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# NONSENSE AND IRONY: WITTGENSTEIN'S STRATEGY OF SELF-REFUTATION AND KIERKEGAARD'S CONCEPT OF INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

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## Abstract

In his preface to the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein states that the question of nonsense has to do with drawing the limits of language. Nonsensical expressions go beyond the limits of meaningful language and reside "on the other side" of what can be said. Yet, at the end of the book he declares that his own propositions are, strictly speaking, nonsensical. The present paper aims at analyzing early Wittgenstein's self-refuting strategy as a mode of transcending the limits of language, comparing his concept of "nonsense" (*Unsinn*) with Kierkegaard's view of indirect communication and Socratic irony.

*Keywords:* Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, nonsense, limits of language, Kierkegaard, Socratic irony, ethical and religious utterance, indirect communication.

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## SINSENTIDO E IRONÍA: LA ESTRATEGIA DE AUTO-REFUTACIÓN EN WITTGENSTEIN Y EL CONCEPTO DE COMUNICACIÓN INDIRECTA EN KIERKEGAARD

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### Resumen

En el prefacio al *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein establece que la cuestión del sinsentido tiene que ver con trazar los límites del lenguaje. Las expresiones sinsentido van más allá de los límites del lenguaje significativo y residen “del otro lado” de lo que puede ser dicho. Aún así, al final del libro declara que sus propias proposiciones son, hablando de manera estricta, sinsentidos. El presente trabajo pretende analizar la estrategia de auto-refutación del primer Wittgenstein como un modo de trascender los límites del lenguaje, comparando su concepto de “sinsentido” (*Unsinn*) con la visión de Kierkegaard acerca de la comunicación indirecta y de la ironía socrática.

*Palabras clave:* Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, sinsentido, límites del lenguaje, Kierkegaard, ironía socrática, proposiciones éticas y religiosas, comunicación indirecta.

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My aim in the present paper is to clarify the concept of “nonsense” (*Unsinn*) in Wittgenstein’s early thought and to compare it with Kierkegaard’s concept of irony. My discussion of irony will focus on Kierkegaard’s remarks on indirect communication in his journals and in his dissertation, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841). My discussion of nonsense will be based on several of Wittgenstein’s early writings, primarily the penultimate Proposition 6.54 of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1918):

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

This summary statement puts in question the entire *Tractatus* as a consistent philosophical text. Rudolf Carnap quotes it, along with the demand for silence in the concluding Proposition 7, to attack Wittgenstein on two fronts:

In the first place [Wittgenstein] seems to me to be inconsistent in what he does. He tells us that one cannot state philosophical propositions and that whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent; and then instead of keeping silent, he writes a whole philosophical book. Secondly, I do not agree with his statement that all his propositions are quite as much without sense as metaphysical propositions are. My opinion is that a great number of his propositions (unfortunately not all of them) have in fact sense (Carnap, 1935: 37-38).

Yet, Wittgenstein explicitly insists that the entire *Tractatus* is nonsense. In a letter to C. K. Ogden, the work’s first English translator, he comments on the book’s title:

As to the title I think the Latin one is better than the present title. For although “*Tractatus Logico-*

Philosophicus” isn’t *ideal* still it has something like the right meaning, whereas “Philosophic Logic” is wrong. In fact, I don’t know what it means! There is no such thing as philosophic logic. (Unless one says that as the whole book is nonsense the title might as well be nonsense too) (Wittgenstein, 1973: 20).

The remark itself harbors a tension, however, between the suggestion that the *Tractatus* has a meaning expressible by the Latin title and the claim that since the entire text is nonsense its title ought to be nonsensical as well. Wittgenstein’s own remark reinforces, then, Carnap’s criticism of the *Tractatus* as inconsistent, raising ever more pointedly the question: Why would Wittgenstein take pains to write a philosophical text as polished as a diamond, knowing full well it is meaningless, or nonsensical, yet insist on giving it a meaningful title? The sense of ‘nonsense’ is thus fundamental to deciphering the text.

In his preface to the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein states clearly that the question of nonsense has to do with drawing the limits of language, since what is nonsensical transcends the limits of meaningful language: “It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*: 4) This leaves open, however, the *purpose* of drawing the limits of language, of *proclaiming* that a certain combination of words is meaningless. As Wittgenstein indicates in §499 of *Philosophical Investigations*,

To say “This combination of words makes no sense” excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason. ... So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*: 138-139).

The question of *telos* in the *Tractatus*—the *telos*, or purpose, of proclaiming something to be nonsense—is thus the focus of our investigation. My discussion will comprise two parts. I will first discuss the meaning of the term ‘nonsense’ in Wittgenstein’s early thought; I will then compare Wittgenstein’s *method of proclaiming nonsense*, as I shall call it, with Kierkegaard’s view of ironic speech as indirect communication,

showing how the concepts of nonsense and irony express Wittgenstein's and Kierkegaard's respective philosophical attempts to transcend the "cage of language" in order to express the contents of ethics and religion.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The Sense of Nonsense

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein distinguishes between two concepts: *Unsinn*, which Pears and McGuinness translate as "nonsense," and *Sinnlos*, which they render as "senseless." Senseless propositions are ones that lack truth-conditions, such as tautologies and contradictions. Propositions of this sort "show that they say nothing. A tautology has no truth-conditions, since it is unconditionally true: and a contradiction is true on no condition" (4.461). Such propositions—the tautologies of logic included (6.1-6.11)—say nothing about reality, representing no state of affairs (4.462): "A tautology leaves open to reality the whole—the infinite whole—of logical space: a contradiction fills the whole of logical space leaving no point of it for reality" (4.463). These propositions "are not, however, nonsensical. They are part of the symbolism, much as '0' is part of the symbolism of arithmetic" (4.4611). Though they say nothing about reality, they "describe the scaffolding of the world, or rather they represent it" (6.124). In doing so, logic, which consists entirely of tautologies, is "a mirror-image of the world" (6.13). It follows that these propositions, while saying nothing about reality, are located within the perimeters set by language. By contrast, nonsensical propositions lie outside the boundaries of language: "It will ... only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein uses the cage metaphor twice—and inconsistently—to discuss the limits of expression. On one occasion, he describes the limits of language as "the walls of our cage"; on the other, he insists that "language is not a cage after all." The patent contradiction is hard to reconcile, so let me simply quote the two passages. At the end of the "Lecture on Ethics" Wittgenstein says: "My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely helpless" (1965: 12). But in a conversation with members of the Vienna Circle on December 17, 1930, he says with regard to religious language: "In religion talking is not *metaphorical* either; for otherwise it would have to be possible to say the same things in prose. Running against the limits of language? Language is, after all, not a cage" (1979: 117).

simply be nonsense" (Wittgenstein, 1975: 4).<sup>2</sup> There is a fundamental difference, then, between these two types of proposition which say nothing about reality: whereas senseless propositions function within the limits of language, nonsensical propositions are located "on the other side of the limit."

As noted at the outset, Wittgenstein proclaims the entire *Tractatus* nonsensical, "on the other side of the limit," both in Proposition 6.54 and in his letter to Ogden. This statement has been at the center of an ongoing interpretive controversy. As Eli Friedlander suggests in his incisive study of the *Tractatus*, the work's interpreters can be divided into two broad groups (Friedland, 2000: 202-204). For those in the first group, the contents of the *Tractatus* are linguistically inexpressible due only to the 'technical' limitations of language; the "complex structure of reality," though linguistically inexpressible, can nevertheless be conceived somehow by the reader.<sup>3</sup> On this view, Wittgenstein is justified in expressing nonsensical propositions since, by doing so, he somehow conveys to the reader meaningful contents (despite what can be seen as an inappropriate use of language, according to his own criteria of meaning). By contrast, those in the second group deny that content of any sort can be conveyed by nonsensical propositions. In their view, there is no difference between "elucidatory" and plain nonsense; the image of the discarded ladder in 6.54 is thus tantamount to the demand that the reader simply relinquish all that is said in the *Tractatus*.<sup>4</sup> The expression of nonsensical propositions is harder to justify on this view: Why would one take the trouble to express propositions which convey absolutely no content? A justification of precisely this sort is offered by Diamond, however, who maintains that the ethical propositions in the *Tractatus*, though without content and hence nonsensical, nevertheless

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<sup>2</sup> As Anscombe notes, nonsensical propositions try to say what can only be shown. The relation between nonsensical propositions and the dichotomy *show-say* deserves closer attention; it is, however, beyond the scope of the current paper. See Anscombe (1996: 163).

<sup>3</sup> In the first group Friedlander (2000: 203) includes Hacker and Pears. As my previous remarks suggest, Carnap may be included as well, for in his view large parts of the *Tractatus* have verifiable meaning. Carnap strongly denies, however, that the *Tractatus* represents metaphysical contents of any sort.

<sup>4</sup> In the second group Friedlander (2000: 204-208) includes Diamond and Conant.

convey to the reader certain of the speaker's attitudes towards the world, attitudes typical of the 'ethical spirit'.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretive dispute can be clarified in terms of Carnap's distinction between the *representative* and the *expressive* functions of language. Linguistic propositions which are used representatively, Carnap writes, manifest a certain state of affairs—they describe something and claim that it exists; on the other hand, expressive propositions say nothing about reality, referring solely to the writer's own personality and feelings (Carnap, 1979: 47-48).

Using these terms, it seems that on the first interpretive approach nonsensical discourse is representative insofar as it somehow describes the 'complex structure of reality' whereas on the second approach such discourse is merely expressive of the speaker's ethical or psychological inclinations. The interpretive dispute may be recast, then, in terms of whether nonsensical language functions *representatively* or *expressively*.

Each of the two interpretive options has its share of weaknesses. The view of nonsense as purely expressive is seemingly at odds with Wittgenstein's letter to Ogden about the translation of the opening of Proposition 6.54 ("My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical"). Von Wright comments on the correspondence:

The original translation [of Ogden] of this passage had been: "My propositions *are explained* in that he who understands me..." When returning the typescript Wittgenstein changed this to "My propositions *elucidate in this way* that he who understands me..." As seen from the Questionnaire, Ogden suggested "My propositions *are elucidated in this way*; he who understands me..." Wittgenstein convinced Ogden that this was a misunderstanding and Ogden then changed "*are elucidated*" to "*are elucidatory*" and this is how the passage is printed (Wittgenstein, 1973: 53-54).<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the propositions of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical, Wittgenstein insists, does not elucidate the propositions themselves;

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<sup>5</sup> Diamond in Friedlander. (2000:208).

<sup>6</sup> My emphases.



rather, *through* such recognition, the propositions elucidate *something else*. This point is further clarified in the aforementioned letter to Ogden:

*Here you misunderstand my meaning entirely.* I didn't mean to use "elucidate" intransitively: what I meant to say was: My propositions elucidate—whatever they do elucidate—in this way: etc.

Similarly I might have said "My propositions clarify in this way..." meaning "My propositions clarify whatever they do clarify—say, the propositions of natural science—in this way: ..." Here clarify is *not* used intransitively although the object is not mentioned. You may put it thus: "My propositions elucidate philosophic matters in this way: ..." This is something like the right meaning. Or "My propositions are elucidations in this way: ..." but this I suppose is bad. If nothing better is suggested and my first way of putting it really won't do add "philosophic matters" as above (Wittgenstein, 1973: 51).

Once understood as nonsense, Wittgenstein insists, the propositions of the *Tractatus* are understood as transitive: that is, they concern something other than themselves. Wittgenstein's examples of what they might concern— "natural science," "philosophic matters"—indicate that the propositions are not merely expressive (they do not merely express their author's feelings, character, etc.), for by being perceived as nonsense they have the non-expressive function of clarifying certain matters, though what these matters might be remains an open question. The above passages seem to undermine, then, the interpretation of nonsensical language as purely expressive.

Let us turn to the interpretation of nonsensical language as representative, as somehow descriptive of the "complex structure of reality." This view, for its part, appears to conflict with the contents of Wittgenstein's oft-quoted letter to his friend Ludwig von Ficker, editor of the cultural journal *Der Brenner* (In Luckhardt, 1979: 94-95). In the letter, Wittgenstein claims unequivocally that the *Tractatus* is mainly concerned with ethics, and that it, as he puts it, "delimits ethics from the inside" (In Luckhardt, 1979: 94) One may infer, therefore, that the

work's nonsensical nature is also bound up with ethics; and from this follows the question regarding the precise nature of the nonsensicality of ethics. Wittgenstein himself addresses this issue at the end of his "Lecture on Ethics":

That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions [i.e., religious and ethical expressions] were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expression, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language (1965: 11-12).

The nonsensicality of ethics is thus 'rigorous' (echoing Husserl's proclamation of philosophy as a 'rigorous science'): ethical discourse is *essentially* nonsensical because it transcends the limits of language and the world. The rigorous nonsensicality of ethics may be viewed, then, to paraphrase Wittgenstein's preface to the *Tractatus*, as a corollary of ethics' attempt to speak from the "other side of the limit" of language. Such rigorous nonsensicality is inconsistent, however, with what Carnap calls the representative use of language. If ethical (or religious) propositions are rigorously nonsensical, if they are beyond the limits of language and the world, then they can say nothing about states of affairs in the world. And if the *Tractatus* is concerned with ethics, then it, too, is rigorously nonsensical. It follows that the *Tractatus* is in principle incapable of conveying anything positive about reality; it is therefore not construable as linguistically representative. This conclusion clarifies Wittgenstein's claim in his above-quoted letter to Ogden that the entire *Tractatus* is nonsensical. It also refutes the first interpretive view, on which nonsensical propositions are linguistically representative by virtue of conveying to their addressees some information about the complex structure of reality.

We seem to have come to an interpretive impasse: If nonsensical language is neither representative nor expressive, what *is* its linguistic function? Moreover, how might we reconcile Wittgenstein's suggestion, in his letter to Ogden, that his propositions elucidate "philosophic matters," with his statement, in the other letter to Ogden, that the entire *Tractatus* is nonsensical? To address these difficulties, let us take a closer look at Proposition 6.54. For clarity of discussion, I will number the section's sentences as follows:

- (1) My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical,
- (2) when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them.
- (3) (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
- (4) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

To begin our discussion, let us compare Proposition 6.54 of the *Tractatus* with the parallel segments of an earlier version of the work, the so-called *Prototractatus*.<sup>7</sup> There, Proposition 6.54 is in fact divided into two separate sections: sentences (1)-(3) comprise section 6.54, whereas sentence (4) is numbered 6.55 (Wittgenstein, 1971: 237). We should bear in mind that in a footnote to Proposition 1 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes that “the decimal numbers assigned to the individual propositions indicate the logical importance of the propositions, the stress laid on them in my exposition” (Wittgenstein, 1975: 5) It follows that in the *Prototractatus* Wittgenstein accords equal logical weight to sentences (1)-(3), taken jointly, and to sentence (4). But why was sentence (4) so important to Wittgenstein? Because—or so I would like to propose—it concerns the work’s *effect* on its readers; that is, it concerns the readers’ adequate response upon realizing that the work’s propositions are nonsensical (they must “transcend”<sup>8</sup> them, etc.). Accordingly, sentences (2) and (3) concern the readers’ actions following this realization: they must “climb up beyond” the work’s propositions, then “throw away the ladder.” Proposition 6.54 is therefore entirely concerned with the work’s readers, with their proper response upon understanding that all of the work’s propositions are *rigorously* nonsensical. This conclusion is echoed in §498 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

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<sup>7</sup> See Von Wright in Luckhardt (1979: 99-137).

<sup>8</sup> The German verb is *überwinden*, a term devoid of the metaphysical connotations of Pears and McGuinness’s “transcend.” Ogden’s “surmount” is in this respect more apposite.

When I say that the orders “Bring me sugar” and “Bring me milk” make sense, but not the combination “Milk me sugar,” that does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect. And if this effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don’t on that account call it the order to stare and gape, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce.<sup>9</sup>

The weight of the exegesis shifts, then, from the question whether the *Tractatus*’s nonsensical language functions representatively or expressively, to the question of its use as a *method* designed to produce a certain ineffable effect in the mind of the comprehending reader. In the *Tractatus*, this method comprises the following successive steps: (1) defining the limits of meaningful language throughout the book’s propositions; (2) declaring the contents of these propositions to be rigorously nonsensical (beginning of Proposition 6.54); (3) implying that the purpose of this declaration is to produce a certain effect in the readers: to make them climb the ladder and then discard it (Proposition 6.54); (4) posing the concluding demand for silence (Proposition 7). From this perspective, the purpose of Wittgenstein’s declaration of nonsense and of the writing of the *Tractatus* in general is to elicit a certain ineffable response in those readers who understand the book.

Wittgenstein employs a similar, though differently ordered method in the “Lecture on Ethics,” written between September 1929 and December 1930 for presentation to the Heretics Society. Here, the method takes the following form: After illustrating the difference between relative and absolute linguistic meaning (Wittgenstein, 1965: 4-6), Wittgenstein asserts that ethics is not amenable to meaningful discourse since (scientific) language can only express natural sense and meaning while ethics is *eo ipso* supernatural.<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein then

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<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, Wittgenstein notes in section 491 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: “Not: ‘without language we could not communicate with one another’ —but for sure: without language we cannot influence other people in such-and-such ways.”

<sup>10</sup> “Our words, used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts” (Wittgenstein, 1965: 7).

asks: What does one try to express when, like him, one is tempted to speak of ‘absolute goodness’ or ‘absolute value’? (1965: 7) He then goes on to describe three experiences that incline him to ethical discourse: the experience of wonder at the existence of the world, the experience of “absolute safety,” and the experience of guilt (1965: 8-10). He then illustrates how talking of these experiences, like talking of ethics or religion, is utterly nonsensical, an inappropriate use of language (1965: 9-11). He concludes with the above-quoted claim that *all* attempts to talk of ethics necessarily result in ‘rigorously’ nonsensical propositions—propositions whose attempt to transcend both language and the world renders them essentially nonsensical (1965: 11). Wittgenstein’s method in this text comprises, then, the following steps: (1) he first draws the limits of language, arguing that language is unable to express ethical contents; (2) he then uses language to describe certain personal ethical experiences; (3) he illustrates how his own descriptions are nonsensical; (4) finally, he clarifies in general terms that all ethical discourse is essentially or ‘rigorously’ nonsensical. The basic move—to make certain assertions, then to proclaim them nonsensical—is thus repeated in this text as well. Here, however, prior to describing the experiences that incline him to ethical discourse, Wittgenstein offers a rare account of the method’s *purpose*:

And there, in my case, it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to me which therefore is, in a sense, my experience *par excellence* and this is the reason why, in talking to you now, I will use this experience as my first and foremost example. (As I have said before, this is an entirely personal matter and others would find other examples more striking.) I will describe this experience in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation (1965: 8).

By expressing in language these intimate subjective experiences, then, Wittgenstein strives to encourage his listeners to recall similar experiences; this way, he explains, they would be able to find common ground for further inquiry. As in Socratic midwifery, the goal here

is recollection—in this case, recollection of ethical experiences.<sup>11</sup> To describe the process briefly: By providing a linguistic description of the experience and proclaiming that description to be nonsense, a certain mental process is produced in the listeners: their recollection of subjective experiences of their own. The same objective is suggested in the opening sentence of the preface to the *Tractatus*: “Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts.—So it is not a textbook.—Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it” (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*: 3).<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the method of proclaiming nonsense is thus to encourage the recollection of those subjective experiences which evoke the need to make nonsensical assertions. The juxtaposition of nonsensical assertions with their proclamation as nonsense, of linguistic expressions with the demand that they be discarded, leaves something behind, namely a certain *effect* on the addressees, the stimulation of certain memories of past experiences.

The question suggests itself, however: Why is the purpose of this recollection not announced explicitly in the *Tractatus*, —as it is in the “Lecture on Ethics” written eleven years later? More specifically, why is it absent from Proposition 6.54, which mentions neither ethics nor

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<sup>11</sup> Wittgenstein’s method calls to mind Socrates’s method in the *Meno* and Plato’s doctrine of learning as recollection. See for example 71d: “As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (Plato, 1997: 880). For Socrates, this view solves the problem of circularity vis-à-vis learning and knowledge: if one knows what one is searching for, then there is no point in searching; and if one does not know, then one knows not what to search for. The difficulty is resolved if learning is understood as the process whereby the soul recalls something it had already experienced. In the *Tractatus*, the recollection of ethical experience similarly resolves, in my view, the problem of ethical value: the question how ethics might be valid if it eludes both language and thought.

<sup>12</sup> Having received Wittgenstein’s clarifications on the *Tractatus* in Austria in 1923, Frank Ramsey wrote: “His idea of his book is not that anyone by reading it will understand his ideas, but that some day someone will think them out again for himself, and will derive real pleasure from finding in this book their exact expressions” (Wittgenstein, 1995: 186).

recollection as the purpose of the method of proclaiming nonsense? In short, what role does *concealing* this purpose play in the *Tractatus*? To answer these questions, let us look at several of Wittgenstein's letters to Ludwig von Ficker.<sup>13</sup> The undated letters were probably written around October 1919, a year after Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus*. That text—"my life's work"—is first mentioned in letter 22, where Wittgenstein stresses:

...but I must ask you above all to maintain complete silence about the entire matter and *everything which has anything to do with it*. ... About a year ago, just before being captured, I finished a philosophical work on which I had worked for the previous seven years. It is quite strictly speaking the presentation of a system. And this presentation is *extremely* compressed since I have only retained in it that which really occurred to me—and how it occurred to me. ... The work is strictly philosophical and, at the same time, literary, but there is no babbling in it (Luckhardt, 1979: 92-94).

Wittgenstein's request for complete silence indicates that what he is about to say to von Ficker about the *Tractatus* ought to remain hidden from view. From this point on, Wittgenstein writes in utmost confidentiality. The book, he says, describes his own intimate experiences; its terse style is thus both philosophical and literary. It is not until his next letter to von Ficker, the oft-quoted Letter 23, that Wittgenstein reveals the book's clandestine meaning, a decision probably reflecting his fear that no one would ever understand his life's work (indeed, the letter was written following the book's rejection by several publishers and the alleged failure of both Frege and Russell to decipher its meaning) (Janik in Luckhardt, 1979: 175). To facilitate our discussion of the relevant passage, let me number its sentences as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> Janik writes of Wittgenstein's relationship with von Ficker and the significance of their correspondence: "These letters constitute the correspondence central to any assessment of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, for they, more than any other document discovered to date, revealed what Wittgenstein was hoping to do in writing the book" (In Luckhardt, 1979: 171).

(1) And it will probably be helpful for you if I write a few words about my book: For you won't—I really believe—get too much out of reading it.

(2) Because you won't understand it; the content will seem quite strange to you.

(3) In reality, it isn't strange to you, for the point of the book is ethical.

(4) I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written.

(5) And precisely this second part is the important one.

(6) For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can *only* be delimited in this way.

(7) In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it.

(8) Therefore the book will, unless I'm quite wrong, have much to say which you want to say yourself, but perhaps you won't notice that it is said in it.

(9) For the time being, I'd recommend that you read the *foreword* and the *conclusion* since these express the point most directly (Luckhardt, 1979: 94-95).<sup>14</sup>

Let us examine the passage carefully. Sentence 1 indicates that Wittgenstein's aim in this letter is to clarify the book's elusive meaning.

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<sup>14</sup> Numbers not in original; emphases in original.



The nature of this elusiveness is clarified in Sentences 2 and 3, which point out a discrepancy between the book's meaning and the impression it will leave on the reader: the book's content may seem "strange," but its concern is, in fact, with ethics. The book thus exhibits a tension between its interior and its exterior, with the latter (the book's explicit propositions) concealing rather than expressing the former (the book's meaning). Sentence 4 clarifies another significant point: the key to understanding the book, which Wittgenstein originally considered presenting in the preface, is actually absent. That is to say, the book is to be published without the key to its interpretation. And the key is that the book comprises not one but two parts: one written, the other unwritten. Sentence 5 announces that it is the second, absent part which is truly important; and as Sentence 3 (as well as Sentence 7) makes clear, that part is the one about ethics. In other words, what the book does *not* say about ethics is the core of its meaning. Here, again, the crux of the matter—ethics—is absent or obscured. The *Tractatus* is thus presented as a text whose core of meaning lies *outside* of its own boundaries. The manner in which the *Tractatus* is written conforms, then, to its central metaphysical claim: ethics is outside the world, therefore it should be kept outside the text, which outlines the world's limits by outlining the limits of language (5.6). Put differently, the book's structure *shows* the central metaphysical claim without explicitly saying it.<sup>15</sup> Sentence 6 clarifies *why* the book is written that way: the only way to "delimit" ethics "strictly" or rigorously is "from within." Ethics can only be delimited negatively<sup>16</sup>, by presenting it as external to what is delimited, namely, to language and to the world. Indeed, in Proposition 4.0641 of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein writes: "The negating proposition determines a logical place with the help of the logical place of the negated proposition. For

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<sup>15</sup> That the *Tractatus* shows its metaphysical claims instead of saying them is, in my view, the meaning of Wittgenstein's assertion, at the end of Letter 22, that the book is both a philosophical and a literary work. I will clarify this matter further when discussing Kierkegaard's view of indirect communication as typical of art.

<sup>16</sup> On positive vs. negative "delimiting," see Wittgenstein's remark in Proposition 4.463 of the *Tractatus*: "A proposition, a picture, or a model is, in the negative sense, like a solid body that restricts the freedom of movement of others, and, in the positive sense, like a space bounded by solid substance in which there is room for a body."

it describes it as lying outside the latter's logical place." Wittgenstein's declaration that the *Tractatus* delimits ethics "from within" implies, then, that the core of the book's meaning is the negating proposition "ethics is not in the world," the assertion that ethics and value are outside all that happens (6.41), outside "all that is the case," i.e., the world (1). It now becomes clear why the entire book is rigorously nonsensical: for even a negating proposition, if meaningful, is a way of describing the world; therefore there is no meaningful way of saying that ethics is not in the world.

The *Tractatus*, however, exhibits both the delimiting function of negation and the absence of what is negated: ethics is both external to the text and, at the same time, unsayable as the core of the text's meaning.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, only those who understand that the work's real concern is with ethics will eventually recognize that its propositions are *eo ipso* nonsensical. In Sentence 7, Wittgenstein goes on to say that construing ethics as outside the world is the only philosophical alternative to the "rumbling and roaring" to which, according to Kürnberger's words which serve as the motto of the *Tractatus*, we are normally exposed. We are thus presented with a dichotomous choice, a choice between silence and concealment on the one hand, nonsensical chatter on the other. Sentence 8 presents the upshot of this concealment of the book's core of meaning: the book says something, but what it says is hidden from the reader. What the book says must therefore be deciphered, and this can only be achieved by perceiving the book as nonsensical. Finally, Sentence 9 declares that the book's meaning is expressed most clearly in the preface and the conclusion—a claim that only underscores the absence of ethics from both parts of the *Tractatus*. What the preface and the conclusion do have in common is their reference to the comprehending reader: the preface states, "Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts"; while the first sentence of Proposition 6.54 says, "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical." In

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<sup>17</sup> Cf.: "[In the *Tractatus*] ethical considerations are also bound up with indirect communication. Here the indirection is double: not only are ethical propositions not candidates for direct expression ... but the very communication of this fact is itself indirect" (Creegan, 1989: 41).

both cases, ethical recollection is implicit as the purpose of writing the *Tractatus* as a whole.

Let us recap. The nonsensicality of the *Tractatus* is the nonsensicality of ethics; therefore, the propositions of the *Tractatus* are by their very essence nonsensical. To express this idea, Wittgenstein uses the method of proclaiming nonsense, of stating propositions only then to proclaim them nonsensical. The purpose of this method is to produce a certain effect in the reader: to stimulate the recollection of ethical experiences by asking the reader to transcend the nonsensical propositions. Moreover, as Wittgenstein's letter to von Ficker indicates, the core of the book's meaning is at once *external to* and *absent from* its contents. The upshot of all this is that the key to the book's interpretation—ethics—is veiled by the effort to delimit language and the world by logic. Logic thus constitutes the work's exterior, ethics—its interior. The exemplary reader, who recognizes the tension between logic and ethics, must negate the work's propositions as nonsensical—and it is precisely this negation that expresses his or her comprehension of the book's deeper dimension. All these features—the tension between interior and exterior, the abstention from saying certain things, ingenious concealment, and the enjoinder to negate, as well as the centrality of the method's effect on the reader's consciousness—all these call to mind Socratic irony. And the link between these issues and *ethics* points us to Socratic irony as it is interpreted in Kierkegaard's thought. In what follows, then, let me compare Wittgenstein's method of proclaiming nonsense with Kierkegaard's method of indirect communication and its expression in irony.

## 2. Proclaiming Nonsense and the Concept of Irony

Wittgenstein's fondness for Kierkegaard's thought is beyond doubt. In a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell from December 1919, Russell wrote: "I had felt in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius" (McGuinness, 1995: 140). Wittgenstein himself said to his friend Maurice Drury: "Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint" (In Rush, 1981: 102). And in a letter to von Ficker, Wittgenstein explained that he wished to publish the *Tractatus* in the journal *Der Brenner* because that is where Kierkegaard's German translator, Theodor

Haecker, had published his writings (Janik in Luckhardt, 1979: 184-187). My aim in what follows is not, however, to argue that Kierkegaard had influenced Wittgenstein, but to clarify the role of the concept of nonsense in Wittgenstein's thought by comparing it with the role of the concept of irony in Kierkegaard's.

The concept of irony in Kierkegaard's thought is connected to the question of indirect communication, and both are based in turn on Kierkegaard's concept of subjective truth. Kierkegaard famously distinguishes between two kinds of truth: objective truth, in which certain knowledge is conveyed directly from the speaker to the addressee, and subjective truth, in which what is conveyed is not content but the insight that the truth is always in a process of becoming (Kierkegaard, 1941: 67-72). This distinction between two kinds of truth implies in Kierkegaard's view a distinction between two kinds of communication, direct and indirect (Kierkegaard, 1941: 98). According to Hong, Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the Socratic method, in which thoughts are masked by irony, motivated his interest in experiences that cannot be conveyed directly (Kierkegaard, 1967). This interest led him to expose the deep affinities between indirect communication, i.e., communication in which messages are conveyed covertly, and the subjective truths of ethics and religion (Kierkegaard, 1967: 512). Taylor adds that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship is the clearest sign of his efforts to cope with this insight (Taylor, 1975: 54-55). The key to understanding Kierkegaard's view of indirect communication is found, however, in his journals; let us direct a spotlight, then, on sections 617-681 of the journals' first volume (Kierkegaard, 1967: 252-319).

The perplexity of the modern age, Kierkegaard writes in section 649/5, manifests itself in the confusion between the direct communication of science and the indirect communication of art and religion (1967: 269). In science, the aim is to convey knowledge to one's addressees; in art, by contrast, we may assume that the addressees are already in possession of the pertinent knowledge, so the goal is to make them put it into practice. Ethics and religion are characterized, then, by indirect communication—ethics, because it concerns the transformation, not of ignorance into knowledge, but of knowledge into reality (1967: 271); religion, because it requires each individual to stand *alone* before God (1967: 273). Since ethical knowledge is simply self-knowledge, the purpose of indirect communication is not some content conveyed to the addressee, but the addressee himself (1967: 281). Accordingly,

in religion some preliminary knowledge is needed, but the essential requirement is that that knowledge be put into practice in the form of a religious life (1967: 279). Religious and ethical communications are not concerned, then, with conveying some objective content; their purpose, rather, is to have the addressee self-reflect and to 'seduce' him to existential awakening. Such seduction, however, which involves internal guidance to subjective truth, can only be achieved indirectly. Indirect communication therefore depends on minimizing or even removing the speaker's presence: in order to let the addressee experience the existential process on his own, the speaker must disguise himself (1967: 307). Indirect communication recalls in this respect Socrates's well-known — some would say 'notorious' — distinction between philosophizing and the "art of midwifery" (*Theaetetus*, 210d).

Indeed, Kierkegaard himself calls ethical and religious indirect communication "the method of midwifery,"<sup>18</sup> a method whose purpose is "to help the other to stand alone" (before God) (1967: 280). It is the inner tension evident in this formula, the opposition between "standing alone" and "being helped" (the latter nevertheless enabling the former), that underlies every instance of ironic speech. This tension also characterizes the ironic stance of the "midwife" engaging in indirect communication: the ironist conceals himself from the addressee in order to avoid being perceived as an authority, for in such a case the addressee would merely emulate the speaker without self-knowledge, replacing the indirect communication of art with the direct communication of science, thereby obstructing the path to subjective truth.

It follows that indirect communication is possible only by virtue of the mask of irony that conceals the speaker's presence (Kierkegaard, 1967: 274-276). The ironist presents himself as frivolous, and deception is needed in order to deliver ethico-religious seriousness from the addressee, a type of action Kierkegaard astutely calls "deceiving into truth" (1967: 288). As Kierkegaard keenly puts it:

Irony — the highest earnestness. Earnestness is that I as an individual relate myself to God and thus with every human being. — People stupidly think it is earnestness to have many followers who are willing if necessary to die for me. — Stupidity — To help a man relate himself

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Manheimer (1977: 143-209), Creegan (1989: 30-52).

to God as an individual is earnestness. But it must be done indirectly, for otherwise I become a hindrance to the one who is helped (23/649: 274).

Ironical concealment is presented, then, as the emblematic method of indirect communication aimed at ethical or religious seduction.

The concept of irony also lies at the center of Kierkegaard's early dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841 [1989]).<sup>19</sup> Here, Socratic irony is viewed as an existential stance (1989: 241). Whereas Hegel defined irony as "infinite absolute negativity" (1989: 254), Kierkegaard offers a positive definition: the essence of negating irony is the subject's infinite freedom, his constant liberation from all social traditions and cultural conventions. The mask of irony thus serves as an instrument of liberty (1989: 253). But irony also consists of *ironic speech*, which, as noted, is strongly related to the method of indirect communication. Indeed, Kierkegaard defines ironic speech as speech in which "the phenomenon is not the essence but the opposite of the essence" (1989: 247). That is to say, one's words (the phenomena of speech) signify the opposite of one's thoughts or intentions (the essence of speech). Kierkegaard quotes in this context Talleyrand's witty remark that "man did not acquire speech in order to reveal his thoughts but in order to conceal them" (1989: 253).<sup>20</sup> Ironic speech is based, then, on a fundamental Parmenidean tension between phenomena and essences, with the latter concealing the former rather than expressing them—with the words expressing the opposite of what is meant. But then again, what is the *purpose* of such concealment? The purpose of irony, Kierkegaard insists, is metaphysical rather than empirical (1989: 256): at root, irony aims to negate, not this or that phenomenon, but phenomenal reality as a whole insofar as it does not conform to the essence (1989: 254). Irony thus gives its addressees an inkling of the existence of some realm beyond the phenomenal world. The ironic speaker presupposes, however, that the addressee will discard the uttered words (the exterior) and perceive the intention that is contrary to them (the interior). The ironic speaker

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Poole (1993).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Tractatus* 4.002: "Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes."

wishes, then, to be negated by the comprehending addressee—that is, the ironic speaker aims at a kind of self-negation (1989: 248). Ironic speech involves, then, a certain condescension over everyday language: the ironist wishes to be understood, but not immediately and not by all (1989: 248-249). Irony is thus designed, not so much to conceal the ironist as to cause the addressee to reveal himself—for by tearing the veil of irony the addressee becomes aware of his own infinite subjective freedom and interiority (1989: 251). Irony thus liberates the addressee from the burden of reality, allowing him to make ethical and religious choices.

Let us summarize the features of Kierkegaard's ironic speech. It is characterized by a tension between an exterior husk of linguistic expression (words) and the interior intention beneath that husk (thought). This tension conceals the speaker's thoughts, yet it also expresses an implicit demand for self-negation: the comprehending addressee is expected to "consume the interior and cast away the husk"<sup>21</sup>—to negate the overt and decipher the covert meaning. Moreover, by negating all of reality as a phenomenal realm opposed to the essence of existence, ironic speech points to something that lies *beyond* the phenomenal world and which may well elude the ironist himself. Ironic speech may therefore be viewed as a kind of negative metaphysics, or the *via negativa* of metaphysics, wherein it is only by negation that we can point to something positive.

### 3. Nonsense and Irony

For the early Wittgenstein and for Kierkegaard alike, the philosophical point of departure is, as shown above, the status of ethics and religion.<sup>22</sup> For Kierkegaard, ethics is bound up with subjective truth; it therefore transcends the objective, direct communication of scientific language. For Wittgenstein, ethics is "supernatural" (Luckhardt, 1979: 7) or transcendent (*Tractatus*, 6.421). Moreover, in some of his scattered

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<sup>21</sup> The phrase is taken from the Gemara (Tractate Hagiga, 15b), where it is written in praise of the ancient Jewish sage Rabbi Meir.

<sup>22</sup> For Kierkegaard, the religious life is superior to the ethical life, and both are superior to an aesthetic life devoted to passing phenomena. For Wittgenstein, by contrast, ethics and religion seem to be closely related, as indicated in the following example concerning the relation between ethics and God. For both thinkers, ethics transcends the 'here and now' of everyday existence.



remarks Wittgenstein views ethics as closely linked to the divine. As he explicitly remarks in a passage written in 1929:

What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural. [...] You cannot lead people to what is good; you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts (Wittgenstein, 1977: 3).<sup>23</sup>

Since ethics is external to the objective world, or the world of facts, it is neither directly communicable nor amenable to codification in scientific language; both thinkers share this fundamental view. Moreover, as our analysis of Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" and Kierkegaard's journals has shown, both associate ethics with subjective experience. This view of ethics requires a different method of communication, one capable of indirectly affecting the addressee. This method of indirect communication finds its emblematic form in Socratic irony as interpreted by Kierkegaard. The *method of irony* conceals the speaker's presence behind a mask of frivolity and laughter, only to reveal the addressee's ethical seriousness by having him negate the speaker's exterior mask as contrary to his interior intentions. By doing so—by having the speaker engage in an act of self-negation—the method of irony drives the addressee to independent action. The ironist's infinite negation is understood now as infinite subjective freedom; moreover, it points to something beyond the phenomenal world. In the same manner, as our discussion of Wittgenstein has shown, the *method of proclaiming nonsense* may similarly be viewed as negatively pointing to ethics as transcending the limits of language and the factual world. And here, too, the self-contradictory move—to make an assertion only to proclaim it as nonsense—is designed to stimulate a certain mental response in the comprehending reader: in this case, the recollection of ethical experiences.

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<sup>23</sup> The German edition is titled *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, or "Assorted Remarks"—a more apt title in my mind for this eclectic selection of passages from disparate texts.



In light of the above comparison, let us turn one final glance to Wittgenstein's formulation of the method of proclaiming nonsense in Proposition 6.54 of the *Tractatus*:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

The propositions of the *Tractatus* are elucidatory by virtue of being understood as nonsense. In this manner, they manifest the tension between interiority and exteriority which characterizes ironic speech. Proclaiming the propositions as nonsense also poses the demand that they be transcended, that is, that they be understood as an effort to delimit ethics negatively. Wittgenstein's move contains, then, the ironist's demand for self-negation. His assertions and their negation produce a certain ineffable effect in the mind of the exemplary reader of his book, namely recognition of the transcendence of ethics and value. And by concealing the speaker's presence, this result is achieved without using the means of direct communication. Wittgenstein's method of proclaiming nonsense may thus be viewed as a subtle, ingenious form of philosophical irony. Viewed from this perspective, the only way to navigate between the Scylla of silence and the Charybdis of "rumbling and roaring" may be to write philosophy *sub specie ironiae*.

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