


Nonsense and the Context Principle in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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INCE THE 1990S THE DISCUSSION ON THE INTERPRETATION of the *Tractatus* has been centred on the dispute between the so-called standard reading and the novel resolute one. This dispute places in opposition two ways of understanding the very philosophical project that Wittgenstein advances in the book and, particularly, two ways of understanding his words in the penultimate proposition of the book: “my propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical” (TLP 6.54). According to Peter Hacker, “the nonsense of the pseudo-propositions of philosophy, in particular of the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, differs from the nonsense of ‘A is a frabble’, for it is held to be an attempt to say what cannot be said but only shown. In this sense it can be said to be ‘illuminating nonsense’” (Hacker 2001, p. 117). This way of understanding the propositions of the *Tractatus* only makes sense against the background of some distinctions introduced by Hacker. Unlike senseless propositions, nonsensical pseudo-propositions allegedly violate the rules of the logical syntax of language. But this violation is not always patent. It can be patent, as in the “question of whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful” (TLP 4.003), but it can also be latent, as is the case in most philosophical propositions. Hence the distinction between overt and covert nonsense. Among covert nonsense, one must also distinguish, according to Hacker, between misleading and illuminating nonsense. The latter “will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover, it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy” (Hacker 1986, pp. 18–19). Although the reader must recognize these propositions as nonsense and must throw the ladder away after she has climbed it, she is still in possession of some “ineffable

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Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin
Vol. 11, No. 23, Dec. 2022, pp. 117-136
ISSN: 2254-0601 | [EN] | **ARTÍCULO**

truths.”

In opposition to the standard reading, James Conant and Cora Diamond proposed a different interpretation of the very notion of nonsense. This reading intends to take seriously what is said in 6.54, i.e., that the propositions of the *Tractatus*, being mere nonsense, do try to say what cannot be said. According to them, even the distinction between saying and showing must be thrown away. Conant says that the ascription to the *Tractatus* of a doctrine according to which nonsense can make manifest “ineffable truths” results from not taking seriously Wittgenstein’s exhortation to throw the ladder away once one has climbed it. The question “What, then, is one left with once one has thrown away the ladder?” has a definite answer: “Nothing.” And Conant adds: “The idea that we are left with nothing must also be thrown away (...) Then the answer to the question ‘What are we left with once we have thrown away the ladder?’ is: our own feeling of deprivation” (Conant 1990, p. 337). According to Diamond, not taking Wittgenstein’s exhortation seriously, as ineffable readers do, is to chicken out¹.

The exhortation in 6.54 only makes sense if the reader understands not the propositions in the book, but its author. By saying that his propositions serve as elucidations in that anyone who understands him eventually recognizes them as nonsense, Wittgenstein is calling our attention to the fact that we cannot understand the pseudo-propositions, but we can understand the author and the activity in which he is engaged, i.e., showing that we are under the illusion of thinking that we want to say something, when, in fact, we neither want to nor can mean anything. The book succeeds in its aim if, when reading it, “first I grasp that there is something which *must* be; then I see that it cannot be said; then I grasp that if it can’t be said it can’t be thought (that the limits of language are the limits of thought); and then, finally, when I reach the top of the ladder, I grasp that there has been no ‘it’ in my grasp all along (that that which I cannot

¹ Diamond characterizes this attitude by making an explicit reference to Hacker: “To chicken out is to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it. (...) It involves holding that the things we speak about are members of this or that logical category, really and truly, only we cannot say so. *That* they are is represented in language in another way. The sentences of the *Tractatus* itself are taken to convey this form of realism, although the doctrine itself requires that any attempt to state it as a doctrine must fail. There are several characteristic signs of this chickening out. The first is the idea of a realm of necessities underlying our capacity to make sense as we do. Hacker explicitly ascribes to Wittgenstein the view that there are ontological categories, objectively fixed and independent of language, which the logical syntax of language is then required to mirror” (Diamond, 2001, p. 194).

think I cannot ‘grasp’ either)” (Conant 2000, p. 196). Even though it is not possible to understand the propositions in the book, the reader has the illusion of understanding them. The method of the *Tractatus* can be summarized in the following terms: “the only procedure that will prove genuinely elucidatory is one that attempts to enter into the philosopher’s illusion of understanding and explode it from within” (Conant 1990, p. 346). The distinction between understanding the propositions in the book (which, according to Conant, we are not asked to do) and understanding its author (which we are asked to do) is introduced in order to give support to this thesis. In order to understand the author, one must enter imaginatively into the point of view from which a piece of nonsense appears to say something.

While Hacker maintained in his early writings that there is a distinction between overt and covert nonsense and that the propositions of the *Tractatus* belong to the latter category, the so-called new Wittgensteinians defend that there is only one concept of nonsense: mere nonsense. This leads to a completely different understanding of the philosophical project of the early Wittgenstein: “The *Tractatus* does not delimit profound but unstatable truths—it aspires to unmask the pseudoprofundity of the ‘truths’ of philosophy” (Conant 1990, p. 341). The distinctions introduced by Hacker eventually lead, according to Conant, to a distinction between mere nonsense and substantial nonsense. In contrast to this conception, according to which some nonsense results from the violation of the logical syntax due to the illegitimate combination of meaningful words, Conant reads 5.4733 in a way that favors an austere conception of nonsense:

Frege says that any legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense. And I say that any possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and, if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents. (TLP 5.4733)

The example introduced by Wittgenstein in 5.4733 (“Socrates is identical”) at first sight seems to favor a substantial conception of nonsense, for it seems to be a kind of nonsense that employs the identity sign as a concept. However, one must note that Wittgenstein writes: “if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents.” The “only” here means that a piece of nonsense that apparently results from an illegitimate combination of meaningful signs must be recognized as mere nonsense, comparable to an inarticulate sound. Nonsense does not result from employing

a symbol wrongly, for there is nothing that can be recognized as a symbol; nonsense results from failing to make a determination of meaning, that is, from the fact that “we have not given meaning to some of its constituent parts. (Even though we believe we did).” This leads to the following conclusion regarding the role of logical language syntax in the *Tractatus*:

Logical syntax is concerned neither with the proscription on combinations of signs nor with the proscription on combinations of symbols. It is not concerned with the proscription of combinations of signs, because Tractarian logical syntax does not treat of (mere) *signs*; it treats of symbols—and a symbol only has life in the context of a significant proposition. It is not concerned with the *proscription* of combinations of symbols, because there is nothing to proscribe. (Conant 2001, pp. 41–42)

Thus, logical syntax is not a combinatorial theory, whose task is to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate combinations of symbols, for there are no illegitimate combinations of symbols. Wittgenstein makes this point in a straightforward way by saying that “we cannot give a sign the wrong sense” (TLP 5.4732) and that “any possible proposition is legitimately constructed” (TLP 5.4733).

According to the resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was committed to an austere conception of nonsense. This conception does not admit different kinds of nonsense, e.g., substantial nonsense and mere nonsense. The first is “the result of putting an item of one logical category in the place where an item of another category belongs” (Conant 2001, p. 44). The latter is “a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax” (Conant 2000, p. 191). Wittgenstein’s austere conception admits only one kind of nonsense: mere nonsense. Conant summarizes this conception in the following passage:

Building on Frege’s own methodological practice, the *Tractatus* argues that in the case of a piece of nonsense—that is, in the absence of the provision of a context of *sinnvollen Gebrauch*: a possible logical segmentation of the *Satz*—we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a proposition; for, *ex hypothesi* there are no working parts of the proposition. One can identify the contribution the senses of the parts of a proposition make to the sense of the whole only if the whole has a sense—if it stands in some identifiable location with respect to the other occupants of logical space. According to the *Tractatus*, there are [no examples of putting a proper name where a concept word belongs], for if one can properly make out that what belongs in that place

is a concept word, then that is a sufficient condition for treating whatever is in that place as a concept word. There isn't anything, on the conception of *Unsinn* which the *Tractatus* advances, which corresponds to a proposition's failing to make sense because of the meaning which the parts already have taken in isolation. On the Tractarian conception, there is only one way a sentence can be *Unsinn*: by its failing to symbolize. (Conant 2000, pp. 194–195)

Frege's methodological practice mentioned by Conant at the beginning of the quotation has to do with the famous principle Frege introduced in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*: "It is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning" (Frege 1960, p. 73). The recourse to the so-called context principle in order to justify the austere view of nonsense may seem unjustified, for Wittgenstein does not (seem to) invoke the principle when he mentions the notion of nonsense. Nevertheless, as Silver Bronzo (2015, pp. 293–294) has shown, there are at least three pieces of textual evidence from the pre-Tractarian writings which show that the ideas expressed in 5.473s were elaborated in close connection with those expressed in 3.3s:

1) In the Prototractatus, the remarks that correspond to TLP 5.473–5.4733 (where Wittgenstein presents his views about nonsense) precede immediately those that correspond roughly to TLP 3.32–3.328 (where Wittgenstein explains the sign/symbol distinction).

2) In the 1914–16 Notebooks, the remarks that are incorporated in TLP 5.473 and 5.47433 are explicitly connected to the critique of the Theory of Types, which is discussed in 3.33s.

3) In the Notes Dictated to Moore, one finds a discussion of the nature of nonsense which anticipates the ideas formulated in TLP 5.473–5.4733, and this discussion is explicitly connected to the critique of the Theory of Types.

Bronzo takes this as strong textual evidence that "Wittgenstein's views about the nature of nonsense, the sign/symbol distinction, and the Theory of Types were developed in close connection with one another" (Bronzo 2015, p. 294). Even standard readers seem to accept this connection between the context principle and nonsense. Hans-Johann Glock (2004, pp. 225–226) expresses this

connection in the following argument:

P1 A word (name) has meaning only in the context of a proposition.

P2 A proposition is a sentence with a sense.

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

Glock accepts that the *Tractatus* is committed to P2: a proposition is, by definition, a propositional sign with a sense, one that has been projected onto reality. Henceforth, the argument is valid. More importantly, he acknowledges that from (C) it follows that no part of “Socrates is identical” has a meaning, since it does not have a sense. Nevertheless, he considers that the restriction to a negative conception of nonsense, according to which nonsense results only from the lack of meaning, is unjustified, for it does not do justice to Wittgenstein’s adherence to the idea that the meaning and the understanding of the whole sentence depend on the meaning and the understanding of the parts of the proposition: “in the *Tractatus* we already find ideas that are at odds with the restrictive principle, namely its compositionality” (Glock 2024, p. 228). In my opinion, this interpretation has been convincingly refuted by resolute readers such as Bronzo and Dain². My purpose in this paper is to argue for a strong version of the austere view of nonsense. On the one hand, instead of admitting, as Glock does, that no part of a piece of nonsense has a meaning, since no piece of nonsense has a sense, we need to go further and say that, since parts have meaning only in the context of a proposition, one cannot strictly speaking recognize parts in a piece of nonsense. Let us remember Conant’s words quoted above: “we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a proposition” (Conant 2000, p. 194). On the other hand, if the logical parts have form and content, in a piece of nonsense it is not possible to recognize neither the meaning nor the logical syntax of its parts. In order to see why this is a strong version of the austere view of nonsense, we need to distinguish stronger and weaker versions, which differ with respect to their commitments about the nature of nonsense:

Weak version of the austere view. Nonsense can only arise from a lack of

² See Bronzo (2015) and Dain (2006) and (2008).

meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. But the parts of a piece of nonsense can have both form (or logical syntax) and content (or semantics). Some of its expressions may have a determinate meaning, and all of its expressions may belong to determinate logical categories. (Nonsense may contain both purely formal and contentful symbols.)

Moderate version of the austere view. Nonsense can only arise from a lack of meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. The parts of a piece of nonsense cannot have content (or semantics), but they can have form (or logical syntax). None of the expressions that compose a piece of nonsense have determinate meanings, but each of them may belong to a determinate logical category. (Nonsense may contain purely formal symbols.)

Strong version of the austere view. Nonsense can only arise from a lack of meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. The parts of a piece of nonsense can have no form (or logical syntax) and no content (or semantics). The expressions that compose it have no determinate content and they do not belong to any determinate logical category. (Nonsense contains only signs, not symbols, whether contentful or purely formal.) (Bronzo 2015, pp. 283–284)

The weak version says that in “Socrates is frabble” all the words belong to determinate logical categories and the first two words may have not only form, but also content (the same content they have when they occur in significant propositions)³. The moderate version says that, even though all the words in “Socrates is frabble” lack content, they possess the same logical form that they have when they occur in significant propositions. Cora Diamond explicitly espouses this view: “the sentence ‘Socrates is identical’ is legitimately put together, in the sense in which ‘Socrates is frabble’ is, as far as its structure goes, legitimately put together. Both contain what are syntactically adjectives; all they need is for some adjectival meaning to be fixed for them” (Diamond 1996, p. 197). According to the strong version, “Socrates is frabble” has neither form nor content, although it may look like it has at least the same form as “Socrates is

³ Bronzo identifies this view in Johnston (2007) and Mezzadri (2013).

wise”⁴.

Bronzo remarks that the discussion of nonsense contained in 5.473s can be taken to show that the *Tractatus* endorses only the weak version of the austere conception of nonsense. Remember that in 5.4733, quoted above, Wittgenstein says that “any possible proposition is legitimately constructed” and that “if it has no sense, that can only be because we have failed to give a *meaning* to some of its constituents.” This seems to favor the weak version, for he does not say that we have given no meaning to all its constituent parts. Even from a resolute point of view, Wittgenstein seems to endorse the weak version, because, when discussing the example “Socrates is identical,” he implicitly assumes that the linguistic construction exhibits a determinate logical form and that its first two words possess a determinate meaning. In fact, Wittgenstein says that “the reason why ‘Socrates is identical’ means nothing is that there is no property called ‘identical’” and that it is nonsensical “because we have failed to make an arbitrary determination” (TLP 5.473) or “because we have given no meaning to the word ‘identical’ as adjective” (TLP 5.4733). It seems that only the last sign in “Socrates is identical” is meaningless. The seeming proposition is nonsensical because one and only one of its signs, even though syntactically correct, lacks a determinate meaning.

While the weak version of the austere view allows the occurrence of meaningful propositional parts outside the context of significant propositions, the moderate version allows the occurrence of syntactically recognizable parts outside the context of significant propositions. Bronzo believes that “there are good reasons for attributing to the *Tractatus* the strong version of the austere view of nonsense and a version of the context principle which is sufficiently strong to demand it” (Bronzo 2015, p. 285). However, he limits himself to arguing that the *Tractatus* is committed to the moderate version of the austere view. He stresses that the strong version requires an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s version of the context principle which “applies not only to contentful symbols, but to symbols in general, including purely formal symbols,” for “if a sign is a symbol (whether contentful or purely formal) only in the context of a significant proposition, then no sign can be a symbol (whether contentful or purely formal) in the ‘context’ of a piece of nonsense” (Bronzo 2015, p. 285). In what follows, I present an interpretation of the context

⁴ Conant says that “mere nonsense” is a “a string composed of signs in which no symbol can be perceived, and which hence has no discernible logical syntax” (Conant, 2000, p. 191).

principle which is sufficiently strong to demand the strong version of the austere view of nonsense. In my interpretation, there is no room for the distinction between a contentful and a purely formal symbol. By assuming that a symbol (including propositions) is always a sign in use, in order to understand a proposition, we must look at its projective relation to the world, i.e., not only to its syntactical form, but also to the relations that its parts establish with elements depicted⁵. We shall see that the projective relations of each part of a propositional sign with elements of the possible situation that it depicts can only be established in the context of a proposition.

Let us examine Wittgenstein's version of the context principle in 3.3: "Only a proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning" (translation modified). At first sight, this formulation seems to combine the principle Frege presented in *The Principles of Arithmetic*, published in 1884, with the well-known distinction he later introduced in "On Sense and Reference." In other words, Wittgenstein just seems to be saying that, if one combines the context principle and the distinction between sense and meaning, one should say that propositions have sense and names have meaning, even though the meaning of names is determined only in the context of a proposition. This means that Frege was wrong to think that names have sense and that propositions have meaning. Wittgenstein clearly gives priority to contextualism over compositionism. If the latter can be summarized by the idea mentioned above that the meaning and the understanding of the whole sentence depend on the meaning and the understanding of the parts of the proposition, the former, on the contrary, can be formulated as follows:

The meaning and the understanding of a sentence are *prior* to the meaning and the understanding of the parts of the sentence. *First* we understand the whole sentence, and *then* we segment it to obtain the meanings of its parts. The meaning of a word is obtained from the segmentation of the meaningful proposition, the content of which must be given

⁵ I think this idea does justice to Bronzo's "Disjunctivist Account of the Sign/Symbol Relation": "The notion of a symbol is primitive and irreducible. It can be elucidated: a symbol can be described as a *sign-in-use* or as a *sensibly-perceptible-mark-of-the-sense-of-significant-propositions*; but it cannot be reconstructed from independent conceptual ingredients. In particular, it cannot be reconstructed in terms of a prior and independent notion of 'sign' and a prior and independent notion of 'use' (...) Given the notion of a symbol, the notion of a mere sign is defined as *what merely appears to be a symbol*, and the notion of a sign *simpliciter* is defined disjunctively as *what is either a symbol* (i.e. a sign-in-use) *or a mere sign*" (Bronzo, 2015, pp. 266-267).

in advance. (Bronzo 2011, p. 87)

Contextualism and compositionality are not incompatible. There are several passages where Wittgenstein explicitly adheres to the latter. In 4.024, for instance, he states that a proposition “is understood by anyone who understands its constituents.” Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that, even though contextualism and compositionality are not incompatible, the former has a primacy over the latter. In order to understand the constituent parts of a proposition, they must be part of a significant whole.

By reading 3.31s attentively, one finds out that Wittgenstein is saying much more than it seems at first sight. He not only rejects Frege’s idea that names have sense and that propositions have meaning; he also rejects the distinction between saturated and unsaturated parts of a proposition. Even a standard reader such as Glock acknowledges that “whereas Frege distinguished between the ‘saturated’ names of objects (e.g., ‘Paris’) and the ‘unsaturated’ names of functions (e.g., ‘is the capital of France’), Wittgenstein insists that all names are unsaturated, that is, have meaning only in coordination with others” (Glock 1996, p. 87). Given that “a name means an object” (TLP 3.203) and that possibilities of occurrence in states of affairs are part of the nature of objects (TLP 2.0123), these possibilities are also the possibilities of names occurring in propositions. The logical syntax of a name expresses its combinatorial possibilities. Insofar as a name is part of a proposition it is possible to discern its combinatorial possibilities. A sign is not a name, i.e., a syntactic unit, if it is not a significant part of a proposition. Wittgenstein acknowledges his debt towards Frege and Russell by saying that “like Frege and Russell I construe a proposition as a function of the expressions contained in it” (TLP 3.318). But this acknowledgment should not prevent us from remarking that he does not think of the unity of the proposition in the same way as Frege and Russell. As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein’s early criticism of Russell’s theory of judgment is to be seen as part of an overall criticism of his approach to the problem of the unity of the proposition⁶. The idea that all names are unsaturated is equivalent to the idea that a name is a kind of propositional function, called in his *sui generis* terminology “propositional variable.” The *locus* of this idea is 3.31s:

⁶ See Segatto (2021).

I call any part of a proposition that characterizes its sense an expression (or a symbol).

(A proposition is itself an expression.)

Everything essential to their sense that propositions can have in common with one another is an expression.

An expression is the mark of a form and a content.

An expression presupposes the forms of all the propositions in which it can occur. It is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions.

It is therefore presented by means of the general form of the propositions that it characterizes.

In fact, in this form the expression will be *constant* and everything else *variable*.

Thus an expression is presented by means of a variable whose values are the propositions that contain the expression.

(In the limiting case the variable becomes a constant, the expression becomes a proposition.)

I call such a variable a “propositional variable”.

An expression has meaning only in a proposition. All variables can be construed as propositional variables.

(Even variable names.)

If we turn a constituent of a proposition into a variable, there is a class of propositions all of which are values of the resulting variable proposition. In general, this class too will be dependent on the meaning that our arbitrary conventions have given to parts of the original proposition. But if all the signs in it that have arbitrarily determined meanings are turned into variables, we shall still get a class of this kind. This one, however, is not dependent on any convention, but solely on the nature of the proposition. It corresponds to a logical form – a logical prototype. (TLP 3.31–3.315)

In order to understand the concept of “expression,” let me exemplify the procedure described in the last paragraph of the quotation⁷. Let us consider a proposition whose logical (or syntactical) form can be represented as a relation of two names: $aA\alpha$. Let us use the letters b , B and β to represent names of the same logical categories as a , A and α , respectively. Let us use the letters x , X and ξ to represent the “variables” corresponding to these categories. Remember that an expression is “any part of a proposition that characterizes its sense” and remember that it is everything “that propositions can have in common with one another.” If one takes into consideration the propositions whose logical form is $aA\alpha$ and $bA\alpha$, one could think that what these propositions have in common is

⁷ I borrow this example and its explanation from Cutler (2002), but I draw different consequences from him.

“ $A\alpha$.” Nonetheless this would be a mistake, for this is only what the two *signs* have in common, but not what the *symbols* have in common. What $aA\alpha$ and $bA\alpha$ have in common is not a mere graphic sign, but the propositional variable $xA\alpha$. The logical category corresponding to the first name in the proposition is an essential part of the proposition as a symbol. The letter x in the example expresses the possibility of substituting a name of the same logical category such as b . The expression $xA\alpha$ is what Wittgenstein calls the general form of the propositions that this expression characterizes and its values are a class of propositions that have this common characteristic mark.

The letters a , A and α are not what one is used to calling names, for if a name has meaning only in the context of a proposition and “all variables can be construed as propositional variables,” the names in the proposition $aA\alpha$ are $aX\xi$, $xA\xi$ and $xX\alpha$. A name is a kind of expression and a kind of propositional variable. This is why it is called a “variable name.” Hence the reformulation of the *sui generis* version of the context principle presented in 3.3: “An expression has meaning only in a proposition” (TLP 3.314). As I said, Wittgenstein does not think of the unity of the proposition in the same way as Frege. By rejecting the very distinction between saturated and unsaturated parts of a proposition, he conceives of the proposition as an articulation of variables. In the place of the Fregean distinction between names and propositions, on the one hand, and functions, on the other, i.e., between saturated and unsaturated entities, respectively, Wittgenstein opposes propositional functions (names being a special case) and propositions (limiting cases in which the variable becomes a constant).

This confirms the idea that contextualism and compositionality are not incompatible. It is true that the meaning of the whole sentence depends on the meaning of its parts, but one can only recognize parts where there is a sense. First, we understand a significant proposition and then we can discern the logical role that each part has in the whole. In 3.315, Wittgenstein says that “if we turn a constituent of a proposition into a variable, there is a class of propositions all of which are values of the resulting variable proposition.” This means that we *start from* a proposition and *then* we can turn one (or more) of its constituents into a variable. This also confirms the austere conception of nonsense, for we can recognize a logical form and combinatorial possibilities only if we have a meaningfully articulated whole. In other words, we cannot recognize syntactical parts in a piece of nonsense. Otherwise, we would go against the context principle, for we would be able to recognize something as a

(variable) name in a nonsensical sign. A sign can be recognized as a name (*qua* logical category) only if it is part of a significant whole.

Nonetheless, this only partially confirms the strong version of the austere view of nonsense; more specifically, it confirms the idea that the parts of a piece of nonsense can have no form (or logical syntax). We still need to see why the parts of a piece of nonsense can have no content (or semantics), more specifically why the expressions that compose it not only do not belong to any determinate logical category, but also have no determinate content. A proposition has sense “in its projective relation to the world” (TLP 3.12) and, as I said above, the projective relations of each part of a propositional sign with elements of the possible situation that it depicts can only be established in the context of a proposition. This means that “projection must not be conceived of as a piecemeal process; it should not be thought of as a process of correlating a sign (i.e., a physical fact) with an object, then another sign with another object, etc., until we finally obtain the whole proposition” (Bonino 2008, p. 335). Naming is not something we do independently of projecting the whole propositional sign in a possible situation. If “only in the context of a proposition does a name have meaning,” only by projecting a propositional sign in a possible situation can we correlate a name and an object. And we do this in a whole. We can reason *per absurdum* that “if projection were conceived of as a piecemeal process, then it would be possible to have a proposition in which every name stands for an object and yet the proposition itself does not have a sense” (Bonino 2008, p. 335). In other words, if projection were a piecemeal process, a name could have a meaning independently of the proposition having sense; if nonsense arises, that would be due to an “incorrect” combination of names. But this is exactly what Wittgenstein’s version of the context principle denies. The piecemeal conception of projection is inextricably committed to a substantial conception of nonsense, according to which nonsense is the result of a combination of intelligible components in an illegitimate way. This conception disregards the fact that the failure to give meaning to some of the propositional elements means that they are not names at all and, henceforth, the proposition is not a proposition at all.

By failing to give meaning to one of the constituents in a piece of nonsense, we have failed to give meaning to all its constituents. This is due to the fact that, as we have seen above, one cannot isolate syntactical parts in a piece of nonsense, i.e., one cannot recognize something as a (variable) name in a nonsensical sign. But this is also due to the fact that, by failing to give meaning

to one of the constituents, we cannot project the propositional sign in a possible situation, hence, none of the constituents designates. A piece of nonsense such as “Socrates is identical” is not a proposition lacking part of its sense; it is a mere sign, *what merely appears to be a symbol*, a sign with no use, where we cannot recognize a symbol (TLP 3.326). If we were to make sense of “Socrates is identical,” we would have to conceive of it as a combination of “Socrates is” and “identical.” The problem is that “identical” in “Socrates is identical” is *not* the same symbol as “identical” as it is used in “*a* is identical to *b*.” But if “is identical” is not a first-level function and does not symbolize a property, “Socrates” is not a proper name and does not really name an individual. Taken in isolation “Socrates” could mean a property such as “Vienna” in “Trieste is no Vienna.” In the particular piece of nonsense that Wittgenstein chooses as an example, one can neither recognize “identical” as a property or “Socrates” as a name.

Conant (2002, p. 451) calls attention to a possible misunderstanding of what Wittgenstein means by his comment on this example. In 5.4733, he says that “‘Socrates is identical’ says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word ‘identical’ as *adjective*”⁸. A standard reader would say that the symbol is not “in itself impermissible” because he (somehow) knows that “identical” in this context is functioning as an adjective, even though this still leaves the question of how he knows this, for the sign is nonsensical. Moreover, this understanding of Wittgenstein’s words seems to contradict what he says almost immediately above: “we cannot give a sign the wrong sense” (TLP 5.4732). The standard reader conflates a feature of the surface grammar of ordinary language and a proper *logical* category, for when Wittgenstein talks about “identical” as an adjective, “he is referring to a feature of the ‘external form’ (4.002) of certain sentences —a grammatical surface pattern— of ordinary language (a certain sort of configuration of *signs*)” (Conant 2002, p. 451)⁹. The sign “identical” has the same surface grammar of ordinary language sentences as signs that symbolize concepts. Compare the following sentences:

⁸ Here I quote the C. K. Ogden translation (Wittgenstein 2013).

⁹ Conant relates this passage to 3.323 where Wittgenstein also talks about “identical” as an adjective: “In everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification – and so belongs to different symbols – or that two words that have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way. Thus the word ‘is’ figures as the copula, as a sign for identity, and as an expression for existence; ‘exist’ figures as an intransitive verb like ‘go’, and ‘identical’ as an adjective; we speak of *something*, but also of *something’s* happening” (TLP 3.323).

- (a) Socrates and the teacher of Plato are identical.
- (b) Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle are happy.

The words “happy” and “identical” in (a) and (b) have the same surface grammar in ordinary language: “two words that have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way” (TLP 3.323). However, the propositions in which they occur have different logical forms and, hence, the words belong to different logical categories. Note that one can say that they belong to different logical categories only because they are part of meaningful propositions in which we can recognize logical parts. In order to see this more clearly, Conant invites us to consider the inferential relations (a) and (b) entertain with the following propositions:

- (a') Socrates is happy
- (b') Socrates is identical.

While the inference from (a) to (a') is felicitous, the one from (b) to (b'), even though it superficially resembles the first, is not felicitous. “Identical,” as it occurs in (b'), even though it seems to symbolize the same way as it symbolizes in (a), does not do so. It has the same surface grammar as an adjective such as “happy” and that is why Wittgenstein says that, in ordinary language, “‘identical’ [figures] as an adjective.”

Notwithstanding, this explanation does not rule out the moderate version of the austere view of nonsense. Remember that, according to Diamond, “Socrates is identical” and “Socrates is frabble” are both legitimately put together, because both contain what are syntactically adjectives. As I said above, according to the strong version, “Socrates is frabble” has neither form nor content, although it may look like it has at least the same form as “Socrates is wise.” Stephen Mulhall remarks the following:

To determine the meaning of any sub-propositional expression, we must determine the contribution it makes to the sense of the proposition in which it figures; but if a putative proposition is in fact nonsense, it has no sense or meaning; hence, we have no way of identifying its logically significant parts – from the point of view of logic, it has none, and

could have none. (Mulhall 2007, p. 3)

By logically significant parts, one should understand not only syntactical parts, but also semantically significant parts. When Wittgenstein says that “an expression is the mark of a form and a content” (TLP 3.31), the point that he is stressing is the following: one cannot even recognize a syntactical part in a proposition if one cannot at the same time recognize a semantically significant part. For example, a sign such as “Socrates” is syntactically a name only if it in fact names an individual in the context of a significant proposition. This has to do with Wittgenstein’s refusal to distinguish formal logic from transcendental logic. Remember that he says in 6.13 that “logic is transcendental.” Jean-Philippe Narboux (2009, p. 284) remarks that, differently from Kant, Wittgenstein thinks that one should not and cannot distinguish between the maximally general rules which are constitutive of all thought apart from its matter (i.e. from its possible object), that is, the constituent norms of all thought as such, and the more special rules which are constitutive of all thought insofar as it has a matter (i.e. it relates to a domain of objects), in particular the constituent norms of objectivity as a particular use of thought.

The interpretation that I proposed in this article of the relationship between the principle of context and the notion of nonsense allows us, therefore, to contest the comparison between Wittgenstein and Kant that standard readers propose. The notions of limit that the two philosophers have in mind are different. Kant does not intend to draw the limits of thought in general, but of the legitimate use of categories, that is, he does not intend to trace the limits of thought per se, but of our thinking about objects. To that extent, the transcendental illusion, as part of transcendental logic, concerns the impossibility of supersensible knowledge and therefore safeguards its intelligibility. Remember that, for Kant, the objects of special metaphysics (God, soul and world as a totality) cannot be known, but can still be thought. Wittgenstein, in contrast, intends to draw the limits of thought in general. Nonsense is therefore not intelligible, as it is not possible to transgress the limits of thought, that is, the limits of logic. To that extent, Wittgenstein would not be limiting what can be thought and said in order to allow another form of access to the objects of special metaphysics; he would be showing that everything that is beyond the limits of logic is “simply nonsense.”

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Nonsense and the Context Principle in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Since the 1990s the discussion on the interpretation of the *Tractatus* has been centered on the dispute between the so-called standard reading and the novel resolute one. This dispute opposes two ways of understanding the very philosophical project that Wittgenstein advances in the book and, particularly, two ways of understanding his words in the penultimate proposition of the book: “my propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical” (TLP 6.54). According to Peter Hacker, the nonsense of the pseudo-propositions of philosophy, in particular of the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, are an attempt to say what cannot be said but only shown. In this sense it can be said to be “illuminating nonsense”. In opposition to the standard reading, James Conant and Cora Diamond proposed a different interpretation of the very notion of nonsense. This reading intends to take seriously what is said in 6.54, i.e., that the propositions of the *Tractatus*, being mere nonsense, do try to say what cannot be said. The idea that nonsense can make manifest “ineffable truths” results from not taking seriously Wittgenstein’s exhortation to throw the ladder away once one has climbed it. According to the so-called resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was committed to an austere conception of nonsense, according to which we have no basis upon which to isolate the logical roles played by the working parts of a nonsense, for there are no working parts of a nonsensical proposition. This austere view of nonsense is justified by recurring to the context principle. In the present paper I take sides with a strong version of the austere view: nonsense can only arise from a lack of meaning, not from the presence of the wrong kind of meaning. The parts of a piece of nonsense can have no form (or logical syntax) and no content (or semantics). The expressions that compose it have no determinate content and they do not belong to any determinate logical category. I argue for this strong version by commenting on 3.31s, more specifically, by stressing the transformations that Wittgenstein introduced into Frege’s context principle, namely, the rejection of the distinction between sense and reference of names and the conception of names as unsaturated.

Keywords: Nonsense · Context Principle · Wittgenstein.

Sinsentido y el principio del contexto en el *Tractatus* de Wittgenstein

Desde la década de 1990, la discusión sobre la interpretación del *Tractatus* se ha concentrado en la disputa entre la, así llamada, lectura estándar y la novedosa lectura resoluto. Esta disputa confronta dos maneras de entender el proyecto filosófico mismo que Wittgenstein plantea en el libro y, en particular, dos maneras de entender sus palabras en la proposición penúltima del libro: «Mis proposiciones esclarecen porque quien me entiende las reconoce al final como carentes de sentido» (TLP 6.54). Según Peter Hacker, el sinsentido de las pseudo-proposiciones de la filosofía, en particular, de la filosofía del *Tractatus*, son un intento de decir lo que no se puede decir sino únicamente se puede «mostrar». Es en este sentido que se pueda llamar «sinsentido iluminador». En oposición a esta lectura, James Conant y Cora Diamond han propuesto una interpretación diferente de la noción misma del sinsentido. Esta lectura intenta tomar en serio lo que se dice en 6.54, es decir, que las proposiciones del *Tractatus*, siendo puro sinsentido, efectivamente intentan decir lo que no se puede decir. La idea de que sinsentidos puedan manifestar «verdades inefables» resulta de que no se toma en serio la exhortación de Wittgenstein de tirar la escalera una vez que uno haya subido por ella. Según la, así llamada, lectura resoluto del *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein estaba comprometido con una concepción austera del sinsentido según la cual no tenemos ninguna base para aislar los papeles lógicos que juegan las partes operacionales del sinsentido, puesto que no hay partes operacionales de una proposición carente de sentido. El punto de vista austero del sinsentido se justifica recurriendo al principio de contexto. En este trabajo me

pongo del lado de una versión fuerte del punto de vista austero: el sinsentido sólo puede surgir de una falta de significado, no de la presencia de un tipo errado de significado. Las partes de una pieza carente de sentido no pueden tener ninguna forma (o sintaxis lógica) ni ningún contenido (o semántica). Las expresiones que la componen no tienen ningún contenido determinado y no pertenecen a ninguna categoría determinada de lógica. Arguyo a favor de esta versión fuerte comentando sobre el grupo de secciones 3.31, más específicamente, enfatizando las transformaciones que Wittgenstein introdujo al principio de contexto de Frege, a saber, el rechazo de la distinción entre sentido y referencia de los nombres y la concepción de nombres como insaturados.

Palabras Clave: Sinsentido · Principio de contexto · Wittgenstein.

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HISTORIA DEL ARTÍCULO | ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 30-November-2022 Accepted: 15-December-2022; Published Online: 31-December-2022

COMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO | HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Segatto, Antonio (2021). «Context Principle and Nonsense in the *Tractatus*». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 11, no. 23: pp. 117-136.

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