Atomism, Contextualism, and the Burden of Making Sense: 
Cavellian Themes in the *Tractatus*¹

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Abstract. The main claim of this paper is one that many readers will find surprising, namely that some central aspects of the *Tractatus’* conception of language can be illuminated with the help of the philosophy of Stanley Cavell. One reason such a claim will seem surprising is that the *Tractatus* as standardly read is advancing an atomistic conception of language. I will be rejecting such a reading. I begin with an overview of the *Tractatus’* contextualism and of the atomistic conception of language that it opposes. Then I show how some Cavellian ideas can help us to make good sense of the Tractarian view. I show (a) that according to Tractarian contextualism, language requires our personal contribution, i.e. the exercise of our own judgment. I suggest (b) that a desire to evade the need of this contribution is at least part of what explains why we are naturally attracted to the atomistic approach and find the Tractarian view disappointing. And finally (c), I spell out the sense in which such a conception of what is involved in the use of language reveals it to be characterized by a pervasive ethical dimension.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to shed light on certain features of the *Tractatus’* vision of language by drawing on some aspects of the philosophy of Stanley Cavell. I will focus, more specifically, on the form of semantic contextualism that the *Tractatus* embraces and connect it to two Cavellian ideas: (1) the idea that language requires our own personal contribution: each of us must take personal responsibility for keeping language alive; and (2) the idea that philosophical theorizing, whether skeptical or foundationalist, is mainly driven by a desire to evade this responsibility. I shall argue

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Third Symposium of the International Ludwig Wittgenstein Society. I am grateful to the audience for their comments.
that these two ideas can improve our understanding of the *Tractatus*’ contextualism—and thus, more generally, of the *Tractatus*’ conception of language—in three mutually related respects. In the first place (a), they help us to see that language, according to the Tractarian contextualist picture, requires the exercise of our judgment, our personal contribution. In the second place (b), they suggest a diagnosis of why we tend to find the *Tractatus*’ contextualism unsatisfying, and by the same token, of why we are attracted to the atomistic conception of the compositionality of language that the *Tractatus* seeks to dislodge. And finally (c), they help to bring out the sense in which the exercise of our very capacity to speak and understand a language involves, according to the contextualist view elaborated by the *Tractatus*, a pervasive ethical dimension.

Cavell has elaborated the ideas that I will exploit in this paper by drawing, especially, on the philosophy of later Wittgenstein; he rarely mentions the *Tractatus* and never, to my knowledge, as a significant source for his views. By arguing that the *Tractatus*’ conception of language can be illuminated by means of the two aforementioned Cavellian ideas, I will commit myself to the thesis that some central Cavellian themes can already be seen to be operative in the work of early Wittgenstein. In so doing, I will go beyond what Cavell has been prepared to acknowledge.² This is not meant to deny that part of what Cavell finds in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and deems of first importance for his own philosophical views, cannot in fact be found in the *Tractatus*. However, an investigation of this issue—which would require a discussion of the discontinuities between early and later

² This is not to say that anything I say in this paper is something that Cavell has committed himself to deny. Cavell’s own handful of scattered remarks about the *Tractatus* are extremely cautious about leaving open the extent to which there may or may not be a significant continuity between Wittgenstein’s later and early work (see e.g. Cavell 1979: 3).
2. Tractarian Contextualism

Let me begin by laying out what I take to be the main features of Tractarian contextualism. The central tenet is that there is an essential interdependence between propositional and sub-propositional meaning: neither can be seen to be conceptually prior to the other. The *Tractatus*’ commitment to the dependence of the meanings of words on the meanings of the propositions in which they occur is most clearly expressed in the manner in which it inherits Frege’s context principle. The context principle, in one of the formulations that appear in Frege’s *Grundlagen*, states that “[…] it is only in the context of a proposition that words have any meaning […]” (Frege 1953: 73). The *Tractatus* reformulates this principle in its own terminology, most explicitly in the 3.3s, but also in other parts of the book. Here is a selection of relevant passages:

[O]nly in the context of the proposition has a name meaning. (TLP 1922: 3.3)
An expression has meaning only in a proposition. […] (3.314)
It is impossible for words to occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition. (2.0122)

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3 I examine in more detail the issues discussed in this section in Bronzo 2011.
According to the *Tractatus*, a sub-sentential linguistic expression is a logical unit, what the *Tractatus* calls a “symbol” as a opposed to a mere “sign”, only to the extent that it contributes to the expression of some complete, intelligible propositional content. The meaning of the whole is always already presupposed by the meanings of the parts. But in addition to this dependence of the parts on the whole there is also, according to the *Tractatus*, a simultaneous dependence that runs in the opposite direction. A proposition, for the *Tractatus*, means what it does in virtue of the meanings of its constituent words and the way they are combined. Sub-propositional compositional structure is, for the *Tractatus*, a constitutive feature of language. This is expressed, for example, in the following passages:

The proposition is articulate. (3.141)

I conceive the proposition—like Frege and Russell—as a function of the expressions contained in it. (3.318)

[...] One understands it if one understands its constituent parts. (4.024)

The translation of one language into another is not a process of translating each proposition of the one into a proposition of the other, but only the constituent parts of the propositions are translated. [...] (4.025)

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4 Cf. TLP 1922: 3.31-3.326. For a discussion of the sign/symbol distinction in the *Tractatus* which is in line with the exegetical approach adopted in this paper, see Conant 2002: 398–405.

5 I shall ignore, for the sake of simplicity, the role that meaningful words play in linguistic constructions to which the *Tractatus* assigns a stable and determinate use in the language, even though they do not count as “meaningful propositions” (*sinnvolle Sätze*), because they are not used for stating that something is the case. Such constructions, which the *Tractatus* does not regard as “nonsensical” (*unsinnige*), include tautologies and contradictions (discussed in the 6.1s), mathematical equations (6.2s), the laws of physics (6.3s), definitions and rules of translation (3.343), and “elucidations” of primitive signs (3.263). I believe that these cases are in tension merely with the letter of the Tractarian formulations of the context principle in 3.3 and 3.314, but not with their spirit, properly understood. For a discussion of (some of) the aforementioned cases that does not take them to be incompatible with the *Tractatus*’ fundamental contextualist commitments, see Kremer 2002; Diamond 2011: § 2; Diamond, forthcoming: § 3.
It is essential to propositions, that they can communicate a new sense to us. (4.027)

A proposition must communicate a new sense with old words. […] (4.03)

These passages should suffice to show that the *Tractatus* is firmly committed to the compositional nature of language. To some, it has seemed that this commitment is incompatible with the *Tractatus* equally firm endorsement of the context principle. But the *Tractatus* is quite explicit about the fact that it considers the two commitments to be not only mutually compatible, but positively interdependent. A revealing passage, in this respect, is the following:

The thing is independent, in so far as it can occur in all possible circumstances, but this form of independence is a form of connection with the atomic fact, a form of dependence. (It is impossible for words to occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition.) (2.0122)

This remark appears quite early in the book, before the topic of language is officially introduced; but the parenthetical observation makes clear that what Wittgenstein says about “things” at the ontological level is meant to apply as well to words in their representing relation to the world. A meaningful word is independent from any particular propositional context in which it occurs, because it may occur in other propositional contexts and make, in those contexts, the same kind of logical contribution; but this form of independence is at the same time a form of dependence, because the word, in order to have the meaning that it has—in order to be the “symbol” that it is—must be a working part of some proposition or other.
We can sum up the Tractarian view of the relationship between propositional and sub-propositional meaning by saying that the *Tractatus* regards the meaningful proposition as an *organic unity*: the proposition is essentially articulated into logical parts and means what it does in virtue of the meanings of its parts and the way they are combined; but these parts cannot be what they are except as parts of the appropriate wholes.

A significant aspect of this form of contextualism is that it rules out what is now known in the literature as the “substantial” conception of nonsense, and entails what is called the “austere” conception of nonsense. According to the austere conception of nonsense, the only reason why a sentence can be nonsensical is because of a failure on our part to assign a meaning to some of its constituent expressions. According to the substantial conception of nonsense, on the other hand, in addition to this privative kind of nonsense, there is also a positive and more interesting kind of nonsense, which results when a sentence, in virtue of the meanings that have been assigned to its parts, violates the requirements laid down by some theory of sense. For example, a sentence could be substantially nonsensical because the meaningful words of which it is composed are combined in a way that transgresses the requirements specified by a theory of logical syntax. I will here assume that Jim Conant, Cora Diamond and the other proponents of the “resolute reading” are right in attributing to the *Tractatus* the austere conception of nonsense and the correlative rejection of the very idea of a theory of sense. Referring to their work for proper textual support, I will here simply mention what I take to be the most direct piece of textual evidence for this attribution, i.e. section 5.4733, where Wittgenstein writes:

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6 These terms have been introduced by James Conant; see Conant 2002.
7 See e.g. Diamond 1991: 73-144, 179-204; Conant 2002. For an overview of the debate on the resolute reading, see Bronzo 2012.
very possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no meaning to some of its constituent parts.

The idea of sentences that have no sense because of the meanings that have been assigned to their constitutive parts is here explicitly excluded.

I stated above that the austere conception of nonsense is entailed by the form of contextualism endorsed by the *Tractatus*. The ground for this claim should now be clear. If words have meaning only in the context of meaningful propositions, then there is no such thing as meaningful words combined in logically illegitimate, nonsensical ways. The meaningfulness of words presupposes the meaningfulness of the propositions of which they are parts. The Tractarian framework admits only two relevant possibilities: (i) meaningful propositions composed of meaningful words; or (ii) meaningless sentences composed of meaningless words.\(^8\) If a sentence has no sense, its meaninglessness goes all the way down to its constituent parts. There is no layer of sub-propositional meaning and logically determinate syntactical combination that is there regardless of the meaningfulness of the whole proposition and that could serve as a basis for the application of a theory of meaningful discourse.

3. The lure of atomism and the inescapability of judgment

The sketch of Tractarian contextualism that I provided in the previous section will have to suffice for the purpose of setting up the topic of the present paper. My next

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\(^8\) As I noted already, I am ignoring the sort of cases mentioned in note 5. A consideration of those cases leaves the *Tractatus*’ commitment to the austere conception of nonsense completely unaffected, since none of them shows that the *Tractatus* admits the possibility of nonsensical propositions (*unsinnige Sätze*) composed of meaningful words.
Step will be to provide an outline of a view that is ruled out by the contextualism of the *Tractatus*, namely an atomistic view of the meanings of words, which gives an atomistic construal of the compositionality of language. With that outline in view, I will then draw on Cavell to make the three points that I anticipated above—i.e., (a) to bring out what Tractarian contextualism demands of each of us, and thus what the alternative atomistic picture contrives to make it appear need not be demanded of us; (b) to recommend a diagnosis of why we are naturally attracted to the atomistic view, and thus of why we naturally resist and are disappointed by Tractarian contextualism; and finally (c), to specify the ethical character of the demand in question—one that the *Tractatus* confers on each language user.

The fundamental claim of the atomistic view is that words have meanings prior to and independently of the propositions in which they may occur. Once the meanings of the basic lexical items of the language are fixed (leaving to one side the vexing question of how this is supposed to have been accomplished), then the rules of the language, be they syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic (and leaving, again, to one side the vexing question of how these are supposed to have been established), are held to determine which combinations of words constitute a meaningful proposition and what the meaning of any such proposition is. The atomistic conception of the meanings of words appears therefore to open up the possibility of a *theory of language*, conceived as the specification of the totality of the rules of the language, which enables us to derive the meaning or the nonsensicality of any sentence from the meanings of its constituent terms and their mode of combination (in addition, perhaps, to a consideration of some pragmatic factors).

I argued elsewhere that there are good reasons to think that the atomistic conception of the meanings of words is a *fantasy*, and that some of these reasons can
be elaborated from remarks contained in the *Tractatus*. 9 I will not try, on this occasion, to rehearse or improve that discussion. Instead, I will ask the reader to concede, for the sake of argument, that the atomistic view of sub-propositional meaning is a fantasy, so as to allow me to raise the question that leads to my present agenda: Assuming that the atomistic view is a fantasy, why are we attracted to it?

It is at this juncture that the two Cavellian ideas that I mentioned at the beginning of this paper are useful. For Cavell, the deepest source of our attraction to philosophical theories of language is always the same, regardless of whether such theories aim to show us that language does not rest on a proper foundation, or whether they invite us to conclude, the skeptical fashion, that though such foundations are indeed required, they are regrettably unavailable. 10 The source of our attraction to such theories, according to Cavell, is our desire to transfer the burden of responsibility onto language—to be able to picture language as capable of doing the whole job of meaning something all on its own, without any need for a contribution on our part. As Cavell puts it,

I must empty my contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning (Cavell 1989: 57).

The atomistic view that I outlined above aspires precisely to be able to show that language can do the whole job by itself. Once the meanings of words have been fixed and the relevant rules of the language are in place, whether what we say and hear

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9 See Bronzo 2011.

10 The difference between foundationalist and skeptical theories, for Cavell, is rather superficial: they are both manifestations of the same desire to evade our responsibility for our speech. This emerges clearly in Cavell’s idiosyncratic use of the word “skepticism”, which he wants to cover what we might call the entire skeptical problematic: not only the philosophical positions that aim to show that we cannot really know a certain range of phenomena (the external world, other minds, etc.), but also all the positions that seek to provide a direct refutation of such conclusions (see e.g. Cavell 1979: 46).
makes sense or not, and if it does, which sense it makes, are issues that are completely determined by the language in a way that does not constitutively involve any active role on the part of a speaker or hearer. The user of language is cast in a position, we might say, of mere passivity: the only task which remains for her to perform is to acknowledge the forms of sense or nonsense already achieved by the self-standing structure of language.

The contextualism of the Tractatus seeks to blocks any such bottom-up account of the meanings of sentences. The rules of the language cannot issue their verdicts on the basis of the meanings of the individual words and their mode of combination, since the meanings of sub-propositional expressions, as well as the logical significance of the way they are combined, depend in turn on the meanings of the complete propositions in which they occur. Someone looking for a certain sort of account for the source of meaning will be obliged to conclude that the Tractarian “account” is circular. But I have sought to bring out that the Tractarian position is patently circular. What this circularity accomplishes is to shift the burden onto the language-user—the burden of having to exercise her own judgment as to what makes sense, what doesn’t, and what means what. This is a form of judgment that she has to exercise, ultimately, on no firmer basis than a trust in its genuineness, while being aware of the fact that this genuineness might at each point turn out to be only apparent.

11 It is worth emphasizing that Tractarian contextualism, as I described it, equally blocks any form of top-down derivation of the meanings of words from the meanings of sentences: propositional and sub-propositional meanings are construed as interdependent notions, neither of which can be unilaterally derived from the other. Moreover, any attempt to extend such a form of contextualism with an eye to taking into account the sorts of contexts in which sentences are used—if it seeks to remains faithful to the spirit of the Tractarian position—will be obliged to rule out any form of top-down derivation of the meanings of sentences from the relevant features of their contexts (e.g., the unilateral derivation of the meanings of sentences from their antecedently given inferential relations, or from the antecedently specifiable properties of the real-life contexts in which they are employed).
Let me illustrate this point by means of a Tractarian example. Suppose somebody comes up with the sentence: “Socrates is identical”. According to the atomistic view, the logical segmentation of this linguistic construction, the meanings of the constituent parts, and the logical significance of their mode of combination, are all issues that are determined prior to and independently of the meaning of the whole proposition. Hence we are driven to an account of the logical features of the sentence which runs along the following lines. The sentence is made up of three logical units: “Socrates”, “is” and “identical”. The word “Socrates” and the word “is” are, respectively, a proper name and the copula, and they have here the same meanings that they have in sentences such as “Socrates is wise”. The word “identical”, moreover, has the same meaning as the one that it has in sentences such as “Socrates is identical to the teacher of Plato”. The sentence as a whole predicates “being identical”, thus understood, of the man Socrates; and the result is a piece of substantial nonsense, a transgression, say, of the laws of logical syntax, which dictate that we cannot put what is designated in logical notation by the identity sign in a place that belongs to a one-place first-level concept. Therefore, according to this view, the nonsensicality of the sentence is mechanically determined by the rules of the language on the basis of the meanings of the constituent words and their mode of combination.

According to the contextualist view recommended by the Tractatus, on the other hand, the sentence must be approached in a very different way. We may very well acknowledge that the sentence is composed of familiar words combined in a familiar way. For example, the orthographic or phonetic unit “Socrates”, what the Tractatus calls the sign “Socrates”, can occur in other sentences where it symbolizes as the name of a certain philosopher. But is the sign “Socrates”, here and now, in this
sentence, symbolizing as it does in those other sentences? Well, only if the whole sentence expresses a complete intelligible thought about the famous philosopher, and does so in virtue of the specific logical contribution of the sign “Socrates” to the whole. But now, does the sentence in fact express such a thought? Is the person who is uttering it saying, of the philosopher Socrates, that he has a certain property, perhaps something like being “unique” or “incomparable”? Or is she taking for granted that we know whom she claims Socrates to be identical to? Or is she saying something different altogether, using the English words in rather idiosyncratic ways? And is she expressing an intelligible thought at all, rather than the mere illusion of a thought, produced by the familiarity of the words and the grammatical constructions that she is employing? The Tractarian view implies that all these issues can only be decided, ultimately, by exercising our own judgment. In order to make sense of what other people say, and in order to use our own words to make sense, we cannot but rely on our own fallible capacity to use the language. In the Tractarian terminology: recognizing the symbol in the sign, and conferring a method of symbolization on our signs, is something that we have to do. Language itself, as if beyond me, cannot exclusively take over the responsibility for meaning.13

12 Consider for example the three following exchanges:

A: Did you say that Socrates is or is not identical to the teacher of Plato?
B: Socrates is identical.

A: Did you say that Socrates or Aristotle is identical to the teacher of Plato?
B: Socrates is identical

A: Did you say that Socrates is identical or similar to the teacher of Plato?
B: Socrates is identical.

In each of these cases, “Socrates is identical” expresses (elliptically) a determinate content; in each case, it says something different.

13 It is perhaps worth clarifying the logical relationship between the two points that I have made so far. The idea that using a language requires the exercise of our own judgment does not depend upon (and should not be made hostage to) the additional, diagnostic claim, according to which our attraction to the atomistic conception of language can be explained in terms of the desire to evade the need for such an exercise. One can endorse the former claim, without ever broaching this diagnostic terrain.
4. The ethical dimension of language use in early Wittgenstein

So far I have argued that the contextualism of the Tractatus conveys a picture of language in which each language-user is required to make her own personal contribution to the language, to participate in it, we might say, in the first person, exercising her own capacity for judgment and taking responsibility for it, in the face of its fallibility. The atomistic view that the Tractatus opposes emerged as an attempt to evade this responsibility by means of philosophical theorizing. I suggested, moreover, that the prospect of being able to make such an evasion seems so much as possible accounts for much of the attractiveness of the atomistic view, and for much of our resistance to the form of contextualism recommended by the Tractatus. I will now attempt to spell out the sense in which the Tractarian view places an ethical demand on the language-user and construes the use of language as imbued by a pervasive ethical dimension.

The basis for appealing to ethical notions in characterizing the Tractarian conception of language lies in the fact that the use of language, according to this conception, involves a certain posture of the will. We must be willing to exercise our judgment, and we must resist the allure of fantasies that appear to be able to show that this necessity can be effectively evaded. There is thus room for a sort of virtue and vice of the will of the language-user.

We might now wonder what is specific about this sort of virtue and vice, as compared to the virtues and vices that are typically discussed in moral theories. Two

Moreover, the Cavellian explanation that I have recommended may peacefully coexist with alternative diagnoses. Some of the people in the audience of the conference where a version of this paper was presented, for example, suggested that it is possible to elaborate a story connecting the attractiveness of the atomistic view to the rise of modern science.
features, here, appear noteworthy. In the first place, the necessity of the right posture of the will, in our present case, is something ubiquitous: it is not called for specifically when dealing with particular sorts of issue or subject matter (as is arguably the case with virtues such as loyalty, justice, or courage). Rather, it is called for anytime we exercise our capacity to use our language.\(^\text{14}\) In the second place, the relevant kind of virtue is here intimately connected with the problematic of self-knowledge. The desire to evade the need to make our personal contribution to language can be operative only if one is less than fully aware of the true nature of such a desire; and theories of language which appear to make any such contribution superfluous can be attractive only to the extent that one remains unaware of the way in which, if properly thought through, such theories collapse into incoherence. So the process of reorienting our will in the manner recommended by the Tractatus’ conception of language is equally a process of achieving clarity regarding the nature of our own thoughts and desires.

My suggestion, then, is that the two features that I have just mentioned—its ubiquity and its relation to the problematic of self-knowledge—are constitutive features of the specific kind of ethical demand to which we, as language-users, are subject.

It seems fitting to conclude this paper by showing how it bears on some of the passages in early Wittgenstein in which the topic of the relationship between ethics and language is explicitly broached. The Tractatus tells us that “it is clear that ethics cannot be expressed” (6.421) and that “there can be no ethical propositions” (6.42). Moreover, in the “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein says that he would reject every significant description of ethical value that anybody could possibly suggest, “ab

\(^{14}\)This is compatible with claiming that the necessity of exercising our own capacity for judgment may be explicitly perceived only at certain junctures of our traffic with language.
initio, on the ground of its significance” (LE 1965: 11). For early Wittgenstein, therefore, there is no region of significant language that manages to express ethical contents in virtue of its specific vocabulary. Moreover, given his commitment to the austere conception of nonsense, there is no region of (strictly speaking) nonsensical language that manages to convey (strictly speaking) ineffable ethical insights. By the same token, there is equally no region of language that expresses ethical contents, where these are construed as instances of an “emotive”, as opposed to a “cognitive”, sort of content.\(^{15}\) For early Wittgenstein, ethics is not a subject matter, regardless of whether this is conceived to be effable or ineffable, cognitive or emotive. We can say, therefore, that for early Wittgenstein there is no language of ethics, if what a “language of ethics” is supposed to be is something other than—a separate language from—the language that we already speak in saying whatever we wish to say about anything whatsoever. But I hope to have shown that, for early Wittgenstein, there is indeed something which may be properly termed an ethics of language: all language use participates in an inevitable ethical dimension—one which involves not only our intellectual capacities, but also a posture of our will.

Bibliography


\(^{15}\) For an extensive discussion and defense of these claims, see Donatelli 1998: 67-13; Donatelli 2005; Conant 2005.
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