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**WITTGENSTEIN'S TRACTATUS  
LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS**

*Reader's Guide*

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continuum

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**Topics for discussion**

How damaging, if at all, is it to Wittgenstein's account of logic that there could not be a notation in which you could always tell by 'mere inspection' whether or not a proposition was a truth of logic?

Are 'scientific explanations' explanations?

Is Wittgenstein's account of the ethical tenable?

**SECTION 7. 'WHEREOF ONE CANNOT SPEAK, THEREOF ONE MUST BE SILENT'**

*Although this section of the Tractatus contains just this one sentence, it is appropriate to devote a whole section to it, since it is the denouement of the whole of Wittgenstein's thought, and here we draw together the strands of the book that indicate the problematic nature of philosophy, and the central paradox that in the book Wittgenstein has at least apparently been attempting to say what, by his own lights, cannot be said, and hence that his own sentences are nonsense. This is close to the centre of the present debate about the Tractatus, and in an introductory guide we do not attempt to adjudicate that debate, but to canvass the different options for interpretation that have been put forward.*

*At the end of the last section, we surveyed the different themes in the book that lead Wittgenstein to castigate his own propositions as nonsense, and it is our final task to look at the implications for an understanding of the Tractatus of the fact that he does so.*

In one way the upshot of the book, as presented in Section 7, is straightforward: having worked our way through the argument, we come to see that it is impossible to present philosophical doctrines – or, at the very least, philosophical doctrines that deal with those questions with which Wittgenstein is centrally concerned in the *Tractatus*. We may leave open for the moment whether this is because we have been brought to see something that can only be shown – 'the limits of language', 'the general form of proposition', 'the essence of the world', etc. – and simultaneously realize that it is impossible to put into words what we have seen, and that any attempt to do so will result in our producing sentences that are nonsense, or alternatively because we have simply been brought in some way to realize that the attempt to talk about such matters is futile, and that even the talk of there being something that can be shown but not said has to be abandoned as an illusion. Either way, 'the problems have, in essentials

been finally solved' (Preface, p. 29). We therefore desist from the attempt to construct philosophical theories, and content ourselves with saying only what can be said – 'the propositions of natural science' (6.53). But if in this way the upshot of the book seems straightforward, it is in another way profoundly puzzling.

Wittgenstein has apparently constructed an account of language and the way language relates to the world that resolves all the semantic paradoxes. He has not done so by providing a 'straight' resolution of the paradoxes, but by giving an account of the general form of proposition according to which the paradoxical sentences could not even be constructed, and are simply eliminated as nonsensical transgressions of the 'limits of language'. But in so doing he has led the discussion to a point that is every bit as paradoxical as the original paradoxes: once we have seen what the solution to the paradoxes is we realize that, by the same token, that solution cannot itself be stated. The paradox is clearly exacerbated by the fact that Wittgenstein seems to have been saying precisely what he is arguing cannot be said, and equally we seem to have been able to understand him, and argue for and against the positions he has apparently been putting forward. As Russell says:

What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said.<sup>51</sup>

We can present the paradoxical situation that the book presents us with by juxtaposing three quotations from it that apparently form an inconsistent triad.

In the Preface, Wittgenstein makes two claims about the *Tractatus*:

In its thoughts are expressed . . . The *truth* of the truths communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive.<sup>52</sup>

At 4, we read:

A thought is a significant proposition.<sup>53</sup>

And at 6.54:

Anyone who understands me finally recognizes [my propositions] as nonsense.

The tension between these three remarks is obvious. Equally obviously, Wittgenstein cannot be simply careless here, but must have intended to confront us with this tension.

Not surprisingly, there has been considerable controversy as to what to say at this point, and for one group of writers at least, the proponents of the so-called 'New Wittgenstein',<sup>54</sup> everything of importance about the *Tractatus* will turn on the answer we give to this question. Although I believe some version of the fifth of the options that we shall be looking at must be the right way of reading the book, it cannot be the purpose of a study guide to the *Tractatus* simply to present my preferred interpretation. Instead I shall sketch out the different ways of regarding this paradox, and look at the difficulties that confront *each* line of interpretation: it is for the reader to decide which is nearest the truth. *Each* of the following approaches of interpretation faces considerable difficulties, and deciding one of them to be the right one is only a preliminary to the philosophical task of thinking through those difficulties.

I shall first outline five possible reactions, of which the first two are in many ways the most natural, but negative responses. They both in different ways treat 6.54 as a *reductio ad absurdum* – what surer sign that an author has gone wrong than that an author has produced a theory that implies its own nonsensicality? Clearly, neither of these can be Wittgenstein's own position, but equally we should be interested not only in the straightforward exegetical question: 'What did Wittgenstein intend us to take away from the *Tractatus*?', but the further philosophical question: 'How should we react to the book?' The other three represent different strands in the straightforward interpretation of the text. I am deliberately not attaching the names of authors who have commented on the *Tractatus* to any of these, since I am presenting these positions as baldly and simply as possible. If we survey what commentators have actually said, there is considerable variety amongst the interpretations offered, and most will offer qualifications designed to overcome the difficulties that confront us at this point. So we may think of the following as tendencies or directions in which the correct interpretation is to be found, and most commentators will present accounts that are variations on one of the following.

1. Whatever Wittgenstein might himself have thought, 6.54 constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the account of logic and language that he has presented in the body of the book.

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2. Rather differently, but once again implying that Wittgenstein has gone wrong, we may challenge Wittgenstein's conclusion that his account does in fact rule out his saying what he has been saying.
3. Although 6.54 was important to Wittgenstein, we may treat it as a relative side issue. There is much that we can profit from or discuss in the earlier parts of the book if we regard the final section of the *Tractatus* as little more than a rhetorical flourish.
4. On the contrary, 6.54 contains the whole point of the book, to which everything else has been leading up. The work has a therapeutic role: you are seduced into reading the work as though it is a theory of the relation of language to reality. Eventually, you come to realize that such a theory self-destructs, and that the propositions that you have been considering condemn themselves as nonsensical. You are thereby disabused of the urge to try to construct such a theory.

5. Wittgenstein is concerned throughout the book with the nature of logic and the relation of language to the world. One of his main concerns is to bring us to see that the answers to the philosophical questions that arise here are things that cannot be put into words – cannot be 'said' – but that are manifest in our use of language. Hence in apparently stating the answers to these questions, he is constantly forced to use sentences to which no meaning can be given. Through the use of these nonsensical sentences – sentences that are condemned as nonsensical by their own lights – he aims to help us to appreciate both what can only be shown, and why what can only be shown cannot be said. Once we have come to see what he is trying to bring us to see – once we understand him – we give up the attempt to say what the solutions to our philosophical problems are.

### 1. A *reductio ad absurdum*

Although Wittgenstein clearly went into all this with his eyes open, and indeed saw it as one of his main objects to confront his readers with this paradoxical position, whatever he himself might have thought, what we have here is as clear a case as could be imagined of a *reductio ad absurdum*. What could be more absurd than espousing a theory that would, once fully worked out, imply that theory to be nonsense?

Despite the fact that this is a natural reaction that many readers may have, we shall look at it only briefly here. The main thing to say

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is that, at least as it stands, this is a *shallow* reaction. It should only command respect if it is accompanied by a serious attempt to rebut Wittgenstein's central arguments that lead him to the positions he has been advocating throughout the book. Here it should be noted that the arguments that lead up to Wittgenstein's saying what he does in 6.54 are among the strongest arguments in the book. There are, on any account, many minor flaws in the *Tractatus* and some of the ideas expressed, even if defensible, would not command widespread support. The ideas, however, lying behind Wittgenstein's insistence that there was something that could only be shown and not said are not only among those to which he is attaching most importance, they also have a deep philosophical point that cannot be set aside by any superficial objection.

## 2. Going metalinguistic

Here we need primarily to consider a suggestion originally put forward by Russell in his Introduction to the *Tractatus*:

Every language has . . . a structure concerning which, in the *language*, nothing can be said, but that there may be another language dealing with the structure of the first language, and having itself a new structure, and to this hierarchy of languages there may be no limit.<sup>55</sup>

No doubt it was in large part because of this suggestion made by Russell at the end of his Introduction that Wittgenstein reacted angrily when he read the German translation, and condemned what Russell had written as 'superficiality and misunderstanding'.<sup>56</sup> Even if the suggestion Russell is making is 'superficial', it is at least a natural one to consider. In the first introduction of the idea that there is something that can be shown but not said, at 2.172 Wittgenstein claims that if a picture must have something (a form) in common with the situation it depicts in order that it should be able to depict that situation, the one thing that it *cannot* depict is that that situation has that form, since mirroring the form of the situation it depicts is a condition of its being about that situation at all. Instead it mirrors that form. So, in the case of propositions, a proposition will not be able to *say* of the situation it represents that it has a certain logical form in common with the proposition, but will itself display that form. Russell's idea is: maybe a proposition cannot itself

say what it must have in common with reality in order to depict it, but why shouldn't *another* proposition say what the first proposition only shows? Generally, if there are certain things which it is claimed a language cannot say, because they are presuppositions of its being able to say anything at all, why shouldn't we be able to say those things in another language that talks about that first language? Wittgenstein only runs into his showing/saying difficulties because he tries to make a language talk about itself as well as the reality it is about. So we replace his way of talking by one that is explicitly about language. Whereas '7 is a number' may, for reasons that Wittgenstein presents, be nonsense, it only appears to make sense because we hear it as saying "'7" is a numeral', which is a straightforward empirical proposition *saying* what Wittgenstein claimed could only be shown.

For Wittgenstein himself, this was just a prevarication that missed the point. I shall indicate here the reasons for thinking Russell's response to be inadequate.

*Do the metalinguistic propositions succeed in saying what Wittgenstein claimed could not be said?*

Do these 'metalinguistic' versions of the problematic *Tractatus* propositions say the same thing as we were trying to say when we put forward the corresponding *Tractatus* propositions? To be sure, "'7" is a numeral' may be regarded as an empirical proposition, comparable to archaeologists identifying certain marks on a tablet, and saying: 'Those marks are numerals', and we may regard the sentence: "'Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white' as a significant proposition about the English language. But to the extent that such metalinguistic renderings of the kind of sentences that we meet in the *Tractatus* make perfect sense, it is an illusion to suppose that they say what Wittgenstein was trying to say with his propositions. Taken in such a way that they are straightforward empirical propositions, these are simply trivial propositions about a particular language. The reason that they can appear to do duty for Wittgenstein's propositions is because we hear them differently. In Wittgenstein's terminology (3.32), we hear them as not about the *sign* '7' — the ink marks on the page — but about the *symbol*, that sign being used with a specific meaning. But if we take the proposition "'7" is a numeral', as one in which we are talking of the symbol, then ' . . . is a numeral' is itself a formal concept, and the sentence is just as problematic as the proposition we started

with, and we have got nowhere. Taking a metalinguistic route will always only tell us philosophically irrelevant facts about accidental features of the signs used. Wittgenstein, however, is only interested in the essential logical features of the symbol.

#### *Language or languages?*

Russell talks as if Wittgenstein were concerned with the structure of a specific language, so that it then makes sense to talk about discussing that language in a second language. But Wittgenstein's concerns throughout are different: he is asking: 'How is Language possible?' and 'What conditions must be satisfied by any possible language?' In much the same way, when Russell developed *his* theory of types, and the way in which nonsense resulted if one violated type restrictions, he was not concerned with the type restrictions that were recognized by a particular language, but these were intended as restrictions that would have to be respected by *any possible* language capable of talking about sets. If we were to construct a second language to talk about a first, what was claimed to be unsayable in the original language would simply be mirrored as unsayable in the second.

### 3. Ignoring 6.54

Much of Frank Ramsey's best work was directly inspired by the *Tractatus* and discussions with Wittgenstein, although he wanted nothing to do with the idea that there were things that could be shown but not said. His essays illustrate how much philosophical insight can be derived from a purely straight reading of the *Tractatus*, if you completely disregard Wittgenstein's claim that his propositions were nonsense. Of course, Ramsey was aware that in doing this he was not straightforwardly interpreting the *Tractatus*, but simply profiting from Wittgenstein's ideas where he could. What his example suggests is, however, the possibility of an exegesis of the *Tractatus* that simply ignores 6.54. There have certainly been many commentators who, while not explicitly saying that this is what they are doing, have done precisely that. One may suggest a number of defences of such a procedure. In the first place, it is so eminently possible: there seems no problem in discussing what Wittgenstein says, and arguing for and against it. Indeed, in the second place, there seems no coherent alternative to interpreting the main body of the book as if it all made sense: this is true, even for those who

strenuously argue that the whole point of the book is to be found in the fact that its propositions are nonsense: it is only with hindsight, that one recognizes these propositions to be nonsense. In the third place, there is strong reason to believe that there was a version of the *Tractatus* produced in 1916 that would have stopped at proposition 6 rather than go on to proposition 7, with the material now in the 6s as later additions: there is much material in the 6s that is considerably less satisfactory than the earlier parts of the book and much that is difficult to integrate with those parts. Whatever may be said about the passages in which Wittgenstein talks about ethics, a large number of commentators have simply ignored their presence in the book, as peripheral to what is truly philosophically interesting (regardless of Wittgenstein's own evaluation of these remarks): why not treat the 6.5s in the same way? It is here that one runs into the chief difficulty with this approach.

There is a major contrast between the remarks about ethics and the 6.5s. Nothing in the earlier parts of the book would lead one to anticipate what Wittgenstein was going to say about ethics, and indeed it is one of the sections that it is most difficult to reconcile with what has gone before. The ideas that Wittgenstein presents in the 6.5s, and 6.54 in particular, have all been carefully built up to, and emerge, as the natural consequence of the main discussion of the book. When we look through the considerations that I listed in the last section in comment on 6.54, we see that they *all* deal with issues that have been central to Wittgenstein's concerns throughout the book. Unlike Wittgenstein's remarks about ethics, in the 6.5s Wittgenstein is simply drawing out the last consequences of the key positions he has been arguing for throughout the book: if, as he has stressed, one of his aims in setting up the general form of proposition was to establish the limits of language, then that has the consequence that the propositions whereby he established those limits constantly transgressed the limits they were establishing, and thus fell on the wrong side of those limits, and hence were nonsense. It seems we can only ignore 6.54 if we fail to do what Wittgenstein did and do not think our position through to the end.

### 4. A 'therapeutic' reading

There has been large interest recently in the kind of reading that we now have to consider. This is the so-called 'New Wittgensteinian' reading of the *Tractatus*.<sup>57</sup> In sharp contrast with the preceding

reading, this makes 6.54 the key to the whole book. The book may be thought of as having two components – a 'frame' consisting primarily of the Preface and the 6.5s (6.54 in particular), and the rest of the book included within that frame – where the frame gives guidance to one's understanding of Wittgenstein's whole project. We take with full seriousness Wittgenstein's claim that the propositions in the main part of the book are nonsense, and stress that by nonsense is meant nonsense – gibberish – and that the point of the book is achieved (when the reader finally understands *Wittgenstein*, not the propositions of the *Tractatus*, since there is no such thing as understanding nonsense) when the illusion that those propositions make sense has been dispelled. The book has a 'therapeutic' purpose that seems to run along the following lines: the reader is initially seduced into reading the book 'straight', as an account of propositions and the way propositions relate to reality. This account finally falls apart and turns out to be nonsense in its own terms. Once the reader realizes this, they are disabused of the urge that led them to engage in the kind of enquiry they had apparently embarked on. They then 'see the world aright', in that they return to be content with our everyday language, without the wish to construct a metaphysical theory to underpin that language. The 'traditional' readings of the *Tractatus* have been engaged in a kind of double-think in which they somehow think it is both possible to accept the main tenets that the *Tractatus* apparently propounds and that the sentences expressing those tenets are nonsensical. We must take Wittgenstein to have been 'resolute' and that when he talked of 'throwing away the ladder', he meant precisely that – abandon any attempt to find any meaning in the sentences of the body of the book. In particular, we must overcome the illusion that there is anything that can be 'shown but not said'.

This way of interpreting the *Tractatus* derives much of its apparent plausibility from the difficulties in giving a fully satisfactory version of the kind of reading that we shall consider next, which the proponents of this reading call the 'traditional reading'. Without minimizing the difficulties that confront *that* reading, this reading has its own, to my mind, even greater difficulties.

#### External evidence

At first sight, this reading can look invulnerable to attack, since any paragraphs of the *Tractatus* that seem straightforwardly to

contradict this interpretation – such as those in which Wittgenstein stresses that there is that which can be shown and not said (4.121, 4.1212, 6.522) – can simply be jettisoned as rungs of the ladder that must be thrown away. The overwhelming difficulty confronting the 'New Wittgensteinian' reading is, however, the apparent impossibility of squaring it with all the external evidence constituted by the ways Wittgenstein himself talked or wrote about the *Tractatus*: it is hard to find *any* remarks that unequivocally support this reading, but a wealth of remarks that seem to contradict it. This is true whether we consider the *Notebooks* in which he did preparatory work on the *Tractatus*, the ways in which he explained the book to Russell and Ramsey, the developments and modifications he made to the ideas of the *Tractatus* in the early 1930s, or the ways in which he subsequently attacked ideas of the *Tractatus* as ideas he had held earlier. Just to give one example: when he writes to Russell in response to Russell's questions about the *Tractatus*, when Russell had objected: 'It is necessary also to be given the proposition that all elementary propositions are given', he says:

This is not necessarily because it is even impossible. There is no such proposition! That all elementary propositions are given is *shown* by there being none having an elementary sense which is not given.<sup>58</sup>

This is incomprehensible unless Wittgenstein did indeed believe there was that which could be shown and not said. But it is not so much a question of this or that remark which it is difficult to reconcile with this way of understanding the *Tractatus*; it is the number and diversity of the remarks that are recalcitrant to being read in accordance with it.

#### What is the 'frame'?

The interpretation rests entirely upon singling out some remarks as 'frame' in which Wittgenstein addresses us *in propria persona* and contrasting those with the other propositions that are to be finally recognized by the reader as nonsense. In practice, the frame is not taken simply to consist of the Preface and the 6.5s, but also to include other paragraphs such as 4.111–4.112 or 5.4733 scattered throughout the book. What is hard to discern is a *principled* account of why these remarks can be singled out, and why Wittgenstein

intersperses them, apparently at random, amongst the 'nonsensical propositions'. This looks a particularly acute problem with, e.g., 4.111–4.112, where on a natural understanding of those paragraphs, they appear as part of the development of a train of thought that begins at 4.1, and as the consequence of an argument that contains propositions that are to be rejected as nonsense. The answer to this problem had better not be that the remarks singled out as belonging to the frame are simply the remarks the interpreters find congenial.

Equally, if we read through the sequence from 6.5 to 6.54, which is the sequence that can most easily be read as giving support to the kind of reading we are examining here, we find in the middle of it 6.522 in which Wittgenstein claims that there *is* that which cannot be expressed, but which shows itself. If, according to the 'New Wittgensteinian reading', the 6.5s are intended to give the reader guidance as to the way to approach the *Tractatus*, the sudden incursion of this remark, which must, on this account, be simply thrown away as nonsensical, seems to make the way in which Wittgenstein has organized the paragraphs of the book look crazy. It seems more sensible to look for an alternative way of reading the 6.5s.

*How is the 'therapy' supposed to be achieved?*

However difficult it may be to fill in the details of the 'traditional' reading that is being rejected by the 'New Wittgensteinians', it is relatively easy to sketch out the main outlines of the way in which according to the traditional reading the book is intended to work: Wittgenstein is wishing to communicate to us something that cannot be put into words, but that is shown by the way language works. To do this, he apparently says what cannot be said, thereby leading us to see what can only be shown: once we have seen what he is trying to draw to our attention, we realize that it could not be properly expressed by the sentences that Wittgenstein had used, and indeed would be falsified by any sentences that purported to say what could only be shown: in fact what has been drawn to our attention condemns precisely the sentences that had been used to draw it to our attention as nonsense. On the account we are now considering there is however a gap in this account – we are shown nothing – and it is obscure what is meant to fill that gap. How are we meant to come to realize that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense? The only answer seems to be that these propositions, taken

seriously, are in some way self-refuting, or imply their own nonsensicality. But then there is just as much difficulty confronting this account as confronts the traditional reading in explaining what is meant by 'taken seriously' when applied to sentences that have no meaning whatever – and equally by what it means to talk of such propositions as implying anything. But even apart from that, the fact that sentences are self-refuting or imply their own nonsensicality does *not* show them to be nonsense: at most, it shows them to be false.

But even if a satisfactory answer can be given to those questions, the real question needs answering: 'How does the fact that the propositions of the *Tractatus* turn out, for what ever reason, to be nonsense have any therapeutic value?' After all, self-refuting metaphysical theories, even theories that turn out to be nonsense in their own terms, are hardly a rarity in the history of philosophy. The Verification Principle in particular was dogged by the difficulty of giving an account of its own meaningfulness in the terms for meaningfulness that it itself laid down – and no one has ever seen any therapeutic role for Logical Positivism analogous to the rôle that is here being assigned to the *Tractatus*.

*A value judgment*

Whether or not this is a difficulty depends upon the judgment one makes on what is of value in the *Tractatus*. It is, however, undoubtedly the main reason why a number of philosophers have not just rejected this reading, but reacted to it with hostility. On any reading Wittgenstein makes a number of mistakes in the development of the *Tractatus*, but those mistakes are comprehensible given that he was struggling with some of the deepest philosophical issues. Anyone reading through the *Notebooks* will be impressed by the intensity of his grappling to get clear about the nature of propositions and logic. And this struggle issues in a whole range of profound philosophical insights that are embodied in the main body of the *Tractatus*. To suppose that he invited us simply to throw all that away in the name of a curious therapeutic exercise can appear as if we are asked to suppose that he committed intellectual suicide. Certainly that therapeutic exercise can look remarkably trivial by comparison. It also seems remarkably ineffective: on his return to philosophy in 1929, he immediately wrote an article<sup>59</sup> in which he continued the kind of enquiry which the 'therapy' would jettison, as if nothing had happened. What is more, he



continues that enquiry without even the constant hints throughout the *Tractatus* that there is something problematic about such an enquiry.

### 5. The 'traditional' reading

I call this the 'traditional' reading, because that is the designation used by the 'New Wittgensteinians' that we have just looked at. However, this designation should not blind one to the fact that there is considerable diversity among the commentators who propose some version of the position that we are now considering: a diversity that is fully intelligible given the difficulties that need to be overcome to give a coherent account of what needs saying here. Indeed, although this is the most natural reading, and indeed the one that best accords, e.g., with the way that Wittgenstein explained his position in correspondence with Russell, the difficulties that confront us here are enormous. In fact, it is only because of these difficulties that the other four ways of reading the *Tractatus* have arisen: they are various ways of cutting the Gordian knot that Wittgenstein presents us with here. (It would be wrong to think that Wittgenstein had himself a neat resolution to the problems that arise here: it is far more likely that he is wanting to confront his readers with a paradoxical situation that he finds just as puzzling as we do.)

According to this reading, there are for Wittgenstein things that cannot be put into words: things that can be shown, but not said. These are things that are manifest in the use we make of language, but which are presupposed to that use of language and cannot be said within language. A major part of the purpose of his book is both to bring us to see what cannot be said, and at the same time to see why it cannot be said. Once we have grasped his point we 'will throw away the ladder'; that is to say, we will recognize that what we have grasped cannot be cast in the form of a metaphysical doctrine, and will recognize that Wittgenstein's own apparent casting of his position in the form of a series of metaphysical doctrines was only a stage that needed to be overcome. He had himself continually been transgressing 'the limits of language' that he wanted us to recognize, and as a result producing sentences that were condemned by those limits as nonsense. Once we understood him, we would give up the temptation to try to say what couldn't be said, and follow his injunction to be silent.

I shall consider two difficulties that confront this reading. These two difficulties are often run together, but they are different and it is

well to treat them separately. The 'New Wittgensteinians' have most frequently urged the first, but it is actually the second that presents the more acute difficulties.

#### *Nonsense is nonsense*

If we recognize the sentences of the *Tractatus* as nonsense, how can we claim to have more than the illusion of having understood them? If we are 'resolute', to use the 'New Wittgensteinians' favourite term, we will realize that there is no such thing as understanding nonsense, and recognize that the only thing there is for us to do once we have understood Wittgenstein, is to reject the preceding sentences in which Wittgenstein had apparently presented us with an account of the way that language related to reality as gibberish, as only apparently presenting us with anything significant at all. The accusation is that those who maintain that we have been brought to recognize something by the body of the *Tractatus*, or at the very least that Wittgenstein was trying to bring us to recognize something thereby, are committed to the barbarous idea of there being 'significant nonsense'.

The accusation that those who espouse the traditional reading of the *Tractatus* are committed to believing there to be such a thing as 'significant' or 'substantial' nonsense, or at least are committed to believe that Wittgenstein thought there was such is, however, a somewhat malicious caricature. Certainly no one, or practically no one, is going to say that there is significant nonsense, so the accusation must be that that is what they are tacitly maintaining, whether they realize it or not. Here we need to keep firmly in mind the distinction between the meaning of a sentence and the use we make of it. The issue is not: 'Does a nonsense sentence have a sur-reptitious meaning?' but 'Can we use a sentence that is confessedly nonsense to communicate something?' The bald answer to the second question is undoubtedly 'Yes': we can, under appropriate circumstances, use almost anything to communicate something – even pulling someone's nose. But that is too quick. What we are dealing with is *verbal* communication, and what is more, if we learn anything from such communication it is surely only by virtue of the words used, and at least by our apparently understanding what is being said. How is that possible? How can we use *nonsense* sentences to communicate? The beginnings of an answer at least are to be found in the fact that we do it all the time. There are

countless examples of the figurative use of language where the sentences used are void of any literal sense whatever: to choose an example at random, consider Wemmick's summary of Jagers in *Great Expectations*:

'Deep' said Wemmick, 'as Australia'. Pointing with his pen at the office floor, to express that Australia was understood, for the purpose of the figure, to be symmetrically on the opposite of the globe.

'If there was anything deeper', added Wemmick, bringing his pen to paper, 'he'd be it'.<sup>60</sup>

It may be objected that in this case Wemmick is using words with special figurative meanings, and so is not using nonsense sentences, or that when someone speaks figuratively we could, in principle, say what they meant in other words. But both objections rest on crude theories of the possibilities of figuration, and certainly the second objection is question-begging. If the purpose of the use of figuration is to bring us to see something that *ex hypothesi* cannot be said, then of course we cannot give a literal translation of the figure. There is no good reason in general, let alone in this particular case, to suppose that when someone speaks figuratively, what they communicate is necessarily propositional in nature. But this is only the beginnings of an answer: there are countless different types of figuration, and a full answer would require a detailed account of how this particular unusual use of words works.

It is perhaps helpful here to consider what Frege said in a somewhat similar situation to Wittgenstein's. (He had argued for the claim that the predicate '... is true' was redundant [i.e. 'p is true' had precisely the same sense as 'p'] and that as a result, strictly speaking the word 'true' cannot indicate the essence of logic):

The word 'true' seems to make the impossible possible: it allows what corresponds to the assertoric force to assume the form of a contribution to the thought. And although the attempt miscarries, or rather through the very fact that it miscarries, it indicates what is characteristic of logic.<sup>61</sup>

Wittgenstein is trying to communicate what cannot be said, and as a result when he says what he does, his words fail to capture what he

wishes to communicate, but the way in which they fail, and the very fact that they fail, may be what serves to bring us to see what can only be shown, and why it can only be shown.

What can 'only be shown'?

Although great stress has been laid by those who have opposed the traditional reading on the difficulty we have just considered, the far greater difficulty is the second one, which we must now consider. What precisely is it that we have been shown? One thing that it would clearly be wrong to say would be something like: 'If there are infinitely many objects, then we cannot say that there are: we have to be shown that there are'. That is the second caricature of the traditional reading that we sometimes encounter in the writings of the 'New Wittgensteinians'. But *that* is plainly absurd, and may be contrasted with Wittgenstein's own more careful rendering in correspondence with Russell:

What you want to say' by the apparent proposition 'There are 2 things' is *shown* by there being two names which have different meanings (or by there being one name which may have two meanings).<sup>62</sup>

Obviously, the question 'What are we shown?' cannot be asking us to say what cannot be said, but it is asking for a characterization of the type of thing that is supposed to be shown to us. The difficulty is that the natural answers – either that our attention is drawn to a fact that cannot be captured in words or to an ineffable truth<sup>63</sup> – both seem to be ruled out by the whole project we have been engaged in. For the world is the *totality* of facts, and the 'limits of language' are coextensive with the set of propositions that are made true or false by those facts. 'Stating the facts' is precisely what language *can* do. Whatever it is that is shown, an additional fact about the world is the wrong kind of answer. It is this question that is the real challenge that confronts us when we read the *Tractatus* (and if we take Wittgenstein's arguments seriously, not simply as a question of exegesis of the *Tractatus*, but as a philosophical question in its own right).

What seems attractive to say is that we are shown not an additional fact, but a pattern *within* the facts, but the difficulty is thinking through what is meant by talking of such a pattern *without*

making it an additional fact. Perhaps it was something like this that Wittgenstein himself had in mind, when speaking about internal relations and properties, which for him were a paradigm case of what could only be shown, he wrote:

4.1221 An internal property of a fact we can also call a feature of this fact (in the sense in which we speak of facial features).

### Topics for discussion

Which of the above approaches to the *Tractatus* seems to you most satisfactory?

How would you address the difficulties confronting that approach?

Can we use nonsense sentences to communicate something?

What kind of thing is it that can be shown but not said?

At this point, having by now worked through much of the detail of the book, it would be profitable to read the *Tractatus* from cover to cover, asking yourself in particular how well such a reading squares with the answers you give to these questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### RECEPTION AND INFLUENCE

An account of the reception and influence of the *Tractatus* naturally divides into two parts. There is the influence of the book on other philosophers, but also the fate of the *Tractatus* in the later developments of Wittgenstein's own thought.

#### ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

The first consideration is very general, and does not relate exclusively to the *Tractatus*. At the turn of the last century, a new style of philosophy emerged, first in the work of Frege, but then that of Russell, the *Tractatus*, F.P. Ramsey, G.E. Moore and later Rudolf Carnap that has come to be called 'Analytic Philosophy' and has dominated much of Anglo-American philosophy ever since. One important way of considering the *Tractatus* is to regard it as one of the founding documents of Analytic Philosophy. Analytic Philosophy is notoriously difficult to define and you can find virtually no philosophical doctrine that would be ascribed to by all philosophers who count themselves as analytic philosophers. Certain trends recur, such as the fundamental importance of logic to philosophy, the need to analyse the language we use in talking about a certain subject matter when approaching the philosophical questions to which that subject matter gives rise; but it is better to consider Analytic Philosophy more as a tradition of influence and a habit of mind than a set of philosophical doctrines, where rigorous argument, precise statement of the positions being argued for, and attention to the language used in formulating philosophical questions are given pre-eminence over the building of large philosophical systems. Although Wittgenstein could never be considered a typical analytic