b) that the putatively patent metaphysical nature of such remarks (the realism implied by them) is what leads resolute readers to make their claims. Both these assumptions are, I submit, specious.

Hutto assumes that remarks such as 2.021, 'Objects form the substance of the world', entail a realist commitment. I submit that there is no good reason to hold this view. Hidé Ishiguro, Brian McGuinness, Warren Goldfarb and Rush Rhees have all made detailed cases for reading these remarks (and *TL-P*) in a non-realist, non-ontological way. Indeed, Ishiguro, McGuinness and Goldfarb show that any attempt to read Wittgenstein here as a realist falls foul of other remarks in the text and is thus, in Tractarian terms, unsustainable.⁸ I would refer Hutto to these papers as they provide the foundations upon which one might find a sure footing so as to get to grips with subsequent developments in *Tractatus* scholarship.

The resolute reading does not, as Hutto assumes, begin by reading remarks such as 2.021 as patent nonsense *because* they are realist claims.

Resolute readers do not, therefore, carelessly and blindly *generalize from* remarks such as 2.021 that the book as a whole is nonsense, as Hutto assumes.⁹ On the contrary, the resolute reading grows out of a *challenge* to the assumption that 2.021 implies realism or a general Tractarian ontology.

To elaborate very briefly (I will be brief here given that this is a reply, and that others more capable have already made cognate arguments in substantially more detail). Again referring to the preface of *TL-P*, this time paragraphs 3 and 4, we can see that the thought that Wittgenstein might be lapsing into metaphysical realism or transcendentalism in 2.021 would entail him being embroiled in a contradiction of quite large proportions. Recall that in the preface Wittgenstein writes:

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

What is crucial about this passage in the context of our discussion of 2.021 is the suggestion by Wittgenstein that any limit to thinking can only be drawn in language. Now, the realist reading of the Tractarian objects of remark 2.021 implies that the objects lie outside language and from there constrain the limits of sense. How might one align this with Wittgenstein's prefatory remark just cited? Why does Wittgenstein help himself to discussing them? If they lie outside our language, how might our language relate to them? Wittgenstein must have an account of such a relation if he invokes them as part of his Tractarian account? An appeal to non- or pre-linguistic mental acts (along the lines of that made by Hacker in *Insight and Illusion*) cannot be invoked here, for it faces the same problem as that to which it is trying to be a solution, namely a non- or pre-linguistic mental act stands outside language/expression of thoughts.¹⁰

Now, I suppose one might be tempted to hold here that this represents a genuine tension or even contradiction in *TL-P*. I would be very wary of invoking this as an interpretive principle or even predilection (particularly if one's alternative reading is explicitly based on 'conjecture' about what the author thought, as is Hutto's). It attributes to the text a deep, maybe fundamental, flaw (the tension between the, putatively, metaphysical remarks – talk of extra-linguistic (brute) objects – and Wittgenstein's claims that metaphysics – that which lies outside thought and thus language – is *Unsinn*) and it entails the conclusion that the text has a hole at its heart (that it is in need of an account of how one might relate names (language) to objects (world) external to that language); this position, therefore, also

implies genuine and rather implausible shallowness in Wittgenstein's philosophical thinking.

Guided by some of Russell's remarks in his Introduction to the book¹¹ (or Ramsey's remark about 'trying to whistle it', which wasn't in any case about the *Tractatus*), one might be tempted to begin one's reading with the expectation of finding Wittgenstein contradicting himself, or, at the least, trying to talk a great deal about that which he had said could not be talked about. However, should one not first, at any rate, *attempt* to take Wittgenstein at his word? I suggest so.

Irresolute readings of the *Tractatus* all begin by failing to see that one is not obliged to understand Tractarian objects in a realist sense. In failing in this way such readers become involved in a task of trying to marry this misapprehended realist commitment to Wittgenstein's closing remark; such readers have to provide some way of accounting for the realism they insist is in the text and Wittgenstein's explicit insistence that the propositions are *unsinnig*. These readers do so, as does Hutto, by being irresolute in the face of 6.54 and claiming that while, yes, Wittgenstein did take his remarks to be *unsinnig*, he also thought that they showed or gestured at something.

I submit, therefore, that Hutto has failed to understand the nature of remarks such as 2.021. This leads to him misinterpret both *TL-P* and resolute readings of *TL-P*. I suggest that this is a failure of his owing to *prejudicial* readings of both *TL-P* and the writings of various resolute readers about whom he has written. Resolute readers, in principle, try to read *TL-P* without such prejudice; if there is a core commitment to the resolute programme of reading *TL-P*, it is this.

3 To Conclude...

the *truth* of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved. And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in the fact that it **shows how little has been done** when these problems have been **solved**.

(*TL-P*, preface)

In the final paragraph of the preface Wittgenstein again returns to talk about the problems of philosophy, introduced earlier in the preface. Things become clearer here if one keeps in mind what Wittgenstein had written six brief paragraphs earlier in the preface. The problems, as we saw, were of our (philosophers') own making. This is why solving these problems achieves so little, or why *TL-P* shows that so 'little has been done' in solving them. We haven't gone *anywhere* or gained *anything* in solving these problems; we

have, rather, shed our attachment to a particularly alluring, though thought-constraining, myth or picture.¹²

Wittgenstein's propositions seem to have sense for us inasmuch as, read aright, they serve to offer us a way out (a ladder to climb up and out) of the pothole of our (philosophers') own making. The propositions of the *Tractatus* are *unsinnig* in that they stand to our language as a plan of a house drawn by M. C. Escher¹³ stands to a plan for a house which one can build and in which one can live. The former only serves as a guide to the unviability of that to which it initially seems to serve as an authentic and accurate guide. Superficial similarities between Tractarian propositions and the propositions of our everyday language should not blind one to and/or make one hesitate in understanding Wittgenstein and recognizing them as *unsinnig*. Analogously, superficial similarities between a drawing by Escher and a draughtsman's drawing of one's own home should not blind one to and/or make one hesitate in accepting that in trying to build and live in a house as drawn by Escher one would achieve no more than the realization that one cannot build or live in such a 'house', that Escher's drawing was not a *plan* at all. Both Wittgenstein's propositions and Escher's drawings are, when looked at closely, *unsinnig*.

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Notes

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- 1 This is a slightly odd claim, given that Wittgenstein, in an October/November 1919 letter to von Ficker (the, at that time, prospective publisher of the German edition) said that the preface and the end of the book were the key to understanding it. The letter is reprinted in Nedo and Ranchetti, 1983: p. 147.
- 2 Accusing Hutto of unsupported speculation hereabouts might seem somewhat harsh. However, consider the following from p. 586 of his reply: 'So to reiterate: the important interpretative question is why did Wittgenstein think, at the time of penning 6.54, that the elucidations of the *Tractatus* were nonsensical, disposable and yet conquerable in some way? In addressing this question we must *leave aside the question of what Wittgenstein had actually achieved in favour of conjectures about what he thought he had achieved* (or failed to achieve)' (Hutto, 'Misreadings, Clarifications and Reminders: A Reply to Hutchinson and Read', p. 586, my italics).
- 3 Those who wish to follow up on my remarks here might begin with the following MS entries: WA 1.152.4 and WA 2.245.1-2.
- 4 This makes some of the metaphors and analogies that are found throughout Wittgenstein's work take on a less flamboyant/eccentric appearance. It serves to

- bring forth the rationale for the talk of ‘knowing one’s way about’, ‘showing the fly the way out of the fly bottle’, etc.
- 5 On this topic, though with respect to standard readings of *PI* (what we there term elucidatory readings), see Hutchinson and Read, forthcoming, 2007.
 - 6 See *WA* 1.157.6 and *WA* 3.266.2 for further support.
 - 7 Compare here Wittgenstein’s response to Turing, regarding Hilbert’s remark about the paradise that is Cantor’s set theory (Wittgenstein, *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, (Lecture XI)); here Wittgenstein comments that he is not interested in driving Hilbert out of the paradise which Cantor has created, but rather in facilitating Hilbert’s own realization that it is not paradise after all. On such a realization, Wittgenstein notes, Hilbert would leave of his own accord. Also compare the following: ‘Imagine set theory’s having been invented by a satirist as a kind of parody on mathematics. – Later a reasonable meaning was seen in it and it was incorporated into mathematics. (For if one person [Hilbert] can see it as a paradise of mathematicians, why should not another see it as a joke?)’ *RFM* V §7.
 - 8 See Ishiguro, 1969; Rhees, 1969; McGuinness, 1981; and Goldfarb’s excellent unpublished, though widely distributed paper, ‘Names, Objects, and Realism in the *Tractatus*’ (Goldfarb, 1979). The arguments are summarized and discussed in the context of current debates in Goldfarb, 2003, which is being reprinted in Read, forthcoming.
 - 9 ‘Wittgenstein’s remarks – such as 2.021 – are, in fact, philosophical nonsense. They are nonsense in the strong sense insisted upon by resolute readers. For this reason, the offending remarks cannot be elucidations or even failed attempts at such’ (Hutto, ‘Misreadings, Clarifications and Reminders: A Reply to Hutchinson and Read’, p. 586).
 - 10 For a detailed argument in this regard see Conant, 2000, pp. 210–11, n. 80.
 - 11 Wittgenstein wrote to Russell telling him that the only redeeming feature of his introduction to *TL-P* was his elegant English prose (noting that even this was lost in the German translation). He wrote further that Russell had misunderstood him and got him wrong. Wittgenstein was adamant that Russell’s introduction should not be published with the book, and he wrote to both Russell and Ogden to this effect. He was defied. One can only assume that the publishers wished to have Russell’s name there.
 - 12 Another analogy that might serve to illuminate here is the following: untangling a ball of wool which has become tangled owing to our own carelessness and neglect is not to have made any start on the knitting of the jumper. It serves only to facilitate our commencement of the knitting: it serves to return us to the genuine starting point from which we might commence knitting. Solving problems which are self-made is not to get anything done.
 - 13 I have in mind here lithographs such as: *Relativity* (1953); *Belvedere* (1958); *Ascending and Descending* (1960); and *Waterfall* (1961).

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