

Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Unsaid Logic of the *Tractatus*

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* sets to answer the relation between thought, language and the world. The young Wittgenstein believed that he had been able to solve all the problems related to philosophical logic in the *Tractatus*. The Preface to the *Tractatus* sums up the complete intention of the book which is to draw a limit to thought. Since this cannot be done because to do so we would have to think the unthinkable, the task must be accomplished in the field of language. For in language, we can distinguish the sensible from the nonsense and thus draw the limit. The early Wittgenstein makes a distinction between sense and nonsense. Propositions according to the *Tractatus* are of two main kinds, sensible and non-sensible. Under the former are included empirical propositions and scientific propositions. Non-sensible propositions are of three kinds, gibberish, senseless propositions (*Sinnlos*) which include the propositions of logic and mathematics and nonsense propositions (*Unsinn*) which attempt to say the unsayable. Under this last category comes ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics as well as the *Tractatus* itself. They attempt to represent something which can never be stated in descriptive language because they are attempts to say the unsayable. Thus, they become nonsense when expressed in language because they can never be expressed but must be passed over in silence. The picture theory of meaning which is the backbone of the *Tractatus* shows how facts are represented in the world. What can be put into words can be pictured. What cannot be put into words cannot be pictured. For the early Wittgenstein religious language like God, mysticism, meaning of life etc. cannot be put into words and hence cannot be pictured. So, they cannot be spoken about too and are nonsense. Religious language is non-scientific and does not mirror reality. Wittgenstein very clearly speaks of value as being outside the world. He also says God does not reveal Himself in the world. He continues that the limits of language correspond to the limits of the world and what can be said can be said clearly and what cannot be said must be passed over in silence. I argue that though the early Wittgenstein is saying that all that is to do with religion, ethics and aesthetics is nonsense, yet actually they constitute the most important part of the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein says that the unwritten part of the *Tractatus* is important. So, since he says that religion cannot be spoken about, he must have considered it to be important at that stage. It is not nonsense in the sense of gibberish but nonsense in the sense that it cannot be pictured. But the question is: is religious language meaningless as far as the *Tractatus* is concerned? I attempt to show that religious language is not meaningless in the *Tractatus* but rather is an important part of the book where he maintains silence. For the early Wittgenstein formal natural theology can only be shown and not said. Wittgenstein was brought up in the Judaeo-Christian background which probably impacted his views on religion.

Key Words : Ludwig Wittgenstein, Religion, Picture theory, Thought, Language, World, Nonsense

INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1959) is arguably one of the greatest philosophers of his time. The *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, (TLP), one of the two works that he published during his life time, is a work on the

philosophy of language, setting to answer the relation between thought, language and the world. The *Tractatus* proposes to set the limits of thought by setting the limits of language and by determining the bounds between sense and nonsense. The *Tractatus* combines logical theory

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with reflections on metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, religion. They are ineffable, being attempts to say the unsayable. The *Tractatus* itself is declared at the end to be nonsensical. Once the correct logical picture of the world has been attained and metaphysics is realized to violate the boundaries of sense by using the steps in the *Tractatus*, one has to throw away the ladder.

Section 1 : The Picture Theory of Meaning :

Before announcing that a proposition is a picture, Wittgenstein considers the nature of pictures in general. Wittgenstein counts as pictures not only paintings, drawings, photographs, but also maps, sculptures, three – dimensional models, and even such things as musical scores and gramophone records. A picture is a fact and it represents certain features of the reality depicted only because it is a fact. It is composed of elements. The elements represent the objects and the fact that the elements are arranged in the way they are, represents the fact that the objects are so arranged. Pitcher points out that three conditions have to be satisfied for one thing A to be a logical picture of another thing, B. Firstly, there must be a one-to-one correspondence between the components of A and those of B. Secondly, to every feature of the structure or form of A there must correspond a feature of the structure or form of B. Thirdly, there must be rules of projection connecting the components of A and those of B. Rules of projection are rules whereby given A or B, B or A can be reconstructed from it. For example, the rules connecting a musical score and an actual performance of it; given either the score or the performance, the other can be reconstructed from it; Certain key terms have been used by Wittgenstein in the picture theory which may be considered as follows:

- (i) **Structure of a picture** : The connection between the elements of a picture is the structure of a picture (TLP 2.15). (A picture is a fact (TLP 2.141) so it must be composed of elements). Every picture has a structure but it is not identical with its structure.
- (ii) **Pictorial relationship** : It consists of the correlations of the picture's elements with things (TLP 2.1514). Pictorial relationship is what makes the picture a picture. (The elements of the picture must stand in for the elements of the situation to be represented). A picture consists of structure plus pictorial relationship.
- (iii) **Pictorial Form**: Firstly, Wittgenstein points out

that the possibility of structure is the pictorial form of the picture (TLP 2.15). It is the possibility that things are related to one another in the same way as the elements of the picture. Secondly, Wittgenstein points out that there must be a common element between a picture and what it depicts and this common element is called pictorial form. He goes on to say that a picture cannot depict its pictorial form but can only display it (TLP 2.172). Pictorial form is the possibility of relationship between elements of the picture and pictorial form is also the common element between a picture and what it pictures. So, pictorial form is also the possibility that the things represented are related in the same way as the representing elements in the picture. Thus, a picture represents a possibility in the real world.

- (iv) **Representational Form**: Representational form is that which is peculiar to a picture, which makes a picture a picture and not the real.
- (v) **Logical Form**: There must be a minimum common element between a picture and what it picturizes *i.e.* reality, in order to be able to depict it correctly or incorrectly. Wittgenstein calls this minimum common element logical form (TLP 2.18)
- (vi) **Logical Picture** : A logical picture is a picture whose pictorial form is logical form (TLP 2.181). Every picture is at the same time a logical one (TLP 2.182). Since every picture must have logical form in common with what it depicts, logical form is part of the pictorial form of every picture.

Wittgenstein prefaces his theory that a proposition is a picture with certain considerations about the world. He describes the world as a totality of facts and not of things (TLP 1.1). Facts are combinations of things, groups of objects ordered or arranged in a particular manner. It is the facts which uniquely determine the world *i.e.*, this actual world as distinguished from other possible worlds. Thus, the world divides into facts (TLP 1.2). The complex facts are composed of less complex facts which in turn are composed of lesser complex facts and so on. Ultimately, we get down to facts which cannot be further reduced. These are the atomic facts. The atomic facts are the ultimate building blocks of the world. They are called states of affairs being composed of simple objects.

This conclusion is arrived at from the side of language. These objects are the direct referents of names, the constituents of elementary propositions. These elementary propositions correspond to atomic states of affairs. These atomic facts are the ultimate building blocks of the world and are the simplest things that are self-subsistent. This conclusion is arrived at from the side of language.

Wittgenstein says all propositions are truth functions of elementary propositions. Propositions are logical pictures. They are bipolar, capable of being true but also capable of being false. They reflect what they represent, a state of affairs which either does or does not exist. The logical analysis of propositions yields elementary propositions which are logically independent of each other because their truth depends solely on the existence or non-existence of atomic states of affairs. The ultimate constituents of elementary propositions are unanalyzable names which stand for objects that are their meaning. Wittgenstein insists that there must be such elements of reality on the one hand and of language on the other, if the latter is to represent the former. This is how language picturizes facts.

There is a story of how the idea of language as a picture of reality occurred to Wittgenstein. It was in the autumn of 1914. Wittgenstein was reading a magazine about a law suit in Paris concerning an automobile accident. At the trial a miniature model of the accident was presented before the court. The model here served as a proposition, that is as a description of a possible state of affairs. It has the function owing to a correspondence between the parts of the model (the miniature – houses, cars, people) and things (houses, cars, people) in reality. It now occurred to Wittgenstein that one might reverse the analogy and say that a proposition serves as a model or picture, by virtue of a similar correspondence between its parts and the world. The way in which the parts of the proposition are combined, the structure of the proposition depicts a possible combination of elements in reality, a possible state of affairs.

Section 2 : Sense and Nonsense:

Wittgenstein explains the distinction between sense and nonsense in terms of the picture theory. The criterion of meaningfulness according to the *Tractatus* is that a proposition must be able to picture a possible situation. So, what cannot be pictured is nonsense.

Propositions are broadly of two kinds: Sensible and Non - sensible. Sensible propositions include Empirical propositions and Scientific propositions. The non – sensible category is of three kinds: a) Gibberish - This is due to incorrect syntax like ‘Bread eats’. b) Senseless or *Sinnlos*- It includes the propositions of Logic and Mathematics. They are senseless because they say nothing about the world, *i.e.*, do not picture or represent any fact or situation. They are pseudo-propositions and do not depend on how things are. c) Nonsense or Unsinn - These are attempts to say the unsayable. It includes Ethics, Aesthetics, Metaphysics and the Propositions of the *Tractatus*. They do not describe any fact in the world. Such propositions deal with subject matter which is not eligible for description. What they want to express cannot be expressed in language. That is to say such propositions express the indescribable and are attempts to say the unsayable. So, they must be passed over in silence.

The Saying – Showing Distinction:

The sensible and nonsensible distinction in the *Tractatus* is connected with the distinction between the sayable and the showing. Wittgenstein wrote to Russell in 1919 that this distinction was the cardinal problem of philosophy and the main point of the book. At TLP 4.115, he says What cannot be said can be presented clearly by what can be said. And at TLP 4.1212 he clearly says what can be shown cannot be said. The main aim of the *Tractatus* is to distinguish sense from nonsense. The nonsense is important nonsense. This important nonsense is based on correctly understanding what can be said thereby also understanding what cannot be said but can only be shown. What can be said will show the boundaries of language. What lies on the other side of the boundary cannot be said. Any attempt to do so will result in important nonsense. Ultimately this distinction will help us in getting a correct logical point of view of the world where the steps of the *Tractatus* itself that have been used to get this view also becomes nonsense. If one looks at the real aim of the book as concerning ethics, since Wittgenstein writes in the Preface that the whole point of the book is an ethical one, it follows that the work itself is nonsensical.

Section 3 : Religion in the *Tractatus*:

Apparently, it seems that the *Tractatus* is against religion. In fact, the Vienna Circle confirmed that this attack was something they were trying to say all along. The *Tractatus* became their Bible. But I think for

Wittgenstein the *Tractatus* has an important ethical and religious dimension. This is clear in the letter that he writes to Ludwig Ficker¹ in 1919 where he points out that the purpose of the book is an ethical one where one is required to be silent about it.

You won't—I really believe—get too much out of reading it. Because you won't understand it; the content will be strange to you. In reality, it isn't strange to you, for the point of the book is ethical. I once wanted to give a few words in the preface which are actually not in it, but which I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to this sphere of the ethical only from inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just babbling, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it. And for that reason, unless I am very much mistaken, the book will say a great deal that you yourself want to say. Only perhaps you won't see that it is said in the book. For now, I would recommend you to read the preface and the conclusion, because they contain the most direct expression of the point of the book. (Letter to Ludwig von Ficker).²

Still further, Wittgenstein writes to Russell in a famous letter in 1919 that the main contention lies in the distinction between saying and showing.

I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical propositions is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed [*gesagt*] by propositions. - *i.e.* by language - (and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown [*gezeigt*]; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy (Letter to Russell)³.

It is clear from the letter to Ficker that the *Tractatus* consists of two parts: written and unwritten. He also makes it clear that the unwritten part is the one which is truly important and that part concerns ethics. Our attempts to express ethics and religion is nonsensical because we go beyond the world. But the point to note is that these areas in so far as they speak about the ultimate meaning

of life, value, goodness, God etc. should be respected because they manifest themselves in our attitudes. At TLP 6.522 he says there are indeed things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest *i.e. shows itself*, they are what is mystical. The meaning of the whole book therefore lies outside its boundaries

The book explains meaning by reference to the nature of representation. The non-sensible propositions say nothing about reality and this is shown via the picture theory. In the background of the picture theory such propositions are unable to depict possible states of affairs. Here it is important to note that for the early Wittgenstein language is not autonomous, but must be capable of mirroring the essential nature of reality. Wittgenstein believed that there is a world in which we find ourselves. The world imposes a fixed structure. Logic is immanent in language with which we speak about the world. Wittgenstein says: Logic must take care of itself (TLP 5.473). Here he is speaking of the autonomy of logic. All things that are possible, actual or thinkable are logically coherent. Yet he says: Logic has nothing to do with whether the world is like this or not (TLP 6.1233). Logical propositions are devoid of subject matter referring to the world. Therefore, ethics and religion which have nothing to do with the world must also be logical. The important nonsense of the *Tractatus* is nothing illogical.

On the personal side Wittgenstein was passionate about religion and was intensely interested in religious beliefs and practices. He lived a deeply religious life. Once he remarked to his friend M O'C Drury that though he is not a religious man yet he could not help seeing every problem from a religious point of view⁴. Several times Wittgenstein thought about becoming a monk. He was born of Jewish descent but had a Christian upbringing being born to converted Christian parents. His paternal grandparents were Jewish but converted to Christianity and his maternal grandfather had Jewish ancestry. Between birth and burial Wittgenstein was a Christian and he had strong religious feelings. I think this impacted his views on religion throughout his life. During his early years in World War I, Wittgenstein resigned himself to God's will and declared Christianity to be the safest way to happiness (Geheime Tagebucher 16/25.8; 12.11; 8.12.1914). Wittgenstein found Tolstoy's *The Gospel in Brief* a magnificent work. He read it and reread it and became what his fellow soldiers during the war called him *The man with the Gospel*.

Wittgenstein's God is not a personal one but identical

with the meaning of life. In the *Notebooks* he writes there are two Godheads: the world and my independent I (1.8./8.7./1.8.16). It is like Spinoza's *deus sive natura* the essential heart of all things. One should not forget that the title of the book that had actually been suggested by Moore has Spinozistic leanings. The young Wittgenstein held philosophy to be primarily a critical activity, a critique of language which clarifies non philosophical thoughts where metaphysics is to be limited (TLP 4.112, 6.53). The nonsense arises from the failure to understand the logic of language. This failure makes us ask questions which do not have an answer. The *Tractatus* shows that such questions violate the bounds of sense. Its goal is to attain a correct logical point of view, an understanding of what can be said and what can only be shown by demonstrating what violates the rules of logical syntax.

Bertrand Russell wrote to Lady Otterline Morrell in 1919:

I have much to tell you that is of interest. I leave here today [December 20, 1919, from the The Hague] after a fortnight's stay, during a week of which Wittgenstein was here, and we discussed his book [the *Tractatus*] everyday. I came to think even better of it than I had done; I feel sure it is really a great book, though I do not feel sure it is right.... I had felt in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk. It all started from William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and grew (not unnaturally) during the winter he spent alone in Norway before the war, when he was nearly mad. Then during the war a curious thing happened. He went on duty to the town of Tarnov in Galicia, and happened to come upon a bookshop, which, however, seemed to contain nothing but picture postcards. However, he went inside and found that it contained just one book: Tolstoy on the Gospels. He brought it merely because there was no other. He read it and re-read it, and thenceforth had it always with him, under fire and at all times. But on the whole he likes Tolstoy less than Dostoyevsky (especially Karamazov). He has penetrated deep into mystical ways of thought and feeling, but I think (though he wouldn't agree) that what he likes best in mysticism is its power to make him stop thinking. I don't much

think he will really become a monk—it is an idea, not an intention. His intention is to be a teacher. He gave all his money to his brothers and sisters, because he found earthly possessions a burden. I wish you had seen him⁵.

Russell, it is clear from the letter was quite in awe of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was not a practising Christian in the general sense but he confirmed to an ethical life of a believing Christian reinforcing the belief that religion can only be shown by one's actions and attitudes and cannot be expressed in meaningful language.

Conclusion:

The *Tractatus* intends to give an account of the essential nature of world, thought and language. But the author admits that in this quest, one is transcending the boundaries of sense because it is an attempt to say what cannot be said. The inexpressible is beyond the realm of facts. Yet, in his private correspondence, Wittgenstein was trying to tell how important the unwritten part of the *Tractatus* is. But from the practical point of view, for publication purposes the written portion of the *Tractatus* was important. Perhaps Russell who undertook to write the preface to the work would not be interested in the unwritten part. Yet Wittgenstein was aware that the text should not lose its significance. I think Wittgenstein keeps the portion unsaid because he wants to keep the higher realm of values, ethics, religion outside the interference of science. He says the problem of life remains untouched even if all problems in science are solved. Wittgenstein claims that ethics and aesthetics are based on accepting the world (NB 20.10.16). It follows that the unsaid part of the *Tractatus* is also based on the world, like the said part of the *Tractatus*. Only if you are able to demarcate the said portion can one understand the unsaid portion. Even though he calls them nonsense they are important nonsense. Otherwise, how can they be based on the world. God is the answer to the problem of life and God is identified with the meaning of life and of the world (NB 11.6 / 8.7.16; TLP 6.521). And herein lies the vanishing of the problem of life. God as the meaning of life and of the world also transcends the world: God does not reveal himself in the world (NB 8.7.16, TLP 6.41, 6.432). Definitely anything to do with God will be nonsensical as per the Tractarian criterion and constitutes the unwritten and unsaid part of the *Tractatus*. Since in God consists the dissolution of the problem of life, I think it constitutes the most important part of the *Tractatus*. It

is quite apparent that Wittgenstein does not think that the problems of life are nonsensical. Instead, he considers them to be the most important problems of all. In the *Notebooks* on 8.7.16 Wittgenstein writes: To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. Therefore, religion and ethics are important over and above the world of facts.

Wittgenstein said that the point of the *Tractatus* was an ethical one, by drawing the limits to what can be thought and remaining silent about what lies on the other side of the limit. For the young Wittgenstein ethics and religion are not clearly distinct but belong together. In the *NB* in 1916 he writes that the notions of God and the purpose of life are connected with good and evil as predicates of the will. How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world (TLP 6.4, 6.41, 6.432, 4.1).

Ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics including religion cannot be reduced to facts in the world and therefore remain ineffable. Wittgenstein calls them transcendental (TLP 6.13, 6.421). Any description about religion will go beyond the boundaries of language because it does not refer to empirical and observable facts. This nonsensicality of religious expressions is an important nonsense. Though one cannot talk about it and must remain silent, it shows itself. I think this statement about being silent about it means that we should respect and value this and not make it a subject of scientific enquiry. We cannot speak about God because God does not reveal himself to us. This is

the very essence of religion, its unscientific character. The *Tractatus* itself is nonsense. That is the logical conclusion because the propositions in the *Tractatus* do not picture anything in the world. Nevertheless, what was the main purpose of the book – to draw a limit to thought has been successful. Yet the nonsense did help us see the world a right. So, this nonsense is important. It shows what cannot be the case. Religion can only be shown by one's actions and attitudes and cannot be expressed in meaningful propositions. In his later works Wittgenstein clearly speaks of religion as a human practice.

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