

# On the *Austere* Conception of Nonsense

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The *Tractatus* is a book that presents a dilemma to its reader. The dilemma can be described briefly in the following manner: what is written in the *Tractatus* will appear possible to understand to a careful reader. But at the end of the book, in 6.54, the author declares that “his propositions” are to be recognized as nonsensical. The reader who thinks that he has reached a reasonable understanding of the *Tractatus* is thus left with the realization that he has in fact failed in his attempts to do so. Put in an even more compact manner: although the *Tractatus* might seem possible to understand, we are not supposed to be able to, according to its author. One way of dealing with the dilemma is to try to make nonsense into something more than just plain nonsense. It can be done by amending the ordinary meaning of the term “nonsense” in such a way that understanding and gaining insight from the nonsense of the *Tractatus* does not represent any direct conflict with Wittgenstein’s statement in 6.54.

James Conant is preoccupied with criticizing this kind of solution to the *Tractatus*-dilemma, or at least that is how it seems. He has presented a reading according to which there is “only one kind of nonsense; *mere nonsense*”, and he refers to this conception of nonsense as the “*austere* conception” (Conant 2000 p.191). The claim that there is exclusively “*mere*” nonsense makes it natural to assume that Conant’s approach will result in a solution to the dilemma of a radically different character than the one outlined above. The name “*austere* conception” indicates that Wittgenstein will be taken very seriously and perhaps literally, when using the term “nonsense” in the *Tractatus*. We might also expect willingness on Conant’s side to deal with whatever consequences that may follow from this radical approach. While trying to get a grip on Conant’s interpretation, I started to suspect that such expectations would not be met. In this paper I will discuss two solutions to the dilemma: one briefly outlined in my introductory remarks and the solution presented by Conant. My main focus will be on the latter.

Conant uses the term “substantial conception of nonsense” when speaking of the first kind of solution. According to its proponents there are two types of nonsense; 1) “substantial” or “illuminating” nonsense and 2) “misleading”, “bad” or “*mere*” nonsense (ibid. pp.176-177, 191). The most important function of the first type is to serve the purpose of conveying insight into matters that cannot be spoken of with meaningful propositions according to the *Tractatus*. The second type of nonsense has no such function (Conant 2000 p.191). According to Conant, some proponents of this approach are confused about the *tractarian* distinction between “saying” and “showing”: They think the distinction should be applied not only to use of language that satisfy the criteria of meaningfulness found in the *Tractatus*, but also to “illuminating” nonsense which, according to them, *show* ineffable aspects of reality (ibid. pp. 178-179). This allows for some nonsense, viz. the propositions of the *Tractatus*, to be elucidatory via their ability to convey insight. The problem of how nonsense is able to form part of a cognitive process, leading to “the throwing away of the ladder”, will thereby be prevented from arising.

Conant presents an alternative solution based on the “*austere*” conception of nonsense. The main principle, as I understand it, is that there is only one kind of nonsense from a *logical* point of view, “*mere nonsense*”: utterances or combinations of words where no logical syntax is discernable (ibid. p.191). In view of the central role logic plays in the *Tractatus*, defining nonsense as language use where no logical syntax can be found precludes it from the realm of cognition and rationality. The *Tractatus*-dilemma is therefore especially acute to the *austere* reading; nonsense has in a radical way been excluded from what is possible to understand or gain knowledge from. Having pointed this out, I suggest that we consider the two following questions: 1. What is meant by the term “nonsense” in the *Tractatus*? 2. What status do the propositions found in the *Tractatus* have?

Proponents of the “substantial” conception of nonsense can be seen as concentrating on the first question: Their solution to the dilemma is given under the assumption that Wittgenstein in 6.54 is referring to the whole of *Tractatus* - all of its propositions are declared nonsensical (give or take the Preface). This demands an adjustment of the meaning of “nonsense” in order to avoid the dilemma; hence they focus on the question of what is meant by this term by Wittgenstein. I will now try to make it clear how Conant’s solution can be seen as focusing on the second question listed above. It will now be of use to be reminded of what Wittgenstein says in 6.54:

“My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.” (Wittgenstein 1986)<sup>1</sup>

Interpreting this remark as Wittgenstein declaring that all the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical is a mistake according to Conant - Wittgenstein is only referring to some of its propositions, (Conant 2000 p.216). Conant presents guidelines as to how we can decide to which category a remark belongs: The main principle is found in a distinction between the remarks that form “the frame of the work” and those that belong to “the body of the work”. The former type has the role of “preparing the way” for the remarks that form part of “the body of the work” (ibid.). The latter type of remarks function elucidatory in that they are to be recognized as nonsensical, and are what Wittgenstein is referring to as “nonsensical” in 6.54, according to Conant. It is important to note that deciding to which category a remark belongs cannot be based on any intrinsic properties of the remark itself. Conant claims that it will depend on “the kind of sense a reader of the text will [...] make of it” and on the “sort(s) of aspect it presents” to a reader in such a way that it “will depend on *her* – on the use(s) to which she is drawn to put it in the course of her ascent [up the ladder].” (ibid. p. 217).

In the solution offered by Conant, the propositions of the *Tractatus* are thus divided into different categories.

<sup>1</sup> I have amended C.K. Ogden’s translation since it ignores the difference between “unsinnig” and “sinnlos” in this remark.

He explicitly tells us that understanding some of the remarks of the *Tractatus* as *sinnvoll* is a presupposition for achieving the elucidatory purpose of the work as a whole. Only in so far as we can understand the "instructions" offered by the remarks that belong to the frame of the work, are we able to reach the philosophical goal illustrated by the metaphor of the ladder in 6.54 (ibid. p.216). It should now be clear that Conant can be seen as focusing on the second question that was introduced earlier: What status do the propositions found in the *Tractatus* have? If we connect this question to the *Tractatus*-dilemma, we could say that instead of making distinctions within nonsense, Conant introduces distinctions within the remarks of the book. Naturally, the question of what Wittgenstein means by "nonsense" is also central to his discussion. Briefly, his answer goes as follows: By "nonsense" Wittgenstein means language use where "no method of symbolizing has yet been conferred upon a string of signs". It is implied in this formulation that we have not given any meaning to an utterance or to some of its parts (Conant 2002 pp. 403-4).

Now, I suggested that Conant makes distinctions within the propositions of the book *instead* of making them within nonsense. It is however not at all clear that this is an adequate way of putting it: We have learned that the arbiter of what kind of role a proposition has in the *Tractatus*, according to Conant, is the reader. Decisions on the status of propositions in the *Tractatus* appear to be an individual matter – what is nonsense to me might not be nonsense to you. The reason why we should differ, as I understand it, is connected to the difference in degree or character of the philosophical confusions we are suffering from. In a pre-tractarian stage we will be under different illusions that the *Tractatus* is aiming at liberating us from (Conant 2000 p.196-197). As a consequence, answers to the question of which propositions serve an elucidatory role will vary from reader to reader. Let's look at a passage from Conant's text:

"[...] the *Tractatus* is not concerned to argue that there are no ways to distinguish between kinds of nonsense – or even that there is no distinction to be drawn in the neighborhood of the distinction sought by the proponent of the substantial conception (i.e. one which marks off cases of "philosophical" nonsense from (other) cases of mere nonsense – but only that there are no *logically* distinct kinds of nonsense [...]. The coherence of the entire procedure of the work, indeed, rests upon the assumption that there *is* a distinction to be drawn [...] the *Tractatus* takes it to turn on *psychologically* distinct kinds of nonsense."(ibid. p. 209)

It is evident here that according to Conant there are in fact distinctions to be drawn within nonsense. He mentions "philosophical" as opposed "to (other) cases of mere nonsense" and claims that what makes his reading different from the "substantial" conception of nonsense is that there are "psychologically distinct kinds of nonsense", but not "*logically* distinct" kinds. We must also look at another passage:

"Question: which sentences are (to be recognized) as nonsensical? Answer: those that elucidate [...] Not every sentence of the work is (to be recognized) as nonsense. For not every sentence serves as an elucidation."(ibid. p. 216)

When these passages are seen together, we may conclude that what distinguishes "philosophical" nonsense from other kinds of nonsense, within the category of "mere" nonsense, is that it serves an elucidatory purpose. It should be clear from the passages above, that if asked whether all nonsensical use of language qualify as

elucidatory, Conant's answer would be negative: there's potentially "elucidatory" nonsense and there's complete nonsense - without the potential to play any elucidatory role. Let's take a new look at the *Tractatus*-dilemma.

My starting-point consisted of two different solutions to the dilemma of 6.54 in the *Tractatus*. The first solution, based on the "substantial" conception of nonsense, tried to escape the problem of how we appear to understand the sentences of the *Tractatus*, whilst the author tells us that they are nonsensical, by introducing different kinds of nonsense. The solution presented by Conant was on the other hand introduced, as an approach according to which there are no distinctions to be made within nonsense and hence no help to find in adjustments of the meaning of the term itself. Conant seemed instead to turn to a division of the sentences of the *Tractatus*, so that it would be legitimate to understand some of them, but in accordance with 6.54 to recognize others as nonsensical. As it turned out however, Conant makes use not only of distinctions within the remarks of the *Tractatus*; distinctions within nonsense are also part of his solution to the dilemma. A difference between the two solutions is instead found *in the way* some nonsense serve an elucidatory purpose – not in the reliance on distinctions between types of nonsense. According to the "substantial" conception, elucidatory nonsense *shows* ineffable aspects of reality that may help us gain the insight necessary to "see the world rightly". According to the "austere" reading the very recognition that certain cases of language use result in nonsense is the aim of elucidation in the *Tractatus* (ibid. p. 198). We must however add that this applies only to "philosophical" cases of "mere" nonsense. Another difference from the substantial conception is the introduction of distinctions within the remarks of the *Tractatus*; Conant claims that we must take some of the remarks as "sinnvoll". Our impression that we have understood at least some of the remarks becomes unproblematic since we are supposed to be able to understand them. Hence a suitable conclusion to my discussion would be to say that the name "austere conception of nonsense" does not reflect an approach to the dilemma according to which there are no distinctions to be drawn within nonsense. I wish, however, to add two comments to the picture we have reached. They concern aspects of Conant's solution to the dilemma that might conceal a tension in the guidelines he offers to an understanding of the work.

We have been told that whether a remark in the *Tractatus* is found to be nonsensical or not depends on the role it has in the work for a particular reader. If the reader realizes that it is nonsensical it has served an elucidatory purpose, helping the reader in the ascent up the ladder. This in turn is related to facts concerning the character of the philosophical confusion the reader is entangled in. In giving this account Conant is opposing interpreters who think that it is possible to find out by examining a string of words whether it is a specimen of nonsense or not. He claims that it is a misunderstanding to presuppose "that certain strings of signs are intrinsically either cases of *Unsinn* or cases of *Sinn*" and that questions of nonsensicality "depend on us" (ibid. p. 216). He further claims that "[t]here can be no fixed answers to the question of what kind of work a given remark within the text accomplishes" (ibid.). At the same time, however, he provides examples of remarks that belong to "the frame of the work" and must be recognized as *sinnvoll* (ibid. Conant mentions the Preface, §§ 3.32-3.326, 4-4.003, 4.111-4.112 and 6.53-6.54.). One would expect that this is the sort of interpretative move that cannot be made according to his reading; Conant's acting as the *voice-over* of the *Tractatus* stands in contrast to his own account of how questions

about the status of particular remarks must be settled by the individual reader of the work.

My second comment concerns the claim that there are *psychological* distinctions to be made within nonsense according to the *Tractatus*, while no *logical* distinctions are possible to make. I think it is reasonable to connect this claim to Conant's account of how it depends on *us* whether we recognize a remark in the text as nonsensical and that there will, as a consequence, be variation between different readers on these matters. What will stop one reader from realizing that a remark is nonsensical, as opposed to another, will be the specific misunderstandings of "the logic of our language" he is suffering from. A successful reader will eventually realize *which* of the remarks of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is referring to in 6.54, and that they are nonsensical. The aim of Wittgenstein's philosophical project will then be achieved. Since the only kind of distinctions within "mere" nonsense Conant allows for are psychological distinctions, we must assume that whether a remark in the *Tractatus* (which is part of "the body of the work") is recognized as nonsense or not, depends on psychological facts about the reader and on the psychological effects a remark has on him.

It is of importance here that Conant emphasizes that the early Wittgenstein adheres to Frege's three principles from *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, the first of which reads: "always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective" (Frege 1989 p.X, Conant 2000 pp.180, 189). Part of the assumption of a strong continuity between the two philosophers in this respect is that the notion of a thought in a *strict logical sense* is seen as operative in the *Tractatus* (ibid. pp. 193-4). These factors lead to a wide gap between what is psychological and what is logical/cognitive. Conant's claim that only nonsensical remarks are potentially elucidatory commits him to an account of "elucidation" as belonging to the psychological realm. It is therefore reasonable to describe how elucidation functions in the *Tractatus* according to Conant in the following way: The starting-point is a person in a certain psychological state which is caused by exposure to philosophical texts and to the nonsensical remarks of the *Tractatus*. These remarks are of a psychologically distinct kind and trigger a process within the reader; he goes through a certain "experience" (ibid. p.197) resulting in the removal of the confused state as he realizes that some of the remarks in the book are nonsensical. Only after having gone through this "experience" is the attainment of a certain intellectual state possible, that of "seeing the world rightly" (6.54). Conant argues that philosophy, as practiced in the *Tractatus*, depends on the reader going through this psychological process of elucidation (ibid. pp.196-197). This might appear to be in order in view of e.g. 4.112: "A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations." But it becomes difficult to account for remarks that bespeak a very different conception of philosophy, such as 4.1121:

"Psychology is no nearer related to philosophy, than is any other natural science."

## References

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