

DISCUSSION

A No-Theory?: Against Hutto on Wittgenstein

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This ambitious book aims to carve out in greater detail than has hitherto been attempted by anyone the relatively new space that its sub-title intimates. The book is ambitious and polemical, including against this reviewer's work; this review will at times – responding to Hutto's way of setting out the debate – be somewhat lively, too.

Dan Hutto¹ wishes to assert both that the *Tractatus* does not present a philosophical theory and that he does not wish to be identified with 'the therapeutic view', by which he refers to the Conant-Diamond etc. account of certain features of the *Tractatus* and also of Wittgenstein's later work. The continuity in Wittgenstein's thought can be seen, according to Hutto, in the lack of theory which is evidenced throughout Wittgenstein's work. In particular, the key to understanding what sort of philosophical activity Wittgenstein was advocating in the *Tractatus*, is, says Hutto, to be sought in Wittgenstein's conception of logic.

Hutto hopes to end up with a different view than the 'view' of Conant and Diamond on all this. But does he succeed in understanding the latter? Does he in practice consider it seriously enough as a candidate interpretation of the text?

He clearly does not think that the 'propositions' of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical or meaningless, as he tells us what they mean. For

1. Dan Hutto, *Wittgenstein and the end of philosophy: Neither theory nor therapy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. pp. xii + 261, ISBN 0-333-91880-0. A full reply to this discussion note can be found in the postscript to the second edition of *Wittgenstein and the End of Philosophy*, which is in press and should be available in paperback in spring 2006. The new postscript also responds to other critiques found in Read. "Throwing Away the Bedrock", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 105:1, September 2004, pp. 81–98; and Hutchinson and Read. "An Elucidatory Interpretation of Wittgenstein's Tractatus: A Critique of Daniel D. Hutto's and Marie McGinn's Reading of Tractatus 6.54", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14:1, January 2006.

example, of §2.0131 he says: “*What this means* is that anything spatial in nature can be imagined as existing anywhere within space;” (Ch.2 p. 53, my emphasis). And indeed, although this is not spelled out, it becomes clear that Hutto takes Wittgenstein’s conception of both philosophy and elucidation to differ pretty radically from Diamond and Conant’s.

A major point of disagreement between the Conant’s reading and Hutto’s concerns the ‘limit of thought’. When explaining the sign vs. symbol distinction, Hutto analogises it to making a model from Lego: “the physical shapes of these internally limit how they might go together.” (Ch.2, p. 67) He continues:

Our judgements are similarly limited by the very chemistry of thought . . . This is why sense is revealed through our successful applications, whereas nonsense is the product of malformed attempts at judgement.

Still, we might hope to articulate what determines the boundaries of sense and nonsense.

So it is clear, as early as Chapter 2, that Hutto sees Wittgenstein as attempting to categorise sense and nonsense through a compositional account of thought (and therefore, presumably, language). The premise is that there is some internal ‘shape’ to the different logical ‘thought elements’ (sic). We are *limited*, for Hutto, in what we can think, and the result of a defective judgement is nonsense. “Logic alone, which says nothing, is the only genuinely *necessary* limit of possibility in both thought and reality.” (Ch.2 p. 80) So what goes missing from Hutto’s account, though it would follow pretty directly from taking seriously the “which says nothing” in the sentence above, is the strikingly libertarian (though quite non-revisionist) ‘message’ of the *Tractatus*: to think of thought as limited or defective, to think that nonsense results from a violation of logical categories, is not to think (of) anything at all.

Hutto believes he escapes the charge of introducing theory at this point, by appealing to the say vs. show distinction: the limits of thought cannot be talked about, only ‘revealed’. This is to use a very broad notion of ‘showing’ and one which cannot be found in the *Tractatus*, (where the distinction is introduced solely as a distinction within the class of meaningful propositions). And, bearing Hutto’s avowed anti-theoretical commitment in mind, it is hard to see what to make of remarks of his such as: “[W]hat makes sense and what does not is . . . written into the very nature of the things. For

Wittgenstein, the ‘rules’ of grammar and syntax run deep; they concern only essential possibilities that cannot be violated.” And: “[L]ogico-syntactic rules for permissible combinations inherently mirror the logical form of the world and permit us to make sense of it” (Ch.2, p. 69). This sounds like theory/metaphysics to me. But not to Hutto, because, according to him, these ‘rules’ cannot be codified or discovered, they can only be *revealed*, and through particular *occasions* of use.

This seems to me merely a shuffle, a disguised ‘chickening out’. Whether it is or not will depend crucially on what terms like “logical form” and indeed “logic” meant for Wittgenstein, and what he thought the purpose was of analysis. The purpose of analysis, on the resolute/therapeutic reading, is *not* to ‘reveal the unspeakable essence of the world’ – there is no such thing as an ‘unspeakable essence’. The purpose of analysis, for Wittgenstein, was to facilitate the resolving of cases of indeterminacy in our philosophical utterances, in order to show us that the use to which we believe we have put such putative propositions is not a genuine use after all. And it was to this end that Wittgenstein introduced the sign vs. symbol distinction.

Similarly, the purpose of a logical notation for Wittgenstein was that merely of an analytic tool with which to achieve a desired (philosophical, ‘therapeutic’) result. I believe that the arguments that Conant and Kremer have put forward in this area are both vigorous and persuasive. On their view, Wittgenstein did not continue and improve on Russell’s conception of logic (Recall that he identified it, remarkably, with “the old logic”!). But Hutto disagrees: “Part of the novelty and ingenuity of [Wittgenstein’s] early philosophy was to take Russell’s method a step further, by challenging the naive representational view of logic itself.” (Ch. 1, p. 44) Russell was an example for Wittgenstein not of someone who simply was not clever enough to work out how to avoid his paradox, or who stopped one stage too soon on the philosophical dialectic. He was fundamentally misguided, in his philosophy.

Hutto himself, meanwhile, makes two assumptions, which seem, but only *seem*, to distinguish his Wittgenstein radically from such a misguided Russell. First, he helps himself to a narrow reading of “theory” such that a would-be theory is only a theory if it produces testable hypotheses and law-like propositions. This makes it easier for him to appear not to have a theory, himself. And secondly and more importantly, as sketched above, he holds that thought is limited, by

logic, ‘internally’, and that that is why philosophy *must* “leave everything as it is”. On this view there is something we *cannot* do: think beyond the limit. But on this picture, there is yet a ‘beyond’, which logic demarcates from what we can do. This is troubling. Furthermore, what status does Hutto give to such remarks? He gives no indication that we are not to try and read his sentences on the limits of thought and the ‘bounds of sense’ as themselves meaningful. Philosophy/logic is not an empirical science. But we are given theories of logic by philosophers, e.g. Russell, and Hutto accepts that as a theory. Surely to claim that the *Tractatus* offers us a way of categorising sense from nonsense, thought from illogical thought, depiction from representation, *is* to offer a theory. It is not clear that appeal to the particular / the occasion-al is going to help leach the ‘theoryness’ out of such theories, in such a case. Hutto, in my view unwisely, fails to borrow from the *Tractatus* its most crucial feature: the questioning of the meaningfulness of one’s own ‘propositions’. Without this borrowing, his does seem after all a no-no-theory, rather than an account which offers “neither theory nor therapy”. Thus I think that Hutto does not actually manage, as he plainly wishes to do, to transcend the theory vs. therapy ‘binary’.

The possibility that Hutto misses is of Wittgenstein being up to something in the *Tractatus* and beyond that is not the purveying of any kind of stance on the “philosophical issues” (p. 220) that Hutto alleges were Wittgenstein’s preoccupation throughout his career. For instance, and crucially, it must be an error of mythic depth and import to take the resolute reading of Wittgenstein to adhere to the following view: “There is only one kind of nonsense”. Why? Because that would involve taking Wittgenstein to adhere to a view. Whereas ‘therapeutic readers’ of Wittgenstein ascribe to him no controversial views/theses/opinions (following *PI* 128, and the remarks in *TL-P* on philosophy as an *activity*).

It is startlingly obvious (at least to those who have read Diamond’s epochal “Throwing away the ladder” with any understanding) how pitifully incoherent and useless such a view would be: irresolute readers must think very little of the philosophical abilities of people like Diamond and me, to ascribe such views to us. Saying that “There is only one kind of nonsense” quite obviously is directly analogous to saying that “There is only logical necessity” (*TL-P* 6.375), etc. I.e. It is a *paradigm case* of a remark that has to be ‘thrown away’, or *overcome* (I note in passing that on the occasions when Hutto discusses

TL-P 6.375, most notably on p. 81, he fails even to consider Diamond's reading of it. This seems a pretty decisive indication that Hutto just has not seriously engaged with the different *mode* of reading the TL-P proposed by 'resolutists'). If resolute readers were to hold onto 'the austere view' of nonsense doggedly as a view, they (we) would be failing in a quite pitiful fashion to follow through the methodology of Wittgenstein as Diamond and Conant expound it.

So: resolute readers do not aim to 'define' nonsense at all. What then of the idea that nonsense is nothing but garden-variety gibberish? Is that something that resolute readers no longer hold?

I would like to suggest that is not that 'resolutists' have abandoned that 'claim'; rather, it better never have been a *claim* in the first place. Again, it is crucial to understand, as is explicit in Conant's major essay "Must we show what we cannot say?", that what Conant and Diamond (and Hutto!) *themselves* write actually must have the kind of status that they have attribute to the *Tractatus's* 'propositions'.

The 'austere view' of nonsense does not rule out anything. It rules out only nonsense; which is to say, nothing (because nonsense is just nothing) (except if and when the word is being used otherwise!). The illusion of an external point of view from which one might make claims about what nonsense really is or about many of the other things that philosophers typically think they can do is a very deep one. It is an illusion which had better not be entrenched by absurd enunciations of views about the 'real nature' of nonsense.

So, when on p. 93, Hutto speaks of Diamond et al. championing "a sharp definition of nonsense" he is not connecting with what 'resolutists' actually think. Diamond et al. do not aim to 'define' nonsense at all. Hutto in practice reads the therapists' view of the *TLP* as being one of a theory that deliberately defeats itself. That is *not* our view.² We therapeutic readers do not say that *Tractatus* self-refutes, and that this has to be taken seriously. We say, rather, that the

2. On a related – and critical – point: Hutto asks on p. 94, "But if all nonsense is really on a par . . . then how can uttering one bit of it be more attractive than uttering another?" But that is a fairly easy question to answer (bearing in mind throughout the proviso in the text above to the effect that 'resolutists' do *not* have a *view* that all nonsense Really Is on a par). See for example the excerpt from the MacDonald lecture notes from Wittgenstein that Diamond has made famous, about pain, and the psychological attractiveness of one way of talking about it as compared to another. Wittgenstein submits that "Abracadabra" and "I cannot feel his pain" are worth describing, for present philosophical purposes, as on a level. But it is clear that the latter offers psycho-philosophical temptations that the former does not.

‘props’ of the *Tractatus* ultimately are suspended between different meanings that one would like to give them. See for instance the close of Conant’s essay in *The New Wittgenstein*, for chapter and verse on this.

Many philosophers, Hutto apparently included, find it very hard not to hear Diamond and Conant as either positivists or ineffabilists. As believing that the end of the book is something like a conclusion drawn from it that counts back against it. This wrongly assumes that there was actually an ‘it’ in the first place . . . When one understands Wittgenstein’s purposes in writing *TL-P*, one understands that the body of the book already merely shimmers and hovers, *before* one reaches the end. One way of putting this point is this: it would in a way do NO harm for the later 6s and 7 to be at the start of the book, or in the Preface even. One could even put the point, more strongly, like this: you don’t strictly need the ‘frame’ at all! When one reads the *Tractatus* with understanding of its point – which is admittedly almost impossible already, even *with* the benefit of the frame, but that is just because of how very hard philosophy is, and how very easy delusion is – when one does this, the body already succeeds in making the frame unnecessary.

Hutto might reply that I am making the unwarranted assumption that everything in the *Tractatus* is thrown away, including the material ‘on logic’. Hutto’s take on ‘early’ Wittgenstein crucially involves his developing an account wherein Wittgenstein’s views on logic (which Hutto likes) can be distinguished from his views on propositions (which Hutto doesn’t like). But it just is not clear what a concept of logic could possibly *be*, for Wittgenstein, without its being simultaneously an account of a proposition ‘in’ that logic.

Hutto nevertheless suggests that we can understand later ‘ideas’ of Wittgenstein’s, such as “form of life”, as a kind of improved re-presentation of early ‘ideas’ of Wittgenstein’s, such as “logical form”. Take the following passage, from Ch. 3 (pp. 108–9), detailing this move:

“... as [Wittgenstein’s] views about the nature of language opened up in this way the office once performed by **logical form** was assumed by **forms of life**; the latter becoming his new metaphor *for that which is the limit of all possibility and sense making*. Famously, and in direct contrast to the idea that all propositions have a common form with their unique essences expressed only by their particular logical form, we are told that, “to imagine a language

means to imagine a form of life” (*PI* §19). Considered thus, the move from logical form to forms of life was a natural, almost irresistible consequence of his growing interest in the distorting effects, not just of logical constants, but also of other forms of symbols, such as ordinary words and names. We can regard the approach in the later writings as a wider application of the proper method for treating philosophical problems, as exemplified by his method of breaking the spell cast by logical symbolism. It is against this background that he trades talk of **logic** for that of **grammar**. In his later period grammar performs the function of underwriting essence **in just the way** the combinatorial possibilities of objects were supposed to underpin the very substance or essence of the world.”

The added emphases are all mine. They are intended to throw into relief why the passage doesn’t satisfy. Hutto seems to be doing here just what Cray critiques in the Introduction to *The New Wittgenstein*; namely, turning the difference between the *TL-P* and the *PI* into little more than the substitution of one set of words for another. In effect, this commits later Wittgenstein to a new, vaguer metaphysics (of ‘grammar’ rather than of ‘essence’), and thus to a form of Anti-Realism (to a conception of the alleged ‘limits’ of thought/language as being constituted by ‘form of life’ – this will tend to yield an idealism, a relativism, or simply a positivism). These are hardly improvements. In short, against his intentions, Hutto follows Dummett and Kripke in reading Wittgenstein as ‘progressing’ from Realism to Anti-Realism. As with Hacker, the most reasonable response to Hutto’s Wittgenstein is to say: your later philosophy is if anything inferior to your early philosophy. Thus Hutto again loses sight of what is crucial for ‘resolutists’: putting oneself in a place from which one can comprehend the *advances* in Wittgenstein’s thought, from early to late.

By the way, it is potentially quite misleading to say, as Hutto does, that Wittgenstein thought in 1919 that all language functions as fact-stating discourse. Wittgenstein allows for ‘ethical language’, and for ‘elucidatory language’, as well as for tautologies etc.; he is concerned to examine the specifics of mathematical language, and of the language of scientific theories; and this list might be extended, especially on a strong reading of the text (and a reading of course that includes 5.5563). If one is looking for the improvement of Wittgenstein’s thought over time, one needs to overcome the temptation

blithely to assume that the *Tractatus* had through-and-through a crippling narrow 'diet of examples' of language.

Hutto is anxious to avoid the charge of Wittgenstein being a 'quietist' who refuses to say what he 'knows' about society / language / the world. This is another example of the inadequacy of Hutto's sense of what might be better in later Wittgenstein than in early. Compare his claim that Wittgenstein in his later writings makes fully general observations about 'the social nature of rule-following' or the diverse uses to which we put language. I hope for Wittgenstein's sake that he does not make such claims. It is not 'quietism' to deny that Wittgenstein makes, in considered presentations of his mature philosophy (and not merely in (wonderful) notes, such as ON CERTAINTY), 'general observations' which are correctly hearable as controversial theses, as facts that will *stand*, or anything similar. His remarks about the 'social nature' of rule-following are remarks in particular dialectics; they are therapeutic in purpose. The same is true about the remarks on 'the diverse use to which we put language': is there any objective standard for what is to count as 'diverse'? Obviously not. This remark is intended to deflect someone away from being captive to a picture that is causing them problems. Nothing more.

'Quietism' involves being quiet *about something*. According to my understanding of Wittgenstein, following Diamond, he is not 'passing over' anything, not being quiet 'about' anything. It is mistaken 'Wittgensteinians' who have given a contrary impression. One way they have done this is precisely by committing Wittgenstein, advertently or inadvertently, to a doctrine of a 'limit' to thought.

The question one is left with at the end of this book is whether there is any room left between theory and therapy. In this review, I have been quite critical of Hutto. I see Hutto, like Marie McGinn, as oscillating between (at worst) a position that is only verbally different from Wittgenstein's theoreticist readers (including under that heading such luminaries as Peter Hacker), and (at best) a philosophical stance that is only verbally different from that of Conant and Diamond. It is quite possible that the actual situation is considerably closer to 'best' than to 'worst'. This possibility is strengthened by the quite evident fact that Hutto does not WANT to be committed to most of what I have claimed him to be committed to, above.

In light also of the friendly criticisms *from the 'left'* that have now been essayed here-and-there, including by myself in this journal, of

the Conant/Diamond reading/methodology, and in light of what seems (see their recent contribution to the Bernhard Weiss edited collection, *Wittgenstein's Lasting Significance*) to be something of a retreat by Conant and Diamond somewhat in the direction of Sullivan, McGinn, Hutto, et al., the way I have described the landscape may be misleading. Perhaps there really is only a verbal difference on many points (though not, for sure, on all!) now between Hutto and Conant and Diamond, because both the leading resolute readers *and* the 'elucidators' (Hutto, like McGinn, likes to think of his reading as an 'elucidatory' one) have sidled toward one another: perhaps the primary struggle – the struggle where the energy is, now – is over what *kind* or *degree* of 'therapeutic' philosophy to ascribe to Wittgenstein, and to practice. In this intriguing struggle, perhaps Hutto is relatively close not only to McGinn, but also to Conant and Diamond, and further from Floyd and Goldfarb and myself.³

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