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Wittgenstein's True Thoughts

Abstract

The central remarks of the *Tractatus* are without substantial content or consequence, remarks at the boundaries of sense that dissolve into truth. While they say nothing, they encapsulate logical features of language and the world. Unasserted, they express thoughts, the truth of which Wittgenstein takes to be unassailable and definitive, while asserted, they are out-and-out nonsense. What is manifest in linguistic practice is no more sayable – and no less significant – than what is manifest in logical truths, mathematical equations and the principles of mechanics.

1. Understanding the Tractatus

Ludwig Wittgenstein seems to espouse philosophical opinions and defend a distinctive philosophical point of view in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP 1955/1961)¹. There is no shaking the impression that he is fully engaged in the philosophical enterprise, and it does him a disservice to interpret him as dismissing philosophy root and branch. Besides criticising traditional philosophy and pioneering a new approach to philosophical problems, he promotes what looks for all the world like philosophical ideas. This is how the *Tractatus* was read at the time by Bertrand Russell, Frank Ramsey and the members of the Vienna

¹ References to Wittgenstein's works will be given using the abbreviations mentioned in the list of references.

Circle, not least Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlick, and how it is still widely read. It cannot be by chance that Wittgenstein refers to “the thoughts which are expressed in [the book]—or similar thoughts” and avers that “in it thoughts are expressed”, indeed writes: “[T]he *truth* of the thoughts communicated [*mitgeteilten*] here seems to me unassailable and definitive [*unantastbar und definitiv*]” (TLP 1955: 27-29/TLP 1961: 3-5, with “set forth” for “*mitgeteilten*”). Yet in 6.54, the penultimate remark of the book, Wittgenstein famously and notoriously says: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless [*unsinnig*]” (TLP 1955; TLP 1961 has “nonsensical” for “*unsinnig*”). Can this apparent contradiction be removed and if so, how?²

There are two markedly different sorts of sentence in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein has many comments on the views of individual philosophers and the history and character of philosophy. Thus he says: “[T]he whole of philosophy is full of [the most fundamental confusions]” (3.324), “The logical symbolism of Frege and Russell [does] not exclude all errors” (3.325), and “The Darwinian theory has no more to do with philosophy than any other hypothesis of natural science” (4.1122). (Also compare 3.143, 3.318, 3.325, 4.003, 4.113, 5.132, 5.525 and 5.5422.) But there are also many philosophical-sounding remarks in the *Tractatus* comparable to the remarks of great philosophers of the past. Thus Wittgenstein says: “The world is everything that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1-1.1), “A name means an object. The object is its meaning” (3.203), and “Logic is ... a reflection of the world. Logic is transcendental” (6.13). Since remarks of the first sort, stripped of hyperbole, are implausibly regarded either as indisputably true or as plainly nonsensical (or as fundamental to the *Tractatus*), Wittgenstein is most charitably

² Except where explicitly noted, I cite TLP 1955, the translation prepared by C.K. Ogden and F. Ramsey, this having been vetted by Wittgenstein himself. I do not attempt to cover all that has been said about Wittgenstein’s characterisations of his own remarks, just touch briefly on some of the leading ways they have been understood. My main object is to resuscitate and develop a line of interpretation advanced in my (2003). I attempt to clarify, refine and deepen what I said there, not least regarding Wittgenstein’s conception of “showing” and its role in the *Tractatus*.

regarded as referring to the second sort of remark in his Preface and 6.54, and the question becomes how these remarks, manifestly central to his thinking, are to be understood.

When the spotlight is turned on what seem to be straight-out philosophical remarks in the book, it is tempting to think a choice has to be made between regarding them as unassailably and definitively true and regarding them as nonsensical. It seems, as has been noted, “quite unacceptable ... that one and the same series of pronouncements should be both devoid of sense and unassailably true”, and it is scarcely possible that “Wittgenstein could ... have it both ways” (Ayer 1985: 20, 30). Moreover, given the choice, the more acceptable – certainly the usual – response is that Wittgenstein is better regarded as thinking the “contents [of the *Tractatus*] true” (30). Such an interpretation, however, labours under the difficulty that Wittgenstein does not appear to be speaking out of turn in 6.54, never mind dabbling in irony or speaking tongue-in-cheek. Rather he seems to be saying what he believes and believing what he says. Furthermore his description of his own sentences at 6.54 does not feel like an optional extra, to be taken with a pinch of salt. To the contrary, there is a case to be made for the view that “ideas that Wittgenstein presents [at the end of the *Tractatus*] have all been carefully built up to, and emerge, as the natural consequence of the main discussion of the book” (White 2006: 125). While it may turn out that 6.54 has to be ignored, this is surely a remedy of last resort.

Perhaps the tidiest solution, were it available, would be to read Wittgenstein as referring at the beginning and the end of the *Tractatus* to different remarks. There would be no contradiction were he thinking in the Preface of his treatment of language and logic and thinking at 6.54 of his treatment of the world, value and philosophy (compare Child 2011: 72, also Black 1964: 381-382). The chief snag with this is that it is hard to discern any difference in tone, even logical status, between the two sorts of remarks. While Wittgenstein applauds some of what philosophers say about logic and language and deplores most of what they say about the world and value, there is no indication in the text that he regarded his own remarks about the two sets of topics differently. He does

not split the difference and mark “The world is everything that is the case” off from “A name means an object” and “Logic is transcendental”. Indeed what he says about the world and states of affairs at the beginning of the *Tractatus* shades into his discussion of pictures and propositional signs (and his discussion of logic and language), which in turn shades into his remarks at the end of the book about happiness, life and death.

Another commonly-defended way of negotiating the problem of interpreting Wittgenstein’s remarks takes him to be meaning to convey unassailable and definitive truths despite – even in virtue of – the nonsensicality of his sentences (compare Anscombe 1959: 162, Malcolm 1967: 331, and Hacker 2001: 139-143). This is an attractive option if only because in a letter to Russell on 19 August 1919, Wittgenstein declares the distinction between “what can be expressed (gesagt) by prop[osition]s ... and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown (gezeigt)” to be fundamental, indeed speaks of it as “the cardinal problem of philosophy” (McGuinness 2008: 98). Such an interpretation is, however, also hard to accept. It presumes Wittgenstein is committed to the dubious idea that nonsense can communicate and takes his own (nonsensical) sentences to carry important information about the world, language, logic and much else besides. Indeed attributing such a view to him is as unjust as it is uncharitable, there being nothing in the *Tractatus* to suggest that he disagrees with what he is reported to have said much later: “Most of us think there is nonsense that makes sense and nonsense which does not. ... But these are nonsense in the same sense, the only difference being in the jingle of the words” (AWL: 64).

A more radical proposal, one stoutly defended in some quarters, is that Wittgenstein bites the bullet and regards his remarks as gibberish pure and simple (compare Diamond 1991 and the essays in Crary and Read 2000). On this view it is not insignificant that Wittgenstein deprecated calling his book “Philosophical Logic” “[u]nless one says ... the whole book is nonsense” (CCO: 20, dated 23 April 1922). But even accepting that he is agreeing, rather than disputing, that the book itself is nonsense (and allowing that what seems to make sense is disguised nonsense), it is difficult to

disregard or dilute his observation in the Preface about the unassailable and definitive truth of his thoughts. On the face of it, Wittgenstein is as wedded to regarding his remarks as true as to regarding them as nonsensical, and he seems to take himself, no two ways about it, to be expressing thoughts about logic, language and the world. Also were he palming off nonsense as sense, how could he claim anything non-sayable is showable? Once everything goes, there seems to be no preserving the distinction between showing and saying, the very thing in the *Tractatus* that is, arguably, “strikingly original, for its period” (Mounce 2001: 187; for further criticism see White 2006: 125-130, and Hacker 2000).

If none of these interpretations is tenable, the only remaining possibility is that Wittgenstein reckoned his remarks in the Preface and at 6.54 to be fully compatible (and had no truck with the notion of significant nonsense). Such a reading of the text has the notable advantage that Wittgenstein does not appear to have believed he was skating on thin ice or to have been, consciously or unconsciously, pulling a fast one. It not only recognises that Wittgenstein proclaims in no uncertain terms that his thoughts are unassailably and definitively true and his propositions nonsensical, it also allows for the fact that he set great, if not overwhelming, store on the say/show distinction. Moreover it explains how he was able to take in stride Russell’s observation in his Introduction to the *Tractatus* that “Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said” (TLP 1955: 22/TLP 1961: xxi), and it accounts for his apparent indifference to the objection when Russell reportedly pressed it in 1929 (Wood 1957: 156). While it is by no means clear that the remarks in the Preface and 6.54 can be reconciled, only an interpretation that takes him as having it both ways can save him from the charge of failing to see – or being unable to admit – that he had set his sights too high.

2. Wittgenstein’s thoughts as tautologies

Wittgenstein would have some explaining to do were he equating “thought” and “proposition” and taking them as they occur in the Preface and 6.54 to mean the same. But this is not how he understands them. His primary aim was to convey his thinking as

effectively and as vividly as he could, and it is more than likely that he is using the two words in two ways. He states that “the value” of the book is “greater ... [t]he more the nail has been hit on the head” (TLP 1955: 29, TLP 1961: 3-5), and the possibility that he contradicts himself so blatantly is hard to credit. He was not a careless thinker but neither was he especially concerned with technical niceties, and it is good policy to reserve judgement regarding his use of tricky words like “thought” and “proposition” prior to a careful examination of the context in which they occur. As has been noted, Wittgenstein “thought intuitively, not discursively” (McGuinness 2002: 135), and what he says in the Preface and 6.54 – in fact, I would say, the whole book – has to be read as recording the considered reflections of an inspirational thinker rather than the hypotheses of a philosopher concerned with spelling out every detail and pre-empting every possible objection.

When Wittgenstein speaks of his unassailably and definitively true thoughts – “The world is everything that is the case”, “A name means an object”, “Logic is transcendental” and the rest – he is not using “thought” in the sense specified in the body of the *Tractatus*. No such remark is “[a] logical picture of the facts” (3), let alone part of “a picture of the world” (3.01). “The world is everything that is the case”, to say nothing of “A name means an object” and “Logic is transcendental”, does not logically picture a fact in Wittgenstein’s (or any ordinary) sense of “logic”, “picture” or “fact”. More strikingly still, remarks of this sort fail to possess what he takes to be the crucial characteristic of pictures, that of being both capable of being true and capable of being false. Thoughts that are unassailably and definitively true cannot be anything but true, and thoughts that cannot be anything but true are not pictures (or thoughts officially understood). What Wittgenstein is claiming in his Preface must be that he is expressing thoughts in the book – his thoughts about thoughts at 3 and 3.01 included – in an anodyne sense of “thought”, i.e. he is saying what he thinks.

It is no surprise that Wittgenstein should describe himself as expressing thoughts that are unassailably and definitively true. He recognises that he may have erred – he says the truth of his thoughts “seems” to him unassailable and definitive (TLP 1955: 29;

TLP 1961: 5) – and he does not hesitate in later work to criticise, supplement and correct what he says in the *Tractatus*. At the time of writing, however, he was convinced that insofar as his remarks are true they are necessarily true. For him “The world is everything that is the case”, “A name means an object” and “Logic is transcendental” are true come what may. It is, he thinks, beyond belief that the world could comprise more or less than what is the case, that names might not mean objects (in his special sense of these terms), and logic is merely a repository of mundane knowledge. For him “[t]he object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts” (4.112), and he is best read as taking his thoughts to be clarifications, i.e. what he will later call grammatical propositions (compare PI §251). While it may not be self-evident that what he says is clarificatory, uninfluenced by how things happen to be, he believed this becomes clear when his remarks are thought through. For him “[e]very sentence in the *Tractatus* should be seen as the heading of a chapter, needing further exposition” (Drury 1984: 159) and further exposition shows their truth to be *unantastbar und definitiv*.

Wittgenstein believed it a gross error to treat philosophy as rooted in science, commonsense or the wisdom of the ages, and he never wavered in regarding the endeavour as essentially logical and devoid of information properly so-called, his own remarks included. Since philosophical observations are categorically different from scientific observations (4.111), the insights expressed in the *Tractatus* are neither supported nor undermined by scientific theory, actual or possible. In his view “[t]here is no picture which is *a priori* true” (2.225), and every genuine *a priori* thought is non-empirical and non-picturing. In contrast to philosophers who take themselves to be expressing substantial *a priori* thoughts, Wittgenstein takes his own (*a priori*) thoughts to be empty (and disparages knowledge purportedly secured by pure reason, rational intuition or the grasping of essences). It is not for nothing that immediately after describing the truth of his thoughts as unassailable and definitive, Wittgenstein states that “the value of [the *Tractatus*] secondly consists in the fact that it shows how little has been done when these problems have been solved”. (Notice

that he does not say that nothing has been achieved when the problems – it is unclear whether he means all philosophical problems or just the ones discussed in the *Tractatus* – have been solved.)

Not without reason the remarks in the *Tractatus* are sometimes treated as humdrum. Gottlob Frege speaks for many when he observes (in a letter to Wittgenstein dated 28 June 1919): “Right at the beginning [of the *Tractatus*] I encounter the expressions ‘to be the case [*der Fall sein*]’ and ‘fact [*Tatsache*]’ and I conjecture that *to be the case* and *to be a fact* are the same. The world is everything that is the case and the world is the totality of facts” (Frege 2011: 51-55/2003: 22-24). This is both right and wrong. On the interpretation I am promoting, what Frege volunteers as criticism is accurate description. Wittgenstein regards the alleged shortcoming as a virtue since he takes the remarks Frege mentions to be without substance, “the case” and “a fact” being, as Frege observes, “the same”. Indeed I see Wittgenstein as believing it indisputable that “every fact [is] the case”, indisputable that “that which is the case [is] a fact”, and indisputable that “Let A be a fact” and “Let A be the case” amount to the same thing. He is not missing a trick when he notes these identifications but expressing thoughts he means to express, “The world is everything that is the case” (1), “What is the case [is] the fact” (2) and his other (philosophical) remarks being in his view *a priori* insights.

To put it another way, I am suggesting that in the Preface Wittgenstein is thinking of the remarks in the book as tautologies in the traditional sense of empty truisms. While he characterises the notion of a tautology narrowly as a proposition [*Sätze*] “true for all the truth-possibilities of the elementary propositions [*Elementarsätze*]” (4.46), he works with a notion that covers much more (for the two notions of tautology see Dreben and Floyd 1991). Thus, to mention a particularly striking example, he takes “propositions” about the internal relationships among colours, tones and the like to be tautologous in the pre-Tractarian broad sense (4.123). To his way of thinking, his own remarks, like tautologies in the official Tractarian sense, “say nothing” and are “without sense” (4.461). He regards “The world is everything that

is the case” as tautologous since in the present context “the world” is synonymous to “everything that is the case”, regards “A name means an object” as tautologous since “[t]he object it names is its meaning”, and regards “Logic is transcendental” as tautologous since it is “not a theory but a reflection [*Spiegelbild*] of the world” (6.13). Presumably he is not thinking of such remarks as tautologies in the sense of 4.46. But he treats them as tautologies in the broader traditional sense – at least so I am arguing.

Later Wittgenstein will disparage the philosopher’s tendency to regard the concepts of world, name, thought and the like as “super-concepts” (compare PI §97). But in 1918, when compiling the *Tractatus*, he regarded his own remarks as true by courtesy rather than by right, i.e. by being “limiting cases of the combinations of symbols” (4.466) rather than “by being pictures of the reality” (4.06). It is not that his remarks “belong to roughly the same category [as tautologies]” (Mounce 1981: 102) but that they are logically on all fours with “Red is a colour” and “Nothing occurs in two different places at the same time”. Once again it is immaterial that the tautological character of his remarks is not immediately discernible, the tautological character of many necessary truths, grammatical remarks and tautologies of elementary logic being equally recondite. Nor is it a strike against reading Wittgenstein as I do that his thoughts are too imprecisely expressed to count as “definitional” (Morris 2008: 22). However unclear the remarks of the *Tractatus*, they are plausibly regarded as pinning down, at least partly, the meanings of the terms involved.

While Wittgenstein does not explicitly distinguish between two senses of “tautology” in the *Tractatus*, still less refers to his own remarks as tautologous, he uses the word “tautology” in the traditional, broad sense in earlier and later writings. Thus in a remark drafted on 17 June 1915 he says: “[T]he complexity of spatial objects is a logical complexity, for to say that one thing is part of another is always a tautology” (NB 1979: 62). And in 1929, on returning to philosophy, he observes that claims about shades of colour having more than one degree of brightness “do not express an experience but are in some sense tautologies” (RLF 1993: 32) and says: “One may be tempted to say what I am

wondering at [when I am wondering at the sky being there] is a tautology” (LE 1993: 42). Moreover when compiling the *Tractatus*, he would have been aware of how the word “tautology” was used at the time, e.g. that Frege writes: “[T]he number which belongs to the concept F is identical with the number which belongs to the concept G if the concept F is equal to the concept G ... sounds, of course, like a tautology” (1950: §73) and Russell writes: “The law of tautology states that no change is made when a class of proposition is added to or multiplied by itself” (1937: 23). Also it is worth noting that in 1925 Ramsey judged the axiom of choice to be “the most evident tautology” (1990: 221).

3. Logic, mathematics and mathematical physics

There is in any event a close resemblance between how Wittgenstein views his own philosophical thoughts and how he treats logic in the *Tractatus*. What he says about logic transfers with minor modifications and qualifications to his own remarks, these being reminiscent of nothing so much as what he calls “logical propositions” (for his unfussy use of “proposition” in connection with logic, see Fogelin 1987: 45-47). In his view the likes of “The world is everything that is the case” are logically on the same footing as tautologies narrowly construed and their “correct explanation”, no less than the correct explanation of “If p, then p”, “must give them a peculiar position among all propositions” (6.112). He was of the opinion that “philosophical propositions”, like “propositions of logic”, “can be no more empirically confirmed than they can be empirically refuted” (6.1222), are “of equal rank” (6.127) and constitute (in part) what he variously calls “logical scaffolding” and “the scaffolding of the world” (3.42, 4.023). It is not just that a “great many” of the major remarks of the *Tractatus* “can be salvaged” by noting that they are “formal statements” (Black 1964: 381). It is that they all can be so “rescue[d]”, “the most striking ones” included (382).

In the present context it is especially helpful to consider what Wittgenstein says about “logical propositions” at 6.124, the most important passage on “logical scaffolding”. On a quick first look, this passage seems to pose a difficulty for the idea that the thoughts

expressed in the *Tractatus* are without substance. The trouble is that far from treating logical propositions – and by extension, as I see it, his own propositions – as devoid of content, Wittgenstein says: “The logical propositions describe the scaffolding of the world”. Once more, however, it would be wrong to jump to conclusions. Wittgenstein’s use of the word “describe [*beschreiben*]” has to be balanced against what he says elsewhere, including his observation at 6.11 that “[t]he propositions of logic ... say nothing”. And, more significantly still, at 6.124 itself he backtracks and adds: “or rather they present it [*oder vielmehr, sie stellen es dar*]”. Which is to say “describe” is misleading and logical propositions are more accurately spoken of as showing or displaying the scaffolding. (It also helps my cause if “*darstellen*” is rendered as “to be” (Schulte forthcoming), my contention being that Wittgenstein’s thoughts belong to, rather than describe, “the scaffolding”.)

How Wittgenstein thinks of his own remarks is, I am persuaded, equally comparable to how he thinks of “the propositions of mathematics” in the 6.2s, even how he thinks of mathematical equations. He was committed to the view that his thoughts, like “every proposition of mathematics”, “must be self-evident [*sich von selbst verstehen muß*]” (6.2341; TLP 1961 has “must go without saying”). For him “The world is everything that is the case” can no more be dismissed as gibberish than a mathematical proposition/equation. Disparaging such philosophical remarks because they do not count as genuine propositions is as big a mistake as disparaging the likes of “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” because they are “pseudo-propositions [*Scheinsätze*]” (6.2). Just as Wittgenstein regards mathematics as a symbolism, so – I am suggesting – his own “philosophical propositions” function as a symbolism, and “[j]ust as with the system of numbers one must be able to write down any arbitrary number” (6.341), so with the system of thoughts adumbrated in the *Tractatus* one must be able to write down any arbitrary sentence. The tautologies of Wittgenstein’s system of thoughts constitute, like tautologies narrowly construed, “part of the symbolism, in the same way that ‘0’ is part of the symbolism of Arithmetic” (4.4611).

Possibly more telling, however, is that the central remarks of the *Tractatus* are comparable to the propositions of mathematical physics (as Wittgenstein construes them). When discussing Newtonian Mechanics, Wittgenstein uses the word “proposition” to cover necessarily true *Sätze*, and it is not forcing the issue to regard him as believing that his own remarks have the same logical status as “the mechanical axioms” (6.341). He writes: “Newtonian mechanics ... brings the description of the universe to a unified form”, and the central remarks of the *Tractatus* can, I venture to suggest, be said to do the same at a more general and abstract level. Philosophy as Wittgenstein understands it can be summarised, not too misleadingly, as he summarises Newtonian Mechanics, namely as “an attempt to construct according to a single plan all *true* propositions which we need for the description of the world” (6.343). For him philosophy also delineates a “*purely* geometrical” network of concepts, “all [the] properties [of which] can be given a priori” (6.35). He holds that “the law of causation, the law of continuity in nature, the law of least expenditure in nature, etc. etc., ... are *a priori* intuitions of possible forms of the propositions of science” (6.34), and I am adding that he is recording *a priori* intuitions about the possible forms of propositions of any sort. In both areas, “the a priori certain [*Genisse*] proves to be something purely logical” (6.3211).

4. Tautologies show the formal properties of language and the world

Recognising the kinship of Wittgenstein’s thoughts to the propositions of logic, mathematics and mechanics has the further advantage of clearing away much of the fog surrounding his observations about saying and showing. Insofar as tautologies, equations and the “logical apparatus [of] physical laws” (6.3431) show the (unsayable) “logic of the world” (6.22), his own more general remarks show in their own way “the logical form of reality” (4.121) and correlatively “the inexpressible”, “*das Mystische*” (6.522). For the purpose of delineating features of language and the world, tautologies broadly understood are as good as logical propositions, mathematical equations and mechanical axioms, and it is as true of

Wittgenstein's own thoughts, as of "the propositions of logic", that their being "tautologies *shows* the formal—logical—properties of language, of the world" (6.12). Otherwise put, I am opposing the suggestion that there is a distinction "in the theory of the *Tractatus* between logical truths [which are 'tautologies'] and the things that are 'shewn'" (Anscombe 1959: 163). Wittgenstein thinks formal/logical properties manifest themselves in his "propositions" as well as in other logical/necessary/*a priori* "propositions".

But how do remarks like "The world is the totality of facts" show logical properties of language and the world? It is unhelpful to note that Wittgenstein writes: "'*fa*' shows [*zeigt*] that in its sense the object *a* occurs [and] two propositions '*fa*' and '*ga*' [show] that they are both about the same object" (4.1211). Nor is there much to be gleaned from his observation in "Notes Dictated to G.E. Moore" that "[e]ven if there were propositions of [the] form 'M is a thing' they would be superfluous (tautologous) because what this tries to say is something which is already seen when you see 'M'" (AM: 110). More useful, though still somewhat obscure, is what Wittgenstein says at 6.36: "If there were a law of causality, it might run: 'There are laws of nature'. But that can clearly not be said: it shows itself [*es zeigt sich*]" . What he means, I take it, is that conformity to the law of causality shows itself in scientific practice, i.e. in the use of mechanics and other forms of scientific representation. This prompts the thought that he takes "formal—logical—properties of language, of the world" to be manifest in linguistic practice, the essential features of which are summed up in the unassailably and definitively true thoughts of the *Tractatus*.

In the course of discussing "logical propositions", Wittgenstein writes: "It is clear that it must show [*anzuzeigen muß*] something about the world that certain combinations of symbols ... are tautologies [*Tautologien sind*]" (6.124), and I am conjecturing that he believed it must show something about the world that the combinations of symbols in the *Tractatus* are tautologies. I read him as holding that it comes out in how we talk about the world that the world is everything that is the case, that it comes out in how thoughts are expressed that a name means an object (compare 3.2) and that it comes out in the impossibility of language representing what is

mirrored in language that logic is transcendental (4.121). My suggestion is that all the truths of the *Tractatus*, not just the “metaphysical truths” of the work, “show themselves precisely *in the use of language*” (Mounce 2001: 188). Wittgenstein believed that the truths at the beginning of the book are “metaphysical” in name only and that none of his “propositions” are “intended to indicate what eludes the medium of language but to direct our attention to what shows itself *in that medium*” (ibid.). (Also see Griffin 1964: Chapter 3, “The doctrine of showing”.)

At the risk of belabouring the obvious, I would mention that I take the remarks in the 6.3s about mathematical physics to be unusually helpful for understanding the significance of the *Tractatus*. It is not just that the discussion of Newtonian Mechanics at 6.341-6.343 sheds light on how Wittgenstein could have taken his own thoughts to be unassailably and definitely true, treated his own propositions as nonsensical and justifiably availed himself of the distinction between saying and showing. It also becomes clear how Wittgenstein’s thoughts can be taken – and were apparently taken by the author of the *Tractatus* himself – to be of the essence. Nobody, least of all Wittgenstein, considers Newtonian Mechanics to be trivial, and the remarks of the *Tractatus*, though doubtless less momentous, are likewise non-trivial. Wittgenstein does not reckon the propositions of mathematical physics important because, while nonsensical, they encapsulate truth or somehow manage to teach useful lessons, so why interpret him as thinking of his own propositions this way? Newtonian Mechanics is important since it “provides the bricks for building the edifice of science” (6.341), and Wittgenstein’s thoughts are similarly important since they provide the bricks for building any sort of edifice.

5. Sätze as elucidations

An account of Wittgenstein’s remarks of the sort I am advancing, the central pillar of which is that they are – and were meant – to be understood as tautologous, has several obvious advantages. Once the tautological character of his thoughts is noticed, his claim to be expressing unassailable and definitive truths poses no special problem. Nor is there any need to distinguish between his opening

remarks about the world and states of affairs from the remarks about language and logic that follow. Nor is it necessary to treat his concluding remarks about the happy person and the meaning of life as out-of-place afterthoughts. Moreover the say/show distinction is accorded the weight Wittgenstein places on it, and showing is neither disparaged nor treated as a dispensable extra. It only remains to consider the other half of the equation, the half about our eventually recognising that the propositions of the book are nonsensical. While tautologies cannot be said straight-out to be nonsensical (and gobbledygook cannot reasonably be regarded as showing what cannot be said), it is unclear how treating Wittgenstein's *Sätze* as tautologies can be squared with taking his declaration at 6.54 at face value. Still it is not outlandish to regard what he says in 6.54 as well-taken, even as inescapable.

6.54 is not as straightforward as often supposed. Wittgenstein first writes: "Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, dass sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt, wenn er durch sie—auf ihnen—über sie hinausgestiegen ist" (TLP 1955: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them" / TLP 1961: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them".) Next he says (within parentheses): "He [i.e. the person who understands him] must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it". And he adds (on a separate line): "He [i.e. the same person] must surmount these propositions; then he will see the world rightly". Three questions immediately come to mind: What exactly does Wittgenstein mean by "Meine Sätze" and how do they elucidate? Why should our coming to recognise them as unsinnig make any difference? And how is the metaphor of climbing the ladder to be understood and why does climbing Wittgenstein's ladder enable us to see the world rightly?

When Wittgenstein speaks of his *Sätze* at 6.54, he cannot be working with the conception of "proposition" specified in the body of the book. No doubt, his primary aim, here as always, is to hit the

nail on the head, and the relevant notion of proposition must be something like “intelligible sequence of words”. None of the main remarks of the *Tractatus* is a proposition in the official sense, none being a “propositional sign in its projective relation to the world” (3.12) or “a picture of reality” (4.021). “The world is everything that is the case” can be said to be “expressed perceptively through the senses” (3.1), but it is hardly a “sensibly perceptible sign (sound or written sign, etc.) of the proposition as a projection of the possible state of affairs” (3.11). To Wittgenstein’s way of thinking, there is no such thing as a nonsensical proposition in the Tractarian sense, there being no such thing as a picture that does not picture correctly or incorrectly. For him a nonsensical proposition/picture is a contradiction in terms, picturing being a matter of thinking what is possible and there being no thinking the illogical (3.02-3.03). (Trick pictures purporting to portray the impossible are obviously not counterexamples.)

When “meine Sätze” is understood as referring to Wittgenstein’s remarks ordinarily understood, the question about how they elucidate virtually answers itself. They are “elucidatory” since they show “formal—logical—properties of language, of the world”. Wittgenstein is underlining that the key remarks of the *Tractatus* lay bare how we speak and think rather than convey information about the world, language, logic and the rest. This is not a new thought. It echoes the point expressed in 4.112 about philosophical works consisting “essentially of elucidations” and philosophy being “an activity”, “not a theory”. Nor is it fortuitous that 6.54 follows 6.53 on “[t]he right method in philosophy”, a passage in which Wittgenstein urges philosophers “[t]o say nothing except what can be said, *i.e.* the propositions of natural science, *i.e.* something that has nothing to do with philosophy”. In stating this, Wittgenstein is not, as regularly assumed, conceding that there is something wrong with his discussion (e.g. Kuusela 2011: 601). He is recognising that there is a world of difference between the elucidatory/showable and the sayable/picturable.

In stressing Wittgenstein’s observation about the elucidatory function of his *Sätze*, I am not cutting myself off from providing an explanation of their nonsensicality. Tautologies must, to the extent

that they elucidate, make some sort of sense. But the possibility of their serving as elucidations does not stand and fall with their making sense (or their being recognised “finally” as *unsinnig*). The crucial point is that Wittgenstein couples elucidation and nonsensicality and has to be regarded as having believed his remarks are simultaneously elucidatory and nonsensical. On pain of interpreting him as contradicting himself and understanding his *Sätze* the same way at 6.54 as in the Preface, he has to be understood as taking the setting forth of thoughts to be different from the setting down of propositions, i.e. he must have reckoned it possible to read his remarks either as unassailably and definitively true thoughts or as nonsensical propositions. While he certainly refers to the same (written) sentences as thoughts and propositions, he cannot have taken his remarks-construed-as-thoughts to be propositions or taken his remarks-construed-as-propositions to be thoughts.

The simplest and most charitable explanation of 6.54, I am arguing, is that Wittgenstein is noting that whoever grasps his thinking will eventually see he is not describing, stating facts, conveying information. The gist of the passage is that the philosophical-sounding remarks in the book are wrongly read as assertions, as propositions in the sense of true-or-false pictures as opposed to tautologous thoughts that show something about language and the world. Though Wittgenstein cannot be said to have worked with a single, precise notion of nonsense, he usually reserves the charge of nonsensicality for fraudulent statements, and in 6.54 he is – on the interpretation I favour – saying that his remarks are fraudulent when taken as contributing positively to what is known about language, the world or anything else. His contention is that, understood as statements, his *Sätze* are nonsensical, i.e. cannot be said or, what amounts to the same thing, cannot be significantly communicated (compare Black 1964: 379). He proceeds true to form and would have us notice that he is not contributing to natural science (or metaphysics). However the thoughts of the book may initially appear, when construed as genuine propositions, they are nothing but waffle.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, I should emphasise that I am not interpreting the remarks/thoughts/propositions of the *Tractatus* as “combinations of symbols that have the appearance of saying something while they are in fact ‘nonsensical’” (Medina 2002: 9). It is no part of my argument that Wittgenstein’s sentences are “pseudopropositions” in the sense of “symbolic creatures that have a deceitful nature” (ibid.). As I see it, it is a mistake to think that “[w]e learn at the end of the book that all ‘propositions’ of the *Tractatus* are deceitful in this way: they have a propositional appearance but are in fact *unsinnig* (6.54)” (ibid.). I am suggesting that Wittgenstein’s remarks are pseudopropositions only in the sense that logical propositions, mathematical equations and the axioms of mechanics are, and their nature is deceitful only in the sense that they have the appearance of stating non-trivial truths. They are not to be regarded as *unsinnig* without addition or qualification since they also have a true, nondeceitful nature, each being comprehensible as a tautology. Nor do I agree that since “tautologies ... are not deceitful”, “[t]he propositions of the *Tractatus* are certainly not tautological” (Medina 2002: 9, 10).

Central to how I read 6.54, then, is the point that Wittgenstein means to alert the reader to the fact that the tautologous thoughts expressed in the body of the work are unassertible. He is not saying his unassailably and definitively true thoughts are in the final analysis nonsensical or presuming the possibility of nonsense expressing truth. He is noting – albeit not in so many words – that any attempt to assert the remarks of the book, no less than tautologies narrowly understood, results in “‘*non-sensical*’ formations of words” (Anscombe 1959: 163). This is integral to his thinking. He takes sentences with content to be assertible and holds that it is nonsensical to assert sentences that say nothing. In his view propositions in the sense specified in the *Tractatus* are assertible as well as expressible, tautologies merely expressible. He is able to have it both ways since he takes tautologies to show, propositions to say, and thinks the core remarks of the book show without saying. There is no contradiction between the Preface and 6.54, the expression of an unassailably and definitively true thought being altogether different from a (meaningful) true-or-false proposition.

For Wittgenstein unasserted tautologies express true thoughts while asserted ones express nothing whatsoever.

6. Sinnlos and unsinnig

At this juncture it may be objected that I am overlooking that Wittgenstein takes every tautologous remark to collapse into nothingness, to be “a perfect and absolute blank” (Anscombe 1959: 76-77, Black 1964: 235). This is not an unreasonable criticism if only because at 4.466 Wittgenstein explicitly speaks of the “dissolution [*Auflösung*]” of tautologies (TLP 1961 renders “*Auflösung*” as “disintegration”). (Also see AM: 118: “What happens in [a ‘tautology (*not* a logical proposition)] is that all its simple parts have meaning, but it is such that the connexions between these paralyse or destroy one another, so that they are connected in only some irrelevant manner.”) Still the objection is not unanswerable. Leaving aside the fact that the metaphor of dissolution is meant to get us over the hump that truth, as Wittgenstein characterises it, attaches exclusively to pictures, there is the difficulty that he is equally well, if not better, read as taking tautologies to collapse into (trivial) truth. To borrow a phrase from a later work, each of the sentences of the *Tractatus* is most naturally regarded, like “If p, then p”, as “a degenerate proposition, which is on the side of truth”, “an important point of intersection of significant sentences” (RFM III, §33).

Nor is it fatal to what I am arguing that in 6.54 Wittgenstein declares his propositions to be nonsensical (*unsinnig*), not senseless (*sinnlos*). It is tempting to think that consistency alone should have prevented him from taking his remarks as tautologies given that he writes: “Tautology and contradiction are without sense [*sind sinnlos*]. ... Tautology and contradiction are, however, not nonsensical [*sind aber nicht unsinnig*]” (4.461-4.4611). Had he meant his thoughts to be read as *sinnlos* when unasserted (and as *unsinnig* only when asserted), would he not have said so? In response, I would reiterate that Wittgenstein speaks of the truth of his thoughts as unassailable and definitive and note that, as someone disinclined to develop his ideas, he may have preferred to leave it unmentioned that he means “nonsensical if asserted”. But I would also underscore that he is

not entirely consistent in his use of “*sinnlos*” and “*unsinnig*”. Thus at 5.1362 he writes: “‘A knows that *p* is the case’ is senseless [*sinnlos*] if *p* is a tautology”, and at 5.5351 he refers to “*sinnlose Hypothese*”, in fact switches between “*unsinnig*” and “*sinnlos*”. More to the point there is the awkward fact that while he criticised the Ogden/Ramsey translation on numerous points, some quite small, he was apparently unperturbed by “*unsinnig*” being rendered as “senseless” at 4.124 and 5.473, indeed even lets the translation of “*am Ende als unsinnig*” as “finally ... as senseless” in 6.54 pass without comment (CCO: 19-37).

The last of my questions about 6.54, the one about the nature of the ladder and what is seen once it is climbed, now practically answers itself. Far from coming to appreciate that Wittgenstein’s remarks (incidental comments aside) are nonsensical and philosophy a charade, we are meant – on the present interpretation – to notice something about the ladder we have been climbing, specifically that its steps do not have the character they appear to have. At the top of the ladder, we do not have to discard the means that put us into a position to see “the world aright”, only have to abandon the easy assumption that propositions have been asserted as well as thoughts expressed. Wittgenstein’s clarifications are not lost, just the impression that they state how things are, and there is no need to explain how a ladder lacking secure steps can be climbed or how we can have fooled ourselves into thinking we have been climbing a ladder without steps. Both the ladder and its steps remain in place, and Wittgenstein can be read as believing he has provided a way to “surmount [*überwinden*]” his “propositions”, “to climb up beyond them”. The message of his parting shot – “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent” (7) – is not that there are no (unassertible) expressible thoughts, only that there are no (assertible) philosophical propositions.

One notable reason that Wittgenstein is persistently misread, I am inclined to think, is that nonsensical utterance is taken to be the only alternative to assertion (e.g. Conant and Dain 2011: §1). It is insufficiently appreciated that treating 6.54 seriously does not force us to suppose Wittgenstein is peddling gibberish disguised as truth or purporting to convey information in nonsensical remarks. He

does not have to be read as packaging truth in the form of nonsense or repudiating philosophy out of hand, it being possible to regard him, as I have been arguing, as expressing thoughts that say, state, describe, represent nothing. Yet again his remarks about science clarify the situation. He is able to slip between the Scylla of accepting the idea of important nonsense and the Charybdis of treating his *Sätze* as out-and-out nonsensical because he believes that in the case of his own thoughts, as in the case of Newtonian Mechanics, “the fact that [the world] can be described by [them] asserts nothing about the world; but *this* asserts something, namely, that it can be described in that particular way in which as a matter of fact it is described” (6.342). In particular when one reflects on his observation that “[t]hrough their whole logical apparatus the physical laws still speak of the objects of the world” (6.3431), one can accept that “[t]here is indeed the inexpressible [*Unausprechliches*]”, which “shows itself” (6.522).

When the *Tractatus* is interpreted as comprising tautologies comparable to logical truths, mathematical equations and the axioms of mechanics (and is taken to show something that cannot be asserted in the form of propositions), terms of criticism common in the secondary literature devoted to the *Tractatus* prove to hinder more than they help. It is pointless to debate whether Wittgenstein’s remarks are theoretical or therapeutic, his aim being to clarify the essential nature of representation with an eye to showing that “the reason why [the problems of philosophy] are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood” (TLP 1955: 27/TLP 1961: 3; also compare 4.003). And it is likewise unnecessary to ask whether Wittgenstein should be interpreted as “resolute” or “irresolute”. He can be read as proceeding resolutely in that his sentences are meant without exception to express unassailably and definitely true thoughts that reduce to nonsense when asserted. And he can be read as proceeding irresolutely in that he conceives thoughts and propositions differently in the Preface and at 6.54 from how he officially conceives them. It is not that the theory/therapy and resolute/irresolute distinctions have no use, just that they have to be handled with care and do not map straightforwardly one on to the other.

Nothing I have said entails that the *Tractatus* is less sophisticated or more elusive than usually supposed. My point is that the already difficult task of fathoming what Wittgenstein is driving at is made more difficult when his description of his own remarks in the Preface is taken to be in serious conflict with his description of them at 6.54. When he is read as speaking his mind in both sets of remarks and as referring to his thoughts differently from how he refers to his propositions, the subtlety of his philosophy shines through and what he is driving at is more readily appreciated. His discussion is highly modulated and syncopated, and allowing that he expresses true thoughts, we save ourselves the unrewarding task of explaining away much of what he says – and what he says about what he says. There is no substitute for tracing Wittgenstein’s steps and attempting to figure out what he says remark by remark and why he might have taken himself to be expressing unassertible thoughts. More common ways of interpreting the text may render it more digestible but only at the price of simplifying his message and opening him to harsh criticism.³

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