

Reading the *Tractatus* and seeing the world rightly

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Abstract

If the cardinal problem of philosophy is to be found in the distinction between what can be said (=thought), and what cannot be said but can only be shown in what is said, the task of making the logic of language perspicuous can be understood as a perceptive exercise – and the TLP as an aesthetics endeavour that, in what it says and in the form in which it says what it says, allows its readers to see the world rightly. In the end, this is both an ethical and an aesthetic achievement, for, what is then seen should make one understand that what is more valuable is indescribable in language – and the way to do it justice, is to keep silent about it.

1.

When, in 1919, Wittgenstein sends his book to Russell, he tells him that all the affair of logical propositions is a corollary and that the real, cardinal problem of philosophy, is related to the distinction between what can be said (*gesagt*) – or, what is the same, what can be thought – and what cannot be said but can only be shown (*gezeigt*) in what is said (cf. GBW, letter from Wittgenstein to Russell dated 19.08.1919). In Wittgenstein's eyes, this was the main business of his book. Moreover, the fundamental thought (TLP 4.0312) he is putting forward, is described by Wittgenstein as the impossibility of delegating logic by mandate, that is, of there being something that can represent the logic of facts in language, in propositions: there are no proxies or replacements for this, but we can see it if nothing stands in our field of vision, hence the necessity of making the logic of our language perspicuous to us. Hence, also, the significance of vision, of images, models, figures, configuration, pictures, picturing, form, and all the plethora of terms related to *Bild*, understood as image or model, such as: *logisches Bild, Bildhaftigkeit, abbildenden internen Beziehung, Urbild, lebendes Bild* etc.

Making the nature of propositions clear, is a supporting and grounding task for the solution of the chief problem of the book: since it must distinguish between what can be expressed in propositions and what can not be thus expressed but is nonetheless shown in

what is uttered with sense, the book, via the clarification of the nature of propositions, should make logic perceptible (and illustrate that logical form or the form of reality, its essential and structural features, the internal relations between language / thought and world, are made visible in propositions with sense).

In the TLP, ethics, aesthetics, the sense of life and the world and the mystical, join logic as that which is not possible to express in language – this does not mean, however, that they are equivalent or of the same kind. In reality, although ethics (one with aesthetics) is transcendental, like logic, it is also supernatural, as Wittgenstein puts it in the *Lecture on Ethics*.

Regarding logic, we have, on one hand, logical propositions, the *Scheinsätze* that are without sense, *sinnlos*. Tautologies and contradictions constitute examples of such propositions: the limits of language are grounded on the logic of language and the bipolarity of propositions, that secure the possibility of representing a state of affairs in a proposition and of it being compared to reality in order to determine its truth or falsity. Tautologies and contradictions are limiting-cases of language and thought – the first permit all states of affairs, the second, none – and for this reason they are not images of any fact of the world, because they do not portray a possible situation (cf. TLP 4.461 and 4.463). On the other hand, we have to consider propositions *about* logic and their *unsinnigen* character, for they belong to a different kind of propositions without sense, i.e., they are different from *sinnlosen* propositions. We are not, here, dealing with propositions that are limiting-cases, but with propositions that go beyond the limit of what is sayable with sense. This has to do with logic being transcendental, prior to any experience that we can describe with sense and compare with reality in order to investigate its truth or falsity. It is due to its transcendental nature that one cannot establish a logical theory with sense, and thus, the attempt to talk about logic, which permeates the world, is *unsinnig*.

On its turn, ethics, that is one with aesthetics, does not permeate the world – it is not only transcendental but also supernatural. Its sphere is beyond the world and so beyond language, truly outside the limits of sense, that is to say, beyond the limits of facts that we can portray in a proposition. It has to do with value, with what stands past the description allowed for in propositions. Propositions that try to talk about this sphere are also *unsinnig*, and although they might seem, at first blush, to say something meaningful, logical analysis shall

make clear that they do nothing of the sort, and the reason for this is that they are about what is higher than facts and cannot therefore be pictured through words.

2.

Since the possibility of a proposition being an image of the situation that it presents, is crucial for it to represent a fact, the notion of *Bild*, as we already saw, is crucial for understanding the book. In fact, vision pervades the *Tractatus*: everywhere we have to exercise it, so much so that one could say that the book is like a series of exercises of perception that aim at extracting the logic of language from everyday language: “Everyday language is part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it. It is humanly impossible to gather immediately the logic of language.” (TLP 4.002)

In addition to the difficulty that this remark points to, another difficulty, related to the comprehension of the aim of the book, has to do with the need of surpassing or overcoming its propositions. This requires, on its turn, that we understand the author, for only then can we see that what he has said throughout, is *Unsinn*, nonsense: the compensation for this is, though, that we are then capable of seeing the “world rightly” (TLP 6.54). Wittgenstein refers to his propositions as the ladder one has to climb up and then throw away. The movement of going up corresponds to the exercise of reading the *Tractatus*: its propositions are degrees of understanding – and vision. We are, in the end (*am Ende*), capable of seeing what was concealed before the nature of the proposition was made perspicuous: the logic of language. Along with this capacity and knowledge, another thing becomes clear – something that has to do with overcoming the tendency and the inclination to speak of what does not let itself be put into words, that is to say, it becomes clear that we must try to be silent concerning all the cases in which anything that we might say, will not do and will not be enough to represent an excess, a surplus in relation to the world of facts. This feeling is not suitable of being communicated in a language with sense because it is *unnaussprechlich* (TLP 6.522). Alfred Nordmann highlights the fact that with this word, Wittgenstein means that which cannot be put into words:

In ordinary contexts, the German “*aussprechen*” concerns our ability to clearly speak, pronounce, or articulate words. As such, the German word is a hybrid of sorts between “*ausdrücken* (to express, quite literally in the sense of squeezing out)” and “*sprechen* (to speak)”. Wittgenstein’s use of “*aussprechen*” and the translation

“express in speech” therefore reflects that the word refers to a particular mode of expression. (...) “*Aussprechen*” is a special case of “*ausdrücken*” or expression: it concerns what we put into words or language, thus suggesting yet another translation of *TLP* 6.522: “There is indeed what cannot be put into words.” (Alfred Nordmann 2005, pp. 50-51.)

3.

In order to understand the essence of propositions, Wittgenstein advises us to think of hieroglyphics and of how they represent the facts that they describe in pictures (*TLP* 4.016). This advice has its roots in the *Einfall*, in the discovery about language and about propositions being images of the realities for which they stand, to which Ray Monk says that Wittgenstein gave enormous importance (cf. Monk 1991, pp. 117-118). However, before we go on to see what was this discovery, a small remark about the word *Einfall* that we just used is due: we again turn to Alfred Nordmann, who speaks of Wittgenstein as having a receptive spirit to discoveries while he works, as someone able to be struck by an image as if by a new way of looking to the world, or, better yet, as someone capable of turning his own moments of seeing into and being invaded by a new image of how things stand, into a decisive moment of genuine, untainted clarity concerning the way in which thought and language mirror the world in pictures. The *Einfall* we mean is a famous example: the well known way in which Wittgenstein saw very plainly before his eyes, how logic could take care of itself, forgoing a doctrine, a system of explanations with the objective of displaying the workings of language to us. It consists of how a report of a case in a court of law in Paris that portrayed a car accident using dolls, made him think of how in language (like in the model presented as a 3d depiction of the cars, people and houses that were part of the scene of the incident), we portray the situations, the facts of the world, with words that stand for things, arranged and related to one another in a certain manner, in a given correlation and connexion. In the *Notebooks*, in an entry listed on the 29th of September of 1914, we can read that this was indeed the much sought after answer to the problem he was facing and that had to do with the ability of language to account for reality while keeping silent about how it is able to do so, in other words, by keeping silent about the logic of facts. For Wittgenstein, the example really shows the way forward, unless one is blind to see it: it is decisive because it shows the internal relation between the dolls representing the cars, the people and the houses, and the real cars, real people, and real houses. Just two days after noting it down, Wittgenstein says,

“logic has to take care of itself”. Someone who is not blind can, in principle, see the logic of language – it suffices that it is first made clear – so that afterwards there is nothing else left to say about it. The Paris model is especially significant for constituting an example of how logic shines through propositions with sense that are images of the facts they describe: a model, like a proposition, projects the form of its internal connection to the state of affairs, without more elucidations, it depicts the reciprocal position of its elements and represents what is essential. It is for this reason that one can say that the model was for Wittgenstein a touchstone to his philosophical undertaking in the TLP: showing how language and thought mirror the world in propositions with sense, without falling into pseudo propositions about the logic of facts – well, at least as much as possible. Wittgenstein has to use words to see his task through, which means to not completely follow the strictly correct method in philosophy (and going beyond only saying propositions of science, that have nothing to do with philosophy), to show that, when someone wants “to say something metaphysical” (TLP 6.53), in what is said, some signals have not been given precise meaning (*Bedeutung*).

4.

Even if Wittgenstein had not added the final propositions to his book, in which he speaks of ethics and aesthetics – of the sense of the world, the world of the happy man and the solution to the riddle of life – we could still say that he was pointing towards them and thus fulfilling the purpose he envisioned for his book, and that we know, thanks to a letter he wrote to von Ficker in 1919, was an ethical one. The *Tractatus* would still draw the frontier line and delimit the ethical from the inside, by keeping silent about it and opening up the possibility, to his readers, of apprehending or seeing that what is more valuable is ineffable in language, untouchable in *sinvollen* propositions. Because it delineates the limit of the sayable and simultaneously shows the sphere of the inexpressible in language, the *Tractatus* is an “ethical deed” (cf. Janik and Toulmin 1996, pp. 167-201) and an aesthetic one also. It is through what it says and in the form of saying it, that Wittgenstein leads the reader to the position from where he can see the world correctly, and from where he can do justice to the feeling – that cannot be put into words – of seeing the world as a whole, and that is, for Wittgenstein, the mystical.

In TLP 6.54, Wittgenstein speaks of whomever reads the book and understands its author, as someone that thus acknowledges that its propositions are *unsinnig*. Understanding

this rests on the comprehension brought about by the distinction between propositions with sense and propositions without sense, and within this last group, of the particular case of the *unsinnigen* propositions that try to state something that is not possible to make accessible to others through discourse, but only understood silently, through vision. In the end, the book opens up a new space, made visible by a limiting task that nonetheless reveals the possibility of really attaining a just vision of the world – one that can be pierced with value.

Literature

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