

The Whole Meaning of a Book of Nonsense:

Reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*<sup>1</sup>

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a monograph of less than 100 pages, has perhaps generated the highest ratio of commentary and controversy to text of any philosophical book of the past century. Wittgenstein recognized the difficulty his work would present to his readers. The only debts he cites in the Preface to the *Tractatus* are to "the great works of Frege and the writings of my friend Bertrand Russell,"<sup>2</sup> yet Wittgenstein concluded that neither of these understood his book.<sup>3</sup> In a famous letter to Ludwig von Ficker, whom he was trying to persuade to publish the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein admitted that "You won't – I really believe – get too much out of reading it. Because you won't understand it – the content of the book will be strange to you." But he added, "In reality, it isn't strange to you, for the point of the book is an ethical one."<sup>4</sup> It is doubtful that Ficker found this last remark comforting, for it must have appeared completely mysterious to him how this book, which seems to consist almost entirely of a discussion of issues in philosophy of logic tied to the then still fairly obscure systems of symbolic logic of Frege and Russell, with only a few cryptic remarks about ethics in its closing pages, could have an ethical point. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein was completely serious in making this remark, and I hope to explain how a book with the title *Logisch-*

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this material were presented to the Philosophy Department at Georgetown University and discussed in a "Master Class" there on the *Tractatus*, and also at a Workshop on Wittgenstein and the Literary, the Ethical and the Unsayable at the University of Chicago. I am indebted to these conversations for several clarifications and improvements in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the *Tractatus* are generally from the Ogden and Ramsey translation. Occasionally I will make silent emendations in the light of the Pears and McGuinness translation. Citations from the body of the *Tractatus* will be by numbered proposition.

<sup>3</sup> *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*, 103, 118, 119-20.

<sup>4</sup> "Letters to Ficker," 94.

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*Philosophische Abhandlung* could yet be conceived as having an ethical point by the end of this essay.

Wittgenstein provided Ficker with a suggestion as to how to understand the book: “For the time being I’d recommend that you read the *foreword* and the *conclusion* since these express the point most directly.”<sup>5</sup> I will begin by following this advice, discussing the Preface and final numbered propositions of the *Tractatus*, with an eye to understanding the general approach to philosophy that these passages suggest. I will then build on my reading of these passages to interpret key moments in the main body of the work, returning at the end to the ethical point of the book as a whole.

#### I. The whole meaning of the *Tractatus*: a first approach

In the second paragraph of the Preface, Wittgenstein provides a statement of the “whole meaning” of the book which “could be summed up somewhat as follows: What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.” This summation has two parts; and a contrast is implied between the two, between “what can be said” and that “whereof one cannot speak.” Both parts reoccur in the main body of the work. The second half corresponds to the last numbered proposition, 7; whereas the first half is close to a proposition in the middle of the work, 4.116:

“Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly.”

This first branch of the contrasting pair seems relatively easy to understand: it expresses an ideal of clarity, shared by Wittgenstein with Frege and Russell – whenever we use language so as to make sense, what we mean can be expressed in a totally perspicuous manner. Frege and Russell held that the way to achieve such clarity was to

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

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employ a symbolism designed expressly for this purpose, a notation in which clarity would be built into the structure of the language – a *Begriffsschrift* or symbolic logic. Wittgenstein shared with his predecessors the project of clarifying our thought; we will see below in what sense Wittgenstein shared also their approach to realizing this project.

The second half of Wittgenstein’s contrast has proved much more difficult to understand, and has generated a great deal of scholarly controversy. Wittgenstein seems to speak here of *that* “whereof one cannot speak” and to say that about *it* “one must be silent.” This suggests the following reading:<sup>6</sup> there are ineffable truths, things we can know, but which cannot be expressed in words. These truths, once recognized, can only be appreciated in a respectful silence. The *Tractatus* aims to get us to recognize these truths. However, since they are inexpressible, the book must do this in an indirect way: it communicates these truths which cannot be spoken *through* the failed attempt to speak them.

An example can help to clarify the thought that is here being attributed to Wittgenstein: Frege’s difficulty in conveying the categorial distinction between concept and object that is fundamental to his conception of logic. Frege found that any attempt to put this distinction into words inevitably misrepresented it – in saying something like “concepts are not objects” he ended up treating concepts as if they were objects, as if the same things could meaningfully (if falsely) be said of concepts as could be said of objects. Yet Frege insisted that his distinction reflected a truth, “founded deep in the

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<sup>6</sup> One *locus classicus* of this kind of reading is Hacker, *Insight*. It was for fairly standard in the literature until the advent of the “resolute reading” or “new Wittgenstein” championed by Cora Diamond and James Conant (see for example “Throwing Away the Ladder” and “The Method of the *Tractatus*”). My reading of the book is in the general family of “resolute readings,” so-called because they attempt to resolutely accept Wittgenstein’s claim that his propositions are nonsensical and convey no ineffable truths; readings such as Hacker’s are sometimes characterized as “ineffability” (or, less sympathetically, “irresolute”) readings.

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nature of things.”<sup>7</sup> One could *see* that the distinction held, and one could bring others to see this as well, though the words one would use to do this would inevitably “miss my thought.”<sup>8</sup> On the present suggestion, Wittgenstein’s view of philosophical matters in general is a kind of analogous extension of this thought of Frege’s about fundamental logical distinctions.<sup>9</sup>

This way of reading the *Tractatus* draws support from its famous closing paragraphs, the “conclusion” which Wittgenstein mentioned to Ficker. Immediately before the final proposition Wittgenstein writes at 6.54:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense, 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.

According to the present suggestion, Wittgenstein’s propositions are nonsensical because they attempt to express in words ineffable truths. Sometimes, this is put using a distinction that Wittgenstein draws between “saying” and “showing:”

4.1212 What *can* be shown *cannot* be said.

Writing to Russell in 1919, Wittgenstein called this distinction both his “main contention,” and “the cardinal problem of philosophy.”<sup>10</sup> According to the reading I am sketching here, the nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* result from the attempt to say what can only be shown – but those unsayable truths can be *seen*, by one who “sees

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<sup>7</sup> “Function and Concept,” 156. (Frege is there referring to his distinction between first and second-level functions but clearly would take the same view of his distinction between first-level functions, including concepts, and objects.)

<sup>8</sup> “Concept and Object,” 193.

<sup>9</sup> An early and influential exploration of this idea is found in Geach, “Saying and Showing.”

<sup>10</sup> *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*, 98.

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the world rightly.” One who sees them overcomes the attempt to express them –and appreciates them in silence.

This is *not* the reading of the *Tractatus* that I am going to develop in this essay. However, it has been a widely popular reading, and it has a definite advantage – it offers a way of accounting for the ethical dimension of the work. Towards the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein makes some brief remarks about ethics, which he says “cannot be expressed” and, like logic, is “transcendental” (6.421, 6.13). If “transcendental” here refers to that which transcends expression, we might take it that ethics, like logic, consists in a body of ineffable truths. There is an ethics, then, that Wittgenstein is trying to communicate. The ethical point of the book is both to get the reader to see this, and also to see the ineffable ethical truths that the book fails to express directly. This ethical point is subsumed under the whole meaning of the book, here understood as follows: whatever we can say can be said clearly; but there is a realm of unsayable truths, including both logic and ethics. We have to be brought to *see* this realm of truths, and then stop talking about it. In his letter to Ficker, trying to explain the ethical point of the book, Wittgenstein says that his work consists of two parts, what he has written, on the one hand, and “everything that I have *not* written” on the other – with the latter “the important one.”<sup>11</sup> Here we might take the part he has not written to consist precisely in those logical and ethical truths that cannot be expressed, but must be *seen* and then recognized in silence.

Thus we have a reading of the whole meaning of the book which helps to give an account of how the book has an ethical point. Nonetheless I think this account is

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<sup>11</sup> “Letters to Ficker,” 94.

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mistaken. To begin to see why, we should return to the summary of the whole meaning in the Preface, and place it in its immediate context.

## II. Drawing limits: thought, sense and nonsense

Immediately *after* summing up its whole meaning, Wittgenstein states an aim for his work: “the book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking.” He adds that this limit will be drawn “*in language*” by limiting “the expression of thoughts” – but as he later equates what can be thought with what can be said<sup>12</sup> this does not seem to make much difference. So it might appear that when we draw the limit to thought (or to the expression of thought) this will amount to drawing a line, on the other side of which will be the ineffable truths that we have to recognize but cannot put into words.

However, Wittgenstein in fact does see a significant difference between drawing a limit to thought and drawing a limit to the expression of thoughts in language. He explains that in order to draw a limit to thought he would have had to *think* both sides of the limit, which is, he says, impossible. In contrast, we can limit the *expression* of thoughts, because “what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.” Here it is useful to consider another form of the summation of the whole meaning of the work, given in the motto Wittgenstein chose as an epigraph for the book: “Whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere rumbling and roaring that he has heard, can be said in three words.”<sup>13</sup> Here the contrast is between what can be expressed succinctly and clearly (“in three words”) and “mere rumbling and roaring.” “Nonsense” for Wittgenstein is mere *noise* – not deep but inexpressible truths. When we draw the limit to the expression of thoughts, for each thought that we can think clearly there will be a corresponding

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<sup>12</sup> 4: “The thought is the significant proposition” – compare the parallelism between what can be thought and what can be said in 4.116, corresponding to the first half of the whole meaning, cited above.

<sup>13</sup> From Ferdinand Kürnberger; I follow the Pears and McGuinness translation here.

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proposition that can be said clearly, but to the putative ineffable truths of logic and ethics there will correspond nothing but noise. Therefore, when Wittgenstein tells us that to understand *him* we need to recognize his propositions as nonsensical, all we are to recognize is that his putative propositions are simply so much meaningless “rumbling and roaring.” But this threatens to make it even more mysterious how writing such a book can have an ethical point, or indeed any point at all.

To shed further light on this, consider a claim Wittgenstein makes just *before* introducing his summation of the meaning of the *Tractatus*. He says that his book “deals with the problems of philosophy,” which, at the end of the Preface he claims to have “in essentials ... finally solved” thereby showing “how little has been done when these problems have been solved.” The key to the solution of these problems involves recognizing “that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language.” This claim, like many other key points in the Preface, is taken up in the body of the book, and linked to the idea of nonsense:

4.003 Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical. We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their nonsensicality. Most questions and propositions of the philosophers result from the fact that we do not understand the logic of our language.

Wittgenstein concludes that “it is not to be wondered at that the deepest problems are really *no* problems.” If we *properly* understand the logic of our language, we will see that the problems of philosophy are, really, no problems, but mere rumbling and roaring.

Commenting at 4.0031 on this account of the questions and propositions of philosophy, Wittgenstein says that “all philosophy is ‘Critique of language’” and credits Russell with having shown that “the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its

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real form.” This “merit” of Russell’s derives from his theory of descriptions, first presented in “On Denoting” (1905). Russell there analyzes the logical form of a sentence like “The present king of France is bald” as very different from its apparent, subject-predicate form. Its true logical form is represented as:

$$(\exists x)(Kx \ \& \ (y)(Ky \supset y = x) \ \& \ Bx).^{14}$$

This contrasts sharply with the logical form of a simple predication like “Nuel Belnap is bald,” represented as “*Bn*.” But more importantly, Russell *uses* this theory to solve logical puzzles, by showing how they arise from *confusion* about logical form.

For example, if we focus on “The present king of France is *not* bald,” a logical puzzle is generated if we fail to distinguish two possible logical forms corresponding to this sentence: the primary occurrence (wide scope) reading,

$$(\exists x)(Kx \ \& \ (y)(Ky \supset y = x) \ \& \ \sim Bx)$$

and the secondary occurrence (narrow scope) reading,

$$\sim(\exists x)(Kx \ \& \ (y)(Ky \supset y = x) \ \& \ Bx).^{15}$$

If we assume that “The present king of France is not bald” is *both* the logical opposite of “The present king of France is bald” *and* of the same basic type as “The present king of France is bald” – two simple predications, one positive and one negative – we can be puzzled about the status of these sentences, given that there is no present king of France. But analysis reveals that these two roles cannot be combined: on the primary occurrence reading, “The present king of France is bald” and “The present king of France is not bald” are of the same basic logical type, and both imply that there is a present king of France, but they are not logical opposites; on the secondary occurrence reading, they are

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<sup>14</sup> “On Denoting,” 482 (although Russell does not use logical notation to express his analysis there, as he later does in *Principia Mathematica*).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 485, 490.

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logical opposites, but are not of the same basic logical type, and the second does not imply that there is a present king of France. The puzzle simply disappears, and is shown to rest on a confusion about logical form.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Sign and symbol, confusion and clarification

According to Wittgenstein, this kind of confusion pervades philosophical discourse. He writes that the “whole of philosophy is full” of “the most fundamental confusions,” deriving from particular forms of equivocation in language. (3.324) He explains the origin of these confusions in terms of a fundamental distinction between *sign* and *symbol*, expounded in the 3.31’s and 3.32’s as part of his commentary on his version of Frege’s “context principle”<sup>17</sup> (3.3): “Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning.” A proposition expresses its sense; but we must distinguish between the “sensibly perceptible” propositional *sign*, and the proposition proper, “the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.” (3.1-3.14) Propositional signs are *facts*, and therefore *articulate*: “Only facts can express a sense, a class of names cannot.” (3.141-2) Therefore, we can distinguish within any proposition the *symbols* or *expressions*, the logical working parts which “characterize its sense.” (3.31) These too have a sensibly perceptible aspect: “The sign is the part of the symbol perceptible by the senses.” (3.32)

A symbol is thus a sensibly perceptible sign put to use in language, and according to Wittgenstein’s context principle (3.3, 3.314) the use we make of signs as symbols is use in propositions that make sense, that say something. Consequently “in order to recognize the symbol in the sign we must consider the significant (*sinnvollen*) use”

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<sup>16</sup> I discuss Wittgenstein’s debt to Russell’s treatment of puzzles at length in my “Russell’s Merit.”

<sup>17</sup> *Foundations*, x.

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(3.326) – use in a proposition that makes sense. Outside of such use, we do not have symbols or meaning at all.

Wittgenstein uses his distinction between sign and symbol to account for the confusions that he says permeate philosophy. The fundamental point here is that “two different symbols can ... have the same sign ... in common – they then signify in different ways.” (3.321) More generally, “in the language of everyday life it very often happens that the same word signifies in two different ways – and therefore belongs to two different symbols – or that two words, which signify in different ways, are apparently applied in the same way in the proposition.” (3.323)

Wittgenstein here mentions two forms of equivocation. We may have one sign used in two ways, functioning as two different symbols; or we may have two signs governed by the same grammatical rules, so that they appear to have the same logical form, yet realizing symbols with distinct logical forms. He provides examples of both kinds: “the word ‘is’ appears as the copula, as the sign of equality, and as the expression of existence” and “‘to exist’ [appears] as an intransitive verb like ‘to go’.” (3.323)

Take the first case, and compare the three propositions:

- (a) Obama *is* American
- (b) Obama *is* (=) Barack
- (c) There *is* a president.

These have the sign “is” in common, but logically they are different and would be represented in logical notation by

(a')  $Ao$

(b')  $o = b$

(c')  $(\exists x)Px$

respectively.

A confusion between the first and second meanings of “is” seems to be involved in F.H. Bradley’s puzzlement about “substantive and adjective” (*Appearance and Reality*, chapter 2). Bradley begins with the example of a lump of sugar which is “white, and hard, and sweet.” He remarks: “The sugar, we say, *is* all that; but what the *is* can really mean, seems doubtful. A thing is not any one of its qualities, if you take the quality by itself...” – and so we are off to the philosophical races.<sup>18</sup> If we represent “the lump of sugar is sweet” along the lines of (a’), and distinguish this from “the lump of sugar is (identical to) its sweetness,” Bradley’s puzzlement simply does not arise. In his puzzlement he has mistakenly confused these two distinct meanings.

Wittgenstein’s second example does *not* involve one sign being used in two symbols. Rather, two signs that realize logically different symbols are used in the *same* way. Consider the sentences

(d) Cars go.

(e) Cars exist.

These *appear* to have the same form. That this is misleading is revealed by their representations in logical notation:

(d')  $(x)(Cx \supset Gx)$

(e')  $(\exists x)Cx$ .

The confusion exhibited in Russell’s puzzle about the present king of France is a complex instance of this latter sort. The difficulty with “The present king of France is not

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<sup>18</sup> Bradley, 19.

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bald” does not arise from any single sign being used equivocally as part of two symbols; rather the whole grammatical form “The *CN* is not *A*” is structurally equivocal – it can be used to represent fundamentally distinct logical forms.

Wittgenstein holds that the problems of philosophy are generated by similar kinds of confusion: confusion about how language works, logically. Russell used a logical notation to represent the distinct logical forms that can be confused in “The present king of France is not bald,” and we have used such a notation to distinguish the logical forms that the different uses of “is,” or the related uses of “to go” and “to exist,” might lead us to muddle together. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein sees here the general remedy to the sorts of confusions he is warning against, “misunderstandings of the logic of our language.” “In order to avoid these errors, we must employ a symbolism that excludes them, by not applying the same sign in different symbols and by not applying signs in the same way which signify in different ways” – for example “the logical symbolism [*Begriffsschrift*] of Frege and Russell.” (3.325)

Logical symbolism therefore provides a tool for an activity of clarification. In the propositions leading up to the reiteration of the first half of the summation, at 4.116, Wittgenstein says that “philosophy is not a theory, but an activity,” whose object is “the logical clarification of thoughts” and whose result is “not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’, but to make propositions clear.” (4.112) Using a properly designed logical symbolism, we can clearly express what can be said, and we can unmask the confusions that everyday language makes possible. We will then discover that the problems of philosophy are no longer there. We can delimit what can be said clearly, within language, not by drawing a line outside of language, but simply by saying everything that can be

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said, clearly. Thus philosophy will “limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable,” will “limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable.” (4.114) In other words, philosophy “will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable.” (4.115) By expressing clearly what can be thought and what can be said, we delimit what can be thought and said, and thereby also what cannot be thought and cannot be said. But what we thereby delimit is not a realm of ineffable truths; we simply indicate cases in which language-users have failed to make sense. It is in *this* way that philosophical problems arise.

We can now begin to see the ethical point of the book, which is meant in some sense to be liberating.<sup>19</sup> Near the end of the book, Wittgenstein writes “For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. *The riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all then it *can* also be answered.” (6.5) Philosophical problems involve questions that it seems *can* be *put* but *cannot* be *answered* – but then they aren’t real questions, either. The same is true of the “problems of life:”

We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (6.52-6.521)

The seeming intellectual problem of how to live vanishes when we realize that there is nothing there to be said, since there is nothing left to ask. Delimiting what can be said clearly from within, we simply exclude the problems of life and are thereby freed up to go ahead and live. “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?” asks Wittgenstein (6.521), and one can imagine that among those men is the author of the *Tractatus*. Yet

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<sup>19</sup> The liberating impetus of the *Tractatus* is a fundamental theme of Ostrow, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*.

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this way of thinking about the ethical significance of the book is perhaps not entirely satisfactory, and I will return to this question at the end of this essay.<sup>20</sup>

#### IV. Sense and nonsense, meaning and superfluity

So far, I have emphasized the idea that the nonsensical problems of philosophy arise from confusions, trading on the equivocal use of words. This may seem like an implausible claim – one which could hardly be supported by the kinds of examples adduced above. Russell, after all, only used his theory of descriptions to solve – or “dissolve,” as it is often said – a toy puzzle of his own invention, not a real “problem of philosophy.” Shortly, I will turn to examples drawn from Wittgenstein’s critical discussions of Frege and Russell, and then consider the claim that the propositions of the *Tractatus* itself are similarly to be discarded as nonsensical. But first I must consider a possible objection to my reading, developing out of some further Wittgensteinian remarks about nonsense that I have so far neglected.

At 5.4733, Wittgenstein says: “Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts.” Hence, nonsense results from a failure on our part to determine a meaning for the signs that make up our failed attempts at making sense. Wittgenstein relies on a similar thought when he says, just before the conclusion of the book, that “the right method of philosophy would be this: To say nothing except what can be said . . . and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to

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<sup>20</sup> Two interrelated concerns in particular arise here: (1) is there a right and a wrong way to live? (2) how can we communicate how to live, if not through ethical propositions? The *Tractatus* teaches us how to live by engaging in an activity of clarification which can free us from confusions and ethical illusions which distort our lives. But it is further possible to derive ethical guidance from stories, parables and poems, which *show* something about human life without trying to *say* how to live. Famously, Wittgenstein admired works such as Tolstoy’s novella, *Hadji Murad*, for their capacity to show something ethical.

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demonstrate to him that he given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” (6.53)

This would be, according to 5.4733, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to make sense. But how is all this related to the idea that nonsense results from forms of equivocation?

To answer this let us first consider how we might demonstrate to another that they have given no meaning to some of their signs. Clearly, it will not be convincing simply to *assert* that we do not understand their words. They would reasonably ask us to try harder. The above discussion suggests a better way: if we can convince them that they have equivocated, sliding between two different possible meanings of their signs, we will make clear to them that they have failed to *determine* a meaning for their signs in *this* context, and so have failed to make sense. And here a symbolic notation can function as a tool for exhibiting distinct possible meanings of their words, making explicit their confusion.

But Wittgenstein appears to indicate another way in which someone can fail to have given meaning to their words: by using words that are logically superfluous, which do no logical work. Wittgenstein associates this idea with “Occam’s razor” and presents it twice, in contexts that are highly significant for the reading we have been developing. Just *after* discussing the forms of equivocation that yield philosophical confusion he writes “If a sign is *not necessary* then it is meaningless. That is the meaning of Occam’s razor.” (3.328) And just *before* explaining that if a possible proposition has no sense, this must be because we have given no meaning to some of its parts, he repeats this idea: “Occam’s razor ... simply says that *unnecessary* elements in a symbolism mean nothing. ... signs which serve *no* purpose are logically meaningless.” (5.47321)

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Once again, the question arises how one might demonstrate to another that one of their signs is unnecessary, logically superfluous, and so meaningless – and that consequently they have failed to make sense. Wittgenstein’s first step here is to construct an *alternative notation* in which nothing corresponds to the sign in question. Consider the example (a) above, “Obama is American.” In the symbolic representation (a’), “*AO*” there is a sign corresponding to “Obama” and a sign corresponding to “American” but apparently none corresponding to “is.” The representation of “Obama is American” is of exactly the same form in our symbolic logic as the representation of “Obama talks” (“*TO*”). So this representation seems to show that the copula “is” is superfluous, and can be dispensed with.

Yet this point has to be handled with care. For of course one should not conclude that, as “Obama is American” contains a meaningless (since superfluous) word, this sentence lacks a sense. The way we show that “is” is superfluous, is to construct a notation in which *the sense* of “Obama is American” is expressed without anything corresponding to “is” among the logical working parts of the proposition. There is, after all, no philosophical confusion in asserting that Obama is American. Confusion arises, rather, from treating the word “is” as a separable part of the entire proposition, rather than recognizing that it forms only a part of the predicate. Such confusion might lead one to wonder about the *meaning* of the copula “is” and thereby to generate philosophical problems about the relation of being uniting subject and predicate.

Yet where does this confused idea come from? I suggest that it is fostered by the presence in the language of relation words expressed through transitive verbs, resulting in the grammatical similarity of “Obama is American” and “Obama eats pizza.” This

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exemplifies the sort of structural equivocation we saw above with “to exist” and “to go,” fostering the illusion that “is” must be treated as a logically separable sentential constituent whose meaning we can then ask after. The ambiguity of “is” itself, pointed out by Wittgenstein, may also contribute to the confusion – we can be tempted to muddle the “is” of predication and the “is” of identity, as we saw F. H. Bradley do.

Consequently the relation between the two sources of meaninglessness, equivocation and superfluity, is complex and intricate. One could say the following: in presenting an alternative notation in which no sign corresponds to a particular sign of our everyday language (such as the “is” of predication), we see how to do *the* logical work that that sign helped to accomplish, in a different way. At the same time we see how *no* logical work is done by certain uses of the original sign that we were tempted to think must be meaningful. The temptation to think of these uses of the original sign as making sense is generated by forms of ambiguity and equivocation involving the sign. This dynamic is played out in some of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Frege and Russell, discussed below.<sup>21</sup>

As I intimated above, this account of the nonsensical status of philosophical propositions and of the activity of clarification that shows their nonsensicality may seem completely unconvincing. In what follows I will flesh it out with examples drawn from the main body of the *Tractatus*.<sup>22</sup> These examples will help to introduce some of the main themes of the work, and to show why Wittgenstein thought that he had such a potent tool for philosophical clarification in the idea of a perspicuous logical notation. They will

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<sup>21</sup> My discussion of Wittgenstein’s criticisms of Frege and Russell is indebted to Ricketts, “Wittgenstein against Frege and Russell.”

<sup>22</sup> At 4.003, Wittgenstein provides as an example of a philosophical problem, the question whether the Good is more or less identical than the Beautiful. It is an interesting exercise to try to trace out what kind of confusion might be involved in this question. I address this example in my “Russell’s Merit.”

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also, eventually, help us to understand both the self-destructive conclusion of the book and its claim to have an ethical aim.

I will begin with a very simple observation. Wittgenstein says that the correct method in philosophy would be to demonstrate to anyone who wished to say something metaphysical that “he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” This will be immediately puzzling to anyone who has been reading the book from the beginning. For, if anyone ever wished to say something metaphysical surely it was Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose book begins with the pronouncements “The world is everything that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” – and so on. (1-1.1) Here Wittgenstein seems to present a metaphysics of logical atomism – the world is analyzed into facts, the facts into atomic facts, and the atomic facts into combinations of objects. (1.2, 2) Yet if this is metaphysical, according to Wittgenstein’s own lights he must have failed to give a meaning to at least some of the words in these opening remarks.

Of course, this is connected to the thought that anyone who understands him will recognize his propositions as nonsensical. (6.54) Ultimately we must come to see that the propositions of the *Tractatus* themselves exhibit confusions from which we need to be relieved. But it will be helpful to first outline how Wittgenstein applies this sort of “critique of Language” to the works of his great predecessors, Frege and Russell.

#### V. The critique of Frege and Russell: letting logic take care of itself

As we saw, at 3.325 Wittgenstein suggests that we can avoid the confusions of philosophy by employing a symbolism that “obeys the rules of *logical* grammar,” “by not applying the same sign in different symbols and by not applying signs in the same way

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which signify in different ways.” He adds, parenthetically, that “the logical symbolism [*Begriffsschrift*] of Frege and Russell is such a language, which, however, does still not exclude all errors.” While praising the logical notations of his predecessors, Wittgenstein criticizes them as potentially encouraging confusions, by “applying the same sign in different symbols” and “applying signs in the same way which signify in different ways.” How do their symbolisms do this, and what problems result?

Frege and Russell devised their logical notations in order to establish the epistemological status of mathematics, and in particular to demonstrate that the truths of arithmetic are reducible to logic. This required a symbolism in which the truths of arithmetic could be clearly expressed, and proofs of these truths could be given from logical laws and definitions alone. Frege, in particular, sought a way to ensure that all proofs were free of “gaps” where an appeal to something extra-logical might be hidden. He therefore set up precise *rules* governing inferences from one or more propositions to the next. Given a putative inference in his notation, it is possible to check whether the inference is correct or not by consulting the rules. The rules separate the good inferences from the bad ones and thereby also *justify* the good inferences.

This conception comes under criticism at *Tractatus* 5.13: “That the truth of one proposition follows from the truth of other propositions, we perceive from the structure of the propositions.” Wittgenstein continues (5.131-2):

If the truth of one proposition follows from the truth of others, this expresses itself in relations in which the forms of these propositions stand to one another, and we do not need to put them in these relations by first connecting them with one another in a proposition; for these relations are internal, and exist as soon as, and by the very fact that, the propositions exist. ...

The method of inference is to be gathered from the ... propositions alone.

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Only they themselves can justify the inference.  
Laws of inference, which – as in Frege and Russell – are to justify  
the conclusions, are senseless and would be superfluous.

Consider a typical rule of inference, *modus ponens*:

$$\begin{array}{l} p \supset q \\ p \\ \hline \therefore q \end{array}$$

Adding this rule to our symbolism adds nothing, according to Wittgenstein. If we understand the symbols involved, we already know that this inference is correct without being told so, and being told so won't make the inference correct if it is not already correct.

This is an instance of a more general theme in the *Tractatus*: “Logic must take care of itself.” (5.473) This is the first sentence in Wittgenstein's wartime notebooks, where he calls it “an extremely profound and important insight.” He immediately draws a consequence: “If syntactical rules for functions can be set up *at all*, then the whole theory of things, properties, etc. is superfluous” – just what he says about rules of inference in the *Tractatus*. This insight puts into question the conception of philosophy he had held up to that point: “How is it reconcilable with the task of philosophy, that logic should take care of itself?”<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to question the meaningfulness of “philosophical questions” such as “whether ‘A is good’ is a subject-predicate proposition; or whether ‘A is brighter than B’ is a relational proposition,” asking “*How can such a question be settled at all?*” He gives an example of a “simpler and more fundamental” such question, “Is a point in our visual field a *simple object*, a *thing*?” He remarks “Up to now I have always regarded such

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<sup>23</sup> *Notebooks*, 2.

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questions as the real philosophical ones” but now worries that there is “a mistake in the formulation<sup>24</sup> here” since “it looks as if I could say definitively that these questions could never be settled at all.”

Consider from this point of view Frege’s distinction between concepts and objects.<sup>25</sup> Frege’s logical language is based on replacing a subject-predicate analysis of sentences with a function-argument analysis.<sup>26</sup> He represents sentences like (a) above, “Obama is American,” by writing things like (a’), “ *Ao*,” conceiving of this as composed of two parts, the “complete” object-expression “ *o*” and the “incomplete” (or functional) concept-expression “ *A( )*.” The latter has a  *gap* which must be filled by an object-expression. The importance of this function-argument analysis comes out in Frege’s representation of quantified sentences like “Every president is an American,” which would be represented as “ $(x)(Px \supset Ax)$ .” Here, Frege says, the distinction between function and argument becomes essential to the  *content*.<sup>27</sup>

Frege conceives of object and concept-expressions as standing for ontologically distinct entities, objects and concepts; the former are “self-subsistent” and complete whereas the latter require completion by an argument. As we saw, Frege insists that this is an  *ontological* distinction of the deepest importance. Here we seem to have a metaphysical theory about the nature of objective reality: it consists of “unsaturated” concepts, and “complete” objects which saturate those concepts. From Wittgenstein’s point of view, this looks like an attempt to provide an ontological  *grounding* for Frege’s

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<sup>24</sup> “Formulation” translates “*Fragestellung*,” the word translated “method of formulating” in the *Tractatus*.

<sup>25</sup> The importance of Frege’s difficulties concerning the expressibility of the concept-object distinction for understanding Wittgenstein’s early philosophy is stressed in Geach, “Saying and Showing.” For a very illuminating discussion, see Jolley.

<sup>26</sup> *Begriffsschrift*, Preface, in *Conceptual Notation*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Begriffsschrift* §9, in *Conceptual Notation*, 128.

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logic. The logical distinction between concepts and objects, reflected in his distinction between names and concept-expressions, must be accepted because it is “founded deep in the nature of things.” But this is to deny that logic can “take care of itself:” logic is made to depend on metaphysical view about features of reality. For Wittgenstein, any such metaphysical view must be *superfluous*. Consequently, our language here *has no meaning*, according to the interpretation of Occam’s razor advanced in the *Tractatus*.

Similarly, Wittgenstein tells us that laws of inference are superfluous and therefore senseless. We can illuminate Wittgenstein’s point through a parable, adapted from Lewis Carroll’s famous 1895 paper “What the Tortoise said to Achilles.”<sup>28</sup> Achilles and the Tortoise (characters drawn from one of Zeno’s paradoxes of motion) are tired out from running, and take a break to discuss logic. Achilles sets up an argument, which we can think of as having the form of *modus ponens*:<sup>29</sup>

$$\begin{array}{l} p \supset q \\ \underline{p} \\ \therefore q \end{array}$$

Achilles wants to use this argument to convince the Tortoise that  $q$ , but the Tortoise, who is rather slow, accepts the premises,  $p \supset q$  and  $p$ , but refuses to accept the conclusion  $q$ . Achilles now makes a fatal mistake – he gets the Tortoise to agree to the *conditional*  $((p \supset q) \& p) \supset q$ . Achilles having made the rule of inference, *modus ponens*, explicit in the form of this additional proposition, adds it to his argument as an additional premise, in an attempt (as it were) to catch up to the Tortoise. But the Tortoise is still one step ahead – he accepts this new premise along with the first two, but still refuses to accept the

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<sup>28</sup> Russell discusses Carroll’s paper in *Principles* (1903), in the context of discussing rules of inference (35). I do not adhere strictly to Carroll’s discussion.

<sup>29</sup> Carroll begins with an argument from Euclid’s *Elements*; but this is inessential to the point I am using this parable to make.

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conclusion. So, Achilles gets the Tortoise to agree to yet another conditional:  $((p \supset q) \& p) \supset q$  &  $((p \supset q) \& p) \supset q$ , trying to assert that the conclusion follows from the three premises the Tortoise has already acceded to. But still the Tortoise keeps ahead, refusing to accept the conclusion – and it is evident that this can go on forever without the Tortoise ever conceding.

Of course, if the Tortoise isn't willing to draw the conclusion from the initial premises, there is nothing that can be done for him, logically. Adding rules as further explicit premises will not force the Tortoise to accept the conclusion. If the Tortoise accepts the *initial* premises but not the conclusion, this shows that the Tortoise did not really understand either the premises or the conclusion in the first place. At 4.024, Wittgenstein tells us that “To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true.” This is to grasp its sense: “The proposition *shows* its sense. The proposition *shows* how things stand, if it is true. And it *says*, that they do so stand.” (4.022) Anyone who *understands*  $p \supset q$  and  $p$ , and accepts both of them, already *knows* that they are in a circumstance in which  $q$  is also true. No rule of inference is needed to show that the inference is valid. Logic has to take care of itself; we can't take care of logic.

## VI. The *Grundgedanke* and the logic of depiction

As we saw, Wittgenstein claims that the problems of philosophy arise from confusions occasioned by forms of equivocation which obscure for us the logic of our language. We can avoid such confusions by employing a logical symbolism designed to eliminate the equivocations that foster them. The logical notations of Frege and Russell can play this role; but, Wittgenstein adds, their symbolisms do not eliminate all possible confusions. As he sees it, these confusions generate the philosophical problems facing

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Frege and Russell. We can now add: the temptation to fall into these confusions is largely generated by the desire to “take care” of logic – to not let logic take care of itself.

At 4.0312, Wittgenstein states his “fundamental thought” (*Grundgedanke*): “that the ‘logical constants’ do not represent. That the *logic* of the facts cannot be represented.” By the “logical constants” Wittgenstein means such signs of Frege and Russell’s logic signs as “ $\supset$ ,” “ $\sim$ ,” “ $\exists$ ,” “ $=$ ,”<sup>30</sup> as well as the forms of proposition expressible in that logic, such as the form of simple predication exhibited in examples like (a’) (“Ao”) above.<sup>31</sup> Such signs – and such forms – “do not represent.” Here he *contrasts* the logical constants with signs that *do* represent. The first half of the remark in which the “fundamental thought” occurs, 4.0312, reads: “The possibility of propositions is based on the principle of the representation of objects by signs.” The contrast is between the logical constants and names like “Kremer,” which represent objects (here, the author of this essay) – and perhaps also predicates like “essay” and “author of,” which represent properties and relations.<sup>32</sup>

Wittgenstein’s claim that the possibility of propositions depends on signs representing objects harks back to the opening sections of the book, which present an account of what he calls “pictures.” A picture “represents a possible state of affairs” (2.202) and “the elements of the picture stand, in the picture, for the objects” – objects which are combined in the state of affairs. (2.131, 2.01, 2.014) He applies this account to propositions, which are “pictures of reality,” indeed “logical pictures.” (4.01, 4.021, 4.03)

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<sup>30</sup> Throughout the paper I use a modernized form of Russell’s notation rather than Frege’s.

<sup>31</sup> On this see McGuinness, “*Grundgedanke*.”

<sup>32</sup> There is dispute in the secondary literature about what the objects of the *Tractatus* are – whether they include properties and relations as well as particulars, whether they include ordinary objects or only elements out of which other objects are to be constructed, and whether such elements would be sense-data, physical atoms, or “logical” atoms. I intend what I say here to be neutral on these topics.

This conception of propositions as pictures involves a parallelism between language and the world, which appears from the very first sentences of the *Tractatus*: “The world is everything that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.” (1-1.1) These parallel 4.001: “The totality of propositions is the language” and 4.11: “The totality of true propositions is the total natural science (or the totality of the natural sciences).” In these first sentences, there is a contrast, as fundamental for the *Tractatus* as the contrast between concepts and objects is for Frege. But Wittgenstein’s contrast is not between concepts and objects, but between *facts* and things. Facts are what correspond to true propositions.<sup>33</sup> “The world divides into facts” (1.2), and these in turn into atomic facts – where “an atomic fact is a combination of objects (entities, things).” (2.01) Atomic facts correspond in turn to true “elementary propositions;”<sup>34</sup> every proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions (5), just as facts consist in the existence and non-existence of atomic facts. (2, 2.06)

True propositions, then, state facts. To say that the world is the totality of facts, and not things, is to say that to list all the things in the world is not yet to describe the world. To do that, one has to say how things stand with these things – and this is to state the facts. Atomic facts are combinations of objects, and Wittgenstein gives a lovely image for this: “In the atomic fact, objects hang in one another like the links of a chain.” (2.03) Objects are made to go with one another, they fit together.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*, 98.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>35</sup> This image can be contrasted with Frege’s image of “incomplete” concepts, with gaps that need to be filled, and objects, forming unities with “complete” objects, which fill the gaps. Links in a chain both have a hole to be filled, and fill the holes in other links. They hang together without any asymmetry like the asymmetry between concept and object.

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Facts divide into atomic facts, which cannot be further subdivided: this means, for Wittgenstein, that the atomic facts are logically independent. (2.061)<sup>36</sup> For example, the fact that Kremer is older than Obama is independent of the fact that Obama is president. The fact that Kremer is older than Obama is not independent of the fact that Obama is younger than Kremer, but Wittgenstein would regard these as the *same* fact, the same combination of objects. Perhaps the fact that Obama is President is not independent of the fact that Obama is an American – but this shows that at least one of these facts is *not* atomic, but can be further analyzed.

Objects too are independent, in the sense that how things stand with one object is independent of how things stand with the others. “The thing is independent in so far as it can occur in all *possible* circumstances, but this form of independence is a form of connexion with the atomic fact, a form of dependence.” (2.0122) To know an object one must know “its internal qualities,” “all the possibilities of its occurrence in atomic facts.” (2.0122-3) An object *is* essentially a potential for combining with other objects in atomic facts; more precisely, “the possibility of its occurrence in atomic facts is the *form* of the object.” (2.0141, my emphasis)

Against this apparently metaphysical background, Wittgenstein introduces the idea of pictures: “We make to ourselves pictures of facts.” (2.1) Pictures have a *sense* – what they represent, “a possible state of affairs in logical space,” that is “the existence and non-existence of atomic facts.” (2.221, 2.202, 2.11)<sup>37</sup> Pictures are true or false,

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<sup>36</sup> Compare 1.21: “Any one can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remains the same.” This remark applies to the facts *into which the world divides* (1.2) – atomic facts – since facts in general are not independent in this way.

<sup>37</sup> Where Ogden and Ramsey have “facts” in 2.11 they should have “states of affairs” (“*Sachlage*”).

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according as their sense agrees or disagrees with the reality they depict. (2.21, 2.222) All of this applies to propositions, for propositions *are* pictures – *logical* pictures.

*What* is a logical picture, though? And *how* do pictures represent possible states of affairs? Let's begin with more ordinary pictures, spatial pictures for example – but we must think of even a spatial picture as representing a possible state of affairs. So the sort of picture to have in mind is not just a picture of Kremer, or of Obama, but a picture representing *that* Obama is taller than Kremer. Such a picture might involve an image of Obama and an image of Kremer, with the first image longer in the vertical dimension than the second. The image of Obama stands for Obama, and the image of Kremer for Kremer; but the way in which they are combined is also significant: the fact that one image is longer than the other, vertically, represents *that* Obama is taller than Kremer.

Wittgenstein says that the picture must have a *form* in common with the reality it depicts. (2.17-2.171) The form of an object consists of the possibility of its occurrence in atomic facts, and the form of a picture is equally explained in terms of possibility. A picture has a *structure*, the “connexion of the elements of the picture” – the “definite way” in which “its elements are combined with one another.” (2.14, 2.141, 2.15) The *form* of the picture is “the possibility of this structure.” (2.15) This might seem to involve only the possible arrangements of the elements of the picture, but Wittgenstein asserts that the form of the picture is “the possibility that the things are combined with one another as are the elements of the picture,” (2.151) and comments “*Thus* the picture is linked with reality; it reaches up to it.” (2.1511)

So for the picture *to be* a picture, it must share form with the reality it depicts – picture and reality must share the same *possibility of structure*. Consider a spatial picture

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depicting Kremer as taller than Obama – contrary to reality. In such a picture, the image representing Kremer will be vertically longer than the image representing Obama. Here the picture has a spatial structure which is not the same as that of the reality it represents. But there is nonetheless a shared *form*, insofar as it is *possible* for Kremer to be taller than Obama. This form is actualized in the structure of the picture, but not in the structure of reality, and so the picture depicts a possible state of affairs that does not exist. The picture is false – it does not “agree with reality.” (2.21) But the possibility of this judgment depends on the sharing of form between picture and reality.

Wittgenstein claims that even a *proposition* like “Obama is taller than Kremer” is a picture – a *logical* picture. Although it does not share spatial form with the reality it depicts, it shares *logical* form with that reality – “what every picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it at all.” (2.18) One name is not vertically longer than the other, so we do not have a spatial representation of Obama being taller than Kremer. Nonetheless the two names *are* placed in relation by the *words* “is taller than.” In this way the *possibility* that Obama is taller than Kremer is contained in the proposition. In this case the proposition is true, agrees with reality, since this possibility is also actualized in the structure of reality. But in the false proposition, “Kremer is taller than Obama,” while the structure of the proposition is not duplicated in reality, its form is shared with the reality, insofar as it is possible for Kremer to be taller than Obama.

At 3.1432, Wittgenstein says: “We must not say, ‘The complex sign “*aRb*” says, that *a* stands in relation *R* to *b*’; but rather, ‘That “*a*” stands in a certain relation to “*b*” says that *aRb*’.” What says that Kremer is taller than Obama, is *that* the name “Kremer”

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stands in a “certain relation” to the name “Obama,” a relation realized through the presence of the words “is taller than” between the two names.<sup>38</sup> This point is reiterated in remarks leading up to the fundamental thought that “the *logic* of facts cannot be represented” (4.0312) – “The proposition communicates to us a state of affairs, therefore it must be *essentially* connected with the state of affairs. And the connexion is, in fact, that it is its logical picture. ... In the proposition a state of affairs is, as it were, put together for the sake of experiment. ... One name stands for one thing, and another for another thing, and they are connected together. And so the whole, like a living picture, presents the atomic fact.” (4.03, 4.031, 4.0311)

## VII. Saying, showing, and logical form

Against this background we can understand Wittgenstein’s claim that the logical constants are not representatives. They are not depicting elements in the logical pictures, the propositions, in which they occur. Why does he think that? What a picture must share with the reality it depicts is logical form – the possibility of structure. But, Wittgenstein argues, “the picture ... cannot represent its form; it shows it forth [*es weist sie auf*].” (2.172) To represent the logical form of a picture, one would have to step outside this picture and make another picture about that logical form. (2.173-4) Clearly, the picture itself cannot do this, but Wittgenstein holds that the logical form of a picture cannot be represented *at all*, not even in some “meta-proposition.” He generalizes his argument: “Propositions ... cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order

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<sup>38</sup> It is misleading to say (as is often said) that the “certain relation” – unspecified by Wittgenstein – between the two names is simply that of flanking “is taller than” on the left and the right. That spatial relation is merely the “sensibly perceptible” aspect of the relation doing the symbolizing work in the proposition – it is merely the sign, not the symbol. The symbol is the relation that holds between the names, such that *that* this relation holds *says that* Kremer is taller than Obama. This “certain relation” cannot be specified independently of this symbolizing work. I owe this point to the dissertation work of my student Daesuk Han.

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to be able to represent it – the logical form. To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with the propositions outside logic...” (4.12)

Consequently, “propositions cannot represent the logical form: this mirrors itself in the propositions. ... The propositions *show* the logical form of reality. They exhibit it. [*Er weist sie auf.*] ... What *can* be shown *cannot* be said.” (4.121, 4.1212)

It can look as if Wittgenstein is telling us here about something we would like to, but cannot, do – represent the logical form of reality – as if logical form were an item we can see there in the proposition, alongside the names that are combined in it, but when we try to depict this item we find we just cannot. But that attempt to describe what we cannot do is itself a nonsensical attempt to represent logical form, to “station ourselves outside of logic.” What is wrong with such an attempt and why are drawn to it?

Part of the problem is that the purported “meta-proposition” representing the logical form is, like rules of inference, superfluous and so lacks sense. To understand a proposition is to grasp its logical form; there is no need of a different proposition to say what that form is. If one understands the proposition “Kremer is taller than Obama” one knows what possible situation is depicted, what possibility of structure is projected. “The proposition *shows* its sense. The proposition *shows* how things stand, *if* it is true. ... To understand a proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true.” (4.022, 4.024)

That is: to understand a proposition is to know how to compare it to reality, to recognize the possible structure it projects and to know how to tell whether that structure is realized. This is not to know an additional fact about the proposition, such as “it is the case that Kremer is taller than Obama, if ‘Kremer is taller than Obama’ is true.” Such an attempt to *say* under what conditions a proposition is true ends up in empty self-repetition. In fact,

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knowledge of the logical form of a proposition is simply the ability to use the proposition to say something, to make sense. We cannot represent the logic of facts, because the logic of facts is not some additional fact or piece of information; grasping the logic of facts is knowing how to speak and think. But then why might anyone be tempted to try to represent the logic of facts in a proposition? This temptation stems from the desire not to let logic take care of itself – to provide a ground for logic in some super-fact about the nature of reality – “founded deep in the nature of things,” in Frege’s words.

#### VIII. The critique of Frege and Russell: violating the *Grundgedanke*

According to Wittgenstein, Frege and Russell’s logical symbolisms fail to “exclude all errors,” all “fundamental confusions” which pervade philosophy. Their notations still contain forms of equivocation that foster such confusions. But these confusions might be harmless, if they did not at the same time fit the mistaken desire to take care of logic. This is shown by Frege and Russell’s violations of the “fundamental thought” that the logic of facts cannot be represented.

Consider such propositional connectives as “ $\sim$ ” and “ $\supset$ .” There is a danger of assimilating these to ordinary property and relation signs. This confusion is encouraged in Russell’s notation by the grammatical similarity between “ $\sim p$ ,” and “ $Ao$ ” (“Obama is American”), and “ $p \supset q$ ” and “ $oTk$ ” (“Obama is taller than Kremer”). Russell reads “ $p \supset q$ ” as “ $p$  implies  $q$ ,”<sup>39</sup> and treats “ $\sim$ ” and “ $\supset$ ” as denoting *propositional functions*, just like “ $x$  is American” and “ $x$  is taller than  $y$ .” Frege, the pioneer of function-argument analysis in logic, thinks of sentences as expressing thoughts and referring to truth-values (the True or the False). He understands concepts (like  $\xi$  is American or  $\xi$  is taller than  $\zeta$ ) as

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<sup>39</sup> *Principia*, 6-7.

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functions from objects to truth-values. Thus “ $\xi$  is American” refers to that function whose value is the True whenever the argument is American, and whose value is the False otherwise, and “ $\xi$  is taller than  $\zeta$ ” refers to that function whose value is the True whenever the first argument is taller than the second, and false otherwise. Frege treats his negation and conditional signs as referring to concepts of exactly this sort: “ $\sim\xi$ ” refers to that function whose value is the True when the argument is any object other than the True, and whose value is the False when the argument is the True, so that  $\sim\xi$  is “a concept under which falls every object with the sole exception of the True.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly “ $\xi \supset \zeta$ ” refers to that function whose value is the False whenever the first argument is the True and the second argument is any object other than the True, and whose value is the True whenever the first argument is other than the False, or the second argument is the True; so  $\xi \supset \zeta$  is a special kind of relational concept.<sup>41</sup>

According to this Fregean conception the True and the False are objects which sentences stand for, and negation and the conditional are concepts under which these objects fall or fail to fall. Wittgenstein comments on this conception at 4.431: “Frege’s explanation of the truth-concept is false: if ‘the true’ and ‘the false’ were real objects and the arguments in  $\sim p$  etc., then the sense of  $\sim p$  would by no means be determined by Frege’s determination.”

Wittgenstein sees Frege’s “determination” of “the sense of  $\sim p$ ” as meant to fix the “truth-conditions of the proposition” (4.431), “what is the case, if it is true.” (4.024)<sup>42</sup> This is determined by setting that  $\sim p$  is true when  $p$  is false and vice-versa – Wittgenstein

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<sup>40</sup> *Basic Laws*, §6, 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, §12, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Compare *Ibid.*, §32, 89.

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agrees with *that*. But if the True and the False are *objects*, our preference for one of these two makes no sense: why should one of them be privileged, tied to agreement of a proposition with the facts, while the other has the opposite role? There is nothing that can force this in the nature of the objects themselves; within Frege's logic the two could switch roles, or be replaced by any two other distinct objects, and nothing would change.

From Wittgenstein's perspective, the treatment of sentences as names of special objects, the truth-values, and of logical signs like negation and the conditional as referring to concepts under which these objects can fall or fail to fall, rests on a confusion fostered by the notation of Frege's logic – a confusion of propositions and names, facts and things. (1.1, 3.14, 3.142, 3.3, etc.) But why is this confusion tempting? I suggested above that the appeal of such confusions rests on the desire to take care of logic, not to let logic take care of itself. Consider once again in this connection rules of inference like *modus ponens*. In the *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, Frege appears to offer a *justification* for *modus ponens* grounded in the nature of the concept expressed by the conditional sign: "From the propositions ' $\vdash \Delta \supset \Gamma$ ' and ' $\vdash \Delta$ ' we may infer ' $\vdash \Gamma$ '; for if  $\Gamma$  were not the True, then since  $\Delta$  is the True,  $\Delta \supset \Gamma$  would be the False."<sup>43</sup> Wittgenstein, in contrast, holds that "The method of inference is to be understood from the ... propositions alone. Only they themselves can justify the inference." (5.132) This is one instance of the more general principle that logic has to take care of itself.

#### IX. Distinguishing logical constants from representational elements

Wittgenstein distinguishes logical signs like " $\sim$ " and " $\supset$ " from depicting elements, such as "Obama," "Kremer," and "taller than" in "Obama is taller than

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, §14, 57

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Kremer.” He points to disanalogies between logical signs and ordinary concept-expressions or propositional functions, in support of this point of view. For example, logical signs can cancel themselves: “ $\sim\sim oTk$ ” says the same thing as “ $oTk$ ,” for example – the first is just a more complicated way of saying what the second says, that Obama is taller than Kremer.<sup>44</sup> But if the “ $\sim$ ” sign were a depicting element, the possible state of affairs represented by “ $\sim\sim oTk$ ” would involve some further item, and would be a different state of affairs than that represented by “ $oTk$ .” (4.0621, 5.44)

But Wittgenstein not only offers such negative arguments (several of which are scattered through the *Tractatus*) to distinguish logical signs from ordinary concept-expressions. He also provides a positive alternative: a different notation to express what we use “ $\sim$ ” and “ $\supset$ ” to express, designed to avoid the confusions encouraged by Frege and Russell’s symbolism. This alternative notation makes use of the idea of truth-tables, but not in the familiar form taught in logic classes today. Wittgenstein does not use truth-tables to test the validity of arguments written in the familiar notation of propositional logic. Rather, he uses truth-tables to *rewrite* this notation. For Wittgenstein, a proposition like “ $\sim oTk$ ” can be expressed as (compare 4.4-4.442):

$oTk$	
T	F
F	T

Similarly, “ $Po \supset Ao$ ” (“if Obama is President, then Obama is American”) can be rewritten as (4.4-4.442):

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<sup>44</sup> The same point can be made for “ $\supset$ ” – “ $((oTk \supset oTk) \supset oTk)$ ” says the same thing as “ $oTk$ .”

<i>Po</i>	<i>Ao</i>		
T	T		T
F	T		T
T	F		F
F	F		T

These truth-tabular notations, Wittgenstein says, are “propositional signs.” (4.442) But they have no depicting elements over and above those contained in the elementary propositions “*oTk*,” “*Po*,” and “*Ao*”: “It is clear that to the complex of the signs ‘F’ and ‘T’ no object (or ‘complex of objects’) corresponds; any more than to the horizontal or vertical lines or to brackets. There are no ‘logical objects’.” (4.441) Just as one would not be tempted to think of the lines making up the truth-tables, or the “(” and “)” in “ $\sim(Po \supset Ao)$ ,” as having a representative function, Wittgenstein’s truth-tabular notation should disabuse one of the temptation to think of the letters “T” and “F” as standing for special logical objects (the truth-values), and so also of the temptation to think of negation and the conditional as representing special concepts, properties of propositions and relations between propositions, or properties of truth-values and relations between truth-values.

Wittgenstein’s symbolism displays negation and the conditional as *operations*. An operation takes one or more propositions as its base, and yields a further proposition as its result. Displaying one proposition as the result of an operation on other propositions expresses an “internal relation” between the base propositions and the resultant proposition. For example, “ $\sim kTo$ ” does not express a property *of* the proposition (or the

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truth-value)  $kTo$ . Rather, an internal relation *between* the propositions, “ $kTo$ ” and “ $\sim kTo$ ” is set up – the two have opposite sense, because the latter is a truth-function of the former, and agrees with reality exactly when the former does not. (5.2-5.22) This internal relation is displayed explicitly in the truth-tabular notation introduced by Wittgenstein. But it is not a further element to be depicted in a separate proposition; it is an aspect of the logical form of both propositions, which cannot further be represented. (4.122ff) To grasp this relation is part of what is required to *understand* both propositions, to locate them in logical space (3.4); and that is just to know how to use them logically, to make sense with them and to reason with them.

In a certain sense, then, Wittgenstein’s alternative notation shows that the apparent “logical constants” of Frege’s and Russell’s notations are *superfluous* – an alternative notation can be constructed which does the same expressive work but without using individual logical signs that correspond to “ $\sim$ ” and “ $\supset$ .” As we saw above, this does not mean that the propositions of Frege and Russell’s logic are meaningless – quite the contrary. But the logical signs of their symbolism are revealed not to be doing the kind of work they might appear to be doing, when we see how the work they do can be accomplished in another way. They are shown to be, as Wittgenstein colorfully puts it, “punctuation signs.” (5.4611)<sup>45</sup>

It is instructive to see how this alternative notation relates to the two logical points introduced in our discussion of the logical signs for negation and the conditional: *modus ponens* and the self-cancelling of negation. Consider first an instance of *modus ponens*, as

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<sup>45</sup> Wittgenstein makes a similar set of moves concerning the identity sign of Frege and Russell’s logic. He shows that it is a confusion to treat the identity sign as a real relation sign, by constructing an alternative notation in which “identity of the object” is expressed “by identity of the sign and not by a sign of identity.” For discussion of this, see my “The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy” and “Russell’s Merit.”

expressed in Russell’s notation:  $Po \supset Ao, Po \therefore Ao$ . Wittgenstein says that “the method of inference” should “be understood from the ... propositions alone,” (5.132) but this is not perspicuously displayed in Russell’s symbolism. If we rewrite the conditional premise in the truth-tabular form given above, it may not seem we have achieved greater perspicuity. But it is also possible to rewrite the second premise, and conclusion, in this form, even though they are elementary propositions – for “propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions,” and “an elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.” (5) Hence the *modus ponens* inference can be written:

$Po$	$Ao$	
T	T	T
F	T	T
T	F	F
F	F	T

$Po$	
T	T
F	F

$\therefore$

$Ao$	
T	T
F	F

One needs only to compare the T's and F's in these displays to see that “the truth-grounds that are common to [the premises]” (namely  $Po$  and  $Ao$  assigned T) “are also truth-grounds of [the conclusion]” so that “the truth of [the conclusion] follows from the truth of [the premises].” (5.11)

Similarly, consider how to represent a double negation like “ $\sim\sim oTk$ ” in Wittgenstein’s tabular notation. Since “every truth-operation creates from the truth-functions of elementary propositions another truth-function of elementary propositions, *i.e.* a proposition,” Wittgenstein argues, “the propositional sign in No. 4.42” – that is, the truth-tabular representation of “ $p \supset q$ ” – “expresses one truth-function of elementary propositions even when ‘ $p$ ’ and ‘ $q$ ’ are truth-functions of elementary propositions.” (5.3-5.31) Applying this to the truth-tabular representation of negation, we should be able to write the double negation “ $\sim\sim oTk$ ” as:

$\sim oTk$	
T	F
F	T

or, fully explicitly, as:

$oTk$		
T	F	
F	T	
		-----
T		F
F		T

If we compare this to the representation of “ $oTk$ ” as a truth-function of itself, we immediately see that these are two ways of writing the same thing, expressing the same sense:

$oTk$	
T	T
F	F

So here the logical relations can be read off of the signs, and do not need to be written down in additional rules. Logic is allowed to take care of itself.<sup>46</sup>

This case study illustrates Wittgenstein’s method for exposing confusions made possible by the logical symbolisms of Frege and Russell. But how does this help us to appreciate the ethical significance of the *Tractatus*? I will approach this question from two directions, which I hope will converge on a coherent conception of the ethical vision of Wittgenstein’s early work. The first line of thought begins with Wittgenstein’s

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<sup>46</sup> Whether logic, as understood by Frege and Russell, can be said to take care of itself in this way, when we include expressive resources such as multiple quantification and relational predicates, that we now know not to be amenable to decision procedures analogous to truth-tables, is a question I will not address in this paper.

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infamous pronouncement, that to understand *him* is to recognize his propositions as nonsensical, a ladder to be thrown away once one has climbed up on it to a proper vantage point. (6.54) The second line of thought is inspired by some remarks in the *Tractatus* not about ethics, but about science, put beside some remarks about ethics that he made in the period immediately after his return to philosophy in the early 1930s.

#### X. Recognizing nonsense in the *Tractatus*

To begin with the first line of thought: Wittgenstein tells us that we are to recognize the propositions of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical. According to the argument of this paper, we should therefore expect some combination of the two factors to be at work in his propositions: forms of equivocation and confusion, on the one hand, and a kind of superfluosness on the other. Consider in this light Wittgenstein's own repeated talk about *logical form* – which any proposition must have in common with the reality it represents, in order to represent it correctly or incorrectly. (4.12) Wittgenstein's discussions of logical form are clearly problematic, given his thesis that logical form can't be represented by propositions. (4.12) As we saw above, any attempt to represent logical form in language, as if it were an additional element of propositions and the reality they represent, would be superfluous and so meaningless. Yet Wittgenstein's statements about logical form – that it is the possibility of structure (2.15), that it is shared by any picture and the reality it depicts (2.18), and so on – certainly seem as if they involve representing logical form and characterizing it in some way.<sup>47</sup>

“Propositions,” Wittgenstein tells us, “*show* the logical form of reality,” (4.121) and

“What *can* be shown *cannot* be said” (4.1212) – but as Russell points out in the

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<sup>47</sup> The ultimate incoherence of Wittgenstein's account of picturing and of the notions of pictorial form and possibility on which it depends is discussed in Goldfarb, “Metaphysics and Nonsense,” 65-66, and is a major theme of Ricketts, “Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense,” from which I draw inspiration here.

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Introduction to the *Tractatus*, “What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said...” (p. 22) In the immediate context of 4.1212, Wittgenstein provides examples of things that can be shown, all of them aspects of logical form: that the object *a* occurs in the sense of the proposition *fa*; that two propositions *fa* and *ga* are about the same object; that two propositions contradict one another; that one proposition follows from another (4.1211); that internal properties and relations hold of objects (4.122, 4.124); that one blue color is brighter or darker than another (4.123); and that an object falls under a formal concept (4.126) – only to declare such seeming propositions nonsensical. (4.124, 4.1241, 4.1272) Here we have what Peter Geach colorfully calls “Ludwig’s self-mate.”<sup>48</sup>

But why are we tempted into this self-undermining discourse? Consider the association Wittgenstein repeatedly draws between *form* and *possibility*: the form of an object is “the possibility of its occurrence in atomic facts” (2.0141), the form of an atomic fact is “the possibility of structure” (2.033), and the form of representation of a picture is also “the possibility of [its] structure.” (2.15) Frege and Russell’s philosophies of logic make it almost inevitable that these propositions will be read as follows:

Objects come in various logical types.<sup>49</sup> Each type brings with it principles that determine possibilities of combination with objects of other types. For example, there is a type of individuals (or Fregean objects). A relation between individuals is of a different logical type – it takes as arguments two individuals and cannot combine in the same way with two relations. The form of a relation *R* is something like  $\xi R \zeta$ ; the letters ‘ $\xi$ ’ and ‘ $\zeta$ ’ indicate the need for arguments of the individual type. There are possibilities of combination – the combination *aRb* is possible – and impossibilities – if *S* and *T* are relations one cannot combine them with *R* to yield *SRT*. Our language needs to conform to these possibilities and impossibilities of combination that characterize the logical types of objects.

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<sup>48</sup> Geach, “Assertion,” 265.

<sup>49</sup> I set aside complications due to the ramification of Russell’s theory of logical types.

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As Russell put it in a letter to Wittgenstein: “the theory of types ... is a theory of correct symbolism ... a symbol must have the same structure as its meaning.”<sup>50</sup>

But Wittgenstein sees this as yet another attempt to take care of logic. He replies: “That’s exactly what one can’t say. You cannot prescribe to a symbol what it *may* be used to express. All that a symbol *can* express, it *may* express. This is a short answer but it is true!”<sup>51</sup> This “short answer” is given in the *Tractatus* as the follow-through on the claim that “logic must take care of itself” at 5.473, which continues: “A *possible* sign must also be able to signify. Everything which is possible in logic is also permitted.” At 5.4733 the same point is made against Frege: “Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts.” One cannot consult the meanings of the signs to determine which combinations of those meanings are possible and which impossible, and then ensure the “legitimate construction” of one’s propositions by guaranteeing that the possible modes of combination of one’s symbols mirror the possible modes of combination of their meanings.

But the picture that associates Wittgenstein’s talk of form with attempts to take care of logic by ensuring that our symbolisms respect logical type distinctions rests on a confusion about what Wittgenstein is referring to when he identifies form with the possibility of structure. This confusion can be elucidated by considering Wittgenstein’s characterization of modal categories of possibility and necessity as themselves *logical*. According to the *Tractatus*, “there is only *logical* necessity” and “so there is only a

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<sup>50</sup> *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

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*logical impossibility.*” (6.37, 6.375) That is – there is only the necessity of *tautologies* like “ $oTk \supset oTk$ ,” propositions which are “true for all the truth-possibilities of elementary propositions;” and there is only the impossibility of *contradictions* like “ $oTk \& \sim oTk$ ,” propositions which are “false for all the truth-possibilities.” (4.46)<sup>52</sup> Therefore, there is also only *logical possibility* – the possibility of “significant propositions,” propositions with sense – propositions which are true for some truth-possibilities and false for others. “The truth of tautology is certain, of propositions possible, of contradiction impossible.” (4.464) In contrast, on the type-theoretic reading of logical form, the logical form of elementary propositions depends on a range of possibilities and necessities that cannot be accounted for in terms of the truth-possibilities of elementary propositions, since it is presupposed by the very ability of those elementary propositions to be true or false, to represent the world correctly or incorrectly. It is no solution to this difficulty to push these fundamental possibilities and necessities into the realm of what can only be shown and not said. If these underlying modal facts are nonetheless *there*, even if they cannot be said, they give the lie to the claim that there is only *logical modality*.

The solution is to recognize that when Wittgenstein associates form with the “possibility of structure” he intends simply the possibility that an atomic fact, represented by an elementary proposition, exists. The form of the proposition “ $kTo$ ” (“Kremer is taller than Obama”) is simply the possibility that Kremer is taller than Obama, the possibility that this atomic fact exists. To what is this possibility opposed? In one sense, it is opposed to the *opposite possibility*, the possibility that Kremer is not taller than Obama, that  $\sim kTo$ . In another sense it is opposed to the impossibility of contradiction, the

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<sup>52</sup> 6.3751 makes clear that “logical impossibility” in 6.375 refers to the impossibility of contradictions.

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impossibility of  $kTo$  &  $\sim kTo$ . What it is *not* opposed to is the supposed impossibility of a faulty combination like “*OTO*” – “older than is taller than older than.” There is no impossibility there, only meaningless nonsense – in this combination of signs we have given *no* meaning to some of the constituent parts. The type-theoretic reading of Wittgenstein’s talk of possibility embodies the confused attempt to speak about *possibility and impossibility of form* – or what one might call a *form of form* – as if there were a more fundamental level of possibility and impossibility determining which combinations are *candidates* for possibility in the logical sense.

It might seem, then, that we have rescued a meaning for Wittgenstein’s talk of possibility and logical form after all. This is simply talk of the possibility of propositions with sense, as opposed to the necessity of tautologies and the impossibility of contradictions. Yet such talk is ultimately *superfluous*, according to the *Tractatus*. For “The picture contains the possibility of the state of affairs which it represents” (2.203) and “the thought contains the possibility of the state of affairs which it thinks” (3.02) so nothing is added in trying to *state* the possibility of this state of affairs.<sup>53</sup> Consequently this too is relegated by Wittgenstein to the realm of what is shown, and so cannot be said. “The proposition *shows* its sense,” (4.022) and while “the proposition shows what it says, the tautology and the contradiction [show] that they say nothing.” (4.461)<sup>54</sup> Yet this

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<sup>53</sup> 3.13 puts the point somewhat differently: “In the proposition ... its sense is not yet contained, but the possibility of expressing it.” But 3.13 goes on to say “In the proposition the form of its sense is contained, but not its content.” Since form is the possibility of structure, what this shows is that the possibility of expressing a state of affairs is not distinct from the possibility of that state of affairs (the form of the sense). Picture and state of affairs share a form – that is there is one possibility that governs them both.

<sup>54</sup> It is sometimes thought that the first part of 4.461 contradicts the claim that what can be shown, cannot be said (4.1212). This rests on a mistaken reading of the remark that “the proposition shows what it says.” This is just another way of saying that the proposition “shows its sense.” It is not that the proposition “*kTo*” “shows what it says” in the sense that it *both* says and shows that Kremer is taller than Obama, in contradiction with 4.1212. Rather the proposition shows what it says in the sense that it *shows that it says*

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solution is itself unstable. We rescue our conception of logical form – of the “possibility of structure” – only by *saying what it is* that supposedly can only be shown.

Moreover, the very claim that “there is only *logical* necessity,” on which we relied to diagnose the confusion of the type-theoretic reading of logical form, is itself deeply problematic.<sup>55</sup> As long as we hold onto this sentence, we set it up in opposition to the alternative view: that there are, in addition to logical necessity and impossibility, substantive forms of necessity and impossibility. We then see ourselves as defending the correct view of the matter against a false conception. But this requires us to recognize the *intelligibility* of that alternate view. Yet to hold onto the idea that the view of modality as logical is correct, as opposed to the false but intelligible view of modality as substantive, is to admit again a higher-order sense of modality in which both these views are in some sense possible – both represent possible ways in which the modal facts might be structured. We then ground the logical character of necessity in a super-fact about the world, a fact which cannot be depicted in our propositions because it is the presupposition of our making sense with propositions of this sort (propositions that are constructed as truth-functions of logically independent elementary propositions). In this way we again refuse to let logic take care of itself.

#### XI. Saying, showing, and the desire to take care of logic

Clearly Wittgenstein’s difficulties here are connected to the crucial distinction between saying and showing, and the way in which Wittgenstein deploys that distinction in his talk of logical form, possibility, necessity and impossibility, as that which is *shown*. Wittgenstein described this distinction to Russell as both “my main contention” and “the

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*that* Kremer is taller than Obama. This is the only reading to make sense of the parallel between the first and second parts of 4.461.

<sup>55</sup> Here I follow Cora Diamond in “Throwing Away the Ladder,” 198ff.

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cardinal problem of philosophy.” This should strike us as strange – how can Wittgenstein’s “main contention” also be a “*problem of philosophy?*” Bearing in mind that “the method of formulating these problems [of philosophy] rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language,” I suggest that the distinction between saying and showing must at least sometimes be deployed in a way that involves philosophical confusion – a confusion we seize upon because it seems to let us satisfy our desire to take care of logic.

Our temptation, in other words, is to give a justification, or grounding, for logic.<sup>56</sup> This is the temptation one is danger of falling into when one embraces the idea of ineffable proposition-like insights into the nature of reality, insights which reveal the structure our language must conform itself to in order to be meaningful. This idea can be tempting insofar as it makes it possible for us to conceive of a grounding for logic which cannot itself be subject to a further demand for justification, an “internal” grounding, which we can appreciate through an insight that cannot be expressed – close enough to a proposition to serve as a justification, yet different enough to escape the demand for further justification. But this idea rests on a confusion, which is fostered by the very word “show” that is so crucial to Wittgenstein’s self-confessedly problematic distinction between saying and showing. We use this one verb, “to show,” in a variety of ways. Suppose you are going to take care of my cat while I am away. I show you my cat, I show you how much food to give her, I show you where I keep the food, and I show you that there is enough food in the cabinet to last until I get back. Finally, I show you how to make her purr by rubbing her under her chin. All of these uses of “show” are related, but

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<sup>56</sup> The following argument is elaborated at greater length in my “The Purpose of *Tractarian* Nonsense” and “The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy.”

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they do not have the same meaning, or even the same logical function – this one sign is shared by many symbols.

Of particular interest here is the final pair of senses of “show” illustrated above: a propositional sense of “showing *that*” and a practical sense of “showing *how*.” We can now see the thought that there are ineffable quasi-propositional truths which can be shown but cannot be said as involving a subtle equivocation between these two senses of “showing,” propositional and practical. Thinking of the practical sense of “showing *how*,” we expect that what is shown can’t be said; slipping towards the propositional sense of “showing *that*,” we think of this “what” as something like a fact. That something like this confusion is involved in the *Tractatus*’s talk of “showing” is suggested by the fact that showing is connected by Wittgenstein to *sense* and so also to *understanding*. At 4.02 Wittgenstein says that “we understand the sense of the propositional sign, without having had it explained to us.” He comments on this at 4.022 that “the proposition *shows* its sense.” Yet sense is something that we make: “We make to ourselves pictures of facts.” (2.1) And “to understand a proposition,” to know what is the case if it is true,” (4.024) is simply to know how “reality is compared with the proposition.” (4.06) Similarly, inferential relations are said to be shown in the *Tractatus*: “if two propositions contradict each other, this is shown by their structure; similarly if one follows from another, etc.” (4.1211) Yet we *draw* conclusions and *make* inferences: “if *p* follows from *q*, I can conclude from *q* to *p*; infer *p* from *q*. The method of inference is to be understood from the two propositions alone.” (5.132) In understanding the propositions, grasping their sense, we know *how* to reason with them.

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So, the idea that “logical form,” as something *shared* by propositions and the reality they depict, is *shown* by those propositions but cannot be represented by them, exploits the equivocation we have found in “show.” We slip back and forth between the idea of a feature of reality, the world which we represent, and the idea of an aspect of our making sense by representing that world, an activity which we engage in and which depends on abilities we possess. We confusedly think of these features both as having to do with how reality *is*, and as having to do with how language is to be *used*. We *willingly* fall into this confusion to the extent that we are moved by the desire that it seems to allow us to fulfill: the desire to take care of logic by providing the ineffable ground of all our saying and making sense. In recognizing that the *Tractatus* itself involves this kind of philosophical confusion, in recognizing its propositions as nonsensical, we understand its author as showing to us the groundlessness of logic: logic has to take care of itself. At the same time we recognize the superfluousness of the ground we sought to provide for logic. If logic *has* to take care of itself, then it *does* take care of itself and needs no caretaker, external or internal.<sup>57</sup>

## XII. The *Tractatus* as an ethical work

Now, to conclude, how does all of this relate to the ethical point of the *Tractatus*? That some connection is intended here is evident from the deep parallel set up in the *Tractatus* between ethics and logic, both of which are called “transcendental.” (6.13, 6.421) I will develop this parallel beginning with a point that Wittgenstein makes about neither logic nor ethics, but rather science. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein discusses natural science in the 6.3s, just before his brief explicit remarks about ethics in the 6.4s and 6.5s. Near the end of his discussion of science, Wittgenstein says this:

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<sup>57</sup> I argue for the plausibility of this reading in some detail in “The Cardinal Problem of Philosophy.”

6.37 A necessity for one thing to happen because another has happened does not exist. There is only *logical* necessity.

6.371 At the basis of the whole modern view of the world lies the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.

6.372 So people stop short at natural laws as at something unassailable, as did the ancients at God and Fate.

And they both are right and wrong. But the ancients were clearer, in so far as they recognized a clear terminus, whereas the modern system makes it appear as though *everything* were explained.

Wittgenstein's thought here can be understood in terms of (one form of) the cosmological argument for the existence of God. Beginning with the contingent events that we observe in the world, we seek an explanation for why *these* events occur, and not others. We can trace each event to a preceding cause, but insofar as that cause is equally contingent, we remain unsatisfied. So, the argument goes, there must be a *necessary* being which is the cause of the entire sequence of causally interrelated contingent events, a being that itself could not have been otherwise. For the ancients, this is "God and Fate." The modern view puts in place of God (and Fate) the laws of nature, thought of as necessary ("unassailable") truths that determine how contingent events are related to one other as cause and effect.

Wittgenstein says that the ancients and moderns "both are right and wrong." They are right in recognizing that "explanations come to an end somewhere," as Wittgenstein later put it.<sup>58</sup> But they are wrong in thinking that this stopping point is somehow *necessary* – for "there is only *logical* necessity." Nonetheless, there is something preferable to the ancients' view over the moderns, according to Wittgenstein. The latter rests on a misconception of the laws of nature and "makes it appear as though *everything* were explained." The laws of nature are not explanations of natural phenomena at all.

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<sup>58</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, §1.

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They do not ground phenomena in some metaphysical necessity. Rather, they are a way of organizing our description of the facts that we have observed in reality. Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of a net with a particular mesh, in which we can capture facts. (6.341-2) The ancients, who stopped at God and Fate, did not conceive of these as explanatory hypotheses on a par with the contingent causes in the chain of explanations within the world – by appealing to some source from out of this world, they really expressed the point that explanations had come to an end – in “one clear terminus.”

After his return to philosophy, in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein made some interestingly similar remarks about ethics, and these can shed light on the ethical point of the *Tractatus*. On December 17, 1930, in a conversation with members of the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein took up the question raised in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, whether the good is good because the gods command it, or the gods command it because it is good. He said:<sup>59</sup>

Schlick says that in theological ethics there used to be two conceptions of the essence of the good: according to the shallower interpretation the good is good because it is what God wants; according to the profounder interpretation God wants the good because it is good. I think that the first interpretation is the profounder one: what God commands, that is good. For it cuts off the way to any explanation ‘why’ it is good, while the second interpretation is the shallow, rationalist one, which proceeds ‘as if’ you could give reasons for what is good.

The first conception says clearly that the essence of the good has nothing to do with the facts and hence cannot be explained by any proposition. If there is any proposition expressing precisely what I think, it is the proposition “What God commands, that is good.”

Here, the profounder interpretation corresponds to the view of the ancients about the explanation of natural phenomena. Like that view, it “recognizes a clear terminus” – “it cuts off the way to an explanation.” In a diary entry written about five months later,

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<sup>59</sup> *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, 115. Wednesday, 17 December 1930. The connection of this passage to the *Tractatus*’s treatment of the laws of nature is illuminatingly discussed by James Klagge, “*Das erlösende Wort.*”

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Wittgenstein wrote: “‘It is good because God commanded it’ is the correct [*richtige*] expression for groundlessness [*die Grundlosigkeit*].”<sup>60</sup> So the proposition “expressing precisely what I think” is also the correct way to express the *groundlessness* of ethics. Saying “it’s good because God commanded it” is really just a way of saying “it’s good – period.” There is nothing more to say. In sum, we could say: “ethics has to look after itself.”<sup>61</sup> Ethics is not some body of ethical theory, but a way to live. The ethical point of the *Tractatus* is to get us to see that logic and ethics are *groundless* – that we cannot provide justifications for them in any kind of theorizing – or even in the grasping of ineffable insights into the nature of reality, or the “higher.” This is why those who “to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted.” The clarity they have achieved is not a clarity about anything like a theoretical proposition, even an ineffable one. It is rather a clarity about how to live. The ethical point of the *Tractatus* is to free us from the need for justification, to enable us to live. Understanding *this* we see the world rightly. (6.54)

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<sup>60</sup> “Movements of Thought,” 82-3. I have modified the translation. The link between this remark, the discussion with the Vienna Circle, and *Tractatus* 6.372, is made by the original editor, Ilse Somavilla – see fn g, p. 82 – and is also discussed by Klagge, “*Das erlösende Wort*.”

<sup>61</sup> This formulation is given in James Conant, “What Ethics in the *Tractatus* is *Not*,” which discusses the parallels between logic and ethics in the *Tractatus* in more depth than I have been able to here.

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