

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: True Thoughts and Nonsensical Propositions

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At the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein appears to contradict what he says about his own remarks at the beginning of the book. In the Preface he says: '[T]he truth of the thoughts that are here set forth seems to me unassailable and definitive [*scheint mir die Wahrheit der hier mitgeteilten Gedanken unantastbar und definitiv*]' – indeed he speaks of his 'thoughts' five times in the space of a page.¹ Yet in the penultimate paragraph of the book he says: 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical [*Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, daß sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt*]' (6.54). How can Wittgenstein believe his propositions are lacking in sense while regarding himself as communicating thoughts? One would imagine that insofar as he manages to express thoughts, he is making sense, and insofar as his propositions are nonsensical, he is not setting forth thoughts, never mind unassailably and definitively true ones.

A common response to this difficulty is to discount one of Wittgenstein's pronouncements and take the other to represent his true view.² Given his belief in the cardinal importance of his thoughts, one may be forgiven for supposing he could not have regarded his propositions as nonsensical. And given the radically critical nature of his philosophy (compare 4.0031: '*Alle Philosophie ist "Sprachkritik"*', and 4.112: 'Philosophy does not result in "philosophical propositions"'), it is tempting to dismiss his claim about the unassailable and definite truth of his thoughts as bombast. Both responses, however, labour under considerable difficulty. The first is

1. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 5. References in the text are to this work.

2. See for instance R. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), pp. 37–38, and C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1991), chapter 6.

suspect since Wittgenstein was not at all reluctant to brand his propositions as nonsensical and was unwavering in his opposition to thinking of philosophy as a body of doctrine. The second is problematic because he did not hesitate a decade or so later, when he returned to philosophy, to criticize and reformulate what he had said in the *Tractatus*.³

Nor is it easy to rest content with the suggestion that Wittgenstein took himself to be expressing ineffable truths by means of nonsensical propositions.⁴ This way of understanding the remarks of the *Tractatus* harmonizes with the supremely confident tone of the Preface and the uncompromising character of the declaration at 6.54 as well as with Wittgenstein's recognition of 'things that cannot be put into words', things that 'make themselves manifest' (6.522). But it has the disadvantage of attributing to him the dubious conception of important nonsense, a conception he does not invoke (indeed he never speaks of nonsense as conveying truths or as being important).⁵ Worse still, there is the awkward fact that in his Preface Wittgenstein not only speaks of 'the truth of the thoughts that are here set forth', he twice avers that thoughts are 'expressed [ausgedrückt]' in the book.

The difficulties besetting these approaches can doubtless be eased to a certain extent. There is little likelihood, however, that they can

3. See, e.g., L. Wittgenstein, 'Some Remarks on Logical Form', in J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (eds.), *Philosophical Occasions* (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1993), pp. 29–35; *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, ed. B. McGuinness, trans. J. Schulte and B. McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), p. 74; *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. R. Rhees, trans. A. Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 212; and *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, eds. G.H. von Wright, R. Rhees and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, revised edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), VII, §36. Moreover Wittgenstein revised the *Tractatus* for the second printing. For instance he replaced 'independent propositions' at 5.152 by 'elementary propositions'.

4. See G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), p. 162; N. Malcolm, 'Wittgenstein', *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 331; and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Connections and Controversies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapters 4 and 5, especially pp. 139–143.

5. Compare B. Russell, 'Introduction' to the *Tractatus*, p. 22; F. Ramsey, *The Foundations of Mathematics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931), p. 263; R. Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*, trans. A. Smeaton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1937), p. 283; and C. Diamond, *op. cit.*, p. 181. Also compare L. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge 1932–1935*, ed. A. Ambrose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 64: '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'.

be removed entirely and more than enough reason to explore the possibility that Wittgenstein means us to understand him some other way. In particular it seems worth considering whether he speaks as he does because he believes unassailably and definitively true thoughts cannot be sensibly set forth in the form of propositions. On this view, to be examined in the balance of this paper, Wittgenstein takes sentences that express thoughts to be assertable only when they are capable both of being true and of being false and regards the assertion of all other thoughts, even indubitably true ones, as nonsensical. He is to be read as noting in his Preface that his thoughts, if true, are indisputably true, and as noting at 6.54 that this very fact means the remarks of the book do not state facts about the world, language, logic or anything else (and hence are not 'meaningful propositions').

Before developing this suggestion, I should stress that Wittgenstein would not have expected us to regard every remark in the *Tractatus* as setting forth an unassailably and definitively true thought or as being nonsensical. He would not have intended his criticisms of other philosophers' views or his pronouncements about the history of philosophy to be so understood. There is no suggestion in the text that he thought of 'The conceptual notation of Frege and Russell . . . fails to exclude all mistakes' (3.325), 'Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical' (4.003) and similar remarks as anything other than straightforwardly true comments (see 3.331, 5.132, 5.525 and 5.5422 for other examples). Nor is Wittgenstein plausibly read as regarding his contentions about philosophy being '*Sprachkritik*' and not resulting in 'propositions' as beyond dispute or less than perfectly coherent. He often challenged common opinion regarding the nature of philosophy (see, e.g., 4.112), and he knew full well that there are other intelligible conceptions of the subject.

In his Preface and at 6.54, I take it, Wittgenstein is alluding to remarks like 'The world is all that is the case' (1), 'A name means an object' (3.203), 'The propositional variable signifies the formal concept' (4.127) and 'The only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity' (6.37), remarks that seem to express significant thoughts about the world, language and logic. He presents such remarks as 'thoughts [*Gedanken*]' and is most naturally understood as referring to them when he speaks of 'my propositions [*meine Sätze*]' (6.54). However he may have regarded his observations about other thinkers' views

and the nature of philosophy, there can be little question that he took 'The world is all that is the case', 'A name means an object' and the like to express unassailably and definitively true thoughts and yet to be, for all that, nonsensical propositions. Since such remarks are as true as anything can be, I imagine him thinking, they are not, properly speaking, propositions at all.

Also to avoid misunderstanding I should note that Wittgenstein uses 'thought [*Gedanke*]' in his Preface and 'proposition [*Satz*]' at 6.54 differently from how he uses them in the body of the book. None of his remarks concerning the world, language and logic is a thought in the sense of '[a] logical picture of facts' (3) or a proposition in the sense of 'a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world' (3.12). Indeed, on the view of thoughts and propositions adumbrated in the *Tractatus*, 'unassailably and definitively true thought' and 'nonsensical proposition' are solecistic. Officially '[t]here are no pictures that are true *a priori*' (2.225), and '[a] proposition is not a medley of words' (3.141). Nor it is of any help that Wittgenstein also says: 'A thought is a proposition with sense [*Der Gedanke ist der sinnvolle Satz*]' (4). While this remark seems to allow for the possibility of nonsensical propositions, it leaves no room for unassailably and definitively true thoughts, every such thought being, on Wittgenstein's own reckoning, devoid of sense.

To appreciate what Wittgenstein is claiming in his Preface and at 6.54, one needs to keep firmly in mind that he was not a technical philosopher who aspired to use terminology as consistently as possible, but rather a thinker who used words – regardless of how he had used them elsewhere – with an eye to hitting 'the nail . . . on the head' (p. 3).⁶ The context in which his remarks occur can make all the difference, and when trying to figure out what he is saying it is essential to consider his immediate aims and interests. More specifically, given the concerns of this paper, it is important to notice that at the beginning of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein is telling us what to expect and at the end he is providing a warning. Whereas in the body of the book he sets forth thoughts about the world, language

6. Though now rarely stressed, this aspect of Wittgenstein's thinking did not escape his contemporaries' notice. See, e.g., the letters quoted in the editor's introduction to B. Russell, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, volume 6, ed. J.G. Slater (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. xxvii, xxxi and xxxvii, and R. Carnap, 'Intellectual Autobiography', in P.A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap* (La Salle: Open Court, 1963), p. 25.

and logic, in the Preface he draws attention to the fact that the thoughts to come are not in any sense common or garden thoughts and at 6.54 he alerts us to something we may have missed – that what we have read is not in any interesting sense information.

Returning now to the question of what exactly Wittgenstein is saying at the beginning and end of the *Tractatus*, the first point I should like to make is that he understands the central remarks of the book as tautologous in the pre-*Tractatus* sense he inherited from earlier thinkers (as opposed to the post-*Tractatus* sense he himself was largely responsible for). He works with a conception of a tautology that covers sentences like ‘Every part is part of something’ as well as sentences like ‘If A then A’, which are true by virtue of their truth-functional connectives, and takes his remarks to be equally empty, uninformative and without consequence.⁷ It is fundamental to Wittgenstein’s thinking that, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, what he is saying is no less truistic. As he sees it, the category of tautologousness covers not only the prosaic ‘propositions’ philosophers usually take it to cover but also thoughts of the sort set forth in the *Tractatus* (along with many other sorts of ‘propositions’ including ‘logical propositions’, ‘the propositions of mathematics’ and ‘propositions’ about the internal relationships among colours, tones and the like).⁸

In noting that Wittgenstein took his remarks to be tautologous in the wide, pre-*Tractatus* sense I do not mean to imply he had in mind anything more precise than other thinkers at the time. My point is that he appropriated the concept of tautologousness current when he was writing and applied it to his own propositions. Like Russell and other contemporaries, he wielded the intuitive notion of a tautology in an informal and unselfconscious manner and did not feel called on – as Carnap and other later philosophers did – to spell out

7. For the shift in the use of the word ‘tautology’ prompted by the *Tractatus* see B. Dreben and J. Floyd, ‘Tautology: How Not To Use A Word’, *Synthese* 87 (1991), 23–49. Interestingly the old sense of tautology is still often invoked. See, e.g., W.V. Quine, *The Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 55, where Quine avails himself of ‘the intuitive notion of tautology, the notion that comes into play when we protest that someone’s assertion comes down to “0 = 0” and is an empty matter of words’.

8. Also see H.O. Mounce, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 102: ‘[T]he propositions of the *Tractatus* are not tautologies but they belong to roughly the same category’. On my view Wittgenstein’s ‘propositions’ are tautologies – and were regarded as such by him. They are genuine thoughts; they are not out-and-out gibberish with ‘an appearance of sense’ (p. 104).

the notion more clearly. In Wittgenstein's view, thoughts the truth of which can be determined *a priori* are tautologies, not substantive truths, and 'propositions' that can be recognized to be true 'from the symbol alone' say nothing (compare 6.113). From his standpoint the important thing is that we shall come to see, if we reflect closely enough on the thoughts he expresses, that they are just as tautologous as 'If A then A' and we are deluding ourselves if we think otherwise.⁹

Consider the first remark of the *Tractatus*: 'The world is all that is the case [*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*]'. While this remark has a metaphysical ring, it is better understood as a tautology in the traditional sense, indeed as a tautology in the simplest and clearest sense: as a sentence that involves a repetition of ideas. Wittgenstein would have regarded it as unassailably and definitively true since it refers to the same thing twice, the ground covered by the phrase 'the world' being the same as the ground covered by the phrase 'all that is the case'. The thought is tautologous (and hence empty, uninformative, devoid of consequences) if only because it is impossible for the world to comprise more or less than what is the case (or comprise something else). As Wittgenstein himself tacitly acknowledged in a notebook from the time the *Tractatus* was being prepared, 'the world exists' is synonymous with 'there is what there is'.¹⁰ He would not have needed to be reminded that the two phrases mean the same thing, and he could have added by way of explanation something he had written slightly earlier: 'A definition is a tautology and shews internal relations between its two terms!'.¹¹

9. Wittgenstein was well aware that the tautologous character of his remarks is not so easily recognized as the tautologous character of 'If A then A'. He writes in the Preface: 'Perhaps this book will only be understood by someone who has himself had the thoughts that are expressed in it', and later observed that 'every sentence in the *Tractatus* should be seen as the heading of a chapter, needing further exposition'. M. Drury, 'Conversations with Wittgenstein', in R. Rhees (ed.), *Recollections of Wittgenstein* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 159.

10 L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), p. 86 (entry for 20 October 1916): 'Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is'.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 18 (entry for 24 October 1914). It is no objection that '*was der Fall ist*' introduces the non-trivial idea that the world consists of facts, not of things (compare 1.1). On the present interpretation Wittgenstein also took 'The world is the totality of facts' to be tautologous and 'The world is the totality of things' to be contradictory (i.e. unassailably and definitively false). Frege seems to have understood what Wittgenstein was saying – though he doubtless missed the point – when he wrote to him regarding the first few remarks of the *Tractatus*: 'At the beginning I find the

And likewise for 'A name means [*bedeutet*] an object', 'The propositional variable signifies the formal concept' and 'The only necessity that exists is *logical necessity*'. While these remarks do not involve a simple repetition of ideas, Wittgenstein would have considered them to be equally as tautologous (in the broad sense) as 'The world is all that is the case'. For him it is impossible for a name to mean something other than an object, impossible for a propositional variable to signify a 'proper concept' instead of a formal one, and impossible for necessity to be non-logical. (Compare 3.203, 4.1271 and 6.3: 'The object is its [i.e. the name's] meaning [*Bedeutung*]'; 'Every variable is the sign for a formal concept'; and '[O]utside logic everything is accidental'.) In fact Wittgenstein is most charitably read as believing each remark in the *Tractatus* of the sort under discussion submits to the same treatment. 'A propositional sign is a fact' is tautologous since '[w]hat constitutes a propositional sign is that in its elements (the words) stand in a determinate relation to one another' (3.14); 'A proposition *shows* its sense' is tautologous (4.022) since the sense of a proposition is what it says, something that is 'show[n]' (4.461); '[L]ogic is *a priori*' is tautologous (5.473) since 'we cannot make mistakes in logic' and 'illogical thought' is an '*impossibility*' (5.4731); and so on.

Wittgenstein does not, it is true, explicitly refer to his remarks as tautologies and there can be no denying that he says: '[W]e call [a] proposition [*Satz*] a tautology' when it 'is true for all the truth-possibilities of the elementary propositions' (4.46). Still he clearly has in the back of his mind the older notion of a tautology as a sentence that is empty and lacking in consequences. At 4.461 he appeals to the unconditional truth of tautologies to explain their lack of truth-conditions; at 6.1–6.11 he writes: 'The propositions of logic are tautologies. Therefore the propositions of logic say nothing'; and at 6.3751 he declares that '[t]he statement that a point in the visual field has two different colours at the same time is a contradiction

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. Is not every fact the case, and is not that which is the case a fact? Is it not the same when I say, Let A be a fact, as when I say, Let A be the case? What is the point of this double expression?'. Letter dated 28 June 1919, quoted in J. Floyd, 'The Uncaptive Eye', in L.S. Rouner (ed.), *Loneliness* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), pp. 88–89. The translation is by B. Dreben and J. Floyd. Also compare Frege's letter of 3 April 1920 to Wittgenstein (*ibid.*, pp. 96–97).

[i.e. the negation of a tautology]'. Moreover he used the word 'tautology' in the traditional sense before and after completing the *Tractatus*. Thus in 1915 he wrote: '[T]he complexity of spatial objects is a logical complexity, for to say that one thing is part of another is always a tautology', and in 1929 he wrote: 'One shade of colour cannot simultaneously have two different colours' and similar sentences 'do not express an experience but are in some sense tautologies'.¹²

In fact Wittgenstein seems to have regarded his own remarks as he regarded logical propositions – as 'limiting cases . . . of the combinations of signs' (4.466). He sees no significant logical difference between 'The world is all that is the case' and ' $p \supset p$ '. To his way of thinking both remarks are 'part of the symbolism, just as "0" is part of the symbolism of arithmetic' (4.4611), each being obtainable from a *sinnvoller Satz* by replacing one of its components with a grammatically similar component – for instance by replacing 'q' in ' $p \supset q$ ' by 'p' and 'inhabited' in 'The world is inhabited' by 'all is that is the case'. For Wittgenstein both kinds of tautology function as degenerate propositions (or hinges) around which ordinary, non-degenerate factual propositions turn. 'The world is all that is the case' is – as he later noted it in connection with ' $p \supset p$ ' – 'a degenerate proposition, which is on the side of truth'; it too functions as 'an important point of intersection of significant sentences', 'a pivotal point of our method of description'.¹³

A better and more striking comparison, though, is with Wittgenstein's conception of the propositions of mathematical physics, propositions that are hardly tautologies narrowly understood. His insistence on the unassailable and definitive truth of 'The world is all that is the case', 'A name means an object' and the rest is reminiscent of nothing so much as his insistence on the *a priori* character of 'the axioms of mechanics' (6.341). As Wittgenstein construes them, the remarks of the *Tractatus* and the axioms of Newtonian mechanics are alike in that they both define a 'purely geometrical' network of concepts, 'all [the] properties [of which] can be given *a priori*' (6.35). In the case of 'The world is all that is the case' and 'A name means an object', as in the case of the 'law of least action',

12 *Notebooks 1914–1916*, *op. cit.*, p. 62 (entry for 17 June 1915), and 'Some Remarks on Logical Form', *op. cit.*, p. 32.

13 *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, *op. cit.*, III, §33.

‘what is certain *a priori* proves to be something purely logical’ (6.3211). There is no difference to speak of, between such remarks and ‘the principle of sufficient reason, the laws of continuity in nature and of least effort in nature, etc. etc.’. They are also ‘*a priori* insights’ about the possible forms of propositions (6.34).¹⁴

Wittgenstein saw himself, as he saw the mathematical physicist, as concerned with the representation of phenomena (as opposed to the description of them). His aims, though much more general than the mathematical physicist’s, are not significantly different. Whereas the mathematical physicist aspires to characterize what counts as a ‘proposition of physics’ and supply ‘bricks for building the edifice of science’ (6.341), he aspires to characterize ‘the most general propositional form’ (4.5) and supply bricks for building any conceivable edifice. The system of thoughts expressed in the *Tractatus*, like mechanics (*die Mechanik*), says: ‘Any building that you want to erect, whatever it may be, must somehow be constructed with these bricks, and with these alone’. For Wittgenstein, the philosopher’s task is to detail what is necessary for a sign-language to represent how things are by providing an ‘essential feature’ of a proposition, specifically a feature ‘without which the proposition could not express its sense’ (3.34). Philosophy is concerned with ‘the logical syntax of any sign-language’ (6.124) and, in much the same fashion as mechanics, it ‘imposes a uniform form on the description of the world’ (6.341).¹⁵

I have been concentrating on Wittgenstein’s claim in his Preface that his thoughts are unassailably and definitely true. What has already been said, however, also helps clarify why he would end up declaring his propositions nonsensical. This seemingly harsh judgement follows directly if, as I have been insisting, he took his remarks to be tautologous. Since he identified making sense with being informative and regarded tautologies as unassertable, he could hardly avoid concluding that any attempt to state his remarks in the form of

14 Also compare 6.35: ‘Laws like the principle of sufficient reason, etc, are about the net and not about what the net describes’. On the interpretation being proposed, the central remarks of the *Tractatus* are likewise about the net rather than what it describes.

15 Also like the axioms of mechanics, the thoughts in the *Tractatus* are comparable to ‘the number-system [with which] we must be able to write down any number we wish’ (6.341). Incidentally, Wittgenstein did not hesitate to write at a time when the main ideas of the *Tractatus* were already in place: ‘My whole task consists in explaining the nature of the proposition’ (*Notebooks 1914–1916, op. cit.*, p. 39, entry for 21 January 1915).

propositions is nonsensical.¹⁶ While ‘The world is all that is the case’, ‘A name means an object’ and the like (assuming they are tautologies) are not nonsensical in the way that ‘Socrates is identical’ is nonsensical (see 5.473), they are – when understood as propositions – nonsensical nevertheless. Indeed, had Wittgenstein regarded his remarks as propositions, he would have left himself open to the charge of failing to notice that his insistence on their tautological character means they are not (fact-stating) *Sätze*.

The point can also be developed slightly differently. What I am suggesting is that Wittgenstein deemed his remarks – construed as propositions – to be nonsensical because he took sentences to be assertable only when they have contrasts. The reason ‘The world is all that is the case’ is unassertable is that the more ‘the world’ is taken to cover, the less the sentence says, and its content – and hence the possibility of its sensibly stating anything – vanishes completely when ‘the world’ is taken to cover all that is the case.¹⁷ In fact Wittgenstein’s thinking in the *Tractatus* is not so very different from his thinking in his ‘Lecture on Ethics’, where he says: ‘[I]t is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing’ (and notes it is equally nonsensical to speak of the experience of feeling that one is ‘safe whatever happens’, ‘safety’ being a matter of being ‘safe from this or that’).¹⁸ Since understanding a proposition requires knowing what the world would have to be like both in the event that it is true and in the event that it is false,

16 Wittgenstein’s identification of sense with conveyable information has often been noted. See, e.g., A. Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 46. Also compare A. Coffa, ‘Carnap’s *Sprachanschauung* Circa 1932’, in *PSA 1976*, eds. F. Suppe and P. Asquith, 1977, p. 212: ‘The inability of a sentence to be supported by or to conflict with a fact was, for Wittgenstein and later positivists [sic] the very mark of its inability to convey information about the world; the very mark, that is, of what they misleadingly called a “meaningless” statement’. Also in this regard it is important to remember that Wittgenstein held that nothing ‘can be said’ except the ‘propositions of natural science’ (6.53) and believed a proposition ‘cannot be given a sense by assertion’ (4.064).

17 Compare G. Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, 2nd edition (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980), p. 40: ‘It is only in virtue of the possibility of something not being wise that it makes sense to say “Solon is wise”. The content of a concept diminishes as its extension increases; if its extension becomes all embracing its content must vanish altogether’. On Wittgenstein’s ‘contrastive view of meaning’, see W.D. Goldfarb, ‘Metaphysics and Nonsense: On Cora Diamond’s *The Realistic Spirit*’, *Journal of Philosophical Research* 57 (1997), pp. 57–73, especially 67–69. 18 L. Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, in *Philosophical Occasions, op. cit.*, pp. 41–42. Also compare p. 42: ‘One may be tempted to say what I am wondering at is a tautology. . . . But then it’s just nonsense to say one is wondering at a tautology’.

remarks like those of the *Tractatus*, which lack contrasts, are not propositions strictly speaking (and anyone who understands Wittgenstein must eventually come to recognize that his *Sätze* are ‘non-sensical [*unsinnig*]’).¹⁹

While Wittgenstein does not say in so many words that his thoughts cannot be stated in the form of propositions since they are tautologies, he undoubtedly thinks this. When discussing properties and relations necessarily possessed by the objects that exemplify them, for instance, he writes: ‘The existence of an internal property of a possible situation is not expressed by means of a proposition [but] expresses itself in the proposition representing the situation’, and goes on: ‘It would be just as nonsensical [*unsinnig*] to assert that a proposition had a formal property as to deny it’ (4.124). In other words it is a mistake to regard a (tautologous) *Satz* like ‘Darker shades of blue are darker than lighter shades’ as a proposition, it being ‘impossible . . . to assert by means of propositions that such internal . . . relations exist’ (4.122). ‘Darker shades of blue are darker than lighter shades’ lacks a meaningful contrast since it is ‘unthinkable’ that darker and lighter shades of a colour ‘should not stand in [the] relation [of lighter to darker]’ (4.123), and there is no escaping the conclusion that this sentence, even though tautologous, is not a (meaningful) proposition.

The parallel with what Wittgenstein says about Newtonian mechanics is again worth considering. To his way of thinking the remarks of the *Tractatus* and the axioms of mechanics both concern the representation of facts and it is nonsensical to treat either kind of sentence as representing how things are. For him ‘The world is all that is the case’ and ‘Force equals mass times acceleration’ are equally true *a priori* (and hence equally unassertable) and the possibility of describing the world by means of the system of remarks adumbrated in the *Tractatus* no more tells us something ‘about the world’ than does ‘the possibility of describing the world by means of Newtonian mechanics’ (6.342). Neither sort of remark asserts anything and neither counts as a genuine proposition. (Also it is worth noticing that at 6.2 Wittgenstein refers to ‘the propositions of

19 Compare: ‘Propositions represent the existence and nonexistence of states of affairs’ (p. 41), and ‘Notes on Logic’, *Notebooks 1914–1918*, *op. cit.*, p. 98: ‘What we know when we understand a proposition is this: we know what is the case if the proposition is true and what is the case if it is false’.

mathematics' – propositions he would not have for a minute dreamed of disparaging – as 'pseudo-propositions [*Scheinsätze*].')

It should not be thought that I am running roughshod over the fact that Wittgenstein maintains that while tautologies (narrowly understood) 'lack sense', they are 'not . . . nonsensical' (4.461–4.4611). To the contrary, I am claiming that he construed his own remarks exactly the same way. He took both types of sentence to be '*sinnlos*' because they say nothing, and regarded both – provided they are not asserted – as '*nicht unsinnig*'. In the one case no less than the other what is nonsensical is treating a proposition that says nothing as though it provides information. We are to understand tautologies – in the broad or narrow sense – as *sinnlos* when taken to 'represent [*stellen*]' the 'scaffolding of the world', and as *unsinnig* when taken to 'describe' it (6.124).²⁰ On Wittgenstein's view 'The world is all that is the case' is as *sinnlos* as ' $p \supset p$ ', and asserting ' $p \supset p$ ' is as *unsinnig* as asserting 'The world is all that is the case'. (Actually Wittgenstein reckoned the *sinnlos/unsinnig* distinction to be of wide application and took the principles of mathematical physics, statements about internal relations among colours and much else besides to be *sinnlos* when unasserted, *unsinnig* when asserted.)

Nor is the distinction between saying and showing, which loomed so large in Wittgenstein's thinking at the time of the *Tractatus*, being overlooked or played down. My contention has been that Wittgenstein believed that 'the logic of the world' is shown in the tautologies of the *Tractatus* in much the same way as he believed it to be 'shown in tautologies by the propositions of logic [and] in equations by mathematics' (6.22). As I read him, the fact that his remarks are tautologies, like '[t]he fact that the propositions of logic are tautologies', '*shows* the formal – logical – properties of language and the world' (6.12). It is as true of tautologies broadly construed as of tautologies narrowly construed that '[w]hat *can* be shown, *cannot* be said' (4.1212), and in both cases the thoughts in question have to be presented, displayed, exhibited (rather than represented, asserted, said). Once again 'The world is all that is the case', 'A name means an

20 At 6.124 Wittgenstein first refers to logical propositions as 'describ[ing] the scaffolding of the world', then corrects himself, adding: 'rather they represent it'. In C.K. Ogden's translation of the *Tractatus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1933), which was vetted by Wittgenstein, '*stellen*' is rendered as 'presents'. On the question of how carefully Wittgenstein examined Ogden's translation, see G.H. von Wright's 'Forward' to L. Wittgenstein, *Letters to C.K. Ogden* (Oxford: Blackwell, and London: Routledge, 1973), pp. viii–ix.

object' and similar remarks are like 'p \supset p'; they can only be shown and any attempt to assert them results in a nonsensical formation of words.²¹

When Wittgenstein speaks at 6.54 of his 'propositions' as 'nonsensical', then, he is not dismissing his previous remarks and going back on his claim in the Preface about his thoughts being unassailably and definitively true. He is noting that his remarks make no sense when understood as propositions, assertions, *Sätze* that say something. Having declared in 6.53 that 'the correct method in philosophy [*die richtige Methode der Philosophie*]' is 'to say nothing' other than 'propositions of natural science', which have nothing to do with philosophy (and to demonstrate to those who 'say something metaphysical' that they have 'failed to give a meaning to certain signs in [their] propositions'), he goes on in 6.54 to note that his remarks are not propositions of natural science, still less propositions designed to convey something metaphysical. Once we understand him, he tells us, we shall see that he is presenting thoughts, not putting forward substantive claims. However it may appear, his *Sätze* are not propositions with sense, propositions about the world.

At this juncture it should not seem surprising that besides speaking at 6.54 of his remarks as nonsensical (*unsinnig*), Wittgenstein also says they elucidate (*erläutern*). If the present way of regarding the remarks of the *Tractatus* is correct, it made good sense for him to write: 'My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical'. A thought that elucidates our means of representation is unassailably and definitively true (or unassailably and definitely false), and it is nonsensical to assert it. What goes by the board when we have climbed the ladder is not Wittgenstein's elucidations, only the illusion that they describe the logic of language (and provide informa-

21 Compare Anscombe, *op. cit.*, p. 163: '[A]ttempts to say what is "shewn" produce "non-sensical" formations of words'. Where I part company with Anscombe is over her claim that in Wittgenstein's eyes only logical truths 'are . . . "tautologies"' and her insistence that there is a distinction 'in the theory of the *Tractatus* between logical truths and the things that are "shewn"'. Also see L. Wittgenstein, 'Notes Dictated to G.E. Moore', *Notebooks 1914–16*, *op. cit.*, p. 110: 'Even 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"'. In my view what Wittgenstein says about the law of causality applies to his own remarks (with obvious changes): 'If there were a law of causality, it might be put in the following way: There are laws of nature. But of course that cannot be said: it makes itself manifest' (6.36).

tion about the nature of representation). The remarks of the book are nonsensical only when taken as (assertable) propositions; regarded as elucidations, they are 'senseless', and Wittgenstein was not being careless when he let C.K. Ogden's translation of '*unsinnig*' as 'senseless' pass without comment.²²

Also, it should now be clear how the way of viewing the *Tractatus* I am promoting differs from the three common ways of viewing it mentioned at the outset. Instead of dismissing Wittgenstein's contention that his thoughts are unassailably and definitively true, I have argued that he construes them the same way as he construes logical propositions, the laws of mathematical physics and other propositions he took to be *a priori*. Instead of discounting his declaration that his own *Sätze* are nonsensical, I have emphasized that he took them to be unassertable because they are tautologous. And instead of trying to reconcile his two characterizations of his remarks by invoking the idea of important nonsense (and the idea of ineffable truth), I have noted that he took the presentation of unassailably and definitively true thoughts to be very different from the statement of facts in the form of propositions. The trouble with standard thinking about the nature of the remarks of the *Tractatus*, as I see it, is that it attends insufficiently to Wittgenstein's view that the truth concerning symbolism and representation has to be exhibited rather than said, presented rather than described.²³

Still the grains of truth in the usual interpretations have not been lost sight of. I have not denied Wittgenstein aims to present the essence of representation, nor have I questioned the view that he believes the propositions of the book 'disintegrate', nor have I dis-

22 Ogden renders the passage as: 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless'. Also it is worth noting that Wittgenstein accepted Ogden's translation of '*unsinnig*' as 'senseless' at 4.124 and 5.473 as well as at 6.54.

23 The reading of the *Tractatus* I am proposing is in some respects close to Carnap's view of how it ought to be read. The main difference is that Carnap saw the remarks of the *Tractatus* as analytic propositions, i.e. propositions that are assertable despite their being devoid of 'material content [*inhaltsleer*]'. It is, I think, wrong to complain, as Carnap does, that Wittgenstein failed to recognize that 'the logic of science can be formulated, and formulated not in senseless, if practically indispensable pseudosentences, but in perfectly correct sentences' (R. Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language*, London, Routledge, 1937, p. 283). For more on the difference between Carnap's and Wittgenstein's conception of tautologies, see B. Dreben, 'Quine', in R. Barrett and R. Gibson, *Perspectives on Quine* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990), especially p. 86.

puted that he means what he says about his remarks both in the Preface and at 6.54. My efforts have been mainly directed at underscoring something additional: that he regarded the tautologies that express his thoughts about language, logic and the rest as unassertable, took the remarks of the *Tractatus* as disintegrating into truth, and believed that 'presenting' the logic of language is very different from 'representing' phenomena (and what is shown in the work is no deeper than what is shown by logical propositions).²⁴ Once we notice that tautologies cannot be sensibly asserted, we can allow that while nothing is said in the *Tractatus*, much is presented. We can straddle the fence and see why Wittgenstein would claim his work is valuable not only because it provides 'on all essential points, the final solution of the problems' but also because 'it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved' (p. 5).

Lastly in case it has gone unnoticed, I should mention that, if I am right, Wittgenstein viewed his remarks in the *Tractatus* in much the same way as he viewed similar remarks in his later writings. My point has been that he believed, early and late, that the logic of language cannot be captured in the form of propositions and from beginning to end he was of the opinion that philosophy consists, as he put it in the *Tractatus*, 'essentially of elucidations' (4.112). Throughout his life, he worked with a conception of nonsense as uninformative and disparaged 'philosophical propositions' about the essential nature of the world (while acknowledging the possibility of 'thoughts' regarding the framework within which substantive remarks about the world can intelligibly be stated).²⁵ What dropped by the

24 As I understand Wittgenstein, he takes the remarks of the *Tractatus* to disintegrate no less than tautologies since they 'are the limiting cases – indeed the disintegration [*Auflösung*] – of the combination of symbols' (4.466) and holds that his *Sätze* are dispensable in exactly the same sense that logical *Sätze* are dispensable (compare 6.122). Also compare the 'Notes Dictated to G.E. Moore', *op. cit.*, p. 118: 'A tautology (not a logical proposition) is not nonsense in the same sense in which, e.g., a proposition in which words which have no meaning occur is nonsense. What happens in it is that all its simple parts have meaning, but it is such that the connections between these paralyse or destroy one another, so that they are connected in only some irrelevant manner'. For a very different view of how the remarks of the *Tractatus* disintegrate, see T. Ricketts, 'Pictures, Logic, and the Limits of Sense', in eds. H. Sluga and D.G. Stern, *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially pp. 93–94. In Ricketts's view Wittgenstein's remarks collapse into gibberish pure and simple.

25 Compare L. Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein's Lectures 1930–1932*, ed. D. Lee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 112: '[I]n philosophy all that is not gas is

wayside in his later work was mainly his concern with 'the logic of depiction [*der Logik der Abbildung*]' (4.015). As time went by the idea that tautologies present the scaffolding of the world figured less centrally in his thinking while his view of 'philosophical propositions' as tautologies remained more or less intact.²⁶

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grammar'; *Philosophical Investigations*, *op. cit.*, §371: 'Essence is expressed in grammar'; and L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969): 'Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described?'

²⁶ I should like to acknowledge Burton Dreben's criticism and encouragement and thank Lynne Cohen, Nadine Faulkner, Paul Forster, Warren Ingber, Puqun Li, J. McDonald, J. Ploude and an anonymous reviewer for this journal for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.