

## On *Satzklang*: On the Sense and on the Nonsense

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1. To question again the philosophy of Wittgenstein to obtain additional considerations that may open doors to further problematic areas, means, in a certain sense, to start from the beginning where Wittgenstein himself seems to have put a full stop. This allows us to turn this full stop into an arch stretched toward other problems, that, with Wittgenstein and beyond Wittgenstein, can be addressed in the light of the productive potential of his thought and of its constant fertility. We will try to show the characteristics of a possible link between aesthetics and language based on the theme of musical sounds of the language, a theme which apparently is not Wittgensteinian, if we do not read some of his theses with care and in a spirit of innovation. With that bow we will try to launch arrows that can hit new targets.

We start, therefore, from the paradoxical and problematic statement contained in the proposition 6.54 of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. This proposition closes the seals the question on the mystical (*Mystische*) and what cannot be put into words (*Unaussprechliches*), but more broadly, it defines what constitutes the question about the meaning of life once all the possible scientific questions are formulated and solved: «My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical (*unsinnig*), when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them» (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*<sup>1</sup>).

Thus, the task of young Wittgenstein's philosophy is not to formulate *philosophical propositions* and to expound a philosophical doctrine or theory or reflection, but rather *the clarification of propositions*<sup>2</sup>: the propositions of the *Tractatus* are *Erläuterungen*,

<sup>1</sup> From now on, T with the proposition number.

<sup>2</sup> «Philosophy does not result in “philosophical propositions”, but rather in the clarification of propositions»; T, 4.112.

nonsensical propositions that are capable of clarifying things without saying anything. Bringing clarity means to put an end to Philosophy as a doctrine, and this task coincides with the exercise «to set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought...by presenting clearly what can be said» (T, 4.114, 4.115). *Philosophy ends in clarity* as the end of its task: to recognize that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical means to reach the limits of language and the world and to stop philosophizing without having come to a definitive conclusion (at the answer). In this consists also understand that the task of philosophy has a period where the problem of life begins, when it is seen. The terminable task of Philosophy indicates the finiteness of thought and of life itself faced with the fact that *daß die Welt ist*, in the intuition of the world *sub specie aeternitatis* as a limited whole (T, 6.44). This is the point in which Wittgenstein allows Philosophy to stop philosophizing, casting aside the ladder onto which he climbed, to encounter the dimension of art, the only one that experiences the miracle that the world is, that there is what there is, as he writes in his *Notebooks* (Wittgenstein [1984]: 86, note of 20.10.1916).

This question – which we define as the question of “*Daß*” – will come to light in the next *Lecture on Ethics* of November, 1929, within an overall framework in which the term ethics is used in a slightly wider sense, «in a sense in fact which includes what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics» (Wittgenstein [1993]: 38). In that conference Wittgenstein expounded the problem of “the miracle *that there is what there is*” as a generally aesthetic problem, starting from the consideration of two tautological experiences, i.e., two forms of experience of what is whatever it is: the experience of the fact that I wonder at the existence of the world, which is closely linked to the experience of feeling absolutely safe («I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens» [ivi, 41]). The second tautological experience described by Wittgenstein, connected with the miracle of the existence of the world, is the existence of language itself which has, as a consequence, the fact the depth of the problem of the “*Daß*” does not consist in the possibility to express the “what the world is”, its miracle, *by means of language*, but in the expression *by the existence of language* (ivi, 44).

Wittgenstein leads us to the evidence that the expressions of these experiences are not nonsensical because we have not yet found the correct expression for them, «but that their nonsensicality was their very essence» (*ibid.*). This essential character is given by the fact that with them we run against the boundaries of language, one step before reaching the clarity that allows us to stop philosophizing, and to have the intuition of the world *sub specie aeterni* as a limited whole (T, 6.45). The aesthetic experience, there-

fore, opens up when meaningful language sensible goes on vacation and language in general, as it is, becomes a problem: every expression of this experience (which we briefly called “experience of *daß*”) is openly senseless, as well as perfectly absolutely hopeless, and can only be explained or clarified, reversing the sense of language and the sense of the world into nonsense, in the moment in which Philosophy vanishes in front of the problem of life, where we also encounter the problem of art, *sub specie aeterni*.

2. The *Philosophical Investigations* are a philosophical reflection, and they lead us to a *plain nonsense*: «The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense (*schlichten Unsinn*) and bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language» (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 119)<sup>3</sup>. Such a discovery would reveal itself in the philosophical thinking that crosses the plane of the language as it is<sup>4</sup>, penetrating the aspects of things that are hidden by their simplicity and normality<sup>5</sup> and, above all, *to see clearly the use of our words*, that is: clarifying so that what appears full of misunderstandings manifests itself explicitly: «My aims is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense (*offenkundigen Unsinn*)»: the nonsense of contingency (PI, § 464).

This important therapeutic task of Philosophy, however, that moves from «something that already open to view and that becomes surveyable by a rearrangement» (PI, § 92), doesn't seem to be a task that ends with the final analysis of our forms of language to the complete clarification (PI, § 91).

It is true that we must have a clear view (*übersehen*) of the use of our words – this is not what we always do, and this is what we are often taken to the level of misunderstanding and misconception; we must also reach that level of perspicuity (*Übersichtigkeit*) that is missing from our grammar in its daily use. Since this perspicuous representation (representation of *übersichtlichen*) makes it possible to understand, which is “seeing connexions” (*Zusammenhänge sehen*), this understanding can only mean one thing: it goes from disguised or hidden nonsense to something that is patent nonsense and leaves the world and the language as they are: i.e., immersed in the nonsense of contin-

<sup>3</sup> From now on, PI with the paragraph number.

<sup>4</sup> «On the one hand it is clear that every sentence in our language “is in order as it is”...Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is»; PI, §§ 98, 124.

<sup>5</sup> «The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity»; PI, § 129.

gency and in the experience of the tautological fact that the world is, and that language is.

If to understand means to leave everything as it is and describe the use of language, Philosophy speaks of the use of the word "Philosophy" and philosophical understanding emerges from asking questions about words: «When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of everyday...In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this by itself shows that I can adduce only exterior facts about language...Well, your very questions were framed in this language...Your questions refer to words; so I have to talk about words» (PI, § 120).

Thus, if the language of philosophy is on the same level of ordinary language and its problems are related to the words – that is, language – then the plain nonsense, to which philosophy arrives at the end of his questioning and quest, coincides with crashing against the limits of language itself revealing with clarity that this analysis elucidates, on the one hand, the finitude and limits of thought, and the other shows which nature has the endless task of a reflection that confronts, and places itself in the midst of, the meaninglessness of contingency. All the reflection of Wittgenstein's philosophy is a question on the possibility of crossing, from the inside, language as it is to move from the hidden nonsense of the contingency of the language and of the reality to the patent nonsense of the philosophy: «We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand...We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena (*Erscheinungen durchschauen*)...towards the "*possibilities*" of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena» (PI, §§ 89, 90).

Now, if the crossing of language and appearance opens the possibility of seeing connexions leaving the language and appearance as they are, and if that "seeing connexions" is a reminder of our representation of a *Darstellung-Form*, the work of the philosopher «in assembling reminders for a particular purpose» (PI, § 127), remaining on the surface of the language and appearance, walking on it, and returning to the rough ground of the reality and of the language (PI, § 107). The arrival at the condition of plain and patent nonsense shows the paradoxical situation of our condition, a condition that Philosophy shares with actual existence: to stay within contingency to talk about and question contingency itself. It is the same paradoxical condition of being within language to talk about language itself, without being able to escape neither contingency nor language. In the very moment of elucidation and clarity the patent nonsense of Philosophy

is explained by the contingency and in the language shows the extent of which raises the philosophical reflection, a limit which, again, is manifested in the experience of *wonder*, provided in the exemplary experience of aesthetics. This frontier zone of Philosophy is the real discovery of the Philosophy «that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question» (PI, § 133).

From the very moment in which Philosophy is on the frontier zone of the patent nonsense, Philosophy puts itself at rest and suspends its questioning, recognizing its language as an obvious nonsense: Philosophy slams against the limits of language, vanishes in the extreme clarity fades and reaches a dimension beyond which it can no longer go any further with the means at its disposal – i.e., asking questions with words referring to words themselves: it is reversed in the aesthetic dimension where there is «the transition from patent nonsense to something which is disguised (hidden) nonsense» (*Übergang von einem offenkundigen zu einem nichtoffenkundigen Unsinn* [PI, § 524]).

The *schlichten Unsinn*, the result of this *Übergang*, is the limit where the Philosophy is put to rest; it is the language of the *Philosophical Investigations* that is endless in its opacity, and which reaches the aesthetic experience of wonder that Wittgenstein had connoted years before in terms of tautological experience. There language stopped to reveal itself to be manifestly nonsensical, here it is reversed into the disguised, hidden, concealed nonsense (in the enigma) of the aesthetic experience. Far from being explanatory clarity shows its own character of non-sense: the enigma of clarity is its non-sense and non-sense of the riddle leads to the question of the possibility, *die Möglichkeiten der Erscheinungen*.

3. In one of the seemingly peripheral paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein calls into question one of the themes of the *Tractatus* revealing a further aspect loaded with serious consequences. He writes: «Let us examine the proposition: “This is how things are”. – How can I say that this is the general form of propositions? – It is first and foremost *itself* a proposition...But how is this sentence applied – that is, in our everyday language?...To say that this proposition agrees (or does not agree) with reality would be obvious nonsense. Thus it illustrates the fact that *one* feature of our concept of a proposition is, *sounding like a proposition*» (PI, § 134).

The German word used by Wittgenstein in this paragraph is closed *Satzklang* (the sound of proposition, in its literal correct translation correct and in its proper sense). Thus I propose to translate it literally as “sound of proposition” and not “sounding like a

proposition": i.e., not only something that in ordinary language I use as a proposition (something that strikes me as a proposition), but, more strongly, to signify that a sign, a mark and character of the proposition (*ein Merkmal*) is the sound of the proposition, *der Satzklang*. If someone asks us what we mean with the word "proposition", a concept of what a proposition is, Wittgenstein argues, we would give examples, that is, we would pronounce some propositions to make him understand what a proposition is (PI, § 135). Therefore, in pronouncing a sentence that, for example, says "This is how things are" we show a blatant nonsense that lies in the claim that the proposition is in accordance with reality or not (the general form of proposition). The *Satzklang*, in saying a patent nonsense, shows its concealed nonsense in saying something that, in any case, we recognize as a proposition. So even the non-sense of the propositions of Wittgenstein shows – that is, explains – a possibility of language by opening a dimension of sound even when there is no reference, or reference is an obvious nonsense. The theory of correspondence and representation of the *Tractatus* show their non-sense, but this non-sense tells us something of the proposition; it tells us what we mean by "proposition", it tells us what the proposition is in our language.

It seems that here the new problem concerns the terms in which through the *Satzklang* we can grasp, within the patent nonsense, the transition to the concealed (and enigmatic) nonsense, caught in a dimension that anticipates the dimension of language: the sound of proposition. That is, the *possibility* that inhabits the sensible and eminently aesthetical sphere of language as *nichtoffenkundigen Unsinn*.

It is the sound of the proposition that occurs the transition to the hidden nonsense, it is in the *Satzklang* that the enigma of clarity is shown, a clarity that goes beyond vision and anticipates the game of language. It is a preliminary dimension of language that must be thought, and whose non-sense emerges as listening to language in order to understand an aesthetic condition, before convenience, before reference and correspondence. It is the dimension to grasp it in a flash (*erfassen sie mit einem Schlage*): «But we understand the meaning of a word when we hear or say it; we grasp it in a flash, and what we grasp in this way is surely something different from the "use" which is extended in time!» (PI, § 138).

We grasp in a flash a word when we hear it and we pronounce it, when it resonates, when the word is a sound, and not an image: «What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word? – Isn't something like a picture? Can't it *be* a picture?» (PI, § 139). When we understand a word or a sentence, this happens suddenly thanks to listening and pronunciation, in vocalization and articulation, in which resounds our belong-

ing to a linguistic dimension: we feel within a limited whole that constitutes the horizon of the human language in which we live. It is not the dimension of forming an image of something, but a sort of involuntary memory of a familiar sound within which resonates the echo of a possibility that we carry within us and that appears in a productive and articulated way in our understanding; it is something that we can certainly connect to the *sound* conceived by Walter Benjamin as the *pure formal principle of linguistic* communicability between man and things (Benjamin [1986]: 321).

In this way recalling the possibility of phenomena is a penetration whose initial moment coincides with an opening in which sound resonance continues the process of comprehension. The echo of the original dimension of a concealed sound as a concealed nonsense is the opening of language. It is something that recalls the *pure language* of which the young Benjamin spoke about, where the language, as the immediacy of every spiritual communication, is in fact the communicable in general, the linguistic being of things which is immediately communicable: the fact that every language communicates with itself originating from the breath and the sound that comes to life (ivi, 316-317).

The resonance sounds in the space in which the word lives and materializes itself in every use (PI, § 117); it is preserved, hidden, in the language of every day. In talking our everyday language we evoke the beginning of every communication, grasping those connections that, *between similarities and dissimilarities*, throw light on the facts of our language (PI, § 130). We grasp in a flash the transition to a concealed nonsense: the *pure will-to-say*, the *pure offering to comprehension*.

4. If what really comes before our mind when we understand a word is not something like a picture, as he writes in § 139 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, then the relation between understanding a word and the possibility to use it properly doesn't lie in the image that the word evokes, but in our ability to grasp in a flash something. In this case, "That our belief in the picture forced a particular application upon us" is refuted by the sound of the word itself that can evoke the same thing even though its application may be different. In other words, the sound of the word has directly to do with its meaning or its application, as it brings us back to that preliminary dimension in which we belong to a language that guarantees the possibility of the meaning of what we say, a possibility that reveals itself only in a dimension of non-sense.

Wittgenstein writes about a specific experience to clarify the relation between the sphere of the sound of a word and the sphere of its meaning: it is the experience of reading as «the activity of rendering out loud what is written or printed; and also of

writing from dictation, writing out something printed, playing from a score, and so on» (PI, § 156). The conscious act of reading, to say words out loud, or only to himself, the act of reading the sound off from the letters (PI, § 159), doing the passage from the printed to the spoken words (PI, § 162), seems to be that same act of *playing a music score*: «I see printed words and I say words out loud...but the spoken words as it were slip in as one reads. And if I so much as look at a German printed word, there occurs a peculiar process, that of hearing the sound inwardly» (PI, § 165).

What the sound of a word, and therefore also of a proposition, brings to mind is not only, and properly, an image that the word can evoke but the echo of the original sounds of the language as it stands as enigmatically senseless because it poses itself as a condition for any language, in a primitive and primeval dimension of language. The familiarity of the word and of the proposition, that sound allows us to grasp immediately, leads Wittgenstein to say that: «the look of a word is familiar to us in the same kind of way as its sound» (PI, § 167). We speak a language that we can already speak, but to go back to this possibility through the language that we speak means to go back to that possibility that holds together the *compossible* and which is present in the dimension of the enigma, of the non-evident that only the opening of sound can re-present in the space of the linguistic game.

5. We still have to clarify the terms in which this experience of the sound of speech and of the proposition brings us back to the concealed nonsense of the aesthetic experience. Wittgenstein writes: «I want to remember a tune and it escapes me; suddenly I say “Now I know it” and I sing it. What was it like to suddenly know it? Surely it can’t have occurred to me *in its entirety* in that moment! – Perhaps you will say: “It’s a particular feeling, as if it were *there*” – but *is* it there?...and this is a definition of the expression “the tune is present to his mind in its entirety”» (PI, § 184).

Here, again, it is as if we could bring the knowledge of a melody to a involuntary memory full of meaning; but this meaning goes back to a dimension of non-sense, to a hidden dimension that Wittgenstein defines in terms of having the complete melody before our mind. Now Wittgenstein can repeat in § 191 (having mentioned it in § 138) of the *Philosophical Investigations*: «“It is as if we could grasp the whole use of the word in a flash...The point is, that it is as if we could “grasp in a flash” in yet another and much more direct sense than that». At first glance it seems that what we suddenly understand of the proposition is what the proposition tells me: if we compare the proposition with an image or a genre-picture it tells me about a state of affairs that is so and so: it “tells”

me something (PI, § 522). But if I ask: “*what* does a picture tell me?” what would I answer?: «“What the picture tells me is itself”. That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in its own lines and colours. What would it mean to say “What this musical theme tells me is itself”?» (PI, § 523). It is this sudden understanding of the theme that suddenly happens, and then it unwinds in time and in making-time, until it vanishes in a silence in which it disappears: it is the same time of the re-play of the sound of the word and of the sentence, which can be both the peculiar phenomenon of the inner resonance of the sound, and the sound that is pronounced and that makes a word familiar, as we are familiar with its sound – something that looks close to the experience of reading and playing a score, but also the experience of singing and vocalization.

So what I understand all of a sudden is not exactly what the proposition tells to me, but what I say about the proposition and what the proposition does not say, but shows in the evidence of its sound. The proposition shows itself. This is the transition from an evident non-sense to a occult non-sense: from the “so-and-so” of the proposition to its “what-is” that says-itself, not being able to say it if not through itself in the immediacy of its sonority, in the same way as in Benjamin language communicates itself. Wittgenstein writes: «Don’t take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds. (“Don’t take it as a matter of course” means: find it surprising [*Wundere*])» (PI, § 524). In § 524 Wittgenstein expounds the transition from patent nonsense to something which is concealed nonsense.

The oscillation and the passage above is understanding and failure to understand (PI, § 526). I understand something *in* the picture or *in* the proposition, but there is something I do not understand *of* the picture and *of* the proposition: what I think I do not understand is what is the enigma of the picture and of the proposition: there is something in the picture but is not seen, and yet I wonder, something that makes me understand all of a sudden a musical theme, as well as a word or a sentence. It is the will-to-say, it is the Voice that wants that language to be and that opens the abyss of contingency: the Voice carries of contingency echoing the inaccessible place of the original opening of the language: the concealed nonsense of the limit of the Philosophy.

In § 527 of the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein describes what he means by philosophical comprehension or understanding of what is not understood as meaning. He writes: «Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why is just

*this* the pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? One would like to say “Because I know what it’s all about”. But what is it all about? I should not be able to say».

To understand something that is neither a meaning, nor an image, is the *same thing than understanding a proposition in the sense that it cannot be replaced by another proposition, something that only these words, in this position, can express: it is the same thing to understand a poem, or no more than a musical theme can be replaced by another* (PI, § 531). Wondering what it means to understand in this sense is the same question that asks: «“But what would the meaning of the sounds be in such a case?” – What is it in music?» (PI, § 529). Once again, what is at stake here is what I mean by “understand” and the concept of “understanding” is also its philosophical use, or what Wittgenstein meant by philosophical understanding. This is a matter of understanding what Wittgenstein’s means to say that philosophical understanding that has to do with the transition from patent nonsense to something which is concealed nonsense that opens the possibility, for language, to grasp in a flash in the sound of the word and of the proposition what resonates as our already-knowing-something as belonging to that language.

«How does one *lead* anyone to comprehension of a poem or of a theme?» asks Wittgenstein in § 533. The answer should clarify what he means about how meaning is explained here. Explain the meaning is not a real explanation but it has to do with interminable pointing in the direction of an enigma. *It means to show what can be expressed only by these words in these positions, by these sounds in this way, leaving everything as it is, starting from the enigma of hearing the sound of a word or of a sentence or a musical theme or a poem in this meaning* (PI, § 534).

To explain the meaning means to move toward the inaccessible original place of the word, to the concealed nonsense in which suddenly things were clarified and in which thought stops philosophizing to rest near its *Musa*. It is the place of having the taking-place of language, the place that since his youth, Wittgenstein had caught *sub specie aeternitatis*, in the miracle *that* the world is. On this limit of philosophical questioning – what puts an end to Philosophy itself and allows Philosophy to quit asking questions – Philosophy meets, as in a mirror, the other side of its question: the sense of the music and the research of its meaning.

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