

Meaning of Life and Nonsense in *Tractatus*

No Answer for No Question and Some Fictional Illuminations

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Abstract

In this paper I clarify Wittgenstein's position on meaning of life as exposed in *Tractatus*, and the related questions about the nonsensical and the ineffable. The problem is as follows: if there is a question that cannot be expressed, does it mean that there is no answer to it or rather that the answers are nonsensical? In order to address this issue, I develop my arguments in three parts: in the first step, I explain Wittgenstein's thesis about the meaning of life as exposed in *Tractatus*, with an especial emphasis on the notions of nonsense and ineffability. In the second one, I go beyond Wittgenstein's explanation in the *Tractatus* and refer to its two possible interpretations: the resolute and the illuminating ones, evaluating their plausibility and accuracy. Lastly, I provide some fictional examples in order to illustrate my explanation and to show, indirectly, what according to Wittgenstein cannot be said.

Keywords: meaning of life, nonsense, absurd, ineffable, mystical, existential crisis

1. Meaning of life in the *Tractatus*

In this section, I explain Wittgenstein's conception of the "meaning of life" in his *Tractatus*, merely for expositive purposes. In his *Tractatus*¹, first published in 1917, the Austrian philosopher stated that the questions about the meaning of life (among others, why do we exist? What is the point of being alive? Why are we here, alive, instead of dead?) cannot be formulated. The reason of this thesis is that the only kind of problems that human beings can define and solve are the problems of natural science (T4.11). These problems refer to physical facts, which are studied and solved by chemistry, biology... The main feature of answerable questions and their answers is that all of them are

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** This paper has been written in the framework of the Research Project: "Cognitive Vulnerability, Verisimilitude and Truth" (FFI2017-84826-P) of the National Program for Research, Development and Innovation of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. I also would like to thank Marta Villar, with whom I discussed the topics of this paper and in whose library (Centro Gallego de Buenos Aires) I gave it its final shape.

¹ The *Tractatus* is quoted as T, followed by aphorism.

measurable, quantitative and objective, contrastable by experience and common to all human being.

However, and this is the main difficulty this inquiry faces, Wittgenstein also stated that even if all possible scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would have not been touched at all (T6.52). That is, scientific research can provide answers to problems such as the composition of a material, when and how the Earth became the Earth, when dinosaurs disappeared, decode the DNA and similar... However, no scientific investigation will answer metaphysical queries, questions related with our beliefs or our feelings, etc. For metaphysical questions are beyond science, they cannot be formulated or solved by any quantitative and measurable method. It is also possible that different human beings have different answers to these questions, so there is no an only and unique answer to them. Moreover, Wittgenstein stated they cannot be answered, because our language is insufficient to express them. Our scientific, objective and quantitative methods cannot grasp them either. These questions belong to what cannot be said: the ineffable.

In order to understand properly Wittgenstein's position on the ineffable, it is important to notice that according to the *Tractatus* the meaning of life is not the only question that cannot be formulated. In this category Wittgenstein also included the question about what a properly correct action is or the classic Kantian question concerning the existence of the World (LE, 6-8)². There also pertain religious questions (on God's existence, life after death; the reality of miracles and similar); ethical questions about the Good (what it is the absolute value, or the experience of feeling absolutely safe..., LE, p. 8); aesthetical questions (if there is absolute beauty...) and, in short, all the metaphysical issues, which ask about the meaning of "being", "absolute"; or give a different, not every-day use, to terms such as "to be" or "good".

In another text, Wittgenstein summarised the main difficulty of such metaphysical questions with this explanation:

“[...] As long as there is a verb 'to be' that looks as though it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to drink'; as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible'; as long as we continue to talk of a 'river of time' and an 'expanse of space', etc., people will keep

² The "Lecture on Ethics" are quoted as LE, followed by number of page.

stumbling over the same cryptic difficulties and staring at something that no explanation seems capable of clearing up” (CV, 22, MS 111 133: 24.8.1931)³.

There is a mistake then when we, human beings, understand and use the verb ‘to be’ as any other verb, or when we think that adjectives such as ‘identical’ or ‘true’ are of the same kind as ‘red’ or ‘big’. The main problem of metaphysical questions is that they have a similar appearance to other questions, but are quite different and can neither be expressed by everyday language nor be solved with scientific methods. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, the query about the meaning of life and all the aforementioned questions cannot be expressed or answered.

It is not exaggerated to consider that, despite his two different periods, Wittgenstein tried to face the difficulties related to these metaphysical questions thorough his entire work. In order to avoid complexity and address one single topic, in this paper I will refer exclusively to the question of the meaning of life in Wittgenstein’s first period, that is, in the *Tractatus*. However, I would like to make clear that, although he defined a different approach to philosophy in his later period, these questions were still of his interest in his late work, as it is going to be mentioned in the final section of this paper.

Another complexity of the early Wittgenstein’s arguments (which will be addressed below, especially in the second section) is that the *Tractatus* itself is composed by metaphysical questions, which are, therefore, ineffable and close to nonsense. That is, Wittgenstein’s first book is an example of these inexpressible questions that cannot be expressed or answered. However, I do not want to anticipate the problems of Wittgenstein’s argumentation before explaining it.

As it has been already stated, according to the *Tractatus*, metaphysical questions are not problems of natural science, because they cannot be formulated or answered (T4.11). That is, the question about the meaning of life (and other philosophical questions related) cannot be formulated. Our words are not enough to express them and when we try to refer to them, we speak nonsense.

The problem is then, and it is the main question of this paper, as follows: if

³ *Culture and Value* is quoted as CV, followed by number of page, number of manuscript and date.

these questions cannot be expressed, does it mean that there is no answer to them?

Not really, according to Wittgenstein, for when all scientific problems were solved, there would be no question left, and “just this is the answer” (T6.52). That is, Wittgenstein found the solution to the problem of life (and to the related metaphysical questions) in the vanishing of the problem itself (T6.521).

According to his argumentation, the problem of life, and all our worries about it, simply disappears when we become aware that we cannot express or formulate it with our language. As human beings we experience and face this impossibility, especially when we try to refer with our words to the ineffable. In his “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein explained this impossibility with the following metaphor: it is like an absolutely hopelessly “running against the walls of our cage”. However, Wittgenstein also considered this impossible search as a tendency in the human mind, which he respected deeply and would never ridicule (LE 12).

In other words: we face the impossibility of speaking about what cannot be said and, sometimes, we have lived or experienced this impossibility. For this same reason, Wittgenstein maintained that we can understand something that we cannot express (T6.521). Coming to this understanding and realising that we cannot speak about these topics is, according to this author, the only solution to this problem.

Therefore, meaning of life cannot be expressed, it is what Wittgenstein calls “a mystical feeling” (T6.45), which cannot be said, just shown (T6.522). Moreover, whoever has understood this meaning cannot explain it (T6.521), cannot put it into understandable words. It is the ineffable.

He gives yet another clue to understand this idea: the question about the meaning of life cannot be formulated in our language. Therefore, the riddle does not exist, because if a question cannot be formulated, it cannot be answered either (T6.51). As the meaning of life is a question that cannot be formulated, we just understand it when we accept that it is inexpressible. It is more a mystical feeling than a fact, it is (again) the ineffable.

In a second step of his explanation, Wittgenstein proposes a method to elucidate this kind of metaphysical questions. The method is “to say nothing

except what can be said” and when someone wishes to say something metaphysical, demonstrate to him that he has given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions (T6.53).

The *Tractatus* serves then as an elucidation of metaphysical problems: who understands this book, recognizes its aphorisms as “nonsense” (*Unsinn*). Then, he has surmounted these propositions and sees the World rightly. (T6.54). But at this point he cannot explain what he has understood; and if he dared to speak about it, his words would become nonsense.

A terminological clarification to explain this argument properly⁴: in the *Tractatus*, “senseless” (*Sinnlos*) means something empty of meaning, meaningless or tautological (such as: ‘A=A’). It is the limit of logic and sense (T4.461). It is not understandable because there is nothing to understand. It has no content. On the other hand, “nonsense” (*Unsinn*) means absurd, a paradoxical content that is beyond the limits of the reasonable and understandable for human beings. While logical propositions are senseless, philosophical propositions and the queries on the meaning of the life are nonsensical (T4.0031). Once someone has understood that philosophical contents and the questions about the meaning of life are nonsensical contents that are limited by the empty bounds of logic, he can finally avoid referring to these nonsensical topics and sees the World rightly (T6.54). He has, Wittgenstein says, thrown the ladder away and then there are neither answers, nor questions, just silence (T7).

Wittgenstein’s conclusion (if it can be called this way) about the question of life is then that the solution of the problem is its sheer vanishing (T6.521). The problem disappears when one acknowledges that it is absurd. It is a question that cannot be expressed in our language, so there is neither question nor answer. The only way of facing this problem is not to speak about it, become silent. It is precisely the last aphorism of the *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (T7).

2. Two possible interpretations of Wittgensteinian theses and of the notion of “nonsense”

After explaining Wittgenstein’s position about the meaning of life in the *Tractatus*, I would like to ask how we can understand this position and if it is

⁴ Further clarifications on the differences among “senseless” and “nonsense” can be found in Glock’s *A Wittgenstein’s Dictionary*.

consistent or even, satisfactory. We need to raise this problem in order to face similar situations to those posed by Eagleton (2007:36-37): if someone has an existential crisis and queries about the meaning of his life, a look-up in a dictionary for some meaning will not help him at all. In a similar way, I would like to consider whether it would be helpful to explain Wittgenstein's critique to philosophical questions to someone who has an existential crisis or to apply the method proposed in the *Tractatus* to solve their existential doubts. That is, what if we tell to the sufferer that their doubts are absurd, because they are not expressible? What if we tell them that the only solution to their concerns is not to formulate these questions, to avoid them, to become silent?

In order to answer these questions and solve (if possible) this difficulty, I would like to point out that Wittgenstein's work is aphoristic, fragmentary and difficult to understand. There is not a unified and clear interpretation of his work, but rather different trends, sometimes opposed. Similarly, his critique to the meaning of the life in the *Tractatus* is complex and controversial. It has not been unanimously understood and is open to manifold interpretations, which give different answers to the raised question. Thus, in the following subsections, I analyse two different ways of interpreting Wittgenstein's position on the question of life in the *Tractatus*: namely, the resolute and the illuminating ones. Each of them understands differently what "nonsense" means and gives divergent answers to the aforementioned questions.

2.1 The resolute answer to the question of meaning of life

One of the most recent and controversial ways of understanding the Tractarian critique to the meaning of life is the resolute reading, proposed by James Conant and Cora Diamond, among other authors. They understand Wittgenstein's solution to the meaning of the life (and all the related metaphysical questions) in a radical way and propose to eliminate these questions:

According to Conant, the primary characteristic of the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* is the rejection of the idea that this book has *something* that requires being grasped and applied by the reader, a method or a way of living according to *some* content... (2006:173-174. Italics by Conant). This author also rejects the idea that the sentences of the *Tractatus* content a theory that specifies the conditions under which some sentences or actions make sense or not. Quite

the opposite, the resolute readers reject the idea that Wittgenstein aimed to put forward substantive theories, doctrines or concepts in his work. The kind of philosophy that Wittgenstein sought to practice not consisted in putting forward theories, but in an activity of elucidation and dissolution of philosophical concepts and existential doubts. These doubts are dissolved when the reader of the *Tractatus* understands them as nonsensical and discards them (Conant, ib.).

The *Tractatus* itself, all the content and related metaphysical questions are thus, according to Conant, just plain nonsense. They mean nothing, are purely absurd and have to be dissolved (2006:176). Therefore, it is not possible to add anything else after Wittgenstein's critique of philosophical questions. We cannot say anything about the meaning of life. There is not answer to this question, the only valid approach to it is its dissolution.

In this sense, the *Tractatus* is committed "just to a piecemeal approach to solving philosophical problems", which consists in showing that those metaphysical contents, which seemed to be profound and somehow "life-guiding", were, in fact, mere nonsense (Conant, 2011:626). The only possible way of understanding this book is to become aware that the first "state of understanding" of the book was only apparent (Conant, 2011:628). There is nothing to understand, think or apply after reading this book, just pieces of nonsense that must be dissolved.

A clarification may be required to understand this position properly: for the resolute readers the term "nonsense" just denotes a critique and a way of naming a sort of illusion, namely, the one that is generated through the inability of speakers to understand their own lack of understanding. In the first and wrong reading of the *Tractatus*, the confused reader did not have a clear view about what he was doing with these words. Apparently, he seemed to understand something, but actually he did not understand it, because there was nothing to understand (2011:630). Once he has acknowledged this nonsense and the illusion is manifest, there is nothing more to understand or speak about. The content has shown to be nonsensical, then the problem has been solved and there is just silence.

In a similar vein, Cora Diamond explains the way of getting rid of the illusion of understanding the *Tractatus*, and subsequently, the way of becoming aware about the nonsense that entails all the questions about the meaning of life. In proposing this, she follows the aphorism 6.54 of the *Tractats*, which I quote:

“My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly”
(T6.54)

According to Diamond, a resolute reading of the *Tractatus* implies “to throw the ladder away”. That is, to throw away any “attempt to take seriously the language of 'features of reality'” or even to understand terms such as “meaning” or “sense” in a substantive and referential way (1988:7). Diamond maintains that reading Wittgenstein’s work resolutely requires a serious commitment to “not-chickening-out” with our language. Moreover, according to Diamond, Wittgenstein never asserted that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words, but shown. There is nothing mystical or profound in the *Tractatus*, there is nothing like some “sort of mysterious kind of meaning” that cannot be said, but just shown. Quite the opposite, in this book there is just confusion and nonsense (1988:7).

Diamond admits that sometimes it may be useful, or even necessary, to speak about the meaning of life, or to look for a mystical approach to our concerns (for example, in faith or looking for a religious relief to a personal crisis...). Notwithstanding, she also maintains that these contents are not present in the *Tractatus* at all. That is, if we accept the resolute understanding of the *Tractatus*, the content (if can be called so) of the book has to be let go of and honestly taken to be what they really is: “a real, plain nonsense”. (Diamond, 1988:8).

In conclusion, according to Conant and Diamond, speaking about metaphysical questions or about the meaning of life after the *Tractatus* turns out to become a real, plain nonsense. We cannot speak about these topics and pretend to make sense. And, which is more important to the topic of this paper, we cannot pretend that there are solutions to our vital and existential queries in Wittgenstein’s work. Maybe someone can find answers to these queries in the faith or in other branches of the philosophy, but never in the *Tractatus*, which is (again and according to the resolute readers) just plain nonsense.

2.2 The illuminating answer to the question of the meaning of life

An alternative interpretation of Wittgenstein's critique to meaning in the *Tractatus* can be found in Peter Hacker's *Illusion and Insight* (1986/1997). Some authors, for example Conant who criticises deeply Hacker's thesis, call this interpretation the "standard view" (Conant, 2006:174). I will call it the "illuminating view", due to its content.

According to Hacker, in a first reading, the Tractarian solution to the riddle of life is unconvincing and even annoying. Remaining silent about what cannot be said is not enough to solve philosophical questions, even less when these questions are not only theoretical, but linked to existential doubts and vital concerns. For this very reason, for the dissatisfaction that this first reading of *Tractatus* causes (on a theoretical and also on a vital level), Hacker maintains that this unconvincing solution means something, which he calls an "illuminating nonsense" (1986:18).

In opposition to the "plain nonsense", which resolute readers find in the *Tractatus*, Hacker distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: the misleading and the illuminating ones. Moreover, he addresses a severe critique –also inspired in the *Tractatus*– to the philosophy in its traditional sense and to the resolute readers, as well.

Hacker accepts and follows the Tractarian delimitation about what can be said and not. However, he does not stop at the moment of silence, apparently established in the seventh aphorism of the book, but tries another approach in an attempt to grasp the ineffable. According to Hacker, philosophy is not enough to understand ourselves and our lives. The solution of the riddle of life cannot be found just in philosophy: a mere theoretical, philosophical answer to our queries will be empty or nonsensical (1986:21). Following the *Tractatus*, Hacker criticises the conception of philosophy as a discipline that provides knowledge about "the essential, metaphysical, nature of the world" (1986:14). If someone tried to say something meaningful about metaphysical topics from a philosophical perspective, he would be incoherent and his words would become nonsensical. In other words, if we accept the Tractarian critique to metaphysics and its delimitation of sense, we also have to accept that any attempt to describe the essence of things will violate boundaries of sense, misuse language and will be nonsensical. (1986:21).

This is the misleading nonsense that appears, according to Hacker's

interpretation of the *Tractatus*, when philosophers try to express what just can be shown (1986:19). Examples encompass theological proofs to demonstrate the existence of God, philosophical theories about the Good, the Beauty or any attempt at defining meaningful thesis about the meaning of life, as it was explained in the first section of the present paper. However, according to Hacker, the Tractarian critique to philosophical and existential questions does not mean that there is no sense or no possibility of understanding the ineffable. Hacker finds here the second notion of nonsense: the illuminating one.

According to Hacker, when we acknowledge the nonsense that appears in philosophy, also appears some light, under which we understand something. This is what he calls an “illuminating nonsense”. It is illuminating because it guides the attentive reader to apprehend what was shown by nonsensical propositions. We only understand it indirectly and incompletely (1986:18).

Hacker accepts that Wittgenstein never used the expression “illuminating nonsense”. What the Austrian philosopher said, as it has been already explained, was that the propositions of the *Tractatus* elucidate something, when they are understood as nonsensical. They are pseudo-propositions over which one can climb in order to see the World aright. When one has realised that these propositions are nonsensical and has thrown away the ladder, one would be, so to say, “illuminated”. He has thus acquired another perspective about philosophy and the World (1986:26). In this sense, Hacker maintains that the *Tractatus* presents nonsensical pseudo-propositions that bring some light to the reader and make some sense about the ineffable and nonsensical (1986:25).

There is then something beyond philosophy and beyond *Tractatus*, which has a strange and unclear sense. It cannot be said in proper words, just illuminated or reflected by nonsense.

There are some additional texts of the early Wittgenstein that support Hacker’s idea of “illuminating nonsense”. In the preface of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote that this book “will draw a limit to the expression of thoughts”. However, in order to draw such limit, “we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit”, that is, “we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought”. This limit can be drawn only in language and “what lies on the other side of the limit will be nonsense” (T, p.3). Wittgenstein also wrote in a letter to Ficker, the editor of the *Tractatus*, that this book “consists of two parts: the one presented here, plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this

second part that is the important one”⁵.

Thus, according to Wittgenstein, there is something beyond the boundaries established by language and logic. We can think about it, without being able to express it properly. It is certainly nonsensical and inexpressible. Notwithstanding, this is the most important part of the *Tractatus*, the one that cannot be said.

Following these texts, Hacker coins the expression “illuminating nonsense”. He maintains that, although we speak nonsense when we try to grasp meaning of the ineffable (for example, when we try to say something about the meaning of life), and although these nonsenses say nothing about the World, they do reveal or show certain qualities of logic and reality, which cannot be expressed in any other way. He also calls it a “meaningless nonsense”, in reference to propositions that do not say anything but show some unsayable content (1997:16). Using another metaphor, Hacker explains that the “nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* manage to echo or whistle the metaphysical melody of what cannot be uttered for an insightful reader”. These sentences are categorised as “illuminating nonsenses” and, despite being nonsensical *sensu stricto*, are nevertheless able to convey insights into the hidden nature of reality and ourselves (Hacker, 1997:18).

There are, then, some contents (maybe not contents; but echoes, whistles or mirror reflections) that resound in Wittgenstein’s critique to philosophical meaning in the *Tractatus*. We cannot address these weird contents directly, as our words fail in this task and become nonsensical; but we can express or show them in a different, not verbal or logical way, which is close to absurd. Questions about the meaning of life, and the nonsense that they entail, can be placed in this complicated and absurd field.

2.3 Comparison and closing remarks

I have explained two interpretations regarding the notion of “nonsense” in *Tractatus* and their related answers to the query about the meaning of life. According to the resolute readers, this question cannot be formulated properly and correctly from the Tractarian perspective. It is possible to obtain answers to this query from other fields, but certainly not in the *Tractatus*. Any pretension of

⁵ Wittgenstein’s “Letter to Ficker”, quoted by von Wright (1971:16).

finding a solution to the riddle of life in this book will only bring nonsense and misinterpretation of Wittgenstein's work. On the contrary, according to Hacker, there are two different kinds of nonsense: the explicit and misleading one, which emerges when we try to speak about what cannot be said; and the indirect, illuminating or meaningless one, which appears beyond the limits of the understandable and expressible. The second one can be just whistled or reflected, not expressed by meaningful words.

A necessary clarification is required to frame this comparison and make my point clear: I do not consider that resolute readers are wrong in their interpretation of Wittgenstein's work. I accept that on the hermeneutic level (where Wittgenstein's work is interpreted to the letter) the resolute theses are correct, solid and well argued. I also accept that the resolute readers are more interested in philosophical and theoretical debates (the meaning of meaning) than in existential or vital crises (the meaning of our lives). However, if we accept that the questions about the meaning of life are not just merely theoretical, but vital and existential concerns, I find Hacker's answer more accurate and satisfactory rather than the resolute one, for the three following reasons:

The first one is a biographical reason: it is possible to ask why Wittgenstein kept writing about philosophy and meaning of life, even though he stated in the *Tractatus* that the solution to the riddle of life was to become silent. That is, he wrote the *Tractatus* in 1917. Then, he abandoned philosophy, became a school teacher and a gardener, and after some existential crises, he came back to philosophy with a pluralistic approach to language, related to human practices (Monk, 1990:191ff.). Afterwards, he kept writing about philosophy until few days before his death. Thus, his own solution to the riddle of life was not the silence, but trying to say something unsayable, in a different way; trying to articulate some (non)sense that cannot be said, but shown somehow.

It is also relevant to remind that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein did not say that there is no sense, but that it cannot be expressed, just shown (T4.1212). As it has also been quoted above, in his "Lecture on Ethics", he identified the search of an absolute good as an impossible, though respectable, search; which runs against the boundaries of language. In essence, it is nonsensical, but it is also unavoidable for any human being who tries to think about ethics or religion (LE, pp.11-12). Moreover, in his later work, he wrote that "the results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of

language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery” (PI 119)⁶. In 1938, he gave lectures on religion in Cambridge, in which he stated that religious believes do not rest on historic, logic or rational basis in the same sense as ordinary believes. Religious believes are neither reasonable, nor unreasonable. These believes cannot be treated as a matter of reasonability, because they belong to a completely different field, which is beyond history, science or rationality. However, it does not mean that they do not exist or are false, because they articulate and give meaning to the life of believers (LRB, 57-58)⁷. To sum up: in his entire life Wittgenstein tried to grasp something about what cannot be properly said and some of his later work and thoughts are addressed to try to clarify these topics. However, resolute readers barely take into account this part of Wittgenstein’s work and focus primarily in the *Tractatus*.

The second reason is linguistic and philosophical: in their resolute interpretation of the *Tractatus*, Conant and Diamond understand language as completely referential, as if the only valid use of language were the scientific one, according to which words refer to things and nothing else can be said. This understanding is similar to the positivist conception of language proposed by the members of the Circle of Vienna, who were pursuing a distinction between the correct and veritable expression of reality and all the misuses of language that only bring confusion⁸. The logical atomism present in the intermediate sections of the *Tractatus* seemed to fit perfectly in this referential understanding of language. Therefore, the members of the Vienna Circle proposed a positivist interpretation of the *Tractatus*, according to which the verifiable sentences of natural science are the only valid sentences and the only possible truth⁹. However, in order to maintain this interpretation of the *Tractatus*, the members of the Vienna Circle (and the resolute readers as well) have to focus just on the picture theory of language proposed in the first four sections of the book and disregard the final parts, especially the aphorisms after the 5.6, where logic is defined as the boundary of the expressible and there are references to the tasks

⁶ The *Philosophical Investigations* are quoted as PI, followed by aphorism.

⁷ The “Lectures on Religious Belief” are quoted as LRB, followed by number of page.

⁸ For this interpretation, see the foundational manifesto of The Vienna Circle “The Scientific Conception of the World. The Vienna Circle”, published in Neurath (1973: 299-318) (There are also several editions of the *Manifesto* available online.)

⁹ For this interpretation, see Hahn, “Empirismus, Mathematik, und Logik”. He was a member of the Vienna Circle and one of the first readers of the *Tractatus*. See also Carnap “Über Protokollsätze”, where he identifies the elementary observation sentences with the verifiable sentences of the *Tractatus*.

of philosophy, the ineffable and the mystical. All these contents seemed to be purely nonsensical and not so relevant to these interpreters. Moreover, Moritz Schlick (the leader of the Vienna Circle) was constantly inviting Wittgenstein to share the *Tractatus* with them, although Wittgenstein rejected all the invitations. Finally, he accepted to join them in some discussions, however, most times he did not want to speak about logic or philosophy; he would rather read poetry to the astonished logicians (see Monk, 1990:242ff.).

Beyond the anecdotes and the philosophical debates, it is worth taking into account that in our everyday use of language there are more uses than the scientific or referential one. That is, we speak with metaphors, irony, jokes; there is poetry, absurd expressions and meaningful ellipsis. We understand them, they belong to our way of expressing ourselves and they cannot be just eliminated or disregarded, in order to propose a strict positivist and referential use of language. The consideration that the only valid use of language is the scientific, referential one is not enough to give an account of how we, human beings, are and communicate. This referential conception is a strict and merely theoretical understanding of language, which does not take into account that in our lives there are much more uses of language, which are not strictly referential. These uses might not have a real reference in the World, might be confusing and absurd; however, they are part of our lives, we use and (somehow) understand them; and philosophers should take them into account as well. Most members of the Vienna Circle, nevertheless, as well as some resolute readers, do not seem to accept this fact and understand language in its strictly referential use¹⁰.

The third reason has already been mentioned: it is the emotional or psychological one, related to the painful reality of existential crises. As Eagleton maintains, if someone asks about the meaning of his life, he is not asking about any concept or theory, but about certain vital unease; in this sense, he does not need logical clarification but solace, and probably he is more likely to reach for suicide pills than for a dictionary (2007:38). If we accept this, the resolute solution is not enough to face real and vital crises. That is, if someone has an existential crisis and wants to end up with his life, would it be useful to tell him that his queries are plain nonsense and have to be dissolved in order to see the

¹⁰ It is not my intention to generalise and apply my critique to all positivist and resolute readers. I understand that there are different authors in both trends, nuances in their theories and their views on language have varied through time. My critique goes against the strictly referential understanding of *Tractatus* which is present in Conant's and Diamond's work, analysed in this paper, and the authors of the Vienna Circle mentioned in footnotes 9 and 10.

World rightly and not formulate these doubts never again?

It is also possible to argue that the resolute solution to existential crises is just located on a theoretical and abstract level, quite far away from our real and actual concerns. The resolute authors do not seem to understand that there is unawareness that cannot be expressed properly with words, but that really does harm. This fact (a pain that cannot be said but hurts) can be explained better by Hacker's "illuminating nonsense" than by Conant's and Diamond's "plain nonsense". For this reason I find Hacker's answer to the meaning of life more accurate than the resolute one.

I would like to make a final consideration, linked to the third reason and to something that can be called the "social consideration of philosophy". When resolute readers understand philosophy as a merely theoretical and conceptual discipline and they develop their arguments on this abstract level; they also isolate philosophy from human lives and prevent this discipline from being linked to everyday concerns. This strict and abstract comprehension of philosophy does not allow to think the real problems, difficulties and concerns that worry us in our daily lives. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the resolute reading is a sterile and alienated understanding of philosophy, quite academic and deep, but quite different as well to the living philosophy that Socrates put into practice in the agora.

There is, then, a barrier among the academic philosophy and the everyday concerns. For this same reason, philosophy is often criticised for being useless or proposing abstract and sterile theories, far away from our daily life. This critique is not just a debate among philosophers and non-philosophers, but has impact on philosophers' work (for example, teaching) and for the future of the discipline. For example, if philosophy is understood as a useless and empty discipline, not related to our lives, it is more likely that legislators decide that it should not be taught in schools, as there is no reason to do it. Quite the opposite, the considerations about the meaning of life presented in this paper can serve as an example of "utility" of philosophy and "connection" of this discipline to some human concerns. So what is offered here is an answer to the question about why it is important to study and teach philosophy. It is my intention, then, to propose a real and living understanding of philosophy, following Socrates, and other philosophers who wanted to discuss philosophical questions on the street with everyone. The philosophical enterprise could be then characterized, Wittgenstein *dixit*, in the following way: "What *we* [philosophers] do is to bring

words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI 116).

After this consideration, in the final part of the article, I will give some examples of answers to the query of life, which are nonsensical, and possibly absurd, but at the same time they are useful to express something that, strictly speaking, cannot be expressed. These fictional examples bring some light to the topic of this paper, serve as illustrations of Hacker’s concept of “illuminating nonsense” and, indirectly, give some (weird) answers to the query about the meaning of our lives.

3. Showing what cannot be said: some fictional examples

To close this article, I would like to propose that some fictional contents can serve as examples that show what cannot be said and this also can illuminate, indirectly, the Tractarian ineffable answer to the query of life. At the same time, they can bring some (strange) light to our queries and doubts about the meaning of life. These examples come from science-fiction stories where the question about the meaning of life is asked and answered in an almost unintelligible way.

The first example is *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by the British writer Douglas Adam¹¹; the second one is *The Left Hand of the Darkness*, by the USA writer Ursula K. LeGuin. These two examples are unconventional and surprising answers to the question about the meaning of life that show, with a different tone, something related to what has been argued in this paper.

In Adams’ example, there is a computer, called Deep Thought, which was processed to have all the answers of “Life, the Universe and Everything” (2000:113). When some wise men and women asked Deep Thought about the meaning of life, the computer said that there was an answer, but he needed some time to process it (2000:115). Seven and half million years later, Deep Thought finally had the answer and it was ‘42’ (2000:120). When the wise men and women refused it and said that ‘42’ was a nonsensical answer, the computer responded that if human beings were dissatisfied with that answer it was because, actually, they did not know what the question was (2000:122).

In LeGuin’s case, Genry, the narrator (an explorer with a complicated diplomatic mission in a strange World) goes to Oderhord, a region of foretellers, in search for some answers about his mission. One of the foretellers, Faxe,

¹¹ Eagleton also mentions this example in his book about the meaning of life (on the 42th page!) (See Eagleton, 2007:42ff.)

explains him how to formulate prophetic questions: “The more qualified and limited the question, the more exact the answer. Vagueness breeds vagueness” (1969:32). Faxe also tells Genry that some questions are not answerable and cannot be formulated because they wreck the humans. He gives an example: Lord of Shorth forced the Foretellers to answer the question about the meaning of life. In an effort to answer it, the Foretellers stayed in the darkness for six days and nights. At the end, “all the Celibates were catatonic, the Zanies were dead, the Pervert clubbed the Lord of Shorth to death with a stone” (ib.).

It does not mean, Faxe follows his explanation, that questions such as the meaning of life do not have answer, but that knowing the answer brings craziness and wreck to humankind, so it is better not to ask them. The reason of this ban is that the unknown is what life is based on. In Faxe’s words: “The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty” (1969:37). That is the only liveable answer. Any other answer would carry craziness, violence and death (that is, not life) to humankind.

To close my explanation and link previous examples to the theses presented in this paper, I would like to point out that these two weird answers to the question of the meaning of life are quite Wittgensteinian, in a broad sense.

Deep Thought’s solution to the riddle of life is Wittgensteinian because the computer recommends the confused human beings to clarify themselves and their ideas, before asking unsolvable and confuse questions. This is one of the methods that the later Wittgenstein proposed in his *Philosophical Investigations* with a view to avoiding philosophical misunderstandings: the “grammatical investigation” or “analysis”:

“Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away.

Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language.—Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an ‘analysis’ of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart” (PI 90)

Then, according to Wittgenstein and to Deep Thought, in order to have real answers, it is necessary to clarify questions first. Otherwise, everything will be

confuse and unclear.

With regard to LeGuin's case: the answer to the riddle of life is that we cannot know everything because life is based on uncertainty. To be alive is to accept that we cannot know everything. Even though all the questions were solved, we would not know everything. The idea echoes almost perfectly the statement of the aforementioned aphorism 6.52 of *Tractatus*: "[...] if all possible scientific questions [are] answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all" (T6.52).

It does not mean that these problems do not exist or that they are unanswerable, it is just that we cannot express them. That is not possible, because there are ineffable realities in our lives that we cannot grasp with our words and thoughts. On the contrary, asking and trying to know some things, such as the meaning of life, will bring craziness and death to humankind. And "just that is the answer" (T6.52, again).

Therefore, Faxe's recommendations to avoid answering problematic questions that would bring craziness are similar to the following aphorisms of *Tractatus*:

"The temporal immortality of the soul of man, that is to say, its eternal survival also after death, is not only in no way guaranteed, but this assumption in the first place will not do for us what we always tried to make it do. Is a riddle solved by the fact that I survive forever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one? The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time.

(It is not problems of natural science which have to be solved.)"
(T6.4312)

"The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

(Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)"
(T.6521)

"There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical"
(T6.522)

There is then a boundary (present in *Tractatus* and in Faxe's considerations about the queries about life) that separates what can be known and what cannot be known. It is also present in the differences among what can be said and what can be shown, and in the differences among the scientific approach to knowledge and the mystical attitude. The second dimension, which is beyond the limit of the expressible, is present in our lives in a different and strange way. There are risks if we try to understand this dimension. The ineffable and the mystical field is beyond logic and can entail craziness. However, this is a dimension present in our lives.

Therefore, there are answers to the questions of the meaning of life; however they cannot be expressed, just shown indirectly by nonsenses, or by what Hacker calls "illuminating nonsenses", such as those I have presented, following Adams' and LeGuin's examples.

A final consideration is required to close my argumentation: science-fiction is not the only way of trying to show what cannot be said. There are many different ways of trying to grasp that. For example, Hacker refers to singing or whistling (1997:18). The "only" requisites to access to this nonsensical field are to overcome the aforementioned scientific and positivist comprehension of language and to be open to other possible expressions of reality. It is possible to reach some sense and unexpected answers to the queries of our lives with abstract art, creativity, humour, absurd, poetry..., more efficiently than with deep and abstract philosophical thoughts.

And Wittgenstein was also aware about his possibility when in his lecture on aesthetics he stated that:

"The sort of explanation one is looking for when one is puzzled by an aesthetic impression is not a causal explanation, not one corroborated by experience or by statistics as to how people react [...] e.g. you can try out a piece of music in a psychological laboratory and get the result that the music acts in such and such a way under such and such a drug. This is not what one means or what one is driving at by an investigation into aesthetics." (LAE, III, 11, p. 21)¹²

¹² The "Lectures on aesthetics" is quoted as LAE, followed by section, paragraph and number of page.

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