

What Does the Wittgensteinian Inexpressible Express?

By Jaakko Hintikka

1. A New (mis)Interpretation of Wittgenstein?

IN HIS *TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS*, WITTGENSTEIN EXPOUNDS AN IMPRESSIVE logico-philosophical theory about language and about its relations to thinking and to reality. On the face of things, the *Tractatus* can be understood and studied as such a logico-semantical treatise. But Wittgenstein's work has a *prima facie* unexpected ending. In the penultimate section of his book Wittgenstein writes:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands them eventually recognizes them as senseless [*unsinnig*], when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them...

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. (*Tractatus* 6.54)

These statements must be taken seriously and therefore must be interpreted as literally as possible. They have nevertheless been experienced by some philosophers as posing a major interpretational problem. For if Wittgenstein's words are taken literally, we seem to have a major problem in our hands. If what Wittgenstein said before proposition 6.54 is literally nonsense, we apparently cannot understand his book at face value. And, as was pointed out, this face value is that of a treatise in logical semantics. Hence primarily a different interpretation has to be given to the entire work—or so it has been claimed. What then is the Wittgensteinian inexpressible—which comprises apparently the bulk of his book—supposed to convey to us? Perhaps the entire *Tractatus* has to be understood as a series of elucidations that ultimately serve to insinuate to a receptive reader certain metaphysical and ethical insights.

This, in a nutshell, is the starting-point of the interpretation that has been self-consciously called "The New Wittgenstein." Unfortunately, this is

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based on a radical misunderstanding of the problem situation that the author of the *Tractatus* was facing. This misunderstanding is both historical and systematic.

2. A Doubly Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*

WHAT, THEN, IS THE CORRECT READING OF WITTGENSTEIN'S CONFESSION OF *Unsinnigkeit*? And where do the not-so-new New Wittgensteineans go wrong? Of course Wittgenstein's statements have to be taken literally, or as the New Wittgensteineans boastfully prefer to say, "resolutely." But their inference from Wittgenstein's statement that asserts the (in some sense) nonsensical nature of his theories in the *Tractatus* to the idea that he must there mean something else is naive, not to say simple-minded. The New Wittgensteineans are not asking what the criteria are according to which the Tractarian theses are nonsense. Yet the answer is embarrassingly obvious. They are Wittgenstein's own criteria. And these Wittgenstein expounds in his book. According to them, meaningful discourse is restricted to truth-functions of elementary propositions about the world. What is excluded?

Many things, of course. Some interpreters might think in the first place of metaphysical statements. Indeed, Wittgenstein's own statements show that in the *Tractatus* he saw himself as an opponent of metaphysics. In his important letter to Schlick on August 8, 1932 (Nedo and Ranchetti 1983, pp. 254-255) he declares himself to be a critic of metaphysics in the *Tractatus*:

And perhaps I do not have to tell you that my criticism of metaphysics is also aimed at the metaphysics of our physicists and not only at that of professional philosophers!

But if so, Wittgenstein cannot be interpreted as trying to introduce a metaphysical vision through the back door of "showing." However "resolutely" we interpret the *Tractatus*, we cannot take it to put forward metaphysical views, however indirectly.

What is most conspicuously excluded according to Wittgenstein are all statements about language, or more accurately, about the meanings of the expressions of our language—that is, all propositions about how our language is related to the world and the logical relations based on these language-world relations. I will call these meaning relations semantical even though this term may be historically inaccurate (compare section 6). The inexpressible thus includes, among other things, rules of inference (5.132), truth (in the form of Frege's *The True* 4.442), logical forms (4.12), tautologicity (5.1362), and above all the limits of language (preface, paragraphs 3-4). This inexpressibility of semantical and logical relations according to the *Tractatus* was one of the main aspects of Wittgenstein's book that worried its readers in the Vienna Circle (see for example Köhler 1991, p.136).

Now the crucial theses of the *Tractatus*, for instance his statements about the picture theory, concern precisely language-world relations. Hence what Wittgenstein is saying in 6.54 is nothing more and nothing less than a simple corollary to the main doctrines of the bulk of the *Tractatus*. For a truly perceptive reader, proposition 6.54 does not come as a surprise, for it fol-

lows in the most literal sense from what he had said earlier in the book. In other words, what statements like 6.54 add up to is not that in the bulk of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is expressing something different from the logico-semantic theory that he seems to be expounding. What Wittgenstein is assuming is that semantics is—literally—inexpressible, and that for this reason his attempt to express it is *stricto sensu* nonsensical. Thus, there is no contradiction in maintaining both that Wittgenstein's statements in 6.54 have to be understood literally and that what he had put forward earlier in the book is a logico-semantic theory.

And one can assert more than that. What 6.54 shows is not that the *Tractatus* cannot be read as a logico-semantic treatise. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's words in 6.54 cannot be understood unless the thrust of his work is taken to be logical and semantic in nature. Reading Wittgenstein in this way is to understand him much more literally (resolutely?) than the New Wittgensteinians do. Wittgenstein is not saying that the message of the *Tractatus* is something different from a semantic and logical theory because it is literally taken as nonsense. He is saying that what is said in the book is nonsense because it is a semantic and logical theory.

Thus, we can safely take the logical and semantic views of the *Tractatus* in the Austinian sense in which these doctrines mean what they say. For what Wittgenstein disavows in 6.54 is not what he expounds in his book, but the literal expressibility of his own doctrines. The *Tractatus* is an exercise in logical semantics, but it does its job by means of showing rather than saying. And, according to Wittgenstein, that very unsayability is a consequence of his logico-semantic theory.

A word on terminology may be in order here. When the "New Wittgensteinians" call their reading of 6.54 "resolute," they are indulging in rhetorical trickery. Wittgenstein's book is written in German, and on a *prima facie* reading we have to understand their meaning in the same way as any German text. When Wittgenstein then says that the bulk of the *Tractatus* is nonsense, the question is not whether we should take his words "resolutely" or not, but what there is in Wittgenstein's subject matter that makes it nonsense according to his own views. And the answer to this question is given loud and clear by Wittgenstein's own words. If one wants to speak of resoluteness here, it is best shown by taking the main content of Wittgenstein's book at its obviously intended normal meaning. We have to listen to Wittgenstein as the "logician" that he told Malcolm that he was in writing the *Tractatus*. Such a reading is not only "resolute." It is doubly resolute. It not only takes Wittgenstein's concluding words in the *Tractatus* literally—it takes the entire book literally.

In a systematic perspective there nevertheless seems to remain a problem if one maintains that semantics is inexpressible while at the same time one puts forward logico-semantic views. I have highlighted this problem on earlier occasions by speaking of "semanticists without semantics." But the problem is Wittgenstein's, not his interpreters'. There is plenty of evidence (some of it reviewed below) that Wittgenstein believed in the ineffa-

bility of semantics. From this it does not follow that an interpreter has to do the same in order to understand him.

3. Wittgenstein as a Member of the Ineffability Tradition

IN ANY CASE, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN VIRTUALLY PREDICTABLE THAT A THINKER IN Wittgenstein's historical situation should have thought that semantics is ineffable. In a long-range perspective, there is a trend or tradition in logical theory that maintains this ineffability. The view its members represent is variously called "logic as language" (van Heijenoort), "language as universal medium" (Hintikka, Gadamer), the "lingua universalis" view (Leibniz, Frege), and a universalist view of logic and language (Hintikka). This tradition is discussed in Hintikka 1997.

The universalist view owes nothing to any mystical element in Wittgenstein's thinking, any more than it is grounded on mysticism in Frege or Quine. It is an element of a perfectly sober view of language and its relation to reality. There is a strand in Wittgenstein's thought that can perhaps be called mystical, but this mysticism is neither the reason for the ineffability doctrine nor a corollary to it. The closest connection between the two is that the ineffability view opened the possibility of a certain kind of mystical stance.

In different ways and for different reasons, Wittgenstein's two main background figures, Frege and Russell, both entertained a variant of the ineffability view. It should therefore be no surprise that Wittgenstein, too, should have done so. What makes the difference between him and his predecessors and what makes his statements so striking is the boldness of his thinking and of his ways of expressing himself. (The same boldness is manifested in other views of attempted elimination of identity and his thesis of the tautological character of logical truths.) Frege and Russell had noted some of the particular problems into which the ineffability view leads in special cases, such as the indefinability of truth of simple objects (Russell). For another instance, when Frege ran into the expressibility problem in explaining the semantical basis of his formal system, he simply appealed to his readers' antecedent understanding of what he meant. But neither of these two earlier thinkers had the temerity to raise the question of the expressibility of the entire enterprise that would later be called logical semantics. What distinguishes Wittgenstein's attitude toward the ineffability of semantics from that of his predecessors is thus not his mysticism, but his *chutzpa*.

One thing that this result implies is that it is futile to try to understand Wittgenstein's radical ineffability view by comparing it with the timid attempts of his predecessors to cope with particular consequences of the same view. (What Frege was doing in his comments on the concept of horse is not a concept how or on how he could only elucidate his basic concepts but not define them is a rearguard action, not a frontal assault on the problem he bequeathed to Wittgenstein.)

How integrally Wittgenstein was a member of the universalist tradition is perhaps best illustrated by pointing out that a small-scale version of the ineffability view was expressed loud and clear by Russell. In his *Theory*

of *Knowledge*, he maintains, among other things, the indefinability of the objects of acquaintance, which include logical forms and the inexpressibility of their existence.

Later, the ineffability of semantics was maintained by members of the Vienna Circle, admittedly in some cases—especially by Carnap—more as a methodological maxim than as a strict limitation on theoretical semantics. There was in fact a term among them for that semantical self-censorship. It was called the formal mode of speech (*formale Redeweise*) as distinguished from the material mode of speech (*inhaltliche Redeweise*). It is to be noted, though, that some other members of the Vienna Circle, especially Neurath, did believe in the impossibility of logical semantics.

These uncertainties in the attitude of the Vienna Circle toward logical semantics are reflected also on the terminological level. The contrast between what was meant by “syntax” and by “semantics” was much less sharp than what it became later. For instance, in spite of its title, Carnap’s *Logical Syntax of Language* contains concepts and arguments that we would now call semantical. Indeed, at one time he thought of calling it *Semantik* but was deterred from doing so by the negative attitude of his fellow members of the Circle to semantics in our sense. What is even more relevant to the saga of Wittgenstein is that all theorizing about language-world relations was considered “metaphysical” by several members of the Vienna Circle.

4. A Resolute Misreading of Wittgenstein

PERHAPS THE BEST WAY OF BRINGING OUT WITTGENSTEIN’S OWN INTENDED INTERPRETATION of 6.54 is to begin with what New Wittgensteinians have to say about his views. For this purpose, let us examine the alleged prize specimen of their evidence that James Conant has repeatedly flaunted. He claims (2000, p.175) that

Wittgenstein says of Carnap that he failed to understand the passage [in question, namely *Tractatus* 6.54], and therefore failed to understand “the fundamental conception of the whole book.”

Unfortunately for Conant, what Wittgenstein says in the passage in question is precisely the contrary to what Conant claims. Conant is quoting Wittgenstein out of context. The relevant context (in a wide sense of the word) is the correspondence Wittgenstein had in 1932 with Schlick. This correspondence is discussed in my 1993 paper “Ludwig’s Apple Tree.” It was unintentionally prompted by the offprint of Carnap’s paper on physicalistic language as the universal language of science that its author sent to Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein read it and flew into a rage. Why? What had Carnap done wrong? Contrary to what commentators might lead you to expect, it was not because Wittgenstein disagreed with Carnap or because Carnap had failed to understand him, but because Carnap was (according to Wittgenstein) plagiarizing him. Well, not literally plagiarizing, for Wittgenstein had not published anything about the relevant new ideas of his. (As I have shown, together with Merrill Hintikka [Hintikka and Hintikka 1986], these new ideas

included prominently the primacy of physicalistic language.) But Carnap was using his ideas without permission and without acknowledgement, Wittgenstein averred, so that when he himself ultimately got around to publishing his ideas, people would believe that he is plagiarizing Carnap or at best offering reheated versions of Carnap's ideas.

Schlick tried to act as a peacemaker. He informed Carnap of Wittgenstein's charges. Carnap responded by saying that he had not heard Wittgenstein expounding the relevant new ideas of his and that there was nothing in the *Tractatus* about physicalism. When Wittgenstein heard this, he was not pacified but on the contrary got even angrier. He began to accuse Carnap of also plagiarizing the *Tractatus*. He listed a number of explicit ideas that Carnap allegedly got from the *Tractatus* but which Carnap was using without any acknowledgment. One of them was, according to Wittgenstein, the exclusive preference of the formal mode of speech. As Wittgenstein put it in his letter to Schlick dated on August 8, 1932 (Ranchetti and Nedo 1983, pp. 254-255):

You know very well yourself that Carnap is not taking any step beyond me when he is in favor of the formal and against the "material mode of speech" [*inhaltliche Redeweise*]; and I cannot imagine that [he] has misunderstood the last few propositions of the *Tractatus*—and hence the basic idea [*Grundgedanke*] of the entire book—so completely [as not to realize it himself].

The ellipsis that I have restored is obvious in context. Wittgenstein must have assumed that Carnap had understood his point in order to be able to accuse him of plagiarism. As in the other case of alleged plagiarism, what Wittgenstein is claiming here is not that Carnap had misunderstood the last few propositions of the *Tractatus*. He is saying, insultingly, that even the poor pedestrian Carnap could not have misunderstood them. Apparently, Carnap accomplished what even Carnap was not, according to Wittgenstein, capable of doing. What Wittgenstein is saying in the quoted passage is that the idea of a formal mode of speech is part and parcel of what is stated in the last few propositions of the *Tractatus*. Now, the Carnapian emphasis on the *formale Redeweise* is but a way of emphasizing the inexpressibility of semantics.

Thus, it is not only the case that the quoted passage fails to show that Carnap misunderstood Wittgenstein's message in the *Tractatus*. This passage offers conclusive evidence to the effect that Carnap's overall interpretation is wrong in that the Wittgensteinian doctrine of nonsense is but a variant of the view of the ineffability of semantics.

For us, though not for Wittgenstein, what the "nonsensical" propositions of the *Tractatus* present is a *Lehre*, that is, a theory. But it is in effect a theory of meaning, and all such theories are according to Wittgenstein's lights impossible to express in language.

The poverty of the evidence that the New Wittgensteinians are presenting for their interpretation could be illustrated by other examples. It makes it difficult to discuss their views in a serious scholarly manner. Perhaps the most concise scholarly verdict on the new Wittgenstein industry can therefore be adapted from Oscar Wilde, who characterized a foxhunt as

the unspeakable pursuing the uneatable. Here, we are witnessing the unspeakable pursuing the unspeakable.

5. Carnap's Irresolute Misunderstanding of Wittgenstein

IT TURNS OUT THAT CARNAP DID MISUNDERSTAND WITTGENSTEIN'S CLOSING REMARKS in the *Tractatus*, but in a way that does not help Conant in the least. In Carnap's copy of Wittgenstein's letter to Schlick cited above, he puts a question mark next to the quoted sentence. It is not hard to understand Carnap's puzzlement. Because of the confusion of syntax and semantics, Carnap took Wittgenstein to say in the *Tractatus* that we cannot even speak of the syntax of our language. In other words, he took Wittgenstein to deny in the *Tractatus* all self-referential use of language, not just to deny semantic self-reference. This is likely to be mistaken. Among other missed clues, Carnap was oblivious to the fact that it was Wittgenstein that brought to prominence the idea of a logical syntax of language. Because of this misunderstanding, Carnap thought that he was going beyond the *Tractatus* when he began to use methods by means of which we can speak of the purely formal (syntactical) features of language. These means were in the first place those developed by Hilbert in his metamathematics and made more explicit by Gödel in his technique of Gödel numbering. Carnap's hope initially was to use such syntactical methods to devise a universal language of science in which one could also theorize about that language itself. *The Logical Syntax of Language* was the best he could do to realize this dream, and he was forced to recognize the limitations of his project only by the results of Gödel and Tarski. Carnap's preference of the formal mode of speech was less an echo of the *Tractatus* than a lesson he had learned from Hilbert and Tarski.

However, this does not make any difference to the interpretation of Wittgenstein's words in his letter to Schlick, which incontrovertibly link his conception of the unsayable and the inexpressibility of semantics. If anything, they show that this link was so obvious to *his* mind that he could not help projecting it to Carnap, too.

6. There is No Fundamental Difference Between "Logical" and "Metaphysical" Readings of the *Tractatus*

WITTGENSTEIN INTERPRETATION HAS ALSO BEEN AFFLICTED BY A MISUNDERSTANDING THAT is similar to the Vienna Circle's belief that all semantics is inevitably metaphysical. Some commentators seem to think that a "logical" interpretation of the *Tractatus* cannot have anything to do with metaphysics, in the sense of having to do with the reality our language can be used to speak of. This kind of view is based on a radical misunderstanding of what logic and logical semantics are about. Logic does not deal only with the properties of linguistic expressions or with their relationships to each other, such as inferential relations. Everything in logic is ultimately based on the ways in which our language, prominently involving logical constants, is connected with reality, ways which enable language to represent that reality. I doubt that it is appropriate to call all discourse about reality (even in the context of logical theory) "metaphysical." But if we allow such usage, we end up saying that

logic and all semantics are inextricably involved with metaphysics. For instance, any language imposes certain conditions on the kind of reality it can be used to describe.

Hence, any attempt to make an informative distinction between logical and metaphysical interpretations of the *Tractatus* is mistaken or at least misleading. Examples can be found aplenty to illustrate this fact.

Again, a telling example is more eloquent here than a hundred citations. An important and vivid example of this interwovenness of logic and "metaphysics" is offered by Wittgenstein's conception of logic in the *Tractatus*. According to a common view, logic deals with the most general features of the world. For the author of the *Tractatus*, logic deals with the most particular features of reality. This is because logic deals with logical forms and because all these logical forms are composed of the logical forms of simple objects. These forms do not enjoy independent existence apart from the objects whose logical forms they are. And the simple objects are of course the most particular entities that there can be. All states of affairs are combinations of such simple objects.

But such a view makes sense only on the metaphysical assumption that the reality ("world") of which Wittgenstein speaks is, objectively speaking, constituted from simple objects—simple in the sense of not being further analyzable but not simple in the sense of not having a structure.

Another metaphysical assumption that has to be recognized is that the simple objects postulated in the *Tractatus* are not restricted to particulars but include properties and relations. The contrary used to be maintained by the likes of Anscombe (1959) and Copi (1958), but the publication of Wittgenstein's *Notebooks 1914-16* and Lee (1980) put an end to this misinterpretation.

7. "Ethics and Semantics Are One"

ADMITTEDLY, WITTGENSTEIN'S VIEWS ON THE UNSAYABLE ARE CONNECTED WITH HIS ETHICAL stance. But the connection is different from what it is typically taken to be and does not gainsay the connection between semantics and ineffability. As I have suggested, Wittgenstein's leading idea was the same as Karl Kraus's. For both of them, the test case of ethical authenticity was the authenticity of language. Here, for Wittgenstein, the inexpressible internal boundaries of language that exclude what cannot be said do not have only an intellectual significance. They have also an ethical significance. They mark the limits of honest, unaffected discourse.

This is what Wittgenstein means when he calls ethics transcendental, that is, something that deals with the limits of language, rather than transcendent, that is, what lies beyond those limits. Thus, the semantical theory of the *Tractatus* serves ipso facto ethical purposes. Wittgenstein says that "ethics and aesthetics are one" (6.421), which is not much more than an echo of G. E. Moore. He could have said more poignantly, "ethics and semantics are one." They are both inexpressible for the same reason. As I have asked elsewhere, isn't the *Tractatus* at bottom nothing more than a sermon on the text, "Let what you say be

simply 'yes' and 'no'; anything more than this comes from evil" (*Matthew* 5.37)? Isn't this biblical injunction echoed by *Tractatus* 4.023: "A proposition must determine the reality so that one only need to say 'yes' or 'no'?" Faithful, presuppositionless representation of reality is not only an aim of positivistic philosophers. It was also a self-imposed ethical requirement of the Russian realistic writers and artists whom Wittgenstein admired. ♢

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