

## A LOOK AT *TRACTATUS* 6.54

Alex BLUM

One of the most enticing passages in the *Tractatus* is:

- 6.54 “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.”<sup>(1)</sup>

No less a philosopher than Carnap uses 6.54 as a basis for criticising Wittgenstein. He writes:

“In the first place he seems to me to be inconsistent in what he does. He tells us that one cannot make philosophical statements, and that whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent, and then instead of keeping silent he writes a whole philosophical work.”<sup>(2)</sup>

There have been various responses to criticisms in this spirit. Richard McDonough responding to Carnap’s criticism directly,<sup>(3)</sup> points out that the sequence of events differs from the one depicted by Carnap. McDonough then proceeds to argue that nonsensical  $\neq$  meaningless.<sup>(4)</sup>

Another approach, antedating Carnap’s criticism is to benignly ignore the purported difficulties 6.54 allegedly leads to,<sup>(5)</sup> and then to argue,

<sup>(1)</sup> WITTGENSTEIN [7:151]

<sup>(2)</sup> CARNAP [2:435], brought to my attention by McDonough [5:294]. F.P. Ramsey takes Wittgenstein to task as well on a related point. He writes: “... we must then take seriously that ... philosophy ... is nonsense, and not pretend, as Wittgenstein does, that it is important nonsense!” [6:263]. This paper will not deal with Ramsey’s criticism.

<sup>(3)</sup> MCDONOUGH [5:294]

<sup>(4)</sup> MCDONOUGH [5:294-5]

<sup>(5)</sup> E.G. DE LAGUNA [3:30]

much in the spirit of McDonough, that nonsensical  $\neq$  unilluminating. <sup>(6)</sup>

But why should 6.54 present a problem? For at the very worst, we have in 6.54 no more than the semi Epimenides:

6.54' : 6.54' is nonsensical.

From which it follows that 6.54 is either nonsensical or false and hence not true. Damaging but not catastrophic. For its non-truth is consistent with the soundness of the *Tractatus* up to 6.54, if the *Tractatus* up to 6.54 is sound.

Matters don't change significantly, if we instead read 6.54, as:

6.54'' : The *Tractatus*, including 6.54'' is nonsensical.

6.54 is thus meant to be taken as a logical truth, believed provable, I suspect via an argument which parallels the one proving the presumed theoremhood of:

(W) Metaphysics<sup>+</sup> is nonsensical. <sup>(7)</sup>

I don't see an argument for the presumed theoremhood of (W), but I can reconstruct one for the theoremhood of its close cousin:

(W\*) Metaphysics<sup>+</sup> is incorrect (i.e., not true) <sup>(8)</sup>

The argument would go as follows. If Metaphysics<sup>+</sup> is correct, so is the *Tractatus*. And if the *Tractatus* is correct then Metaphysics<sup>+</sup> is incorrect. Thus, if Metaphysics<sup>+</sup> is correct then it is incorrect. Hence (W\*).

Similarly, but less importantly, in the ultimate scheme of things, if most of the *Tractatus* (without 6.54 among others) is correct, then it is incorrect. Hence:

(6.54\*) Most of the *Tractatus* (without 6.54 among others) is incorrect.

*Bar-Ilan University*  
Dept. of Philosophy  
52-100 Ramat-Gan  
ISRAEL

Alex BLUM

<sup>(6)</sup> E.G. BLACK [1:378-386], Hintikka ad Hintikka [4:216-217]

<sup>(7)</sup> I.e., metaphysics plus other condemned portions of philosophy.

<sup>(8)</sup> That is it is either nonsensical or false.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Black, Max. *A Companion to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell, 1964).
- [2] Carnap, Rudolph. "Philosophy and Logical Syntax" in *Readings in Twentieth Century Philosophy*. Edited by Warren Alston and George Nakhnikian. (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1969).
- [3] de Laguna, Theodore. Review of *Tractatus* (1924). Reprinted in *Essays on Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. Edited by Irving M. Copi and Robert W. Beard. (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1967).
- [4] Hintikka, Merrill B. and Hintikka, Jaakko. *Investigating Wittgenstein*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
- [5] McDonough, Richard M. *The Argument of the "Tractatus"*. (N.Y.: SUNY, 1986).
- [6] Ramsey, Frank P. "Philosophy" (1929) in *The Foundations of Mathematics*. (Patterson. N.J.: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1960).
- [7] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). Translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuiness. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).