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THE SIMPLICITY OF THE *TRACTATUS*

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Let us begin by remembering the most central doctrine of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*.

Objects—which are simples—combine into elementary situations. The kind of way they hang together in such a situation is its *Structure*. *Form* is the possibility of the structure. Not all possible structures are actual: one that is actual is an ‘elementary fact’. We form pictures of facts, of possible facts indeed, but some of them are actual too. A picture consists in *its* elements combining in a particular kind of way. Their doing so presents the objects named by them as combined in just that way. The combination of the elements of the picture—the presenting combination—is called *its* structure and its possibility the form of representation of the picture.

This ‘form of representation’ is the possibility that things are combined as are the elements of the picture.

Note, then, that the possibility of the structure of a picture *is*

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the possibility that the objects to which its elements correspond are combined as are the elements of the picture.

This resolves a problem apparently raised by the ‘isomorphism’ of the *Tractatus*. Propositions are pictures. If this means that there is a projective relation between propositions and possible or actual facts, must not the fact presented by a proposition, if it *is* actual, be as much a picture of the proposition as the proposition is of it? Projective relations can be seen as going in both directions. So isn’t the reality as much a picture of a possible proposition—which, if actual, is itself also a fact—as *it* is of the reality? The answer to this objection is that the elements of a proposition (completely analysed) are *names*. So if the reality represented by a true proposition were a *picture* of that proposition, the simple objects of which *it* was composed would have to stand for names. That some object is a name is not to be seen by looking at the object—the mark on paper or the bit of furniture or whatever is doing duty as a name. You have to understand the configuration of those objects as a logical configuration of *names* in order to understand it as a proposition. I don’t mean that every picture is a proposition, its form of representation may be spatial and it a picture of a spatial arrangement somewhere; or temporal and a picture of a temporal arrangement. But *every* picture, according to the *Tractatus*, is at any rate *also* a logical picture and propositions are *only* logical pictures. This is so even though they represent by means of a spatial arrangement. A representation by a spatial arrangement—like a musical score—can be a representation of something temporal *i. e.* of a succession of sounds. Here the ‘form of representation’ is not the spatial form, because it isn’t a representation of anything spatial; there is no form of representation in question except the logical form.

I have set forth the doctrine of the *Tractatus* to be found in numbers 2 to 2.22, in order to bring out Wittgenstein’s solution to the ancient problem of the connexion between language or thought and reality. Thoughts (we learn from a letter to Rus-

sell) consist ultimately of elements, just as propositions consist ultimately of simple names: these are sprinkled on a logical network —so Wittgenstein described his earlier doctrine in a later notebook. The ancient *problem* is solved by the thesis of the *identity* of the possibility of the structure of a proposition and the possibility of the structure of a fact.

We can derive from this the astonishing thesis that the structure of reality within the world is logical structure. See 2.18. “What any picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it truly or falsely, is the logical form, that is, *the* form of the reality.”

What I have set forth is enough to explain, or at least to adumbrate, the *Tractatus* doctrines about tautology and contradiction, about propositions of logic and proofs of them, about psychological propositions and, finally, about ethics and the mystical. Before approaching this last, I will call attention to number 4.221: “It is obvious”, Wittgenstein says, “that in analysing propositions we must come to elementary propositions which consist of names in immediate combination”. He goes on: “The question arises here, how the propositional connexion comes to be”.

To this question, which obviously does arise, Wittgenstein offers no hint at all of an answer. I assume he could not think of anything worthwhile to say about it. He had already said at 3.3 “Only a proposition has *sense*, only in the context of a proposition does a name have *meaning*”. (By “meaning” he means what Russell meant, and what Frege meant by “*Bedeutung*”, namely, the object a word stands for.) Then the question he speaks of at 4.221 would not be how names —already there— get connected into propositions, but how names —connected into propositions as they must be— come into existence at all. This is a question about the origin of language, which knowledgeable intelligent people have banned as a topic of investigation. Wittgenstein once said to me “Why shouldn’t men have been created ploughing and sowing?”. It would seem to me

difficult to give any reason why not. And equally if you add speaking to the list. Upon the whole, then, I commend Wittgenstein for not offering any suggestion of an answer to the question “how did the *SatzVerband* come about?”.

However, for the moment I have a further purpose in reminding you of the doctrine of the *Tractatus* that the things that are the *case*, the *facts*, whatever they might be, have logical structure. Lots of people, including myself at one time, would protest that logical structure and logical connections are features of the linguistic and of thought about this-and-that-being-the-case. We know from a letter of Wittgenstein to Bertrand Russell shortly after the end of the ‘Great War’, that he was sure that such thoughts must be composed of elements just as in the end a fully analysed proposition would turn out to consist of simple names in a logical pattern: he did not know, he said, *what* elements thoughts were composed of —it would be the business of psychology to find that out. Here he displayed a naïf belief in experimental psychology as one of the natural sciences which he certainly did not retain —remember what he says in what we put as the last fragment of Part II of the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (for it was a loose sheet in the MS. of that writing). There he characterised the foundations of mathematics, or set theory, as *methods* of proof together with conceptual *confusion*; and experimental psychology as *experimental methods* also together with conceptual confusion. But in 1919 and in the *Tractatus* itself, he manifested a sort of belief in experimental psychology as a *natural science*: “Philosophy is no closer to psychology”, he said than to any other natural science, and indeed after that: “Theory of knowledge is philosophy of psychology”. The latter observation is indeed a valuable one, if we take it as meaning, not anything about experimental psychology as a natural science (as Wittgenstein intended the phrase there) but as about what we call psychological matters, e. g. the mind and its acts: belief, guessing, hoping, trying; and also will and the emotions. That theory of knowledge is *part* of philosophy of

psychology in *this* sense has some truth in it, except for this, that 'to know' is *not* a psychological verb, even though it has some of the aspects of a psychological verb. It is, I think, much to the credit of Descartes that he did not count either knowing or remembering among what he called *cogitationes*, though the empiricist side of the watershed that he caused did in effect think that about knowledge and memory.

However, back to my purpose: the *Tractatus's* conceptions of propositions and facts and the world exclude from being possible propositions any sentences about what Wittgenstein called "the ethical" or anything religious. This immediately follows from the character of *significant* propositions as being propositions that can be true *or* false: tautology and contradiction are not 'significant propositions' because, as can be seen in a truth table, one, e. g. ' $p \vee \sim p$ ' excludes *no* possible truth-values of its arguments, and the other, e. g. ' $p \& \sim p$ ' excludes *all* of them. Neither therefore can determine anything as being *so*, with other things *not so*. Further, this is supposed to be a proper account of logical necessity and impossibility, and there is *no other* kind of necessity or impossibility. Significant propositions, when true, are merely a matter of this and that *being the case* and they are all on a par —'*gleichwertig*'. We learn from Wittgenstein's later "Lecture on Ethics" *circa* 1930, that "Palmer was a murderer", (this is my example), may well be a fact, but, being a mere *fact*, it does not have the kind of weight or value that an *ethical* proposition would, if there *could be* such a thing. Or, as he said in the *Tractatus* "The *facts* all belong to the exercise" —that is to say, the exercise set one as a school teacher sets homework for his pupils— and not to the answer. Or as Ramsey translated the sentence "the facts all belong to the task and not the performance". The rendering is partly good. It does not bring out the meaning of '*Aufgabe*' as an exercise set, or of "*Lösung*" as a solution of a problem. I don't know how to give a translation with the merits of Ramsey's, but which does *also* bring out that association of the German words.

That life sets us a *task*, and ‘the facts’ are relevant to the task, but our way of executing our task can’t be given as among the facts of which the world is made up —this is evidently Wittgenstein’s thought here. But it is not the sort of thought that fits his account of the truth and falsehood of significant propositions which just give or purport to give information about the perfectly indifferent facts going to constitute ‘the world’. This explains his letter to Ficker, in which he says that the *point* of his book is to characterise the ethical *from inside*. What he meant by that is made clear if you think that the description of a body, of its shape, gives you the shape of the space surrounding it; the surface of the body is the inner surface of the space where it is.

And now I come to the matter of the penultimate proposition of the *Tractatus*. I think it has not been translated well. I give you what I think is a more accurate translation thus: “My sentences are illuminating in the following way: one who understands me rejects them as nonsensical if, using them as stepping stones, he has climbed out over them. He must as it were throw away the ladder after he has climbed it. Then he sees the world rightly”.

Notice that this does not say that someone who rejects the sentences of the *Tractatus* as strictly nonsensical understands *Wittgenstein*. There is a condition: the rejection *as* nonsense depends on the process of using the propositions of the *Tractatus*, i. e. climbing on them as on the rungs of a ladder; *if* the climber *so* climbs out over them and *so* comes to recognize them as nonsensical then they have been enlightening to him. Note that the word I translate “nonsensical” is “*unsinnig*” i. e. *absurd*, not “*sinnlos*”. In the *Tractatus* “sense-less” *should* be used only to translate “*sinnlos*”: *this* is a characteristic of tautology and contradiction, and relates to that contrast with “significant propositions”, “*sinnvolle Sätze*” which I have tried to explain. Wittgenstein’s own propositions in the *Tractatus* are characterised as nonsense, as absurd, just because they

are neither “*sinnvolle Sätze*” nor “*sinnlos*” like tautology and contradiction. We may infer from number 7: “Whereof there cannot be discourse, thereon there should be silence”, that in teaching philosophy it would have been strictly correct, as he also said, to teach *only* by uttering true significant propositions, the totality of which Wittgenstein calls “the totality of the natural sciences” —and then when someone tried to say something metaphysical, to show him that he had given no meaning to some of the words he used, i. e. that he was not using them as standing for any things.

About this I would comment: in his belief that the totality of true propositions is the totality of the natural sciences, I really do have the impression, as nowhere else in the book, that his feet have left the ground. *Either* he thought that e. g. “Napoleon came from Corsica” was a proposition derivable from, and so part of, the contents of a complete natural science, *or* he forgot all about such humble true propositions as that one.

Second, consider “*Propositions* cannot express what is higher” and “God does not reveal himself *in* the world” and “People to whom the sense of life become clear have not been able to say what it was”. This last is somewhat laughable, as most people of whom it is plausible to say that the sense of life has become clear to them have done quite a lot of saying what it was. Such people may sometimes have been silent, whether they have lacked the ability to express themselves or for some other reason. And some have deserved Samuel Johnson’s stricture on Boehme: “Sir, if Boehme saw the unutterable, he should not have tried to utter it”. But plenty have spoken without committing what offended Johnson. Augustine, for example: “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee”.

Did Wittgenstein mean that they were unable to say anything significant in the sense of the ‘significant propositions’, the *sinnvolle Sätze* as spoken of in the *Tractatus*?

If so, one might say: so much the worse for the *Tractatus*

conception of the 'sinnvolle'; so much the worse, to put it in English, for that sense of 'significant'.

But also remember what he said in his preface: part of the worth of the book is that it shows how little has been done when the problems it solves have been solved.

But consider the other two examples I gave ("God does not reveal himself *within* the world", and "propositions can't express what is higher"), how was it that Wittgenstein so much as possessed the words "what is higher", "God", "the ineffable" except that these words *belong in human languages*? One wonders wildly: if we were not a fallen race, greatly given to talking real rubbish, would our race have uttered verbally only the things that Wittgenstein called significant propositions, descriptions of this and that supposedly in the world, but have *lived* in consciousness of the ineffable, with the seriousness he seems to indicate, but *never* speaking of such things.

Reading the "Lecture on Ethics", which is *extremely* 'Tractatusy', one would not think so. There he speaks of thoughts, propositions if you like, which do *not* 'have a sense' but which instance something in the human spirit which he has the greatest respect for and would not for anything mock at. One example: conviction or feeling that it doesn't matter what happens; one is absolutely safe. It doesn't mean any thing like a conviction that one's bank account will always be in funds an oil-rich Arab is taking care of that. I also remember the story of Wittgenstein as a schoolmaster in a poor village, bringing the children back from an expedition he had taken them on; the getting back had some difficulty —it was dark— and perhaps even a bit of danger; and he told them not to be frightened but to think of God. He once said to his friend Rush Rhees, a sighing man —not to repine and blame himself for something in himself: "That's God's fault, not yours". He greatly admired the prayers of Samuel Johnson; he loved the utterance of a certain cricketer who had become a missionary and said in his preaching "What God wants is a heart —any old turnip will do for a

head”. I could go on but these are enough, and a clue for you is his liking for something Bismarck once said. Someone quoted something to him and asked what he thought of it. Bismarck replied: “Tell me who said it and I’ll tell you what I think of it”.

What Wittgenstein rejected was the idea of a theory —a *Lehre*— of ethics, of theology. He disliked it. That is there already in the *Tractatus* at the final remark —which I think might be better represented by: “What there cannot be significant propositions about, we should not discourse about”, though that lacks the fine rhetorical flavour of: “What can be spoken of —on that there should be silence”.

Now what about the much later Wittgenstein? Did he come to think that the *Tractatus* not merely contained serious mistakes, but was just rubbish? —Some people think so. But it is not true: it is well known that he said “It isn’t like a bag of junk —rather it is like a clock that doesn’t tell the time right”. A good deal of what he said in the *Tractatus* is extremely solid stuff: the theory of truth-functions and the use of truth-tables in expounding it, the conception of some things *showing*, though you can’t state them; that “*A* thinks that *p*” does not state the existence of a certain relation between a person, *A*, and a proposition *p*, though its *form* might make you think so; that identity is not properly speaking a relation, which, as it happens, everything has to itself. One can find many such examples of very useful thoughts in the *Tractatus*.

It would be accurate to say that the book offers a strange and powerful account of meaningfulness, truth and falsehood. It would, I think, also be correct to say that the more Wittgenstein worked —and he worked immensely hard— when he resumed philosophical investigation, the more he came to see: “It’s not as simple as all that”, for one of the powerful attractions of the *Tractatus* is a sort of simplicity. This *partly* accounts for the fascination that it exercises on some people, like me, who do

not believe: *This is the truth*, the true account of the system of the world and of language and of how language is significant.

That facts in the world have a logical structure—which is the thought that makes Wittgenstein speak of logic as ‘world-mirroring’—this has not been refuted and, if correct, *would* be a solution to one of the deepest problems of philosophy. One thing Wittgenstein *showed* in his later work is that many concepts are of human invention. He said “Mathematicians produce essences”, and *that* is something it is easy to justify in some examples. Also, it appears to me—I have argued this elsewhere—that there is a ‘sort of’ essence expressed in the grammar of the term “element”, even though the grammar has partly altered since the Greeks, and with it what we *call* elements are different from what they did. And I have argued that this ‘sort-of-essence’ *is* a human invention. But I would never suppose that all the essences expressed in the grammars of the words of common speech were human inventions. It belongs to human nature that there is speech, so they cannot be. Nor do I *even* think that Wittgenstein in the end thought that they were human inventions, keen as he was on suggesting and exploring the possibility of some other tribe of men *not* having certain very common concepts that *we* have. I don’t mean technical ones, but e. g. colour-concepts. Others might have *different* ones: he tried “colour-shape” concepts.

I mentioned earlier how Wittgenstein said in the *Tractatus* “The question arises here, how the propositional connection comes to be” —and does *nothing* to answer it. At a later date, would he have rejected the notion, of *the* propositional connection? Yes, by a development of what he already had thought, namely that the outer form of a sentence may be deceptive as to its actual logical form: he praised Russell —and might also have praised Frege— for drawing *attention* to this. At a later time he would contrast the “surface grammar” with the “depth grammar” of an expression, and held that we were often deeply deceived by the surface grammars. He almost certainly rejected

the *Tractatus* idea that there is such a thing as *the most general form of proposition*, which all propositions share. Indeed, the actual representation of the general form in the *Tractatus* [p, ξ , N (ξ)], he *must* have rejected, for there is no sign of his always continuing to believe in 'elementary propositions' and 'elementary possible facts'. That the general concept of a proposition is prominent in our speech and that the *thing* is important by its very *commonness*, he positively asserted, only discounting some thoughts about it by comparing them to attributing to seen objects the shape of the spectacles we see them through. He also firmly adhered to the equation.

$$p \text{ is true} = p$$

The *Tractatus* question about the *Satz* turns into a question; how does something's *saying that* something *is so* come about? And what account of it can we give? The first is answered, if it can be, by the judgment that men were created with speech: The second is a pretty serious problem, a present area of dispute.

It may be that some readers have formed the impression that Wittgenstein came to think that concepts were uncriticisable. This tribe has these, another perhaps different ones. Neither is right, *or* wrong.

This would I think make of him, in his later work, a *trivialiser*. It is false, as may be seen from his considerations about physiology in connection with sense perception and speech: he objects to the idea that there must be a system continuing right into and out of the brain; as also to the idea of a memory mechanism. He remarks on the possibility that we might *only* be able to distinguish seeds by knowing which different plants they *come* from: there might be no here and now difference between them discoverable by examination.

And about these possibilities he says: if this upsets our concepts of causation, well it's high time they were upset.

It would be a worthy task to explore what of that first great

work was not, and what was, rejected, gradually or suddenly, and to fill out my sketch of Wittgenstein as in effect coming to say “It’s all *more complicated* than that”. This task would require consideration of topics not treated in the *Tractatus*, not even mentioned, topics like what Wittgenstein later called the *motley of mathematics* —in the *Tractatus* he had said I think, that all mathematical propositions were really equations. And, of topics which *are* spoken of in the *Tractatus*, like the regularity of the world: “we could not *say* of an irregular world, what it would be like”. And such topics as *understanding*: “I understood what you said” surely sound like a report of an event but *that* betrays a deception through the surface grammar. And historical propositions —in one of his pre-*Tractatus* notebooks he wrote: “What is history to me? Mine is the first and only world”. He didn’t say that in the *Tractatus* —but his remark about the totality of true propositions, which I have quoted, shew a curious unnoticingness of history on his part. Certainty is narrowly conceived and so no adequate account of it is even suggested in the *Tractatus*.

These are but pointers —hints— of what such a work as I have suggested would have to include. It would also, and this would perhaps be hard, give what important thoughts, true or false, remained. With that I will close.

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RESUMEN

El trabajo comienza exponiendo la doctrina central del *Tractatus*: la relación de figuración entre lenguaje y mundo, para explicar, a partir de ella, otras tesis (especialmente de la parte final) y mostrar la simplicidad del texto. Por último, se busca evaluar esta filosofía desde la mirada del segundo Wittgenstein.

- 1) La doctrina central del *Tractatus* es la que establece una relación proyectiva entre lenguaje y mundo. La proposición (elemental) tiene la posibilidad de combinar sus elementos —nombres— de la misma manera en que se combinan los elementos —objetos— de un hecho atómico. A esta posibilidad Wittgenstein la llama “la forma de representación” y la identifica con la forma lógica, es decir, con la forma de la realidad. Muchos piensan en la forma lógica como algo propio del lenguaje y del pensamiento; sin embargo, Wittgenstein no privilegia la perspectiva del pensamiento y considera la epistemología como perspectiva del pensamiento y considera la epistemología como “filosofía de la psicología”. E. Anscombe comenta que aunque es cierto que la teoría del conocimiento es parte de la filosofía de la psicología, no es correcto incluir el verbo conocer entre los verbos psicológicos.
- 2) Esta doctrina está en íntima relación con las tesis finales del *Tractatus*:
 - 2.1) La concepción del *Tractatus* acerca de la relación entre proposiciones y hechos, excluye los juicios éticos y religiosos del campo de proposiciones significativas. Las proposiciones sólo pueden describir hechos, no valores. Por ello, Wittgenstein intentará, como dice a Ficker, caracterizar la ética *desde dentro*. La idea es clara, dice E. Anscombe, si pensamos que al describir los contornos de un cuerpo dibujamos los contornos del espacio que lo rodea.
 - 2.2) Wittgenstein dice que quién entiende las proposiciones del *Tractatus* sabe que carecen de sentido. E. Anscombe comenta que las proposiciones de la filosofía no son sinsentidos en el mismo sentido en que lo son tautologías y contradicciones (de hecho el texto alemán original distingue dos tipos de sinsentidos: “*unsinning*” y “*sinnlos*”), por ello este reconocimiento del sinsentido debe ir precedido de cierto uso de las proposiciones: las proposiciones filosóficas deben escalarse como los peldaños de una escalera pues sólo así resultarán esclarecedoras.
 - 2.3) A pesar de los límites impuestos a la significatividad, nuestro lenguaje contiene expresiones (como “dios” o “inefable”); por ello, dice E. Anscombe, la idea central de Wittgenstein parece ser prescriptiva: no debemos hacer uso de estas expresiones, sino limitarnos a hablar sobre los hechos del mundo, sin por ello dejar de tener presente la importancia de lo inefable. Wittgenstein viola esta norma en su “Conferencia sobre ética”. Al parecer, lo que sucede

es que, aunque está hondamente preocupado por cuestiones éticas y religiosas, le desagrada la pretensión de una teoría —ética o teológica— que intente describir lo inefable.

- 3) El segundo Wittgenstein reconoce en el *Tractatus* algunas ideas sólidas. La tesis de que el mundo tiene una estructura lógica aún no ha sido refutada y constituye una solución posible a uno de los problemas más profundos de la filosofía. Por otro lado, hay tesis que han cambiado: en sus escritos posteriores Wittgenstein mostró que muchos conceptos son invenciones humanas. Se rechaza también la idea de una forma general de la proposición (aunque ello no implica que se rechace la tesis de las proposiciones elementales). Finalmente hay quienes piensan que Wittgenstein llegó a la idea de que los conceptos no se pueden criticar: diferentes comunidades pueden tener sus propios conceptos lo cual impide juzgar sobre su corrección; en la opinión de E. Anscombe esto convertirá su doctrina posterior en una trivialidad. De cualquier manera —reconoce E. Anscombe— una evaluación más completa debería detenerse en aspectos que, en este trabajo, no han sido mencionados.

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