

Reading the Tractatus from the Beginning: How to say everything clearly in three words

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Motto:

His own writing is extraordinarily compressed, and it is necessary to ponder each word in order to understand his sentences. When one does this, they often turn out to be quite straightforward, and by no means so oracular or aphoristic as they have been taken to be. (Anscombe 1967, 19)

Abstract:

This paper introduces some suggestions towards a new reading of the *Tractatus*. The single most basic idea is to put the book into the right perspective by distinguishing the language the book is written in from languages and calculi discussed in the book.¹ This helps to identify the standard Wittgenstein tried to meet in writing his book and also to judge how well he succeeded in doing this. It is suggested that the book has been approached from the wrong end, the beginning being read in the light of the end. The paper first introduces and discusses the respective standards of clarity and distinctness as two basic styles in philosophy (Section 1). It then suggests a “clarity” approach taking its start from the motto (Section 2), and it suggests that Wittgenstein rejected terminology in philosophy. The example of *sinnvoll*, *sinnlos* and *unsinnig* is examined (Section 3). The standard of clarity is further explained and used to group the remarks of the book (Section 4). Some comments on the resolute reading are given in order to highlight some features of this novel approach (Section 5). Finally, some core commitments of reading early Wittgenstein are discussed (Section 6) and a piece of future historiography presented (Appendix).

1. Traditions of Clarity and of Distinctness

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is a difficult book.² There is one particular difficulty that has shaped many discussions in recent years, namely the fact that right at the very end he declares his propositions to

¹ One rare attempt to articulate anything along these lines is Bernstein 1966 who distinguishes „perspicuous language“, „ordinary or colloquial language“ and „ladder language“, the last one being „the language he uses“ (236). The present attempt will try to show that ordinary and ladder language are actually one and the same, to be set apart from (logically) perspicuous language. Bernstein points out that “a careful reading will show that insights contained in the *Philosophical Investigations* were anticipated or suggested in the *Tractatus*” (234). Unfortunately, his article which builds on some hints from Wilfrid Sellars (236), that may ultimately derive from Carnap’s emphasis on different languages, has remained largely neglected.

² Wittgenstein was very clear about this. The sheer novelty and difficulty of his approach made it improbable that anybody would understand him, Frege and Russell being the only obvious exceptions. This difficulty was not one Wittgenstein primarily associated with his way of writing, although he was aware of the fact that the extreme brevity and terseness of his style would make it even harder to understand it. Actually Wittgenstein doubted as early as 1915 that anybody would understand him (“What I have written recently will, I fear, be even more incomprehensible”, letter to Russell, May, 22, 1915), but he kept up hope (“It will perhaps cause you quite a bit of effort to understand everything, but don’t let this deter you”, letter to Russell, October 10, 1915) and he went to great lengths to explain the basic points to Frege (with no success whatsoever as he complains in his letter to Russell on August 19, 1919) and to Russell (travelling to The Hague in 1919 for discussions) and later to Ogden and to the Vienna Circle. –This indicates that he strongly believed that in principle his book could (and should) be understood.

be nonsensical.³ This immediately gives rise to the question how a philosophical book can possibly consist of nonsensical propositions. To many („positivist“) readers this ending has been an embarrassment and they have tried to more or less disregard (or reject) the end, while others have tried to find some way out of this difficult situation.⁴ Some of the more recent suggestions about how the book is to be understood if we take the end seriously and if we are also consistent or resolute about the consequences have led to a reading of the book that has struck many as fascinating and sophisticated while it has caused utter disbelief in others.

The most basic aim of this paper is to show that many ongoing disputes about the *Tractatus* can be resolved if we start reading the book from the beginning while keeping in mind the standard according to which it was written. Once this point is clarified it will be much easier to judge how well Wittgenstein succeeds in living up to the standard he set for himself. Furthermore it will become much clearer what measures he took in order to conform to his ideal of presentation. Putting it in one word, the standard Wittgenstein subscribes to is one of *clarity*.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* he discusses standards of clarity in opposition to standards of accuracy or exactness and he suggests that descriptive clarity is more elementary than any kind of exactness, say of measurement⁵ However, and this has been widely misunderstood, already in his first book Wittgenstein aims most basically at clarity, not exactitude, in writing and doing philosophy. First, we have to understand his notion of clarity, and more generally his way of using language, before we can properly understand the way he uses vocabulary like „senseless“, „nonsense“, and „nonsensical“.

In order to explain clarity it is important to understand what it is opposed to. Taking up some traditional vocabulary I propose to contrast „clarity“ with „exactness“ or „distinctness“. Historically speaking, Wittgenstein belongs to the “clarity” tradition in philosophy initiated by Descartes in reaction to the scholastic “distinctness” style, - advocating natural language, simple steps and informal presentations, as opposed to the “distinctness” tradition going back to Leibniz that tried to introduce standards of distinctness and terminological as well as logical precision in order to advance beyond “mere clarity”.⁶ This distinction corresponds to two opposing conceptions regarding the aim and also the appropriate style of philosophy. One style aims at cogent argument, convincing proofs that are preferably gapless, all of which is to be based on precisely defined terms and sharply articulated judgements constructed from them. This style could also be called the analytic, or logical style, emphasizing the elements of precise concepts, judgements, and proofs – developing ever more refined logical machinery. Paradigm cases for this “scientific” style can be found in the work of Leibniz, Kant, Frege, Russell, Carnap, Quine, Kripke and Brandom. The “clarity” style, on the other hand, includes being suspicious of too much terminology or logical

³ Of course, we should keep in mind that Wittgenstein *loved* nonsense and thought it important (for many great examples see McGuinness, unpublished).

⁴ Most commentators, however, have been overestimating the relative importance of that penultimate remark.

⁵ See the entire stretch from §69 (on the lack of a definition of exactness), to §88 (on the “ideal of exactness”) and §133 (on his ideal of “perfect clarity”).

⁶ Of course, this is a somewhat idealized separation of two strands within the philosophical tradition and there are few pure cases of someone belonging to one strand only, as will become apparent even in cases like Frege, Carnap and Quine. However, the distinction can be used to shed light on a number of interpretative issues.

fine-grainedness because in many, or most cases this will obstruct simple and clear thinking.⁷ Classical examples for such an attitude can be found in the works of Descartes,⁸ Hume,⁹ later Wittgenstein and others. Their favorite literary form will be some sort of essay designed to convey to the reader a natural way of seeing matters.

Another way to bring out this contrast is this: The distinctness tradition attempts to give precise expression and cogent proof for some statements that can be regarded as improved versions of our everyday intuitions, especially in ethics but also regarding “truth” and other basic notions. The clarity tradition would rather aim to give convincing *expression* to our intuitions, in order to help us understand and appreciate their scope and impact, not to improve over them. The art of expressing basic points lies at the heart of this tradition.

Now, if it is correct that the clarity strand is close to the most basic impulse in philosophy it is to be expected that we will find some such elements even in the works of the most vehemently scientific-minded philosophers those professed enemies of “mere clarity”. One example: In *Logical Syntax* Carnap severely criticized Wittgenstein for being not scientific enough, yet in some of his later work he emphasizes the necessity of extra-theoretical elucidation concerning the most fundamental issues of choosing frameworks as well as theoretical approaches at large.¹⁰ Quine who can be seen as somebody basing everything on formal logic plus exact science surprises his readers with his “principle of shallow analysis” in *Word and Object*, explaining this to be in the interest of philosophical clarity. Formal precision, for him, turns out to be a tool for reaching clarity – the supreme goal in philosophy.¹¹ This can be seen as the single most important objection Quine directs at Carnap’s idea to make everything formal by working exclusively with formal languages where we have a chance of doing this. He objects that Carnap is not clear enough, wasting much of his time on mere exactness which illuminates too little.¹²

The main point of this paper will be the suggestion that not only later but already early Wittgenstein subscribed to an ideal of clarity and of expressing some very basic intuitions in his work. The fact that these intuitions concern problems of formal logic has done much to obscure this fundamental point. It will be seen that lack of appreciation of this difference has resulted in early Wittgenstein being regarded as one of the prime scientific philosophers. The exegetical problem seemed to be: How can we reconstruct Wittgenstein’s formal system precisely from the few hints he gives us? However, this task is very much misguided and rests on a fundamental misunderstanding:

⁷ One paradigm case can be seen in the attacks on formal logic in the writings of Descartes and Bacon. Other examples are subject to the particular style of interpretation: Kant can, in his ethical writings, be interpreted as an analytic mind who wants to drive his arguments home, about morals being founded on reason alone – or as somebody who primarily tries to articulate his basic ethical vision using the vocabulary of his time. This vision could be seen as something so simple that it is hard to discern clearly, but once the reader gets it into clear view, she can see through Kant’s terminology and stop worrying about the details of his (seeming) argument.

⁸ Of course, there are many items in Descartes that do not fit with this ideal of clarity.

⁹ Hume can be seen as a philosopher who first worked at the destruction of exact thinking, this partly being a self-destruction through even exacter thinking leading to severe skepticism -- while his later *Enquiries* (especially the second *Enquiry*) contain a large number of seemingly simple examples designed to clarify some very basic notions.

¹⁰ Carnap’s 1956 paper is entirely devoted to such issues and, even if very reluctantly, resounding with Wittgensteinian insights.

¹¹ Compare also the entry on “mathematisiosis” in his *Quiddities*.

¹² Of course, there are other places where Carnap in turn finds much in Quine far from clear.

Wittgenstein does not offer us some fragments of an exact formal system but rather he tries to clarify some basic notions and we are not to mistake the examples he uses to illustrate his points for fragments of an exact system he felt too lazy to work out in detail.¹³

This difference of traditions can be seen in Frege's response to the *Tractatus* manuscript. He wrote that he had come to believe that Wittgenstein intended more an artistic than a scientific achievement. Then he continued: „I had proceeded on the assumption that you would want to communicate some new content. Then, in any case, greatest distinctness would be greatest beauty.“ (September 19, 1919) This suggests the distinction between clarity and distinctness as two opposing aims in philosophy, with Frege going for one and Wittgenstein for the other ideal. Wittgenstein seemed to share Frege's impression that they were following different ideals by calling him an „exact thinker“ (6.1271), not a clear one, in his book.¹⁴ Also, Frege is looking for “a question, a problem” – he wants to see “a question put at the outset, a puzzle, so that the reader will enjoy learning its solution” (September 30, 1919) – and he further suggests that Wittgenstein divide his treatise in as many parts as “philosophical problems are treated of”. He also admonished him to make his terminology more precise, starting with the words “fact”, “to be the case” and the different usages of “is” in “The world is all that is the case.” (April 3, 1920) Frege sincerely believed that his suggestions could help to make Wittgenstein's book more intelligible by making it more precise. To Wittgenstein, however, this appeal to exactness showed that Frege “did not understand a word of it”, as he famously remarked to Russell. Following Frege's *advice* would have meant to compromise his fundamental ideal of clarity. He did not want to give the precise answer to some puzzle but to get clear about logic and philosophy, once and for all.¹⁵

Wittgenstein's talk of clarity can hardly go unnoticed, the words „clear“ and „clarify“ occur very often and in prominent places of the book. However, on closer inspection, there are very few attempts to address the question of clarity explicitly. One of them is Ramsey's early 1923 review, the other one consists of two papers by W. D. Hart „The whole sense of the *Tractatus*“ (1971) and „Clarity“ (1990).¹⁶ Both conclude that Wittgenstein believes that clarity has to do with the logical

¹³ This is not to say that Wittgenstein had no real interest in logic but only in ethics, or something like that. He was intensely interested in logic, only in such a way that he rather tried to clarify the notion of “setting up a formal system” – so he tried to give something like the conditions for the possibility of formal systems – and this cannot be done by simply giving one formal system, even if it will be useful to give some examples of doing it in a good, or, much more likely, in a misguided way.

¹⁴ Frege is alluding to the following quote from Lessing: „To me, greatest distinctness (*Deutlichkeit*) was always greatest beauty.“ (*Das Testament Johannis*) The same quote, which originally refers to the legibility of the handwriting, was used by Heidegger in his 1926 dedication copy of *Being and Time* to Husserl, which may indicate that Heidegger subscribed to a different ideal from Husserl (Heidegger-Jaspers 1990, 235). He thus classifies Husserl with the clarity tradition where clear intuition is more important than subtle logical distinctions, while it seems that Heidegger believed that he himself could be the champion of both traditions simultaneously. The translation of this quote in Floyd 2007, 177 insists on the word “clarity”, disregarding the distinction emphasized here.

¹⁵ The idea that problems can be solved once and for all is not part of the ideal of clarity, even if early Wittgenstein seemed to think so.

¹⁶ Hart presents one rare attempt to clarify the notion of clarity within the analytic tradition. He notes: “It is striking that the corpus of analytic philosophy includes no settled articulate analysis of clarity, nor even much in the way of rivals for that office.” (Hart 1990, 197) However, while assembling much interesting material Hart more or less identifies clarity and formal exactness and thus does not get similar oppositions to the ones developed here. Concerning the *Tractatus* he remarks that the book “embodies an extreme mathematical ideal of philosophy, perhaps even to the point of parody” (204). This could have been just a small step away from the insight that the book *mentions* rather than *endorses* such an ideal of mathematical exactness.

form of propositions. Hart writes: „Philosophy is the activity of replacing the ordinary propositional signs of natural science by clear ones.“ Thomas Ricketts emphasizes the logical aspects rather than natural science but he still concurs with the exactness ideal in writing that we have to „appreciate the standard of clarity set by the general form of sentences“ (Ricketts 1996, 94). In doing this he collapses standards of clarity into those of exactness. These suggestions all seem to take for granted that Wittgenstein is following some standard of logical accurateness and precision, like Frege or Carnap - but this seriously misrepresents the most basic ideas Wittgenstein is trying to communicate in his book.

Marie McGinn has proposed to develop an „elucidatory, or clarificatory interpretation“ (McGinn 1999, 492). In her recent book on the *Tractatus* she writes: „It is a work in which the nature of the proposition, which is already clear although we do not see it clearly, is allowed to make itself clear to us.“ (McGinn 2006, 16) Putting it thus McGinn justly notes that the clarity Wittgenstein speaks of cannot come from outside by ways of some formal tool but still she confounds the work of the author who is putting in much effort to express things in such a way that they become clear with Wittgenstein’s idea that in a certain sense, each proposition is in order and thus clear, as it is (even if to us it does not seem to be clear).

2. Clarity from the Beginning

The natural place to begin is at the beginning. Here we find the motto of the book.¹⁷ So far, it has received almost no attention, most commentators, including Max Black, do not even mention that it exists, although it is every bit as important as, say, 6.54.¹⁸ We will be in a much better position to understand what Wittgenstein is doing at 6.54 if we have understood the beginning of the book. Maybe then it can fall into place and not come as a shock.

It is a mistake that the motto has never been taken seriously in any discussion of the book, although much has been made of things in the preface. It reads: „And everything one knows, and which is not a mere rumbling and roaring one has heard, can be said in three words.“¹⁹

The motto is taken from a book of literary essays by Ferdinand Kürnberger. We know from his correspondence that in early 1917 Wittgenstein gave a copy of the book as a present to his friend Paul Engelmann.²⁰ The passage the motto is taken from reads more fully:

¹⁷ The motto was originally placed right above the beginning of the preface and thus facing the dedication. This can be seen in Ts 202 and 204; it is also recognizable in the Prototractatus where Wittgenstein wrote it in the top right-hand corner of page 1 and then (probably for reasons of space) decided to place the preface in the back of the ledger. The arrangement on the title pages as well as the sequence of facsimiles in the printing of the Prototractatus obscures this: The dedication should face the preface and motto, not the title page. For some reason none of the existing editions reproduce this original arrangement and it is therefore still an open question how Wittgenstein intended his book to look like in a single-language version. Wittgenstein’s directions to Ogden in Wittgenstein 1973, 47 are directed at the bilingual edition where all “those more subtle points are lost at any rate” (15) and cannot serve as a guide to his original plans.

¹⁸ It is only with the 1971 Prototractatus edition that the motto was translated into English.

¹⁹ The motto’s *sound* is hard to move across language barriers.

²⁰ See the letter of thanks from Engelmann’s mother mentioning Paul reading from the book in the evenings and that Wittgenstein „would surely enjoy hearing them anew“ (January 30, 1917).

If I ask somebody semi-educated: What is the difference between ancient and modern art? he will answer in much confusion: Sir, this question stirs up whole universes of ideas. This is a matter for entire books and university semesters. If, however, I ask somebody thoroughly and entirely educated [„gebildet“], I will get the answer: Sir, this can be said in three words. Ancient art issues from the body, modern art issues from the soul. Therefore ancient art was sculptural while modern art is lyrical, musical, in short romantical.

Bravo! Thus, entire universes of ideas can be put in a nutshell, if you are actually in command of them; and everything one knows, and which is not a mere rumbling and roaring one has heard, can be said in three words.²¹

Wittgenstein most probably learned about Kürnberger through the writings of Karl Kraus, and also his use of the motto seems influenced by Kraus.²² In his journal „Die Fackel“ (The Torch) Kraus repeatedly referred to Kürnberger (1819-1877), he strongly supported efforts towards an edition of Kürnberger’s works²³ and he liked to reprint articles from other journals where Kraus was called a present-day Kürnberger. It is difficult to trace the exact lines of influence here but it seems safe to say that to Wittgenstein, Kürnberger and Kraus subscribed basically to the same ideal. This ideal of writing well advocated by Kraus can be illustrated by a well-known aphorism already quoted by Engelmann in his *Memoir*:

Adolf Loos²⁴ and I have done nothing more than show that there is a distinction between a burial-urn and a chamber pot and that it is this distinction above all that provides culture with elbow room. The others, those who fail to make this distinction, are divided into those who use the urn as a chamber pot and those who use the chamber pot as an urn. (Kraus 1986, Vol. 8, 341)

Karl Kraus thus sees himself on a mission to communicate something very elementary and simple which at the same time has far-reaching consequences. He is not writing textbooks but rather he presupposes that his readers are already well-informed about the facts. He works at putting things straight where they have fallen out of proportion. His aim is to make his readers see things, or for that matter the world, in the right way.

It is well known that Kraus had a strong satirical vein and that a large part of his satirical power was directed against the misuse of language. More specifically however, Kraus distinguishes two languages in his writing. One kind of language is the language he writes *about*.²⁵ This comes in many varieties, but very often the language he writes about is deformed by artificial constraints, including attempts to improve on natural language by making it more ornate or interesting or more logical or by introducing some special terminology. Kraus rarely derides people who are simply incapable to use language properly or in an educated way. He consistently aims at people who

²¹ Kürnberger 1911, 311, also quoted in the Innsbruck Edition of the letters and in Wittgenstein-Engelmann 2006, 173. Whether Kürnberger’s theory of art is convincing or not is not to be discussed here, just his way to express it.

²² There have been suggestions that Wittgenstein got the quote directly from Kraus. However, I have been unable to verify this as it does not occur in the Fackel volumes.

²³ The motto is taken from the second volume of this edition which appeared in 1911, titled *Literarische Herzenssachen* (“Literary Labours of Love”).

²⁴ The importance of Loos, concerning the questions discussed here will have to be discussed on another occasion. Engelmann reports that Loos, who unlike Kraus actually had long conversations with Wittgenstein, repeatedly exclaimed: “You are I!” – and we may safely conjecture that this responded to Wittgenstein’s particular ability to express ideas Loos was trying to articulate in a way Loos himself could not. Wittgenstein apparently could “say in three words” what Loos was struggling to say.

²⁵ As far as I am aware, this point has been very little noted in the vast literature on Kraus.

imagine that they are „in command of language“ and feel that they are master over language. One extreme case of this would be an entirely artificial language like Esperanto.

By contrast, Kraus views the language that he himself *uses* as something natural and alive that he has to respond to and treat with respect, something he has to use with the utmost care and above all as naturally as possible. In one of his literary feuds he made such a difference between languages striking by offering some explicit “translations” as well as a “Harden Dictionary” from articles of Maximilian Harden, a Berlin-based journalist who took pride in making language slightly more logical and in using out-of-the-way words. Kraus had these translations printed in two columns, and on some occasions he declared himself unable to give any translation because there was no sense in the statements to be translated, they were literally senseless.²⁶

On the other hand Kraus felt free to use his own language as “illogically” as he pleased. He remarked famously that an aphorism is always „either a half-truth or a one-and-a-half-truth“, while still insisting that his aphorisms are no ironical word-play but that they rather do communicate some serious if basically simple and elementary distinctions concerning the nature of art and newspaper business, man and woman, Vienna and Berlin etc.²⁷ He once wrote: „It is impossible to dictate an aphorism into a typewriter; it would take too long.“ (Kraus 1986, Vol. 8, 116) This aphorism is in one sense simply wrong, -- of course we could do this in almost no time; in another sense it is a piece of nonsense, because we have no idea how exactly we are to understand this talk of „too long“; and finally it is quite clear that Kraus primarily wants to stress the distinction between his own aphorisms and the language of ordinary Vienna newspaper writing, suggesting that no amount of newspaper-writing could contain just what Kraus expressed in a few lines. He also opposed the introduction of new words: „Only a language infested with cancer will produce many neologisms. It tells of bad manners to use uncommon vocabulary. To the public we are to offer only intellectual difficulties.“ (Kraus 1986, Vol. 8, 128)

Although there is little direct and immediate contemporary evidence that early Wittgenstein tried to follow Kraus in his style of writing²⁸ there are some striking remarks along the same lines in his letters to Ogden concerning the translation of the book. For instance, Wittgenstein insists that “the *sense* (not the words)” (Wittgenstein 1973, 19) should be translated, he refers to “words commonly used” (24), he tries to avoid “clumsy words” (28), he prefers words “used in every day language” (30), and tries to find “a usual expression” (35) wherever possible. When suggesting that the preface be printed in both languages he remarked that “it would make the sense of the preface and the book plainer” (48).

In the light of these considerations a fairly natural²⁹ way to understand the motto might go like this:

²⁶ Kraus 1986, Vol. 2, 52-78 and Vol. 3, 79-138, “Several passages I could only handle in being very liberal; others proved untranslatable.” (Vol. 3, 99 [all writings against Harden are from 1907-08]).

²⁷ Thus, Kraus would have refused to view his aphorisms as being “merely aphoristic”.

²⁸ There are quite a few remarks on Kraus but all of them are from a much later period.

²⁹ The most general line of the approach presented here is to develop a natural rather than a sophisticated reading of the book.

- a) The *Tractatus* intends to place entire universes of ideas in a nutshell; the book tries to say “everything one knows”, and more particularly everything³⁰ that Wittgenstein has to say in philosophy (which will coincide with all there is to say in philosophy), maybe not exactly in three words, but in just about 20,000 words or about 80 pages.³¹
- b) Just as Kürnberger writes briefly about ancient and modern art, Wittgenstein intends to write briefly and clearly about ancient (“old”) and modern logic, expressing the most elementary distinctions between the two. The place where the book comes closest to Kürnberger’s example would be 6.371 and 6.372 discussing ancient and modern “Weltanschauung”.
- c) The statements will be made using a clear, non-technical, non-academic and non-terminological language.³²
- d) The book will address educated people and it will presuppose a thorough knowledge of the subject. However, it will not give any new information but will rather express a novel point of view on the entire matter, on everything. It will not be a textbook but more like a conversation among or a monologue in front of educated and informed people (or maybe just one person).
- e) The motto also suggests that most people will be quite at a loss about what is going on, not because they lack any particular piece of information - but because they are unable to clearly grasp the simple fundamentals, or maybe because they cannot properly distinguish that which is fundamental from that which is not.

Before the motto, of course, we meet the title of the book: *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*.³³ This is how Wittgenstein always referred to it. He accepted the suggestion *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for the English edition but he rejected „Philosophical Logic“, writing to Ogden: „There is no such thing as philosophic logic“ (Wittgenstein 1973, 20). The book is not offered as a treatise in philosophical logic, because this would suggest that we could use logic as an exact tool or medium to give exact answers to philosophical problems, or perhaps that we could calculate philosophical results. This would fit in with Russell’s and Frege’s idea of doing logic and philosophy, but not with Wittgenstein’s. His book is rather a treatise of a logical and philosophical *character*, discussing logic as well as using logical notation to clarify certain points.

³⁰ A note right in front of the *Prototractatus* ledger reads: “Between these propositions *all* the good propositions from my manuscripts are to be fit in.” (Wittgenstein 1971, 35, 40, 41; emphasis added)

³¹ The word „word“ in the motto is not opposed to „sentence“ but used rather synonymously. In Hume we can find the same usage: “In a word, every effect is a distinct event from its cause.” (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sec. 4, Part 1)

³² Compare the motto taken from Elizabeth Anscombe. However, sometimes she does not get the sentences quite straightforward enough and thus feels compelled to say strange-sounding things like: “Now the things that would be true if they could be said are obviously important.” (Anscombe 1967, 162) Still there are many important things to be learned from her ground-breaking book on the *Tractatus*. Where Cora Diamond carefully criticizes some of her explaining around the statement “Somebody is not the name of somebody” (Anscombe 1967, 85) she uses ways of explaining the usage of such words as “somebody” that are clearly taken from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy - while it seems that Anscombe stays more on the level of a *Tractatus* treatment of such vocabulary (see Diamond 2004).

³³ “No one remembers what Wittgenstein called it” (Rhees 1970, 37).

In his own way of writing Wittgenstein tries to comply with the ideal Kraus set up.³⁴ He uses language as freely as possible, and he keeps his own language strictly apart from the languages or calculi he writes about. He does so, however, without using any formal device consistently, trying to keep this “natural”, too.³⁵ In his letters to Ogden he points out that he is using mostly everyday vocabulary that should be rendered by English everyday vocabulary. He introduces rather different phrasings in his suggestions for improvement of the translation and he nowhere shows any concern about preserving any kind of terminology. Of course, this attitude led to many apparent inconsistencies in the phrasing of the book, but Wittgenstein had never intended to install any terminology but only to express things clearly. He just wanted to „hit the nail on the head“, and this you have to do individually.

3. Is there any Terminology in the Tractatus?

The idea that Wittgenstein, in following Kraus, rejected the use of philosophical terms terminology at first blush obviously wrong -- in the presence of the basic terminological distinction between sentences that have *Sinn* and those that are *sinnlos* in contradistinction to those that are *unsinnig*.³⁶ However, this piece of terminology originates with textbooks on the *Tractatus*, not from the work itself. While it is true that Wittgenstein points out some very important differences between certain sentences, he never actually installs any terminological regimentation to mark off and classify kinds of sentences or propositions.³⁷ Arguably, the threefold distinction was introduced mainly through the Pears-McGuinness translation of the book that supplanted the Ogden translation from 1961 on.³⁸ According to the view defended here Wittgenstein uses the adjectives *sinnlos* and *unsinnig* as well as the noun *Unsinn*³⁹ rather freely to locally mark off important differences, but this comes nowhere near any kind of terminology or classification of propositions. To be more precise it can be noted that Wittgenstein marks off more than just three kinds of propositions, so that his elucidations are actually more diverse than commonly understood and especially he does not claim that all propositions that can be called *unsinnig* have something in common: There can be many reasons why something is *unsinnig*.

³⁴ This will no longer be quite true for later Wittgenstein who recognizes it to be a mistake to believe that we can express the essence of something in a few words – mainly because he no longer believes in essences. This necessitates also a change his style of writing.

³⁵ This liberal way of expression will result in Carnap’s discovery that the book is misleadingly written in a “material” instead of a “formal mode of speech” – and that therefore it should best be translated into such a formal mode (see Carnap 1937, Part V).

³⁶ Expressions like “fact”, “state of affairs”, “elementary sentence” which do relate to somewhat more technical features of Wittgenstein’s conception will be exempted for the moment.

³⁷ Even talk of “kinds” or “species” of propositions, stemming from biological classification, would be out of tune with the spirit of the book..

³⁸ In personal communication, one of the translators remarked to me about Wittgenstein’s use of terminology: “We tortured it to reach some degree of consistency”. This translation “normalized” a number of other features of the book also and thus made it look more like a textbook conforming to contemporary academic usage. - Remarkably, the Ogden translation has regained some ground following the publication of the letters to Ogden and the subsequent reprinting of the earlier edition.

³⁹ Wittgenstein uses quite frequently the expression “es ist ein Unsinn” which can also be found in Kraus and Loos and which could best be translated as „what rubbish“ in relating to how people might be acting.

The term *sinnlos* seems to be the most straightforward case of a terminological regimentation, relating solely to propositions of logic. Actually however, the word *sinnlos* occurs four times in the book and there is in 4.461 exactly one place where he calls tautologies and contradictions *sinnlos*, going on to remark that they are, however, not *unsinnig*, (or superfluous) because they are an important part of the symbolism, comparing this to the case of the number or numeral zero. In other places he expresses the same idea by saying that all propositions of logic “say Nothing”⁴⁰ (6.11) or that they “treat of nothing” (6.124). There are three other passages where *sinnlos* occurs and in each of them the word is used somewhat differently.

- a) In 5.132 we read “laws of inference are *sinnlos* and would be superfluous”. In this case, Wittgenstein uses *sinnlos* to express almost the opposite point to 4.461. His idea is that in logic everything relevant can immediately be taken from the form of the propositions themselves; there is simply no need for anything like “laws of inference”. These could not make our inferences any more secure or more firmly justified. These laws are therefore *sinnlos* in a way that tautologies are not: They are simply good for nothing and they play no role in any symbolism. This usage of *sinnlos* is quite analogous to the use of *unsinnig* in 4.1272. There Wittgenstein remarks that statements like “1 is a number” is superfluous because what we try to say here is already shown by our use of the numeral 1. It is like an idle wheel that does no work.
- b) In 5.5351 Wittgenstein speaks of a hypothesis “p implies p” which Russell prefixes to some propositions in order to insure that only propositions can be substituted for the variables in question and – in passing - calls it *sinnlos*. The main point he is making here is that Russell’s *way of proceeding* is misguided, superfluous and useless, he calls it *unsinnig*. It is correct to remark that this hypothesis actually is a tautology but Wittgenstein does not criticize Russell for this – this hypothesis is rather *sinnlos*, for one because no tautology can be used as a hypothesis, and more specifically because any such hypothesis would be quite useless and idle because it could never do what Russell wants it to do. All of this has very little to do with the logical form of that “hypothesis”: No proposition of any form could possibly serve that purpose! So the most adequate translation in this case would be “the idle hypothesis appended for that purpose”.
- c) The final occurrence of *sinnlos* in 5.1362 reads: ““A knows that p is the case” is *sinnlos*, if p is a tautology.” In this case it seems at first sight that Wittgenstein believed that the phrase quoted actually is a tautology – so that this would support the terminology hypothesis. In his *Prototractatus* he had written: ““A knows that p is the case” is tautologous, if p is a tautology.” (PT 5.04441) On closer inspection it becomes clear that Wittgenstein actually corrected a mistake of his earlier version: Even if p is a tautology a proposition of the form “A knows that p is the case” definitely is *no* tautology but rather a proposition of a more complicated logical form – and one that could not even be written down and expressed

⁴⁰ Note the almost Heideggerian capitalization of *Nichts*. There is some analogy in Wittgenstein’s and Heidegger’s “illogical” use of language; except that Heidegger linguistically stretches his way of expression to a degree that Wittgenstein would object as “unnatural”. Here, the capitalization of the word “Nothing” is simply a device of placing emphasis.

symbolically using the means Wittgenstein offers in his book. To be sure, there is some *similarity* to the case of the tautology because we have some degenerate kind of proposition, carrying no information, but for one, we would not say that this proposition is “unconditionally true” but rather that it is idle and useless to speak of “knowing” in this case. Therefore it is an improvement that Wittgenstein changed the term “tautology” to *sinnlos*, thus he is actually making a *distinction* in his use between *sinnlos* and tautologous by indicating that in this case we would come up with some sentence-like structure that is of no use, something entirely idle. With equal right he could have used the word *unsinnig* to characterize this case.

These cases strongly suggest that Wittgenstein uses *sinnlos* and *unsinnig* quite freely and in most places almost synonymously. The main reasons of using one term rather than the other seem to be considerations of style and rhythm, not semantics and terminology.

Turning to the topic of *unsinnig* and *Unsinn* we find that these are mainly used to describe futile ways of acting rather than properties of propositions: “It would be *unsinnig* to ascribe a formal property to a proposition...” (4.214), “it is *Unsinn* to place the hypothesis...” (5.5351), “To say of two things that they are identical is a piece of *Unsinn*...” (5.5303)⁴¹ All of these are examples of superfluous, silly behaviour, this has little to do with the logical form of the propositions themselves: here people simply try to do what cannot be done.

One comparatively minor case of something being *unsinnig* occurs where we have missed to give meaning to a sign. Here Wittgenstein operates on the level of ordinary, empirical, logically well-formed text-book propositions like “Socrates is identical” and the like. In this respect Wittgenstein thinks little of Frege’s worries “that every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense” – and he answers that if we construct propositions these will have the sense we have given to them. Therefore the only thing that can go wrong is that we have failed to give them some specific meaning – but we can always easily correct this by supplying some meaning afterwards (5.4733). These cases, however, are *not* of the kind of propositions the book is made up of, and neither sees Wittgenstein any philosophical trouble originating with them. Actually, the main point he makes here is that we should simply not worry about such cases.⁴²

The bulk of cases where Wittgenstein calls something *unsinnig* rather has to do with attempts to do something which cannot be done or to say something which cannot be said, very often simply because that which we want to say is already shown or implied by the language forms we use to express our point.⁴³ Wittgenstein emphasizes this especially in 4.1272, immediately following the introduction of his most basic distinction between internal and external concepts or relations starting in 4.122.

⁴¹ Also, Skepticism is *unsinnig* because the Skeptic tries to *do* something which cannot be done, not because his propositions lack the proper logical form: In 6.51 there is no mentioning of any skeptical *propositions*.

⁴² Therefore James Conant’s suggestion that this is “the only way” that a proposition can be *unsinnig* is misguided by taking Wittgenstein’s local anti-Fregean remark too literally and by giving it a much too wide scope (Conant 2002, 379).

⁴³ “Saying” and “showing” are another example of supposed terminology in the book and also one which rests on an optical illusion.

Considering his liberal use of *sinnlos* and *unsinnig* it may be no surprise anymore that Wittgenstein was quite content that in Ogden's translation most occurrences of *sinnlos* as well as of *unsinnig* were indiscriminately rendered as „senseless“. There was simply nothing that could get lost that way. After discussing the book with Ramsey in 1923 Wittgenstein agreed to substitute „nonsensical“ for „senseless“ in one special place (4.4611), in order to clarify the remark about tautologies being part of the symbolism - but this was just a local improvement of in the 1933 edition.⁴⁴ If Wittgenstein should have forgotten to take care of his terminology in his letters to Ogden this would have been the chance to finally install the correct expressions. It is striking that he let it pass.⁴⁵

Wittgenstein discusses many examples of logical calculi and logically structured language, and logical correctness is an important topic in the book, but these languages are only mentioned and not used by him. One might, following van Heijenoort, put things in such a way that in his book Wittgenstein is *using* natural language as the universal medium in order to *discuss* special kinds of languages, seen as calculi.⁴⁶

One special difficulty in the book arises from the fact that while using just natural language, Wittgenstein did so in an unusual way. He writes as if to communicate with himself or with somebody who has reached a similar level of concentration in thinking about these matters. He does not in any way simplify his thoughts and he writes nothing of an introductory nature. Thus the book is written and organized rather like a somewhat one-sided conversation with a friend (or maybe with himself), much like the way somebody might speak on a walk while commenting on particular features of the landscape or the architecture as they come into view.⁴⁷

The whole sense of the book is to explain clearly how „whatever can be said, can be said clearly“ (Preface). This can be taken to mean that the book explains what kinds of articulate expressions in sign-language (and therefore in speech) are fundamentally possible. In the preface Wittgenstein uses the word „say“ in its plain everyday sense that would include what logical, mathematical or philosophical propositions say. This is also true of words like „thought“ or „truth“ that occur in the preface: Wittgenstein is not alluding to any theory of truth but simply stating that he is completely

⁴⁴ See Lewy 1967 for some minor changes in the 1933 edition (p. 420 for 4.4611).

⁴⁵ It may be noted in passing that the much-discussed question whether propositions of mathematics are to be considered *sinnlos* or *unsinnig* according to the *Tractatus* can be answered thus: For one, Wittgenstein simply feels not obliged to put a label on them because it is the conceptual description that counts, not the label, and secondly he points out some strong similarities between logic and arithmetic but also some, maybe less decisive, differences. He could easily have called them *sinnlos* but not *unsinnig*, simply because the similarities are so important but this would still be no cogent reason to state that they are of the same kind, and even less to express this in technical terms.

⁴⁶ This should also make it clear that it is a mistake to place Wittgenstein on just one side of this divide: He was very much interested in this difference and one could almost say that he was the first one to find it important.

⁴⁷ Some examples are: “Now we understand the feeling...” (4.1213), “Now this settles the question...” (4.1251), “It also becomes clear now...” (6.1224), and “And now we see the relative position...” (6.342). The expression “now” always refers to the point reached in the course of the conversation and also to the idea that “seen from this point” these points are really very obvious and open to view.

convinced that he has solved all the philosophical problems and that he simply knows that he has come up with all the right answers.⁴⁸

4. Standards of Clarity – Used in Grouping the Remarks

But what is this standard of clarity, after all and how can it be correctly defined or at least explained? In one way the answer is very simple: there is and there cannot be any formal standard of clarity, because any formal standard has first to be basically clarified in an informal way. Clarification comes first and formal precision is but a tool towards gaining clarity. Otherwise we would be confusing aims and means. Therefore all we have is our everyday understanding of clarity that consists in our command of the use of the words “clear” and „clarity“ and therefore we have to work without any definition of clarity, because we already know what it is. There is no special “philosophical” kind of clarity. All we can give are some examples, like the ones from Kürnberger and Kraus quoted earlier. The reason we have problems in understanding the book is not that Wittgenstein subscribes to some special kind of clarity, the difficulty rather comes from the circumstance that Wittgenstein is trying to express some distinctions which are very hard to grasp and even more difficult to express clearly. One reason that it is so easy to get them wrong is that the matter is in a certain sense presupposed in all our use of symbols and signs, i.e. of language.⁴⁹ In a certain sense we know all these things (only they are not „things“) and in this sense Wittgenstein gives us no new information but *reminds*⁵⁰ us of what we are doing all the time. He is not opening up new areas of knowledge, like Frege and Russell imagined to be doing but he shows us the place where we already are in a new light. Maybe the main problem is one of expression, as Wittgenstein once remarked: We have no vocabulary ready to unambiguously express what we are dealing with: words like „category“, „concept“, „sign“, „sense“, „nonsense“, „tautology“ cannot simply be used as technical terms, because Wittgenstein is remodelling the entire conceptual landscape. Therefore he uses existing vocabulary, yet he has to use it carefully, often against the grain of earlier philosophical use.

To repeat: The problem with understanding the book is not that it is difficult to understand Wittgenstein’s special kind of „clarity“ but rather that Wittgenstein is trying to express some points that are exceedingly difficult to express. Once we have grown attentive to the standard of clarity however, we can read the book in a new light.

Apart from the end the beginning of the book has startled many readers. If we try to view the book as a natural mono- or dialogue, then we would expect to find some opening remarks that would introduce us into the topic. However, what happens is not that we are informed about the *topic* but that we are led *to view things* from a certain angle.⁵¹ Wittgenstein gives priority to facts over things

⁴⁸ Another kind of “resolute reading” of the book would thus consist in taking the Preface literally and seriously and going on from there. This is the strategy suggested here.

⁴⁹ This point is justly emphasized in Maslow’s early monograph. He also points out that “logic”, for Wittgenstein, most basically means “a consistent use of symbols”, of any symbolism whatsoever. His interest lay in determining the basic notions of such consistent use. In this sense there can be only “one” notion of logic even though there can easily be many different symbolic systems (Maslow 1961, 53 and 59).

⁵⁰ This idea recurs more explicitly in the *Investigations*.

⁵¹ Remember that the title of the book does not mention any topic.

in order to prepare us for the priority of sentences over names. The opening remarks have been widely misunderstood because the wrong words have been emphasized: The stress should not lie on “the world” but rather on the distinction between “things” and “facts” while “the world” only serves as a variable, or it could be compared to the notion of “universe of discourse”. There is nothing ontological about this, if simply because there is no statement being made.

Facing their extreme brevity we obviously cannot expect (and are not expected) to understand these statements fully, or even precisely, right away, but farther on it should become clear to us, *why Wittgenstein is leading us this way*. This way of taking the beginning contrasts with most recent proposals. We are *not* expected to believe that we understand these statements as truths about „the world“ and then, later on, to realize that the sense of these statements „falls apart on us“, but quite to the contrary Wittgenstein introduces some basic distinctions and only later on he will explain what purpose these distinctions can serve. We are given a tool and later on we are shown what to do with it. The opening proposition introduces some vocabulary and a point of view and hints at an important distinction in order to understand the logic of language, but it is a sentence that is supposed to *do* something rather than *state* or say some truth.

In a similar manner the early 2s continue to develop this line of thought. It is quite mistaken to view these remarks as intended to dissolve into nonsense as Thomas Ricketts (1996) suggests. It is true that we can realize that those remarks do not have a „regular“ logical form and thus they would have to be called „nonsensical“ by any standard of being logically well-formed. But this would amount to reading the book from “sideways on”, to borrow McDowell’s phrase. However, the entire language of the book is not designed to agree with any such standard and the point of the passage in question is to make us grasp some very basic distinctions, still in a very preliminary way. The book does *not* invite us to read it on two levels at the same time - we are not supposed to apply talk of logical form to the sentences of the book but rather we are to move on one step at a time. The double reading Ricketts suggests would only be possible after one has been through the entire book – and then Ricketts would be right to point out a certain contradiction: But according to Wittgenstein’s instructions we need no second time around: He invites us to throw away the ladder.⁵² The standard of clarity developed so far can be used to organize the remarks in the book into different groups -five of them will be introduced here.

Group 1:

At the most basic level remarks of the first group express how logical, mathematical, empirical and philosophical propositions differ in fundamental ways. These differences are so decisive that Wittgenstein emphasizes them by withholding the word „proposition“ from some of these cases.⁵³ Seen in this light, the core of the book consists of the 4s. These remarks introduce the notion of a regular empirical sentence in contrast to propositions of logic and also in contrast to propositions of

⁵² In a sense Ricketts assumes the position of a reader who reads the book simultaneously for the first and the second time. Only this impossible assumption makes it seem possible and that we have to complain that there is something wrong about the sentences the book is made from.

⁵³ Many peculiar phrasings of the book are devices to express emphasis and they should rather not be taken literally.

philosophy. Here we find his “fundamental idea” that the logical constants do not represent (4.0132), his elucidations about the nature of philosophy (4.112), his ideas about the distinction between saying and showing and, most importantly the distinction between internal and external relations and concepts. It is striking that Wittgenstein is very brief in the beginning of his book, explaining nothing about his vocabulary, but now, seemingly all of a sudden, he is very careful and, compared to his own style, quite outspoken: “In a certain sense we can speak of formal properties [...]” and then he follows up: “I introduce these expressions in order to show the ground of the confusion, very common among philosophers, between internal relations and real (external) relations.” (4.122) To get this point absolutely straight Wittgenstein, quite contrary to his otherwise very condensed style, repeats almost the very same warning a few remarks later when he introduces formal concepts: “In the same sense in which we speak of formal properties we can also speak of formal concepts. I introduce this expression in order to clarify the ground of the confusion of formal concepts with real concepts which pervades all of the old logic.” (4.126)⁵⁴ This is the only place in the book where Wittgenstein introduces some special vocabulary and comments on his reasons for doing it. This distinction forms the core of the *Tractatus* and the reader has to understand it in order to understand Wittgenstein’s book.⁵⁵

Group 2

In addition to this most elementary level the remarks forming the second group explain how Frege and Russell (not to mention any other philosopher!) did not sufficiently understand these distinctions. This is the main reason why Wittgenstein feared that nobody would understand his book. Frege and Russell were the only ones he even considered as possibly being capable to understand his work. Both Frege and Russell subscribed to an ideal of mathematical or scientific philosophy and they tried to solve philosophical problems by doing formal proofs and deductions. To Wittgenstein, this is the most elementary and fundamental category mistake and renders their philosophical projects hopeless. With Frege, the main problem was not that his logical system turned out to be inconsistent but rather that he tried to decide a philosophical question by doing formal derivations in the first place. This is confusing clarity and distinctness.⁵⁶

The *Tractatus* offers some criticism of Frege and Russell which are quite obvious once the right view of logic is in place. These points of criticism are offered as simple observations and they never depend on any technical elaborations. They include the distinction between internal and external properties, concepts and relations, functions and operations, the theory of types and classes etc.

⁵⁴ Both remarks are somewhat obscured in the Pears-McGuinness translation. Wittgenstein is not saying that we can speak *about* formal properties but rather he is introducing the notion of a “formal property” which he intends to add to his working vocabulary. He could have written: “We can use the term “formal property” to characterize what I am introducing here – however, we could also use another term.”

⁵⁵ It is tempting to offer a nutshell version of the book in the spirit of the motto: What is the difference between a regular sentence and a proposition of logic? Regular sentences use external concepts and relations and therefore they have to be compared with reality to ascertain their truth or falsity, but not their sense. On the other hand a logical proposition can be decided from looking at the sign if we just know the rules making it a symbol.

⁵⁶ From Wittgenstein’s point of view Frege was trying to make something distinct and exact before he had made it clear. The same could be said of much of analytic philosophy.

Wittgenstein offers these remarks as examples but not as parts of an attempt to create an improved version of symbolic notation in order to advance scientific philosophy like Carnap and others would try to do later. He is interested in conceptual clarity, not in technical progress. This can be seen particularly from his way to treat the question of logicism.

In the 4s he distinguishes internal and external relations, and *this* is the deepest level he is operating on. Once this distinction is firmly in place, logicism isn't worth much more than an aside: „The way Russell and Frege express general propositions [about the ancestral] is wrong; it contains a *circulus vitiosus*.“ (4.1273) This talk of a *circulus vitiosus* is no allusion to the Russell paradox,

Wittgenstein's point is rather that the conceptual confusion is there right from the beginning not only in the end when the paradox finally appears. For him, the paradox itself is not the main problem but rather just a symptom that something deep-seated is wrong – and this would *have* to go wrong as long as Frege and Russell failed to distinguish between functions and operations.

Wittgenstein did not go out and try to derive an equivalent of logicism using his own, methodologically restricted means (or tools) but rather he tried to clarify the basic view of logic and arithmetic. In doing this he had to clarify the nature of the „and so on“, and the nature of what we call „number“. In both cases he is doing some elucidatory work but this has nothing to do with proving anything. Wittgenstein had so little genuine interest in logicism that he did not even bother to prove it incoherent.

Group 3

However, apart from his criticism of Frege and Russell, Wittgenstein feels obliged to do some further explaining himself. This is done in a third group of remarks: He now explains how exactly propositions work like pictures and how sense and truth are neatly separated. Wittgenstein was very certain that a sentence needed to have sense before it could be checked for its truth or falsity but he found it very difficult to explain this – and his way of explaining it resulted in his “picture theory” of the proposition. This leads him to develop a theory about elementary propositions and similar intricate matters. Also he feels that in order to vindicate his claim that he was explaining “the nature of the proposition” he needed to explain that there is exactly one such nature that could be clarified in one stroke – thus he has to tell something about the general form of the proposition. These are justly called two „theories“, he is offering us and in doing so he frequently reasons and argues that because of this things must really be such and such. In doing this he obviously does *not* meet his own original standard of clarity. This includes the fact that he even felt forced to introduce some technical vocabulary into his philosophical reasoning which strictly speaking should have been unnecessary.

Group 4

Wittgenstein does, however, try to make himself (and his readers) believe that all this really is just as obvious and clear despite strong appearances to the contrary. These remarks are among the least convincing of the book, but precisely because he tries to do this they highlight the standard he tries to live up to. He tells us that „we *obviously feel* that a proposition of the form aRb is a picture“

(4.012) and he insists that „these sign-languages prove to be pictures, *even in the ordinary sense*“ (4.011; emphasis added both times) and goes on to claim that we best understand the nature of the proposition by looking at hieroglyphic script (4.016).⁵⁷ Actually it is quite plain that the ordinary person does *not* feel that aRb is a picture and most people would find it very strange to call a sign-language, or symbolic-language, or an ordinary sentence a picture. So Wittgenstein tries to persuade his readers and himself of things being so – in the face of their obviously *not* being so. These remarks are best understood when we realize that they are designed to make us believe that the picture theory is really obvious where it rather evidently is *not* obvious. Wittgenstein tries to do the same thing to considerations regarding the general form of the proposition in stating e.g. that „people *have always had an inkling* that there must be a realm [...] forming a self-contained, regular system“ (5.4541; emphasis added).

In order to clarify, or make us believe that he is pointing out something that is already clear, Wittgenstein makes ample use of vocabulary like „it is clear“, „obviously“, „now we see“ and the like. Of course, this vocabulary by itself in no way guarantees that the remark in question is actually clear but by failing to achieve their aim these passages show that Wittgenstein is trying to meet his own standard of clarity.⁵⁸

So far, four kinds of remarks have been distinguished:

- a) Remarks reminding us of the most elementary differences in the way different propositions work.
- b) Remarks pointing out some obvious consequences connected with the most basic remarks - often including some criticism of Frege and Russell.
- c) Remarks trying to explain some seemingly necessary preconditions connected to some things Wittgenstein is putting forth.
- d) Remarks where Wittgenstein states that his arguments in these passages are really just the explications of what everybody always felt.

The remarks in the first two groups can be regarded as clear to the thoughtful and thinking reader - indeed Wittgenstein would claim that he is saying things that are basically just ordinary. Even later as his way of doing philosophy changed substantially he would still view them as basically correct observations. The remarks in the third and fourth group he later came to regard as resting on very doubtful reasoning and he used some of them in order to show how *not* to do philosophy.

Group 5

However there is also a fifth group of remarks in the book. These are highly metaphorical remarks, often containing comparisons that do not really work. In these remarks he tries to express some very general insights, or rather he tries to say what everything he has said (or will say) really

⁵⁷ This last remark actually is very striking in being quite incomprehensible (one might be inclined to say “nonsensical”): there is some obvious picture-like quality in the words of hieroglyphic script but what could be obvious about propositions in hieroglyphic script to somebody who is not an Egyptologist?

⁵⁸ One particular device he frequently uses that is difficult to translate directly is the German particle „ja“. It usually means „yes“, but it can also be used like „indeed“ to express that something is certainly or naturally so. It is also striking that the *Investigations* use no such vocabulary designed to tell us that the things we read are „really clear, even if we do not see this right away“.

amounts to. Some of these remarks seem to be especially profound and extraordinary. Here are some examples: Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of the limit or border, but in such a way that there are no two sides of the border. He also calls logic „a mirror-image of the world“ (6.13) but there is no way to compare the two sides as in the case of an ordinary mirror.

Sometimes such a remark is simply vague: „Logic must take care of itself“ - this *sounds* very good but if you do not already know what to make of it it will tell you nothing.

This is not to claim that Wittgenstein considered these remarks unimportant, actually they seem to have been very dear to him. (Compare e.g. his remark about the better half of the book being the one he did *not* write.) These remarks, however, do not do any philosophical work. They rather seem to celebrate the achievement of the work already done. This is where „language goes on holiday“, as he would later say. It seems unwise to put too much emphasis on just these remarks if we try to understand how the book actually works and what we can learn from it. Wittgenstein did surround his logical and clarificatory work with some metaphysical-sounding remarks that at one time seemed to express the special importance of the work. On closer inspection we can realize that the problems he is dealing with are really of fundamental importance, but these metaphysical propositions or metaphors are actually creating only fog around the original work.

But what about the end of the book? Which group of remarks does 6.54 belong to? We could place it in the second group, the one articulating some obvious consequences from the most elementary distinctions that have been laid down. This might run like this: Why would Wittgenstein call his own propositions nonsensical? As explained above he uses the words „nonsense“ and „nonsensical“ we find that he uses them to mark off different kinds of things that can go wrong in using language. In his book Wittgenstein tells us how different kinds of propositions work, or in a certain sense he helps us to see the nature of the proposition.⁵⁹ In doing so he has no choice but to use ordinary propositions. So his book is using propositions in order to say something about the nature of the proposition. Thus a discerning reader could see everything in the book for herself if she would already see things in the right way. This is pointed out in 6.54, and only then, in the end. Then, but only then, the reader would be able to say: Come to think of it, these *Tractatus* propositions are really of a strange kind. And we might just as well characterize this strangeness by calling them *unsinnig* – but we could just as well use the word *sinnlos*.⁶⁰

We could also imagine different phrasings for 6.54. When Carnap discusses the same question in his late paper „Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology“ (1956) he calls his elucidating propositions „strictly speaking, unnecessary“ (211).⁶¹ Maybe much ink would have been left unspilled if Wittgenstein had chosen this variant.

⁵⁹ This sentence is to be understood as a whole, especially the phrase “tell us something about”. This is not to imply that there is a “something” that Wittgenstein wants to communicate to us like a piece of information.

⁶⁰ This reflection belongs right at the end of the book. At an earlier stage it could easily lead to confusion and to a breakdown in the process of climbing up the ladder.

⁶¹ Carnap explains: “Although characterizations of these and similar kinds are, strictly speaking, unnecessary, they may nevertheless be practically useful.” (Carnap 1956, 211)

In reflecting on the language Wittgenstein uses we find that he is overstating (or maybe understating) his case in this remark. In the ordinary and common sense of the word his propositions tell us the truth (preface), but we must understand them in the right way because it is easy to misunderstand them, especially if taken individually. Also, when Wittgenstein writes that the reader is to understand “him”, he does so mainly for stylistic reasons and not to indicate some opposition between understanding him and understanding the book.⁶² By doing this he avoids saying paradoxically that the reader is to “understand his propositions by understanding them to be nonsensical”. Wittgenstein deviates from Kraus in usually not looking for paradoxical phrasings. What he tries to emphasize here is that the reader is to understand not the propositions individually and separately but as parts of the book, in understanding the work they do together. It might also be looked upon as some kind of context principle for reading the book.

5. Some Comments on the Resolute Reading

In trying to make sense of Wittgenstein it is important to start from his view on philosophy and more specifically his way of doing philosophy and not from his positions on any particular single issue. This is connected to the idea that we have to get clear about the standards of reading the book. When Cora Diamond asked „What does a concept-script do?“ (Diamond 1991) she opened up fresh lines of understanding that do not get trapped in the blind alley of the *Tractatus* being „a treatise in philosophical logic“. She writes of „liberation“, not of progress by proof and this fits well with the idea of „getting things clear“. The key idea to the book is one of „clarity“. This is in one sense very obvious but it appears to be rather difficult to fully grasp the point and to carry it through. This seems the right starting-point.

The most important thing seems to be to understand the „spirit“ of Wittgenstein’s approach, his special way of investigating philosophical and logical problems. Wittgenstein is not introducing a „science of logic“ but rather trying to make us see some essential points.

A paradigm example for this could be Frege’s way to make us understand the difference between concepts and objects;⁶³ or the distinction between internal and external properties, or Karl Kraus on the night-pot and the urn. In order to advance such understanding Wittgenstein will be prepared to use any kind of tool that he would find promising, bits of formal logic among them.

So far, the resolute reading seems to be in a strong position simply because there seems to be no viable and attractive alternative, and because of excellent criticism of existing suggestions, thus the

⁶² This way of phrasing is one of the most fervently misunderstood places of the entire book. However, it does seem that this misunderstanding was no accident but almost necessary to create “Diamond’s way out” of the predicament she had gotten into by declaring the entire book to be nonsensical in the strict sense. Something still would have to be understood, after all, as long as it is to be regarded as a philosophical book: If it could not be the propositions then all that was left was their author. However, there still remains the important observation that what counts is not subtle understanding some individual propositions but rather to understand the right approach to philosophy.

⁶³ This is what could be called the “clarity strand” in Frege. Thus Diamond places Frege squarely within the clarity tradition. From an exegetical point of view, however, this emphasizes an element in his work about which Frege himself was quite unhappy because it was unfit for any exact treatment. He consistently expresses regret at being only able to give hints instead of proofs.

result looks almost like winning by default.⁶⁴ Most criticism directed at the resolute reading does not succeed or even aim at giving a coherent and convincing picture of the *Tractatus*. As an example, Peter Hacker, the most prominent critic, poses several difficult questions for resolute readers, but he seems much less concerned to create an attractive overall picture of the book (one of his points being that the book is actually incoherent).⁶⁵

Something similar seems true of Marie McGinn: After working on the *Investigations* she has developed some ideas towards working out an alternative that would combine insights from the two major approaches in order to create a convincing and also more natural reading (McGinn 1999). In her new book (McGinn 2006) she presents much considered exegesis but directs less energy than one would have expected towards questions of approaching the book and of discussing Wittgenstein's basic philosophical outlook.⁶⁶

Seen in retrospect, the resolute reading had a promising start and some very good ideas but it took an unfortunate turn when attention got focused too closely on 6.54. This has put something like a spell on much work on the book. It has placed too much emphasis on „nonsense“ and has created the idea that once the penultimate remark is understood then the whole book is understood. It is true, but also a truism that we have to try to make sense of every remark in the book and therefore this is also true of 6.54: If we seriously misunderstand it, we probably misunderstand other parts as well. However, it is quite misleading to take this remark as the starting point into dealing with the book -- it would have been more fruitful to start at the beginning, trying to get clear about clarity, and then to work through the book one step at a time.⁶⁷

But, one might say, isn't this just the idea that we need to do a „piecemeal reading“ of the book?⁶⁸ Well, if this just means that Wittgenstein is to be understood in detail and we have to pay close attention to what he says and to how he says it, yes, but as Cora Diamond pointed out Wittgenstein is *not* presenting several small bits of doctrine that we can pick up and do with them as we please, but he is trying to give us a unified picture, a very specific way to do philosophy, and that we will

⁶⁴ It is one of the unquestionable merits of the resolute readers to have pointed out how great a philosophical book Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* really is.

⁶⁵ Diamond and Conant calling Peter Sullivan their most perceptive critic (Diamond/Conant 2004, 69) reinforces this impression. Sullivan is brilliant (and useful to resolute readers) at doing close readings of particular passages and pointing out problems of consistence (Sullivan 2003), but his own way of telling what the book is about looks fairly conventional, e.g. in stating that "it presents a philosophical system of the world" (Sullivan 2004, 32), and much less inspired than his critical work.

⁶⁶ As the subtitle explains the book deals with Wittgenstein's early "philosophy of logic and language" – the sequence of chapters does not include any extended discussions of the philosophical method of the book nor of the way it is written; even the question of internal and external relations is touched upon only rather briefly. Where McGinn does write about philosophical method this relates more to the *Investigations* than to the *Tractatus*.

⁶⁷ However, there are strong indications that precisely this narrowing down, expressed in strikingly paradoxical terms has earned the resolute reading much of the attention it has been receiving. It seems to establish the correctness of a thesis that at first blush seems simply unheard of – and by establishing it, the resolute reading appears sophisticated to a degree that makes everything else look pedestrian. – Of course, "establishing the correctness of a thesis" is quite out of tune with Wittgenstein's method of doing philosophy, early or late. This is a point of tension between method and "content" which is possibly resolved only in the fine print of some contributions.

⁶⁸ Actually, the piecemeal idea could be used to take some of the pressure off 6.54. It should best be regarded as one of many (almost) equally difficult and important remarks.

understand the bits and pieces only if we see them in the light of the big picture and his method of doing philosophy. The „piecemeal“ idea seems to run counter against this way of reading Wittgenstein.

Some of the fine work of Thomas Ricketts and Warren Goldfarb on the logical parts of the book, doing such piecemeal work, would be still more convincing if they did not approach things from a “technical” point of view that is too isolated from the most basic ideas of Wittgenstein.

They do not seem to find it so very important for their exegetical work to first get clear about the way Wittgenstein introduces operations together with the internal/external-distinction around 4.122 - and that is right at the heart of the book. Thus eventually they get things upside-down by looking for some “technical motivation” that would have led to the particular way of handling the ancestral and the introduction of numbers: For Wittgenstein the basic philosophical insight always comes first. So the first question should be: What is Wittgenstein doing in the 4s? rather than: How does he think about logicism and second order logic?

Attention on 6.54 also directs people’s attention *away* from the very text of the book. It is striking that there still exists no „resolute reading of the book“. There is much discussion on „how to read the book“ and also much work leading *around* the book and away from it. To understand „he who understands me“ as saying „he who understands me, in contradistinction to understanding the (propositions of) the book“ seems to rest on a misunderstanding. We need to understand the book - what else? In some important respects the resolute reading keeps readers *away* from doing it – writing about Wittgensteinianism rather than about Wittgenstein, or about the ethical or religious background, or about what it should be like to read Wittgenstein in the right way.⁶⁹

One example for such misplaced emphasis is Michael Kremer and his paper on the “Purpose of Tractarian Nonsense” (2001). He seems to feel obliged to look somewhere else for the meaning of “nonsensical” than in the book itself. So, instead of investigating the different ways the word „unsinnig“ and its family is used by Wittgenstein he goes for the ethical point of the book -- which is something interesting and important -- but stressing this point is something very different from *reading the book*. So, in the end, we learn not very much about the book itself but are led around it (along the outside) in a curious way.⁷⁰ If Kremer would have felt allowed to work his way through the book from beginning to end he might have come up with a natural reading for 6.54, putting this remark in the context of the book that precedes it. So, he feels obliged to place the book (or rather

⁶⁹ The three lists introduced in Conant 2007 seem more concerned with criticizing principles of other readers of the book than with developing tools to organize and read the book. They could be summarized as one list of *Tractatus* propositions (only) seemingly introducing some doctrine, another list of some general points which Wittgenstein also did not regard as doctrines but which expressed some non-trivial commitments, and a final list containing double-faced propositions that could be related either to the *Tractatus* or the *Investigations*. All lists express something of a general attitude but they do little to organize the book itself and to give it some fine structure (which is the point of the four groups of remarks introduced above).

⁷⁰ A similar strategy leads Kremer to answer the question concerning the „truth of solipsism“ by offering „the self-humbling of pride“ (Kremer 2004, 78), collecting various evidence from other sources to support this. Also, the “cardinal problem of philosophy”, in this light, does not refer to Wittgenstein’s distinction of saying and showing as a tool to solve the problems Russell and Wittgenstein discussed, but is rather seen as something to be dissolved itself because it can tempt us to speak of “inexpressible truths” (Kremer 2007, 162).

what he takes to be the point of the book: not the book itself) in the context of the remark 6.54. So the search for a resolute reading is actually keeping people from doing any reading of the book itself. -- Proceeding in such a way may result in a variety of *avoiding* reading the *Tractatus*. In a sense resolute readers seem to say: “We give you the reasons why this book cannot really be read.”⁷¹ One of the most basic ideas presented here is to say: yes, it can and should be read – and we have to be careful and coherent in doing it. In some of Cora Diamond’s papers it seems that she is forgetting about 6.54 and doing very much just that - only that she seems to be concerned with explaining one particular piece at a time, more or less disregarding the book and the particular way it is written.⁷²

There are also some external hints that we should not overemphasize 6.54. In his Vienna Circle conversations Wittgenstein talks of his former dogmatism and he singles out 6.53 as expressing his „method“ -- the one he advocated in the *Tractatus* (without practicing it) and the one which he wants to practice now. Also in his plagiarism letter of 1932 he states that the final remarks are especially important, and he more particularly expresses his belief that Carnap has lifted his „new“ ideas from there.⁷³ This complaint refers to 6.53: Wittgenstein thinks that Carnap’s material-formal mode distinction catches the basic point of this remark, so that Carnap actually practises the „correct method of philosophy“ without giving credit to Wittgenstein – hence Wittgenstein’s anger.⁷⁴ Thus Wittgenstein places much more emphasis on 6.53 than on 6.54.⁷⁵ Thus 6.54 is a comment on 6.53; and it also echoes it in contrasting the sentences the person from 6.53 would say against “my sentences” – this is another detail disregarded by readers putting much emphasis on “understanding me”.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Thus it might be more appropriate to speak of a “resolute approach” than a “resolute reading”.

⁷² The spirit of Diamond’s best work actually seem quite opposed to most of what the „resolute reading“ is known for. She typically picks out some particular sentence she finds problematic and unravels the background leading up to some paradoxical or misguided statement quite without putting forward any kind of general thesis on her own. Compare in particular the fine papers Diamond 2001 and 2004. This method very much resembles later Wittgenstein’s way of doing philosophy as exemplified in the lectures on the foundations of mathematics, edited by Diamond in 1976. A core element of that method consists in dissolving paradoxically sounding statements by leading language back to ordinary use in such a way that everything extraordinary or even paradoxical disappears from our own way of expression. In the light of these observations it seems quite remarkable, even paradoxical, that Cora Diamond should be situated at the core of an approach leading to interpretations that to most readers do seem paradoxical. It may turn out to be that her best work is only very loosely connected to the “Great Nonsense Reading” by simply observing that when Wittgenstein writes “nonsense” he usually does mean “nonsense”. However, this could be understood much more locally than it is usually taken. The bulk of her work addresses issues in the spirit of later Wittgenstein and the main tenets of the “resolute reading” (if such a reading is no chimera) seem derived from a number of her scattered more general remarks.

⁷³ Letter to Schlick, May 6, 1932.

⁷⁴ Remark 6.54 would seem an unlikely target because Carnap had no use for it and he explicitly rejected it. Of course, he did not understand this remark very well in rejecting it, but that is another matter. Kienzler 2008 discusses the Wittgenstein-Carnap controversy in the light of the opposing philosophical styles elucidated above.

⁷⁵ Note that 6.53 is about the “correct method to do philosophy” while 6.54 makes a remark about philosophy as it is laid down in books (or for that matter, in one particular book). The more interesting claim would be to state that *every* philosophical book is made up of such nonsensical propositions – then the *Tractatus* would no longer stand alone and it would no longer be an embarrassment for Wittgenstein but for everybody writing a philosophical book. This, too, might change the focus of much discussion: Wittgenstein is not pointing out some spectacular or peculiar feature of his own book but rather makes an important but passing remark about the notion of a philosophical book.

⁷⁶ In 1932 Wittgenstein felt „unable to imagine“ that Carnap had completely misunderstood that remark. This means that he believed that Carnap had not only understood it but he had also put it to use. Conant repeatedly (see e.g. Conant 2002, 378, also n. 9 and n. 99) mistranslates that sentence, reversing the sense.

6. Conclusion: Core commitments of an adequate reading

Turning to the „core commitments“ of an adequate reading of the book: Readers have been looking in the wrong places and combining pieces that do not fit well. The idea that there is to be no „doctrine“ in the book is something very basic, but the idea that 6.54 must be taken literally is not nearly of the same importance, besides being mistaken. A convincing reading that would state that 6.54 is actually something of a joke not to be taken *too* seriously (and giving reasons for doing so) would seemingly not qualify to be a „resolute reading“-- but some such result might not be too far off the mark.

In the light of the present suggestions the core commitment would be something like this: Make as much sense of the book as a whole as possible by giving the maximally clear reading from beginning to end and explaining what Wittgenstein is doing on his way from 1 to 7! Also you should give us a good story about the unity of the book -- i.e. why did Wittgenstein think that he was really explaining more or less one point, and how could we express this point? How could he say that everything can be said in three words? A good thing would be to start from things Wittgenstein calls his central ideas, not from some isolated hard-to-make-out remarks.

The answer might run something like this: Wittgenstein is trying to explain to us some very basic and elementary points about the logic of our language, especially about the distinction between external and internal properties -- it is this distinction above all that sets Wittgenstein's view very much apart from everything Frege and Russell did. One very important point concerns the nature of Wittgenstein's approach, and of the language that he uses. Readers stressing 6.54 feel forced to see Wittgenstein as working with his sentences on *two* levels at the same time in order to prevent the whole book to collapse into a giant piece of nonsense. The basic idea here is that we are *not* supposed to take the sentences in the book at face value but rather as being carefully constructed to be different from the way they at first appear to be. This idea then unfolds into different variants: The sentences could be saying „nonsense“ but showing something important by doing it; or, they could be taken to be ironical; or, finally, they can be taken to build up an illusion of sense which is to be destructed afterwards (there can be different ways here, too, according to when the collapse is to occur: along the way or only at the end). In an extreme version the book could then be compared to a long, complicated joke.⁷⁷ But the result from reading the *Tractatus* is *not* intended to be of that kind.⁷⁸

A new proposal for a „core commitment“ is that, unless we have strong local indications to the contrary, we are to read the book as much as possible at face value⁷⁹ and to treat it as being written

⁷⁷ See Conant 1991, 160 for such a joke-like parable. One may also think of the numbering system that has been a puzzle to many, Max Black conjecturing it to be a “joke at the expense of the reader” (Black 1964, 7). However, Wittgenstein wrote to von Ficker that it gave the book coherence and clarity and Stenius aptly compared it to the way music is organized (Stenius 1960, 5). The numbering serves as an aid in highlighting the structure of the whole, making it as clear as possible – nothing exact and pedestrian about it. Also, it is not designed to give it an ironical look like a textbook: the numbers are there to do some work, not to be some kind of joke or ornament. To Wittgenstein, such an ornament would indeed be a crime. Cf. the famous article by Loos.

⁷⁸ The distinction between frame and body also supports such double-talk-interpretation - actually however it seems to be forced upon resolute readers to make such a double standard available in the first place.

⁷⁹ This does not include that we have to take the book to be relating facts: Wittgenstein is nor using his own language in

as nearly as possible in colloquial, everyday language. Wittgenstein claims to tell us everything that is philosophically important in three words; he is trying to explain some important distinctions to us that have been blocking the clear view on the logic of language, not just doing something that helps us see “the sources of metaphysics” (Conant). This is not putting forward a doctrine but just intended as some help in seeing things in the right way for ourselves: it is basically simple stuff, not theory.

Appendix: A Piece of Future Historiography: Three Ways to Approach the *Tractatus*

In this suggestion the main steps are distinguished according to the way the language of the book is understood, not in relation to any more specialized exegetical point. This leads to a somewhat unusual grouping of approaches.

The Textbook Reading (naïve)

Early readers tried to read it like a textbook and to extract its doctrine by following its supposed terminology. A technical use of the main notions is presupposed. In addition, much is read in a very much everyday („naïve) fashion. A partial exception is Carnap who in *Logical Syntax of Language* tries to resolutely stick to the idea that philosophy is not putting forward any doctrine and who produces some very interesting „translations“ into the „formal mode“ of speaking, but who does not quite succeed in explaining what this amounts to.

Double Language Readings (varieties of irony)

More sophisticated readings tried to create room for the pronouncement in 6.54 that the propositions of the book are „unsinnig“. The „core commitment“ of these readings (which is usually not recognized as such) consists in putting excessive emphasis on 6.54, stating that this is the key to understanding the book.⁸⁰ These readings, whether resolute or not, introduce some device to the effect that all or at least very much of the book is not intended to be read as it is written. We find distinctions of illuminating and misleading nonsense, some remarks that are to be taken as nonsensical yet showing something, or they are to be taken as building up some illusion of sense. This double standard is sometimes called „ironical“ (McGuinness) and compared to Kierkegaard (Conant), or the reader is invited to perceive what the propositions (seem to) say and what they show (their usually defective logical form) at the same time, thus making for a dissolution of the supposed sense.⁸¹

Everyday Language Reading (clarity)

such a restrictive mode consisting mainly of declarative sentences. He wants to convey a point of view not some facts about the world, and thus he is writing more like Karl Kraus than Bertrand Russell.

⁸⁰ Hacker 2000, 357 justly and critically emphasizes this point.

⁸¹ It may be noted that Karl Kraus expressly rejected irony in his famous pamphlet on “Heine and the Consequences”, Kraus 1986, Vol. 4, 185-210, endorsing Nestroy’s kind of humour instead (*Nestroy and Posterity* 1912). This pamphlet also includes the Nestroy quote later used as a motto for the *Investigations*. From his use of the Kürnberger motto we may infer that Wittgenstein was a follower of Kraus in this, too, putting simplicity above irony. The things he wanted to communicate were, as they were, complicated and difficult enough to express.

If the point of departure is taken from the beginning and not the end of the book we find the reader invited to read the propositions in a very much colloquial, everyday manner. The book aims at clarity. If we start at the beginning we are led to the 4s as the heart of the book and from there we will be able to put 6.54 and all the other remarks in their proper place. „Clear“, not „nonsense“ is the key notion to the book; and „elucidation“ is systematically and even etymologically just a variant of „clarification”.

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