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Introduction: Wittgenstein's provocation

A DISTURBING CONCLUSION

This investigation is another in a long series of responses to the extraordinary provocation by a small book that was published in 1922. Many philosophers provoke admiration and respect, and when we find them difficult to understand our response is puzzlement and the desire to explore the depth of their thought. In striking contrast, readers of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* typically respond with "It can't be so," resisting its conclusion, seeking out where it might have gone wrong. While much is disputed about Wittgenstein's work, this uncomfortable and still provocative conclusion can be sketched with a few broad strokes.

In his book, the *Tractatus* for short, Wittgenstein distinguishes three uses of language or, more precisely, three types of sentences. Then he shows us what good these sentences are or whether they are any good at all. At the end of this investigation he leaves us with precious little and a rather restrictive view of what one can and cannot say. Moreover, this view flies in the face of what we thought we could say, brazenly contradicting how we like to think of ourselves.

The first of the three types of sentences is ordinary and familiar enough: "The blue car hit the red car from the right," "The sample of iron melted at 1,535 degrees Celsius," "Rita is not at home but George is." These kinds of sentences show language at its best. We use them to describe how things are, to represent the world as we find it, to identify what is the case and what is not. In principle at least, it is easy to determine whether such sentences are true or false: we simply compare them to reality and call them "true" if they correctly identify what really is or is not the case; we call them "false" if they do not agree

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with how things are. The sentences of science are like this insofar as science aims to provide a correct, perhaps complete representation of the physical and social world. Equally good are many of the sentences that we use to negotiate daily life by telling each other what happened, what to look out for, what is in the refrigerator, where to find that piece of paper.

Why does this first type of sentence show language at its best? It relies on an elegant and compelling symmetry between language and the world: at any given time something either is or is not the case in the world – no ambiguity here; and at any given time these descriptive sentences are either true or false with nothing in between. This symmetry allows us to define “being true or false” as “agreeing or disagreeing with what is the case.” We now find that the meanings of these sentences are perfectly clear: They mean to assert or deny something about the world and we can itemize for each sentence just what needs to be the case for it to be true. Indeed, we can equate the sense of such a sentence with its so-called truth-conditions, that is, the conditions under which a sentence would be true or the situation that would make it true. Aside from the obvious fact that these sentences and their use *make* sense to us, they also *have* a very definite sense or meaning. When we use them, language is working very well, indeed: the sentences *do* something (they serve to determine what is and is not the case) and they communicate effectively (we can completely understand them and agree among one another about their meaning and their truth or falsity).

A single example suffices to introduce the second of Wittgenstein's three types of sentences: “A statement and its contrary cannot be true at the same time” or $\neg(p \ \& \ -p)$ in the logician's shorthand. This “law of noncontradiction” tells us that it cannot possibly be the case that Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland* and that he did not. Either he is the author or he is not, but for all his delight in paradox, he certainly did not simultaneously write and not write the book. Now, does the law of noncontradiction really *tell* us this? Did we need to be told? Are we surprised to find out? Will we conduct library research to discover whether he might be both author and nonauthor of *Alice in Wonderland*? The answer to these questions is no. It goes without saying that something contradictory cannot obtain, that everything (you name it) either is or is not the case. How many sentences like

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the law of noncontradiction are there – sentences that do not tell us anything but formalize only what is self-evident and should go without saying? There is no clear-cut answer to this question: the theorems and laws of logic should be included for sure, but what about all of mathematics (is mathematics a branch of logic?), and what about tautologies (“all bachelors are unmarried”), so-called analytic statements (“all matter occupies space”), axioms and rules in formal systems (“a bishop in chess travels in straight diagonal lines forward and backward on white or black fields only”), or definitions (“a mule is a sterile cross of donkey and horse”)?

Regardless of how many sentences should be included with this second type, even for the narrowly logical ones, the question arises what they are good for. On the one hand, there is nothing wrong with them: we understand them well enough, they are perfectly grammatical and therefore not nonsensical. On the other hand, these sentences do not seem to do any of the work that is so admirably performed by sentences of the first type: they do not determine what is or what is not the case in the world, nor do they communicate any particular content, since we are already agreed upon them. Sentences of the first type had definite meaning or sense, but these are senseless: they have no truth-conditions, there is no situation in the world that would *render* them true or false, indeed, they cannot be true *or* false (tautologies, for example, *are already* true for all situations, and contradictions already false). Since sentences of the second type go without saying, Wittgenstein provides the following answer to the question what they are good for: “Logic must take care of itself” (*TLP* 5.473).¹

Third and last are sentences like “Truth is the highest good,” “Life has absolute value,” “Unicorns live on the lost continent of Atlantis,” “The beauty of this painting touches me,” “My conscience tells me what is right,” “He can feel your pain,” “God exists,” “Thou shalt not kill,” “I love you,” and many, many more. The one thing all these

¹ Wittgenstein's *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* consists of seven main propositions that are numbered 1 to 7. Wittgenstein explains in a footnote to proposition 1 that he uses an elaborate numbering system to “indicate the logical importance” of the propositions. According to this system, 5.473 comes after 5.472 and remarks upon 5.47, which remarks upon 5.4, which remarks upon main proposition 5. This book follows the custom of using the numbers to refer to and cite the remarks from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*TLP*).

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different sentences have in common is that, according to Wittgenstein, they only pretend to be sentences but are not grammatical at all. They are nonsensical and in this respect quite like "All mimsy were the borogoves." We have arrived at Wittgenstein's startling conclusion: there are descriptive sentences including those of science and then there is logic, which must take care of itself, and that's it. The rest is silence. "Whereof one cannot speak, about that one must remain silent" concludes the *Tractatus* (TLP 7).

But why are the sentences of this third type no sentences at all? After all, while they may not constitute the lion's share of spoken language, such formulations occupy us when we think about ourselves and others, when we reflect upon our values, our relation to this world, and what may lie beyond it. How can Wittgenstein banish all such formulations from language, declare them nonsensical, and condemn us to silence about these most important matters?

Wittgenstein was quite aware of the magnitude of his conclusion: "We feel that even once all *possible* scientific questions are answered, our problems of life have still not been touched upon" (TLP 6.52).

Before addressing (in chapter 1) just what compelled him nevertheless to advance such an unpalatable verdict, I wish to consider how, in principle, one might object to Wittgenstein's conclusion. This will take me to the central question of this book.

STRATEGIES OF AVOIDANCE

There are three strategies for criticizing Wittgenstein's conclusions. The first two apply to any philosophical work, while the third aims at the *Tractatus* specifically.

The first of these strategies is the hardest to pursue and I will not do so in this book. It consists in a so-called immanent critique that takes Wittgenstein on his own terms and probes the soundness of his argument. It asks whether he somewhere committed a mistake that would invalidate his conclusion. This amounts to the difficult task of finding an inconsistency in his argument. While the immanent critics need to establish that it is quite impossible to reconcile some of Wittgenstein's statements, his defenders have a much easier task (it is not a fair fight): all they need to show is that his statements can

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somehow be reconciled with more or less ingenuity and with the help of any and all interpretive resources. But though it is least likely to succeed, immanent critique provides the most valuable line of attack because it can teach us the most about Wittgenstein's philosophical commitments.

The second critical strategy brings external considerations to bear: rather than demonstrate that the *Tractatus* is somehow flawed on its own terms, one might show that it fails to do justice to the phenomena of language and thought, that it fails to provide a complete picture, that it is seriously limited and takes far too much for granted. The one who pursued this strategy most vigorously and most successfully was Wittgenstein himself, especially in his *Philosophical Investigations* of 1953. This kind of external critique will add numerous qualifications to the *Tractatus*, pointing out the narrowness of its approach, determining the limits inherent in its focus on the descriptive language of science. And yet, all of this may leave untouched its core insight and disturbing conclusion. Yes, there is a lot more to be said about our uses of language, but does that in any way diminish the force of the original conclusion, namely that some sentences “work” pretty straightforwardly while many others deceive and confuse us by seeming to work like the straightforward ones? It is because of Wittgenstein's later recognition of the many uses of language that many have spoken of two Wittgensteins – the early and the late Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein I and Wittgenstein II – as if these were different persons, each the author of an important work with a lasting impact.² For example, Bertrand Russell declared a few years after the death of his former student: “During the period since 1914 three philosophies have successively dominated the British philosophical world: first that of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, second that of the Logical Positivists, and third that of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.”³

Since these first two strategies may fail to directly engage and refute Wittgenstein's disturbing conclusion, a third strategy combines the others in a manner that is specifically aimed at the *Tractatus*. This strategy is as old as the book itself. It was first advanced in Russell's

² Compare, for example, Stegmüller 1970, pp. 394 and 423. ³ Russell 1959, p. 216.

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introduction to the *Tractatus*. After noting that Wittgenstein's conclusion "grows naturally out of his doctrine," Russell gives us good reason to quickly dismiss it nonetheless: "What causes hesitation is the fact that, after all, Mr Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the skeptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit."⁴

This is an immanent critique in that it discovers a tension within the *Tractatus* itself; it is external in that it adopts an outside point of view and points out how the work is systematically incomplete by failing to adequately reflect its own use of language. Russell draws our attention not to the aesthetic or stylistic peculiarities of Wittgenstein's language. He simply asks how the pronouncements of the *Tractatus* fit into Wittgenstein's threefold division of sentences. Statements like "The world is all that is the case" or "A sentence is a picture of reality" (*TLP* 1, 4.021) are unlike scientific descriptions of fact, nor are they logical theorems like the law of noncontradiction. If all other sentences are nonsensical then, surely, this must include the sentences of the *Tractatus* itself. Indeed, Wittgenstein himself embraced this implication: "My sentences elucidate through this: who understands me recognizes them in the end as nonsensical" (*TLP* 6.54).

By biting this bullet, Wittgenstein claims consistency for his work. But as we saw from Russell's introduction, Wittgenstein's willingness to concede that his own sentences are nonsensical has encountered incredulity from the very start. Where Russell tactfully noted "a certain sense of intellectual discomfort," others took their gloves off. A. J. Ayer, for example, considered Wittgenstein's claim "a vain attempt to have it both ways. No doubt some pieces of nonsense are more suggestive than others, but this does not give them any logical force. If the verification principle really is nonsensical, it states nothing; and if one holds that it states nothing, then one cannot also maintain that what it states is true."⁵

Even less tactful than that, others considered Wittgenstein's "attempt to have it both ways" profoundly disingenuous:

⁴ See pages 22f. in the 1922 edition of the *Tractatus*.

⁵ Ayer 1959, p. 15. For further expressions of this "intellectual discomfort" see Fann 1969, pp. 34f.; Favrholt 1964, pp. 139ff.; Garver and Lee 1994, pp. 201–204; also Hintikka and Hintikka 1986, p. 216.

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For he talks nonsense, numerous statements makes,
 Forever his own vow of silence breaks:
 Ethics, aesthetics, talks of day and night,
 And calls things good or bad, and wrong or right.⁶

Such accusations make it easy to write off Wittgenstein's provocative conclusion: since he did not stick to it himself, he cannot very well have meant it. Or are we missing something?

I have now arrived at the central question of this book. It concerns Wittgenstein's language but also the language of philosophy, indeed, any attempt to communicate more than statements of empirical fact. To be sure, there is a serious problem here. Why would anyone set out to write nonsensically? No matter how one goes about answering this question, the *Tractatus* seems to be seriously flawed. For example, if Wittgenstein was intent to persuade his readers, his action (writing a persuasive book) would be running counter to his words (according to which he is only writing something nonsensical). In that case, he would be implicated in what is called a performative contradiction. However, if he was not intent to persuade his readers and instead produced empty words that he knew to be nonsensical, why did he bother at all and why should we pay attention to him? In this second case, we would call his efforts moot. And if we are to believe that he set out in good faith only to discover as he went along that his theory renders nonsensical the very statements that are necessary for its formulation, should we not consider this discovery an indictment of the theory? We might then call his attempt to persuade us self-defeating because his own theory deprived his proposed persuasions of their persuasive power. Or, to consider a fourth and last possibility, if the *Tractatus* actually persuaded us that there are very narrow limits to the sayable, would this not tempt us to take the very existence of this book as a welcome opportunity to escape from these limits through some loophole or some other exit? We might conclude, for example, that Wittgenstein somehow persuaded us and communicated matters without actually "saying" them. In this case, we would begin speculating about this mystically "other" means of communication and turn Wittgenstein's clear analysis into an obscure flight from reason.

⁶ Julian Bell's "An Epistle on the Subject of the Ethical and Aesthetic Beliefs of Herr Ludwig Wittgenstein" first appeared in 1930; see Bell 1966, p. 70.

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The *Tractatus* either involves a performative contradiction, or is moot, or self-defeating, or invites mystical speculation – none of these judgments is very flattering, and none of them compels us to accept its provocative conclusion. It therefore seems that by choosing to consider the *Tractatus* a meaningful philosophical document, we are already indicating that something must be wrong with it – at the very least, it cannot be (literally) true that (all) its propositions are nonsensical. And since for reasons of consistency Wittgenstein was forced to declare that his sentences are nonsensical, far more might be wrong with the *Tractatus*.

THE TASK AHEAD

Charitable readers of the *Tractatus* thus have their task cut out for them. Recognizing the magnitude of this task, Cora Diamond urges us to confront Wittgenstein's conclusion for what it is – a conclusion that leaves no loopholes, no exit. She warns us not to “chicken out.” As I will show, however, Diamond has it both ways herself and in ingenious fashion may well be chickening out, too.⁷ Still needed, therefore, is a defense of the following claim: *the Tractatus is written in a nonsensical language and it advances a persuasive argument*.

All attempts to provide this defense will encounter a curious phenomenon: though it aims to survey and classify all of language, the *Tractatus* does not reflect on the sentences in which it is written, save for a few cryptic remarks. The silence it prescribes extends to its own composition. This silence needs to be broken if one wants to save the *Tractatus* from the charge that it commits a performative contradiction or that Wittgenstein could not have meant what he wrote or that by referring to Wittgenstein's practice one can somehow escape his disturbing conclusion.

⁷ Diamond 1991 suggests that the *Tractatus* was written in a “transitional language,” one that makes sense only when one understands the argument. However, this idea of a “transitional language” only gives a name to Wittgenstein's attempt “to have it both ways.” It does not help us to understand how its persuasive force can linger on even once the nonsensicality of the language is revealed. In a later essay, the idea of a transitional language gives way to that of a transitional state, namely the state of a reader who is neither “inside” nor “outside” of nonsensical writing but goes as far as one can with the idea that there is an “inside” (Diamond 2000, p. 157; cf. p. 169). Her approach is discussed more extensively at the end of chapter 2, see also chapter 4, note 58.

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After reconstructing in chapter 2 the compelling argument for Wittgenstein's disturbing conclusion, chapter 3 will characterize Wittgenstein's manner of writing. Chapter 4 then establishes the complementarity between structure of argument and method of composition. It will show that an argument of the type that is employed by Wittgenstein requires the type of language in which the *Tractatus* is written, for which the *Tractatus* leaves room, and about which the *Tractatus* maintains an artful silence. This leads to the conclusion that the theory and practice of the *Tractatus* distinguishes not just three, but four uses of language, including the one in which it is written.

Paradoxically, perhaps, my proposal will incur suspicion because it sets out to meet the test of literal consistency with the *Tractatus*. It agrees with Wittgenstein that his statements must be considered nonsensical and that they can nevertheless advance his philosophical argument because they are not senseless. While Wittgenstein scholars have learned to accept that some sentences might be senseless but not nonsensical (the logical propositions described above), most will not find intelligible the inverse claim that other expressions are literally nonsensical and yet make sense, for example, in that they help us "see the world right" (*TLP* 6.54). In order to render this conception plausible, chapter 5 will gather evidence for Wittgenstein's lifelong exploration of this fourth kind of expression.

If this reconstruction succeeds, it will not just solve a peculiar problem in the interpretation of the *Tractatus*, but will shed light more generally on Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy as critical practice, a conception that unites his early and later work. This view also illuminates the tentative character of all philosophy, of all our probing when we attempt to understand each other in matters of value or feeling.

INTRODUCING THE *TRACTATUS*

By looking at the form and content of the *Tractatus*, this book seeks to engage the experience of a first encounter with the text. It is best read by those who are impressed, perhaps taken aback by Wittgenstein's verdict about the limits of language, and who are intrigued by his manner of writing even where they find it exasperating.

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As we have seen, a book that claims to be written in a nonsensical language and yet to make sense, demands interpretation. In light of the many interpretations that have been advanced so far – some of the most interesting and most controversial coming in the last few years – one can find no shelter in supposedly innocent paraphrase or summary. Every statement about the *Tractatus* enters a contested field of claims and traditions. An introduction to the *Tractatus*, therefore, can do no better than to carry its interpretation on its sleeves. According to the very first sentence of its preface, the book cannot be understood by mere readers but requires those who think its thoughts for and by themselves. By laying my cards on the table and being as transparent as possible, I aim to expose to scrutiny some of the interpretive choices that are made by this self-thinking reader. The introduction to the work may thus give way to critical engagement – with a clear sense, I hope, of what is at stake in our understanding of the *Tractatus*.

Interpretive choices and critical engagement have so far produced three translations of the *Tractatus* and several editions of Wittgenstein's drafts, manuscripts, and typescripts.⁸ Indeed, among the first choices by any interpreter of the book is how to define the source. Do we limit ourselves to the self-contained text in the book before us or do we include source documents (publication in the original language, notes, drafts, contemporary letters about the manuscript)? And do we include remarks by the later Wittgenstein only where he critically reflects upon his earlier work or also, more or less eclectically, where this may help elucidate some aspect of the *Tractatus*?

Different interpretations answer these questions differently. The following chapters rely heavily on textual evidence. Especially where novel claims are advanced in a field of numerous plausible interpretations, it may not be sufficient to establish consistency among Wittgenstein's remarks or to indicate interesting points of contact with the work of other philosophers. The appeal to textual evidence

⁸ The works by Wittgenstein in the references itemize the three translations and two critical editions of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), but see also on pp. 218f. Wittgenstein's *Prototractatus* (PT), the *Notebooks 1914–1916* (NB), and the *Geheimes Tagebuch* or so-called "Secret" Diaries (SD). Von Wright 1982 includes a chapter about the origin of the *Tractatus*, as does McGuinness 2002; see also Geschkowsky 2001.