THE GREAT CONVERSATION

A Historical Introduction to Philosophy

Fourth Edition

Norman Melchert

Virginia Commonwealth University

"ANALYSIS"

For Richard, Clark, and Emmy Ray

Cover: *The School of Athens* by Raphael, fresco, 1510–11, Papal Apartments,
the Vatican, Rome. Scala/Art Resource. Raphael represents philosophers and
scientists from various periods and places as though they were all involved in
one great conversation.

Text and photo credits appear on page C-1, which constitutes a continuation of
the copyright page.

uld we be naturalists? Are

roblem solving?
he quest for certainty?
cisms of empiricism? Of
owledge?
ue of scientism?
n?
and chairs events with
meaning, or are there

alue? How does Dewey
origin, the valuable is not
en to like?
between ends-in-view and
es Dewey think that means
ated?
s rise to the peculiarly mod-
ues, how does pragmatism
roblem? And what role does
e resolution?

er Thought

h urge fallibilism, giving up
. Imagine that our culture
t would be the result? Do
e mostly good or mostly

we human beings are, with-
of the natural world ex-
;—not thinking souls (Plato,
f perceptions (Hume), nou-
or the World Spirit on its
1 (Hegel). Why should we
of all this philosophical

Notes

1. References to the works of Charles Sanders Peirce are as follows:
   FB: "The Fixation of Belief;" *HMIC:* "How to Make Our Ideas Clear;" *WPI:* "What Pragmatism Is;" *SCFI:* "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities;" and *SP:* "Survey of Pragmatism," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce,* ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College, 1934).
2. Note added by Peirce in 1903 to "The Fixation of Belief," in Hartshorne and Weiss, *Collected Papers,* 232.
3. Epigraph (translated from the German) to W. V. O. Quine's *Word and Object* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960).
4. References to the works of John Dewey are as follows:
   FAE: "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," and *NRP,* "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *Dewey: On Experience, Nature, and Freedom,* ed. Richard Bernstein (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960).
   IDP: "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works (1899–1924),* vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977).
   QCO: The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action (1929; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, Capricorn Books, 1960).
   HWT: How We Think (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1933).
   EN: Experience and Nature (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1929).
   TV: Theory of Valuation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

Chapter Twenty-Two

Analysis
Logical Atomism and the Logical Positivists

ONE OF THE MAJOR interests in twentieth-century philosophy is language. At first glance, this may seem puzzling, but a second look suggests that it is not so surprising. Our scientific theories, our religious and philosophical views, and our commonsense understandings are all expressed in language. Whenever we try to communicate with someone about a matter of any importance, it is language that carries the freight. What if there were something *misleading* about the language in which we think? What if it set traps for us, catapulted us into errors without our even realizing it? Perhaps we ought not to trust it at all.

Actually, this suspicion is a sort of subtext running through modern philosophy. Descartes notes that we naturally *say* that we "see" men passing by, but the truth is we see only colors and shapes; we "judge" that these are men. So our language misleads us. Hobbes tells us that words are the money of fools who think they can buy truth with them, but that the wise are not deceived. One of the four books of Locke's *Essays* is titled "Of Words." Berkeley claims we have misunderstood how general terms work. Hume thinks that language deludes us into identifying as ideas what are

merely fictions or illusions. Kant holds that we do not understand how words such as "substance" or "cause" or "I" actually work. Nietzsche thinks nearly all of traditional philosophy is a house of cards built from misleading words. Peirce says his pragmatism is nothing but a doctrine of meaning and explores the geography of the land of signs. Only in our century, however, does attention to language become a major preoccupation of philosophers, both on the European continent and in the Anglo-American world. The interest in language has been so dominant that some speak of "the linguistic turn" in philosophy.

In this chapter and the next we examine two phases of this interest in language. These two phases are often called *analytic philosophy* and *ordinary language philosophy.* Both are complex movements involving many thinkers, and one could get a taste of these styles of doing philosophy in a number of ways. I have chosen to focus on one remarkable thinker, Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom many would cite as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. He has had, and continues to have, a pervasive influence on philosophical thought. Surprisingly, he can stand as an emblem for *both* of these

phases. In Wittgenstein's change of mind and his severe critique of his own earlier analytic thought, we can see how attention to language in its *ordinary* employment tends to supplant the earlier attraction to constructing an *ideal* language. Wittgenstein is also interesting because he is not just interested in language—or even just in traditional philosophical problems; his passionate concern from first to last is, *How shall we live?* But first we need a little background.

Language and Its Logic

To understand analytic philosophy, we need to know at least a bit about modern logic. It is a tool of very great power, incredibly magnified in our day by the speed and storage capacities of the digital computer. Every college and university now teaches this "formal," or "symbolic," logic, which was developed in the period near the turn of the last century by Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and others.

The power of the new logic derives from abstracting completely from the meaning or semantic content of assertions. It is a *formal* logic in just this sense: The rules governing transformations from one symbolic formula to another make reference only to the syntactical structures of the formulas in question and not at all to their meaning. Aristotle's logic of the syllogism, of course, is formal in this same sense.* But it is oversimple. The new logic provides a symbolism for the internal structure of sentences that is enormously more powerful than Aristotle's. It can also deal with a more complex set of relations among sentences. For the first time, it really seems plausible that whatever you might want to say can be represented in this formalism. Because this logic abstracts entirely from content, it can be used with equal profit in any

field, from operations research to theology. It can show us what follows from certain premises, which assertions are inconsistent with each other, and so on. Being formal in this sense, it sets out a kind of logical skeleton that can be fleshed out in any number of ways, while preserving the logical relations precisely.

The prospect opened up by the new logic is that of a language more precise and clear than the language we normally speak—a purified, *ideal language,* in which there is no ambiguity, no vagueness, no dependence on emphasis, intonation, or the many other features of our language that may mislead us and that are inessential for representing the truth. Bertrand Russell expresses the appeal of such a language in this way:

> In a logically perfect language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact, with the exception of such words as "or," "not," "if," "then," which have a different function. In a logically perfect language, there will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words, by a combination derived, of course, from the words for the simple things that enter in, one word for each simple component. A language of that sort will be completely analytic, and will show at a glance the logical structure of the facts asserted or denied. The language which is set forth in *Principia Mathematica* is intended to be a language of that sort.* It is a language which has only syntax and no vocabulary whatever. Barring the omission of a vocabulary, I maintain that it is quite a nice language. It aims at being that sort of a language that, if you add a vocabulary, would be a logically perfect language. Actual languages are not logically perfect in this sense, and they cannot possibly be, if they are to serve the purposes of daily life.[1]

Two complementary ideas make the new logic of particular interest to philosophers. The first is

the conviction that natural language, such as ordinary English, does not in fact possess this sort of perfection. The language we normally speak is full of vagueness, ambiguity, and confusion. It is by no means what Russell calls "a logically perfect language." The second idea is the suspicion that these tawdry features of our natural languages tend to lead us astray, particularly when we think about philosophical matters, which are always at some conceptual distance from everyday talk "of shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings."

So the dazzling idea of applying the new logic to traditional philosophical problems takes root in the imagination of many philosophers. Perhaps, if we could formulate these problems in terms of the crystalline purity of these formal logical structures, they could finally—after all these centuries—be definitively solved. The excitement is great. And indeed some very impressive analyses of puzzling uses of language are produced.

As an example, let us consider Russell's "theory of definite descriptions." A *definite description* is a phrase of the form, "the so-and-so." Some sentences containing phrases of this form have a paradoxical character. Consider this sentence: "The golden mountain (that is, a mountain wholly made of pure gold) does not exist." We think this is a true sentence, don't we? You couldn't find a mountain made of gold anywhere. But now ask yourself: How can it be *true* that the golden mountain doesn't exist unless this definite description, "the golden mountain," is *meaningful?* (Meaning seems to be a prerequisite for truth; if a term lacks meaning you don't even know what it is that is true!) And how can that phrase be meaningful unless there is something that it means? And if there *is* something that it means—why, then, there must be a golden mountain after all. So the original sentence seems to be *false,* not true. So it looks as if the sentence, if true, is false. And that's a paradox.

Russell applies the new logic to this puzzle and shows how it can be made to disappear. The solution goes like this. We go wrong in thinking of the phrase "the golden mountain" as a *name.* It is true that for a name such as "Socrates" or "New

York" to be meaningful, there must be something that they name.* Although definite descriptions *look* like names, they actually have the *logic* of predications. If we can get clear about the logic of such phrases, we will clear up our confusion.

According to Russell, to say, "The golden mountain does not exist," is equivalent to saying, "There exists no thing that has both of these properties: being golden and being a mountain." In the language of formal logic, this is expressed as follows: $\sim(\exists x)(Gx \,\&\, Mx)$. In this formula, it is crystal clear that the "G" (for golden) and the "M" (for mountain) are in the predicate position. There are, in fact, no names in it at all—not even the occurrences of the letter "x," which function as variables ranging over everything. In effect, the formula invites you to consider each and every thing and assures you with respect to it: This is not both golden and a mountain. And that statement is both true and unparadoxical.

So by getting clear about the *logic* of the language in which the puzzle is stated, we get ourselves into a position to understand that language in a clear and unpuzzling way. We see that it is just a confusion to think that this language commits us to the existence of a golden mountain. Of great importance, however, is that we also identify the *source* of the confusion—which lies very naturally in the language itself. Phrases such as "the golden mountain" *do* look like *names.*

This analysis has a great impact on many philosophers, and a sort of cottage industry develops in which bits of language are analyzed in similar

---

*See pp. 165–167. For the distinction between syntax and semantics, see pp. 590–591.

* *Principia Mathematica,* written by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead between 1910 and 1913, is a classic of modern logic.

*You might think at this point, "Whoa—I know that's not true; 'Santa Claus' is a name, but there isn't anything that it names!" But Russell holds that "Santa Claus" is not a true name; it is shorthand for "the fat, jolly, bearded man who flies through the air on a sleigh and brings presents to children at Christmas time." And that is a definite description, subject to the same analysis as "the golden mountain." True names *do* name something. (In some moods, Russell thinks that even "Socrates" is not a true name, but a disguised description; when he is thinking along these lines, he is inclined to say that the only true names are terms such as "this" and "that.")

BERTRAND RUSSELL

Over a long lifetime (1872–1970), Bertrand Russell wrote on nearly every conceivable topic. His books range from *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Limits* (1948) to *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930) and *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (1959). In 1950 he was awarded a Nobel Prize for literature. A pacifist during World War I, Russell was active in social causes all his life. Three passions, he said, governed his life: a longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind.

Though his views changed and developed on some topics, he was consistent in wishing philosophy to become more scientific. As one of the major contributors to the new logic, he held that traditional philosophical problems either are not properly the business of philosophy at all (and should be farmed out to the sciences) or are problems of logic. As a maxim for scientific philosophizing, Russell recommended that logical constructions replace inferences whenever possible.

Consider, for example, our knowledge of the external world; suppose I think I am now seeing a table. What I have directly in my acquaintance is a "sense datum"—some brownish, trapezoidal, visual figure or a tactual feeling of resistance. Common sense (and philosophy, too) characteristically *infers* from such data the existence of a table quite independent of my evidence for it. But such inferences are notoriously unreliable and lead easily to skeptical conclusions.

Russell suggested that my knowledge of the table should rather be *constructed* in terms of logical relations among all the sense data (actual and possible) that, in ordinary speech, we would say are "of" the table. Thus the inference to the table external to my evidence is replaced by a set of relations among the data constituting that evidence. About those items, skeptical problems do not arise.

In matters of ethics, Russell took a utilitarian line, holding that right actions are those that produce the greatest overall satisfaction. With respect to religion, he was an agnostic. He was once asked what he would say if after his death he found himself confronted with his Maker. He replied that he would say, "God, why did you make the evidence for your existence so insufficient?"

---

*Think, for example, of what might happen to Plato's semantic argument for the reality of the Forms (p. 123), if understood in this light. His argument is that terms such as "square" and "equal" do not name anything in the visible world, yet they are meaningful. So they must name something in the intelligible world. But if what Plato takes to be a *name* has the logic of a *predicate*, the whole argument for the Forms on this basis falls to the ground.

fashion, trying to show how we are misled by misreading the logic of our language. The suspicion grows that many of the traditional problems of philosophy have their origin in such misreadings. The prospect opens up that some, at least, of these problems in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics can be cleared up and perhaps even made to completely disappear.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein:
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

In 1889 a son was born into the wealthy and talented Wittgenstein family of Vienna. He grew up in an atmosphere of high culture; the most prominent composers, writers, architects, and artists of that great city were regular visitors to his home. His father was an engineer and industrialist, his mother was very musical, and Ludwig was talented both mechanically and musically. It was also, however, a troubled family; there were several suicides among his siblings. He himself seems to have struggled against mental illness most of his life.

Having decided to study engineering, he went first to Berlin and then to Manchester, England, where he did some experiments with kites and worked on the design of an airplane propeller. This work drew his interests toward pure mathematics and eventually to the foundations of mathematics. The early years of the twentieth century, as we have seen, were a time of exciting developments in logic and the foundations of mathematics.

It was apparently Frege who advised Wittgenstein to go to Cambridge, England, to study with Russell, which he did in the fall of 1911. Russell tells a story about Wittgenstein's first year there.

> At the end of his first term at Cambridge he came to me and said: "Will you please tell me whether I am a complete idiot or not?" I replied, "My dear fellow, I don't know. Why are you asking me?" He said, "Because, if I am a complete idiot, I shall become an aeronaut; but if not, I shall become a philosopher." I told him to write me something during the vacation on some philosophical subject and I would then tell him whether he was a complete idiot or not. At the beginning of the following term he brought me the fulfillment of this suggestion. After reading only one sentence, I said to him: "No, you must not become an aeronaut." [2]

When the war broke out in 1914, Wittgenstein was working on a manuscript that was to become the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He served in the Austrian army and spent the better part of a year in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, where he finished writing this dense, aphoristic little work that deals with everything from logic to happiness. After the war, he gave away the fortune he had inherited from his father, designating part of it for the support of artists and poets. He considered that he had set out in the *Tractatus* the final solution of the problems addressed there and left philosophy to teach school in remote Austrian villages. He lived, at that time and afterward, in severe simplicity and austerity.

His days as a schoolmaster did not last long, however, and for a time he worked as a gardener in a monastery. Then he took the lead in designing and building a mansion in Vienna for one of his sisters. Eventually, through conversations with friends, he came to recognize what he thought were grave mistakes in the *Tractatus* and to think he

"At some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description."

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

might be able to do good work in philosophy again. He was invited back to Cambridge in 1929, where he submitted the *Tractatus*—by then published and widely read—as his dissertation.

He lectured there (except for a time during the Second World War) until shortly before his death in 1951. He published nothing else in his lifetime, though several manuscripts circulated informally. A second major book, *Philosophical Investigations*, was published posthumously in 1953. Since then, many other works have been published from notes and writings he left. This later work is the subject of our next chapter.

Subsequent developments leave no doubt that Wittgenstein is one of the century's deepest thinkers. He is also one of the most complex and fascinating human beings to have contributed to philosophy since Socrates. [3] Wittgenstein's concerns early in life are fundamentally moral and spiritual; the most important question of all, he believes, is *how to live.* As we'll see, however, he also believes there is very little one can *say* about that problem.

In fact, he thinks getting clear about what one cannot say is just about the most important thing we can do.

Like a number of other Viennese in the early decades of the twentieth century, he is repelled by the degree to which the hypocritical, the artificial, the ornate and merely decorative, the false and pretentious, and the striving for *effect* characterizes politics, daily life, and art at this time. He is a kindred spirit of the revolt that includes Arnold Schönberg in music and Adolf Loos in architecture. An austere lucidity and ruthless honesty are the values Wittgenstein sets against the confusion of the age. It is not, perhaps, accidental that he masters the new logic of Frege and Russell and becomes an important contributor to it. He sees in it the key by which certain fundamental problems of life and culture can be definitively solved. He also shares the feeling that the new logic might make *all* the difference for philosophy. In the preface to the *Tractatus*, he writes,

> The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence. (*Tractatus*, preface, 3)[4]

Wittgenstein's thought here is a radical one indeed: The posing of the problems of philosophy is itself the problem! If we can just get clear about "the logic of our language," these problems will disappear. They will be part of "what we cannot talk about." About them we must be silent.*

How will getting clear about the logic of our language produce such a startling result? If we get clear about the logic of our language, Wittgenstein

---

*Those of you who know something of Zen may detect a familiar note here. So far as I know, Wittgenstein never discusses Zen—his concern is for problems, not schools of thought. But you would not go far wrong to think of him as a kind of Zen master for the West—especially in his later thought, the subject of the next chapter.

thinks, we will see what the *limits* of language are. We will also see that thinkers violate those limits whenever they pose and try to answer the sorts of problems we call philosophical.

> Thus the aim of the book is to set a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e., we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).
>
> It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense. (*Tractatus*, preface, 3)

This has a somewhat Kantian ring to it, and it is worth taking a moment to compare it to Kant's view of the limits of knowledge. You will recall that Kant sets himself to uncover the limits of rational knowledge and thinks to accomplish that by a critique of reason. Knowledge, Kant holds, is a product of a priori concepts and principles supplied by reason on the one hand and of intuitive material supplied by sensibility on the other. Its domain is *phenomena*, the realm of possible experience. Beyond this are things-in-themselves (*noumena*), thinkable, perhaps, but unknowable by us. Knowledge, Kant believes, has definite limits; and we can know what these are.*

Wittgenstein's strategy in the *Tractatus* bears a family resemblance to this Kantian project, but it is more radical on two counts: (1) It aims to set a limit not just to knowledge, but also to thought itself; and (2) what lies on the other side of that limit is *not in any way thinkable*. Wittgenstein calls it "nonsense."

He refers, rather opaquely, to a problem standing in the way of such a strategy. In drawing boundaries, we draw a line and say, for example: Here, on this side, is Gary's land; there, on that side, is Genevieve's. But as this example shows, drawing ordinary boundaries or setting ordinary limits presupposes that both sides are thinkable,

---

*A quick review of Kant's Copernican revolution and the idea of critique will bring this back to mind. See pp. 431–434.

perhaps even experienceable or knowable. How, then, is it possible to set a limit to *thought?* To do so, it would seem we would have to "think what cannot be thought," survey what is on the other side of the boundary line, if only to know what it is we intend to exclude. Wittgenstein's ingenious notion, which we explore in the next section, is that this limit setting must be done in language—and *from inside* language. He thinks he has found a way to draw the line, which doesn't require having to *say* in language what is excluded, what lies outside the limit. One can set the limit, he thinks, by working outward from the center through what *can* be said. The center is defined by what a language *is*, by the *essence* of language. What lies out beyond the boundary simply *shows itself* to be linguistic nonsense.
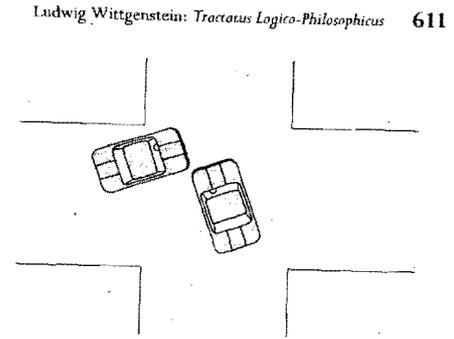
Here are the first two sentences in Wittgenstein's youthful work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

1.   The world is all that is the case.
1.1   The world is the totality of facts, not of things.*

These sayings, announced so bluntly, may seem dark, but the key to unlock these mysteries is at hand: the new logic. Wittgenstein believes that he can use this logic to reveal the *essence of language*, and the essence of language *shows* us what the world must be. But this needs explanation.

Picturing

What is language? We are told that Wittgenstein's thinking about this question takes a decisive turn when he sees a diagram in a magazine story about an auto accident. Let us suppose it looked like this:

---

*The *Tractatus* is arranged in short, aphoristic sentences, or small groups of sentences that express a complete thought. These sentences are numbered according to the following scheme. There are seven main aphorisms, 1, 2, 3, and so on. 1.1 is supposed to be a comment on or an explanation of 1; 1.11 is to play the same role with respect to 1.1. It must be admitted that this elegant scheme is sometimes difficult to interpret.

This diagram, we can say, pictures a *state of affairs*. It may not, of course, accurately represent what really happened. Let us call the actual state of affairs the *facts*. We can then say that this is a picture of a **possible state of affairs**—a picture of what might have been the facts. (We can imagine the lawyers on each side presenting contrasting pictures of the accident.)

2.1   We picture facts to ourselves.
2.12   A picture is a model of reality.
2.131   In a picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects.
2.14   What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way.
2.141   A picture is a fact.

The preceding diagram is itself a fact: It is made up of actual elements (lines on the page) that are related to each other in certain ways. Moreover, each element in the diagram *represents* some object in the world (the edges of the streets, cars). So this fact pictures another (possible) fact: the way the objects here represented were actually (or possibly) related to each other at a certain time and place.

Every picture has a certain *structure*. By "structure," Wittgenstein means the way its elements are related to each other. Two pictures that are different in many ways might still have a similar structure. Imagine, for instance, a color photograph taken from a helicopter hovering over the corner just after the accident. The elements of this

picture (blobs of color) are quite different from the elements of our drawing (black lines on a white background). But if our drawing is accurate, the two pictures have similar structures: Their elements are related to each other in similar ways.

Furthermore, the two pictures not only have similar structures but also have something in common: what Wittgenstein calls **pictorial form.** It is important to note that pictorial form is not another element in addition to the lines in our drawing or the colors in the photograph, nor is it the actual structure of these two pictures. Rather, pictorial form is the *possibility* that a picture might actually have just this structure, that elements of some sort might actually be arranged in just this way. There needn't ever have been a picture, or a fact, with elements related to each other like this. But even if there never had been, there *could* have been. This possibility, actualized in our diagram, might also be actualized in many more pictures of the same state of affairs. All these pictures would have the *same* pictorial form.

But it is not just similar pictures that share the same form.

2.16   If a fact is to be a picture, it must have something in common with what it depicts.

2.161   There must be something identical in a picture and what it depicts, to enable the one to be a picture of the other at all.

2.17   What a picture must have in common with reality, in order to be able to depict it—correctly or incorrectly—in the way it does, is its pictorial form.

Pictures and *what is pictured* by them (e.g., the possible accident itself) must also share the same form.

So far we have been thinking of spatial pictures of spatial objects. But there are other kinds of pictures, too. We can, for instance, think of an orchestra score as a picture; this is a spatial picture (the notes are laid out next to each other on a page), but what it primarily pictures is not spatial, but temporal: the succession of sounds the orchestra plays in a performance. Yet a score is also a

picture, in Wittgenstein's sense, of the grooves in a recording of the work and of the magnetic tracings on a tape or compact disc. And we could think of the grooves in a recording as in turn a picture of the sound produced when it is played (see *Tractatus*, 4.0141). So while we tend to use the word "picture" rather narrowly, the concept applies very widely. Wherever there are objects in relation representing other objects, there is a Wittgensteinian picture.

Every picture, Wittgenstein claims, is a *logical* picture. And logical pictures can depict the world (*Tractatus*, 2.19). As we have seen, a picture may represent reality correctly or incorrectly. That is why Wittgenstein says that logical pictures *can* depict the world: They depict ways the world might be—possible states of affairs.

If we think of a certain two-dimensional space, such as a desk top, we can see that there are a variety of possible ways the books on it can be arranged. Analogously, we can think of *logical space*. Logical space consists of all the *possibilities* there are for all the *objects* there are to be related to each other in all the *possibly different* ways there are. Logical space, then, comprises the form not only of all the actual states of affairs but also of all possible states of affairs. Given this notion of logical space, we can say,

2.202   A picture represents a possible situation in logical space.

Some pictures represent reality correctly, and others don't. How can we tell whether what a picture tells us is true?

2.22   What a picture represents it represents independently of its truth or falsity, by means of its pictorial form.

2.223   In order to tell whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality.

2.224   It is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false.

2.225   There are no pictures that are true *a priori*.

You can't tell just by looking at our accident diagram, no matter how microscopically you

inspect it, whether it represents the accident correctly. And this is the case with *all* pictures, Wittgenstein says. A *true* picture is one that represents a possible state of affairs that is also actual. And actual states of affairs are *facts*. So a true picture depicts the facts. If there were a picture that was true a priori (independent of experience), you wouldn't have to "compare it with reality" to tell whether it was true; you could discover the facts just by examining the picture. But that, Wittgenstein says, is precisely what is not possible. To tell whether a picture is true (represents the facts correctly), you have to check its fit with the facts. In no case can we tell a priori whether a picture is true. This is an extremely important feature of pictures.*

Thought and Language

Among the logical pictures, there is one sort that is of particular significance:

3.   A logical picture of facts is a thought.

3.001   'A state of affairs is thinkable': what this means is that we can picture it to ourselves.

3.01   The totality of true thoughts is a picture of the world.

3.02   A thought contains the possibility of the situation of which it is the thought. What is thinkable is possible too.

Our thoughts, then, are pictures, too. And, being pictures, they have all the characteristics of pictures we noted earlier: They are composed of elements in a certain arrangement, so they are facts with a certain structure; in virtue of that, they possess pictorial form; they represent possible states

---

*If Wittgenstein is right, rationalist attempts to say what the world must be like based on reason alone must be mistaken. No matter how "clear and distinct" one of Descartes' ideas is, for instance, one can't deduce from this that it is true. By stressing that there are no pictures that are true a priori, Wittgenstein expresses one version of empiricism. Compare Hume, pp. 408–409.

of affairs; and they share their pictorial and logical form with what they represent.

And now comes a crucial point:

3.1   In a proposition a thought finds an expression that can be perceived by the senses.

3.11   We use the perceptible sign of a proposition (spoken or written, etc.) as a projection of a possible situation.

So thought finds its expression in perceptible signs, or sentences—that is, in *language*. Now we can understand why Wittgenstein thinks he can set a limit to thought by finding the limits of language. It is in language that thought is expressed. If there are limits to what language can express, these will be the limits of thought as well.

But what is a propositional sign, a sentence? Like all pictures, it is a fact, an arrangement of objects.

3.1431   The essence of a propositional sign is very clearly seen if we imagine one composed of spatial objects (such as tables, chairs, and books) instead of written signs.
Then the spatial arrangement of these things will express the sense of the proposition.

For instance, suppose you want to picture the fact that Sarah is standing to the east of Ralph. You might use a table to represent Sarah and a chair to represent Ralph. By putting the table to the east of the chair, you can picture the fact in question. This shows us, Wittgenstein says, "the essence of a propositional sign." What he means is that written or spoken sentences are like this, too; they are made up of elements standing in certain relations.

But it is not obvious that they are like this.

4.002   Everyday language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it.
It is not humanly possible to gather immediately from it what the logic of language is.
Language disguises thought.

The *essence* of language is hidden, "disguised." Yet it is something that can be disclosed, or shown. What reveals the hidden essence of language? *Logic.* Wittgenstein agrees with Russell that the superficial grammar of what we say may not be a good indication of the logic of what we say. And he holds that the new logic displays for us the internal structure, the essence of language. Still, he is not tempted to discard our natural languages (German or English, for example) in favor of some artificially created "ideal" language. Nor does he have any inclination to reform our language in the direction of some postulated ideal. Because the languages we speak are *languages,* they too must exemplify the essence of language. So logic must reside even there, in the heart of our confusing, vague, and ambiguous languages. What we need is not to junk them in favor of some ideal, but to understand them.

5.5563   In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order.

If they weren't, they wouldn't constitute a language!

But because "language disguises thought," the logical structure of our language is not apparent. To bring it to light we need *analysis.* What sort of analysis, then, can we give of a sentence? We already have the elements of an answer in hand. A sentence is a picture, and we know that a picture, like all facts, is composed of elements set in a certain structure. So there must be elements and a structure in every sentence. It only remains to determine what they are.

Let's consider again the sentence "Sarah is to the east of Ralph." We saw that this could be represented by one object in relation to another, a table and a chair, for instance. The table would in effect be a kind of name for Sarah, and the chair a name for Ralph. Wittgenstein concludes that the *only* elements needed in a language are names. Everything else——all the adjectives and prepositions, for instance——are inessential. If sentences were completely analyzed into their basic ele-

ments, all this would disappear. What would be left would be names in a structure.*

3.202   The simple signs employed in propositions are called names.

3.203   A name means an object. The object is its meaning. . . . .

3.26   A name cannot be dissected any further by means of a definition: it is a primitive sign.

As you can see, there would be a very great difference between the "look" of a completely analyzed propositional sign and our ordinary sentences. One might have a hard time even recognizing the complete analysis of a familiar sentence, particularly because the names in question have to be *simple* signs. What we take to be names in ordinary language are invariably complex; they can be "dissected . . . by means of a definition." "George Washington," for instance, is a shorthand expression for "the first president of the United States" (and many other descriptions). These descriptions themselves need to be analyzed if we are to get to the roots of things to understand how language pictures the world.

If we could get to that level of clarity, Wittgenstein thinks, we would see that sentences are composed of names in a logical structure. And names are *simple.* They cannot be further analyzed or "dissected." The meaning of a name cannot be given in a definition using other linguistic elements; the meaning of a name is the object it stands for.†

Now we are ready to go back to the beginning and understand those first mysterious proposi-

---

*Here is a rough analogy. Certain notations in mathematics are merely a convenience and could be eliminated without diminishing the science. For instance, x^3 is just $x \cdot x \cdot x$, and $4y$ can be defined as $y + y + y + y$. So Wittgenstein thinks names standing in certain relations will express whatever we want to express, though we usually use more economical means.

†It is worth noting that Wittgenstein does not offer any examples of these simple names in the *Tractatus.* He argues that such names must be implicit in our language and ultimately reachable by analysis; but just what they are——and what they name——is something of a mystery.

---

tions of the *Tractatus.* Just as sentences represent possible states of affairs, true sentences represent facts. True sentences, moreover, are made up of names, and names stand for objects. But a sentence isn't just a list of names; it has an internal structure. And a fact isn't just a jumble of things; it has the same structure as the true sentence that pictures it. Why? Because the pictorial form of sentences mirrors the logical form of facts. The *world* is what is pictured in the totality of true *sentences.* The world, then, is not just a random collection of objects; it is "the totality of facts, not of things" because it shares the same logical form as the true sentences.

1.13   The facts in logical space are the world.

So the world is "all that is the case."

But we do not yet see how to solve the main problem Wittgenstein poses: to set a limit to thought. To do this, we have to look more closely at the logic of propositions.* As Russell shows, ordinary language often disguises the logical form of our sentences, but analysis can reveal it. A complete analysis would leave us with sentences that could not be further analyzed——simple sentences sometimes called *atomic propositions.* They would have constituents (names in a structure of possibility), but they could not be further broken down into other sentences.

4.221   It is obvious that the analysis of propositions must bring us to elementary propositions which consist of names in immediate combination.

But how are these simple sentences related to each other? Wittgenstein holds that

5.134   One elementary proposition cannot be deduced from another.

---

*For our purposes, I do not distinguish sentences from propositions, though some philosophers do; a *proposition* is often thought of as an abstract feature several sentences can share when they mean the same thing. For example, "Mary hit Sally" and "Sally was hit by Mary" are different sentences but can be said to express the same proposition. Another example is "Snow is white" and "Schnee ist weiss."

What this means is that the truth-value of each is independent of the truth-value of any other. An elementary proposition can remain true while the truth-values of any others (or even all the others) change. This has consequences for our view of the world as well.

2.061   States of affairs are independent of one another.

2.062   From the existence or non-existence of one state of affairs, it is impossible to infer the existence or non-existence of another.

Recall once more the beginning of the *Tractatus:*

1.2   The world divides into facts.

1.21   Each item can be the case or not the case while everything else remains the same.

This view, called **logical atomism,** is reminiscent of Hume's remark that "all events seem entirely loose and separate."* It means that relations existing between atomic facts cannot be *logical* relations. Given one true elementary proposition, it is never *necessary* that another one be true——or false.

There are, of course, logical relations between complex propositions. If we are given the truth-value of p and of q, we can infer something about the truth of the conjunction, p and q. To display these logical relations, Wittgenstein devises *truth tables.* A truth table for a complex proposition sets forth all the logically possible combinations of truth-values for its components and then displays the corresponding truth-values for the whole. Here, for example, are truth tables for conjunctive, disjunctive, and negative propositions.

p	q		p and q	p or q	not p
T	T		T	T	F
T	F		F	T	F
F	T		F	T	T
F	F		F	F	T

The two columns on the left set out the possibilities: They show us that two propositions may both be true, one or the other may be true, or neither

---

one may be true. The truth table for the conjunction shows us that the conjunction is true only when both of the components are true, and false otherwise. The truth table for the disjunction (an "or" statement) shows us that the disjunction is true unless both of the components are false. And the truth table for negation shows that negating a proposition changes its truth-value.

Propositions may be of any degree of complexity. There may be a very large number of elementary propositions in its makeup, and the logic of their relations may be extremely complicated. The truth table for a proposition such as

if [if (p and q) then not (r or s)]
   then (t if and only if not u)

is very large, but it is calculable. The truth-value of a complex proposition is a function of the truth-values of the component parts; this feature is called *truth functionality*. The logic of the *Tractatus* is a truth-functional logic.

Logical Truth

We noted before that no pictures are true a priori. To determine whether a proposition is true or false, then, we must compare it to the world. From the point of view of logic, any elementary proposition might be true, or it might be false. Such propositions are called *contingent*: Their truth depends on the facts. The contingency of elementary propositions has another implication: However the world is, whatever the facts are, they *might have been different*. There is never any necessity in the facts. The negation of any true elementary proposition always pictures a possibility. Suppose it is true that it is now raining where I am; then it is false that it is not raining here and now (see the preceding truth table), but it is not necessarily false. It is a coherent possibility that it should not be raining here and now, even if it is. Given the configuration of the objects in the world, it is raining. But the objects of the world *could have been* otherwise configured.

We might like to ask, Just how far do these unrealized possibilities extend? How many possi-

bilities are there? The answer is that this is what logic shows us. Our experience of the world can tell us what the actual facts are. Logic shows us what they *might be*. Logic is the science of the possible. And everything that it shows us is *necessary* (i.e., not contingent).[*]

Consider, for example, the truth table for a proposition like this:

Either it is raining, or it is not raining.

p	not p	p or not p
T	F	T
F	T	T

The first column gives us the possibilities for the truth of p. The next column shows us what is the case when p is negated. And the third displays the results of disjoining the first two. The crucial thing to notice is that whatever the truth of p (and there are just these two possibilities), *p or not p* is true. In other words, there is no possibility that this proposition could be false. It is *necessarily* true; it is a **logical truth.** Such a proposition Wittgenstein calls a **tautology.**[†]

There are three important points to notice here.

1. The sentence represented by *p or not p* is a complex, not an elementary, proposition; p may or may not be elementary, but in this complex proposition, it is set in a structure defined by the logical operators, "not" and "or."[‡] Only propositions that are logically complex in this way can be necessarily true or false. (That is just another way to

---

[*]If something is possible, it cannot be merely contingent that it is possible, since whatever actually exists must already be possible; so what is possible couldn't depend on what the facts are.
[†]There are two limiting cases of propositions. Tautologies are one case; contradictions are the other. While *tautologies* are necessarily true, *contradictions* are necessarily false. Tautologies do not rule out any possibilities, contradictions rule them all out. In a sense, it is not strictly correct to call tautologies and contradictions "propositions" because propositions are pictures of reality; tautologies and contradictions do not picture states of affairs. They have a different, and very important, role to play.
[‡]A *logical operator* is a term that has the function of producing propositions from other propositions. Additional examples are "and" and "if-then."

say that the truth of an elementary proposition is always contingent.)

2. Logical words such as "not," "and," "or," and "if-then" are not *names.* These terms do not stand for objects; they have an entirely different function. They are part of the *structure* of sentences, not part of the content.[*]

4.0312   My fundamental idea is that the "logical constants" are not representatives; that there can be no representatives of the *logic* of facts.

Wittgenstein illustrates this "fundamental idea" by considering double negation. There is a law of logic stating that negating the negation of a proposition is equivalent to asserting the proposition:

(not not p) if and only if p.

To say that it is not the case that it is not raining is equivalent to saying that it is raining. If the logical operator "not" were a name of something, the left side of this equivalence would picture something quite different from what the right side pictures, and the law would be false. But it doesn't. And the proof of this is that a truth table for this principle is a tautology. So the logical operators are not names.

3. Suppose we interpret p as "It is raining"; then the tautology *p or not p* says, "Either it is raining, or it is not raining." But while "It is raining" gives us some information, the tautology tells us nothing. It says nothing; it is not a *picture.* Why is it that the proposition p can tell us something? It can be informative because it picks out one of several possibilities and says: That is how things are. In picking out that possibility, it excludes another. It tells us something about the world by shutting out one possibility and allowing another; *p or not p,* by contrast, excludes nothing. It does not rule out any possibilities, so it does not *say* anything.

4.461   Propositions show what they say: tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing. A tautology has no truth conditions, since it is unconditionally

---

[*]Compare Russell's description of a logically perfect language on p. 606.

true; and a contradiction is true on no condition.

4.462   Tautologies and contradictions are not pictures of reality. They do not represent any possible situations. For the former admit *all* possible situations, and the latter *none.*

Saying and Showing

In 4.461 (above), Wittgenstein makes use of a distinction that is very important to him: the distinction between *saying* and **showing.** Propositions do two things; they show something and they say something.

4.022   A proposition *shows* its sense.
         A proposition *shows* how things stand
         if it is true, and it *says that* they do
         so stand.

The proposition "All crows are black" shows or presents its sense. We can see what this means if we ask what would be required to *understand* it. To understand this proposition is to grasp its sense; to grasp its sense is to understand what *would be* the case if it *were true.* When we understand the sentence, we know that *if* it is true, any crow we come across will be black. Notice that understanding the sentence is not yet knowing that all crows are black. Given that we understand it, we might wonder whether it is true or doubt that it is true. It is, after all, possible that some crows aren't black; the proposition might present a possible state of affairs only, not a fact. But we grasp its sense in *knowing what would make it either true or false.* That—its sense—is what a proposition *shows.*

But a proposition such as this plays another role. It not only shows its sense but also *says* that things are this way, that crows actually are black. It makes an assertion and so is true or false, depending on the facts of the world. According to Wittgenstein, this is the most general propositional form—that is, what all propositions have in common:

4.5   This is how things stand.

Propositions *show* (display) their sense; they *say* how things are.

But tautologies and contradictions *show* that they *say nothing.* If these limiting cases of propositions say nothing, however, we might wonder whether they have any importance. Couldn't we just ignore or neglect them? No. They are of the very greatest importance. They show us what is possible and what is impossible. They display for us the structure of logical space.

But they have another importance as well.

6.1   The propositions of logic are tautologies.

What Wittgenstein here calls the "propositions" of logic are sometimes called the laws of logic. Consider as an example the very basic law called the *principle of noncontradiction:* No proposition can be both true and false. We can represent this as

not both p and not p.

If we write a truth table for this formula, we can see that it is a tautology—that is, necessarily true no matter what the truth-values of *p* are.

p	not p	p and not p	not (p and not p)
T	F	F	T
F	T	F	T

So the device of truth tables provides a justification for the laws of logic. Showing they are tautologies is equivalent to demonstrating their necessary truth. The truth table shows that there is no alternative to the laws of logic—no possibility that they might be false.* The *Tractatus* doctrine is that every principle of logical inference can be reduced to a tautology.†

Moreover,

6.113   It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbol alone, and

---

* Of course this also shows that the laws of logic *say* nothing—that is, are *about* nothing. The laws of logic are purely formal and empty of content. And that is exactly why they can be noncontingently true.

† In fact this claim is not correct. Truth tables constitute a decision procedure for validity only in *propositional logic,* where the analysis of structure does not go deeper than whole propositions. In *quantificational* (or *predicate*) *logic,* where the analysis reveals the internal structure of propositions, Alonzo Church later proves there is no such decision procedure.

this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic.

What this means is that the propositions of logic can be known a priori. As we saw previously, we can know about the actual world only by comparing a proposition with reality. It is the mark of logical propositions that this is not only unnecessary, but also impossible; because they say nothing, they cannot say anything we could check out by examining the facts.

So the propositions of logic are one and all tautologies. And every valid form of inference can be expressed in a proposition of logic. This means that all possible logical relations between propositions can be known a priori. And in knowing them, we know the logical structure of the world—logical space, what Wittgenstein calls "the scaffolding of the world" (6.124).

6.1251   Hence there can *never* be surprises in logic.

6.127   All the propositions of logic are of equal status: it is not the case that some of them are essentially primitive propositions and others essentially derived propositions.
Every tautology itself shows that it is a tautology.

Setting the Limit to Thought

Finally, we are ready to understand how Wittgenstein thinks he can show us the limits of language. An operation discovered by Wittgenstein can be performed on a set of elementary propositions to produce all the possible complex propositions (truth functions) that can be expressed by that set. Suppose we have just two elementary propositions, *p* and *q.* Using this operator, we can calculate that there are just sixteen possible truth functions combining them: *not p, not q, p or q, p and q, if p then q,* and so on. Now imagine that we were in possession of *all* the elementary propositions there are; using this operation on that enormous set, one could simply calculate all the possible truth functions there are and so *generate each and every possible proposition.*

Remembering the picture theory of meaning, we can see that this set of propositions pictures all the possible states of affairs there are, and in all their possible combinations. So, it represents the entirety of logical space; it pictures everything that there could possibly be in reality—every "possible world." Notice that there would be no proposition saying that these are all the possible facts; in fact, there couldn't be such a proposition. But there also doesn't need to be. That these are all the facts there are *shows itself* in these propositions being all there are—in there simply being no more propositions that are possible, calculable, formulable. And we can see there are no more possible propositions, because all the possible ones are part of this set produced by this operator.

This very large set of propositions contains *everything it is possible to say,* plus the tautologies and contradictions (which say nothing). Beyond this set of possible propositions lies only *nonsense.* So the limit of thought is indeed set from inside. Thought is expressed in language. The essence of language is picturing. And, given this, we can work out from the center to the periphery of language by means of logic. We do not need to take up a position outside the thinkable in order to draw a line circumscribing it. The limit *shows itself* by the lack of sense that pseudopropositions display when we try to say something unsayable. It is indeed, then, only "in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense" (*Tractatus,* preface, 3).

5.61   Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.
So we cannot say in logic, 'The world has this in it, and this, but not that.'
For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well. We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot *say* either.

Value and the Self

We noted earlier that the young Wittgenstein's concerns were mainly spiritual and moral, but we have just seen that the bulk of the *Tractatus* deals with quite technical issues in logic and the philosophy of language. How are we to understand this apparent discrepancy? In a letter to a potential publisher for the *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein writes,

The book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written, and it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY *rigorous* way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just *gassing,* I have managed in my book to put everything firmly in place by being silent about it.[5]

What could this mean—that the really important part of the book is the part he did not write? Why didn't he write it? Was he too lazy? Did he run out of time? Of course not. He didn't write the important part because he was convinced it *couldn't be written.* What is most important—the ethical point of the book, the "key" to the work—is something that *cannot be said.*

Nonetheless, and again paradoxically, he does have some things to "say" about this sphere, which he also calls "the mystical."* Before we examine his remarks—brief and dark sayings, as many have noted—it will be helpful to set out a consequence of what we have already learned.

4.1   Propositions represent the existence and non-existence of states of affairs.

4.11   The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences).

---

* It is obviously a problem how we are to understand what he "says" about the unsayable. He makes a suggestion we consider later.

The essence of language is picturing; and to picture is to say, "This is how things stand." The job of natural science is to tell us how things are, to give us a description of the world. And if natural science could finish its job, we would then have a complete picture of reality.* Nothing—no object, no fact—would be left out. It would include the *totality* of true propositions.

But natural science does not contain any propositions like these: one ought to do X; it is wrong to do Y; the meaning of life is Z. It follows that these are not really propositions at all; they look a lot like propositions, but, if Wittgenstein is right, they lie *beyond the limits of language*. Strictly speaking, they are unsayable. Those who utter them may be "just gassing." Or they may be trying to say the most important things of all but failing because they "run against the boundaries of language." In a "Lecture on Ethics" Wittgenstein gave in 1929 or 1930 (not published until 1965), he says,

> This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.[6]

Ethics "can be no science" because science consists of propositions, and

6.4   All propositions are of equal value.

6.41   The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case.

6.42   And so it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.
Propositions can express nothing that is higher.

6.421   It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.
Ethics is transcendental.

We can think of the *Tractatus* as the absolute endpoint of that road that begins with Copernicus and leads to the expulsion of value from the framework of the world.* The vision of the *Tractatus* is one where everything in the world is flattened out, where nothing is of any more significance than anything else because nothing is of any significance at all. In the world is no value at all, nothing of importance. There are just the facts. And even if there were such a thing in the world as a value, that thing would itself just be another fact. It would *have* no value.

In Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame,* a character named Hamm, blind and unable to move from his chair, commands his servant, Clov, to "Look at the earth." Clov gets his telescope, climbs a ladder, and looks out of the high window.

CLOV:
    Let's see.
    (He looks, moving the telescope.)
    Zero . . .
    (he looks)
    . . . zero . . .
    (he looks)
    . . . and zero.
HAMM:
    Nothing stirs. All is—
C:
    Zer—
H: *(violently):*
    Wait till you're spoken to!
    (Normal voice.)
    All is . . . all is . . . all is what?
    (Violently.)
    All is what?

---

*Look back again to the discussion of how *final causes,* purposes and goals, are excluded from explanations in the new science. See p. 318. So far as the *world* goes, Wittgenstein agrees with Hume and disagrees with Augustine. See the diagram on p. 243. In spirit, though, he may be closer to Augustine. Compare also Nietzsche, p. 551.

C:
    What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment.
    (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns toward Hamm.)
    Corpsed.[7]

Beckett's vision could not be more like Wittgenstein's. At the same time, it could not be more unlike it. Turn the telescope to the earth (the world) and the verdict is "Zero, zero, zero." "Corpsed." In it, no value exists. For Beckett, that is all there is; and that accounts for the sense of desolation and despair you find in his work. But Wittgenstein also knows another "reality." *

Ethics, Wittgenstein says, "cannot be put into words." But what does it mean that ethics is something "higher," that it is "transcendental"? To understand this saying, we need to consider Wittgenstein's views of the subject, the self, the "I." He suggests that if you wrote a book called *The World As I Found It,* there is one thing that would not be mentioned in it: *you.* It would include all the facts you found, including all the facts about your body. And it would include psychological facts about yourself as well: your character, personality, dispositions, and so on. But you—the subject, the one to whom all this appears, the one who *finds* all these facts—would not be found.[†]

---

*In a phrase as opposed as possible to Beckett's conclusion that the earth is "corpsed," Wittgenstein says, "The world and life are one" (5.621). But in the light of his claim that the world consists wholly of valueless facts, this is a dark saying. It does seem, though, to be related to the idea that the self is the "limit" of the world and to the complementarity of solipsism and realism. We examine these ideas subsequently.
†Among thinkers we have studied, this should remind you most of Kant, for whom the ego is also transcendental. It is not identical with Kant's view, however. Kant believes that, though we can't come to know the nature of "this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks," we could come to know a lot about it—that it is the source of the pure intuitions, the categories, the a priori synthetic propositions, all of which explain the structure of the empirical world. And all this can be stated in meaningful propositions. For Wittgenstein, none of this is possible. The structure of the world is not dictated by the structure of rational minds because the structure of reality is just logic; and logic, consisting as it does of empty tautologies, neither has nor needs a source.

5.632   The subject does not belong to the world; rather, it is a limit of the world.

5.641   The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world—not a part of it.

It seems, then, that there are two "realities" in correlation: the world and the self; however, in the strict sense, the self or subject cannot be said to be a reality. The self is not a *fact*. Wittgenstein compares the situation to the relation between an eye and its visual field. The eye is not itself part of the visual field; it is not seen. In the same way, all content, all the facts, are "out there" in the world, which is the "totality of facts" (1.1).

5.64   Here it can be seen that solipsism, when its implications are followed out strictly, coincides with pure realism. The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality coordinated with it.

5.62   For what the solipsist *means* is quite correct; only it cannot be *said*, but makes itself manifest.*

What the solipsist wants to say is that only he exists, and the world only in relation to himself. But this cannot be *said*. Why not? Because to say it would be to use language—propositions—to picture facts. And in picturing facts we are picturing the world, *not* the transcendental self to whom the world appears. So this self "shrinks to a point

---

Kant's world needs a structure-giver because its fundamental principles are thought to be synthetic. For Wittgenstein, logic is *analytic*. It requires no source beyond itself because it has no content requiring explanation. This "scaffolding of the world" is not itself a fact in the world, nor is it a fact about the world or about rational minds. It is not a fact at all! It shows *itself*. Look again at the relevant discussions of Kant on pp. 449–450, including the diagram on p. 465.
*Compare Descartes' struggles to overcome solipsism by proving the existence of God in *Meditation III;* see also pp. 334 and 362. Wittgenstein acknowledges there is a truth in solipsism, but such truth as there is already involves the reality of the world—of which the self is aware. So there is no need to *prove* the world's existence—or that of God, about whom in any case nothing can be said.

without extension." And if we ask *what there is*, the answer is the world—"all that is the case" (*Tractatus*, proposition 1). And this is just the thesis of radical **realism**, the antithesis of solipsism.

The concern of ethics is good and evil. But, as we have seen, there is no room for good and evil in the world, where everything just is whatever it is. What application, then, do these concepts have? Ethics must concern itself with the transcendental: the self, the subject. But how? Here is a clue.

6.373   The world is independent of my will.

6.374   Even if all that we wish for were to happen, still this would only be a favour granted by fate, so to speak.

I may will or intend to do something, such as write a check to pay a telephone bill. And usually I can do it. But it is clear that paying a bill by check depends on the cooperation of the world: The neurons have to fire just right, the nerves must transmit the neural signals reliably, the muscles must contract in just the right way, the bank must not suddenly crash, and so forth. And none of that is entirely in my control. That is what Wittgenstein means when he says the world is independent of my will. If I intend to pay my telephone bill, getting it done is, in a way, a "favour granted by fate." *

Good and Evil, Happiness and Unhappiness

Wittgenstein seems to have proved that good and evil cannot lie in the world. Everything just hap-

---

*If these reflections are going to make any sense to you at all, you will have to pause a bit and try to sink into this way of viewing things. It will not be any good to just try to learn the words, or even memorize the sentences. Wittgenstein would insist that if you are able only to parrot the words, you will have understood *nothing*. Here is an exercise that might help. Pick out some fact about your present experience. Focus on it. Try to regard it as merely a fact in the world, one fact among others. Now try to focus on some psychological state in the same way. Practice in this should make even your own psychological states have the same status as any other fact in the world; they will not be "privileged," as it were, but just facts that are *there*. Then ask yourself, For whom are they there? For ideas that are in some ways similar, see the discussion of the Stoics on p. 207.

---

pens as it does happen. So good and evil must pertain to the will. What I will is in my control, even if the outcome of my willing in the world is not. In a strict sense, my willing is my action: The rest is just the result of my action. But now we have to ask what good and evil could be, if they pertain to the will only.

6.422   When an ethical law of the form, 'Thou shalt . . .', is laid down, one's first thought is, "And what if I do not do it?" It is clear, however, that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the usual sense of the terms. So our question about the *consequences* of an action must be unimportant. At least those consequences should not be events. For there must be something right about the question we posed. There must indeed be some kind of ethical reward and punishment, but they must reside in the action itself. (And it is also clear that the reward must be something pleasant and the punishment something unpleasant.)

Good action (good willing) is rewarded with something pleasant, and evil action is punished with the unpleasant. But these are not rewards and punishments "in the usual sense"; they cannot be external to the action itself. They cannot, in other words, be something added by the world. How could a "favour granted by fate" have anything to do with *ethical* rewards? Such rewards and punishments must be intrinsic to the actions themselves. But what could they be?

6.43   If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts— not what can be expressed by means of language.
        In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole.
        The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.

These are difficult sayings, indeed. And I do not claim to understand fully what Wittgenstein means

by them. It does seem clear that the reward for good willing is happiness and the punishment for bad is unhappiness. The good person, as Plato also thinks, is the happy person.* But this obviously does not mean that Jones, who lives righteously and well, will get whatever she wants in life. That kind of connection between willing and the world doesn't exist. (This fact is also recognized by Kant.) Goodness does not produce *that kind* of happiness.† What kind does it produce, then?

Strictly speaking, this question cannot be answered. In the *Notebooks, 1914–1916*, Wittgenstein asks,

"What is the objective mark of the happy, harmonious life? Here it is again clear that there cannot be any such mark, that can be *described*. This mark cannot be a physical one but only a metaphysical one, a transcendental one." (*N*, 78)[8]

And we know that nothing can be *said* about the transcendental. Still, there are clues and hints. What could it mean, for instance, that the world of the happy person is a different world from that of the unhappy one? That the world waxes and wanes as a whole? Here is a possibility.

Most of us, most of the time, do not occupy the position of the transcendental subject, even though that is what we essentially are—the limit of the world, not some entity within the world. We identify ourselves with a body, with certain desires, with a set of psychological facts. This is, we think, what we are. And in so identifying ourselves, our world narrows, *wanes*. We are concerned with *this* body, with satisfying *these* desires. And *our* world is just the world relevant to these concerns. It is as though the rest didn't exist. If we could, however, identify with the transcendental self, our world would wax larger. Indeed, we would see it just as it is—a limited whole and the totality of facts, none of which are of such importance that they crowd out any other. *Our* world

---

*See Plato's discussion of the happiness of the just soul, pp. 145–151.

†It might help to remember here that Wittgenstein gave away the considerable fortune he inherited when his father died and lived the rest of his life simply and austerely. What the world can supply cannot *make* you happy!

---

would become *the* world. Only the world of the happy person is identical with the world as it is.*

The happy see the world with that disinterested enjoyment we experience when we appreciate a fine work of art. In Wittgenstein's words,

6.421   (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)

and

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics.
The usual way of looking at things sees objects as if it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. (*N*, 84e)

and

Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist.
Is it the essence of the artistic way of looking at things, that it looks at the world with a happy eye? (*N*, 86e)

To live one's life "from the viewpoint of eternity" is to live in the present.† And here we have another clue:

Whoever lives in the present lives without fear and hope. (*N*, 76e)

What could this mean? The thought seems to be that fear and hope essentially refer to time; one fears what may happen, and one hopes for the future. But if one lives entirely in the present, there is no past and future about which to fear and hope. If there is nothing one fears—absolutely nothing—and if there is nothing one hopes (presumably because one lacks nothing), how could one fail to be happy? In his "Lecture on Ethics," Wittgenstein tells us that when he tries to think of

---

*Compare Heraclitus, who says, "To those who are awake the world order is one, common to all; but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own." The *Tractatus* might almost be read as an extended commentary on this and related sayings by Heraclitus, with logic—the "scaffolding" of the world—playing the role of the *logos*. See the discussion of these matters on pp. 19–24.

†Compare Augustine on God's eternity, pp. 245–246.

something with absolute value, two "experiences" come to mind.

> I will describe this [first] experience in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation. I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as "how extraordinary that anything should exist" or "how extraordinary that the world should exist." I will mention another experience straight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say "I am safe, nothing can injure me what ever happens." [9]*

Wittgenstein adds that the expression of these "experiences" in language is, strictly speaking, nonsense. One can wonder that the world contains kangaroos, perhaps, but there is no proposition that can express the "fact" that the world exists. Why not? Because this "fact" is obviously not one of the facts that make up the totality that *is* the world, and beyond that totality, there is nothing. It is equally nonsense to say that one feels *absolutely* safe. One can be safe from tigers, or protected from polio, but to say, "Nothing whatever can injure me," is just a misuse of language. Yet, that is the only satisfactory expression, Wittgenstein thinks, for what is of absolute value. Here we have an example of running against the boundaries of language.

To "wonder at the existence of the world" is to experience it as a limited whole. And that Wittgenstein calls "the mystical."

6.44   It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.

6.45   To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical.

To live the life of the philosophical self, the metaphysical self that is not a part of the world but its limit, is to have a sense for "the mystical." This life is also the good life, the beautiful life, and the happy life. It is a life of absolute safety.

Remember, though, that none of this can properly be said. It cannot even really be asked about. It is tempting to think that we can ask, Why does the world exist? or Why is there anything at all, rather than nothing? But

6.5   When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.
The riddle does not exist.
If a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it.

The *answer* cannot be put into words because to say why the world exists would be to state a fact—and the world itself is already the *totality of facts*. So the question, "Why does the world exist?" which has exercised so many philosophical minds and has produced so many arguments for God's existence, is *no question at all*. It seems like a question—but that is an *illusion* generated by language.

What we can say is *how* the world is. And that is the job of natural science. But

6.52   We feel that even when *all possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.

6.521   The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?)

6.522   There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

The Unsayable

If you have been following carefully, you have no doubt been wondering how Wittgenstein can

*Such a powerful echo of Socrates! In his defense at his trial, Socrates says, "a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death" (*Apology* 41d).

manage to say all this stuff that he so explicitly "says" cannot be said. This is indeed a puzzle we must address. What he has been writing is clearly philosophy. But if, as he (philosophically) says, the totality of true propositions is science, what room is there for philosophy?

4.111   Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences.
(The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them.)
Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.
Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.
A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.
Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions,' but rather in the clarification of propositions.
Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.

The key thought here is that philosophy is an activity; its business is clarification. It follows that we should not look to philosophy for *results,* for truths, or for "a body of doctrine." To do so is to mistake the nature of philosophizing altogether. It has been one of the major failings of the philosophical tradition, Wittgenstein believes, that it has tried to produce "philosophical propositions"—that it has thought of itself as something "beside" the sciences, in the same line of work as science. But it is *altogether different* from science. It lies, one might say, at right angles to science. Wittgenstein's view of his predecessors is severe:

4.003   Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only establish that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language. (They belong to the same class as the

question whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful.) And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all.

6.53   The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e., propositions of natural science—i.e., something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person— he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—*this* method would be the only strictly correct one.

Plato and Aristotle, Hume and Kant all think they are revealing or discovering truth. But, if Wittgenstein is right, all of their most important claims are nonsensical. They aren't even *candidates* for being true! Their theories—to the extent that they are not absorbable by empirical science— are pseudoanswers to pseudoquestions. Just *gassing.* Such theories arise because these philosophers don't understand the logic of our language; Wittgenstein thinks he has, for the first time, clearly set this forth.

But there is still a worry. Wittgenstein is himself not utilizing "the correct method" in writing the *Tractatus.* How, then, are we to take his own "propositions" here?

6.54   My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them— as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

To "see the world aright" is to see it from the viewpoint of eternity, from the point of view of the philosophical self. It is not too far-fetched to be reminded of that ladder the mystics talk about

as leading to oneness with God. Having climbed Wittgenstein's ladder, we too can wonder at the existence of the world, feel absolutely safe, experience happiness and beauty—and do our science. But we would always have to keep in mind the last "proposition" of the *Tractatus:*

> 7.   What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

Yet, the things we must "pass over in silence" are the most important of all.

In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus,* then, we have an excellent example of analytic philosophy. He uses the new logic in an analysis of our language and finds the result to be a kind of logical atomism. In Wittgenstein, however, this logical analysis of language is placed in the service of larger ends. His problem, from first to last, concerns the meaning of life. If he had not thought that applying logic to thought and language would clarify *that* problem, we cannot imagine he would have devoted himself to philosophy in the way he did. He might just have become an aeronaut.

Logical Positivism

In the preface to the *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein writes,

> Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts. (*Tractatus,* preface, 3).

This was to prove prophetic. Russell supplied an introduction that Wittgenstein thought so misunderstood his intentions that he refused to have it printed in the German edition. And his book was studied painstakingly by a group of scientifically oriented philosophers in Vienna (a group that came to be known as the Vienna Circle) who admired its logic and philosophy of language but had no sympathy with what Wittgenstein himself thought most important. Because this latter group proved extremely influential, at least for a time, we briefly note their major theses here. The movement they began had a significant impact on scientists (both

natural and social), on philosophy of science, and on the general public. These philosophers are called *logical positivists.*

Logical positivism can be identified with three claims, all of which have recognizable roots in the *Tractatus.* The first is that logic and mathematics are *analytic.* The positivists accept Wittgenstein's analysis of the basic truths of logic: The truths are tautological in nature. Both mathematics and logic are empirically or factually empty, providing no knowledge of nature at all.* They are, however, extremely important: They provide a framework in which we can move from one true factual statement to another; that is, they license inferences, just as Wittgenstein says they do.†

The second principle is a criterion for judging the meaningfulness of all nontautological assertions. It is called the **verifiability principle.** The positivists believe they can use it to sweep away not only the confusions of past philosophy, but also everything Wittgenstein holds most dear. Here is Moritz Schlick's explanation of verifiability:

> When, in general, are we sure that the meaning of a question is clear to us? Evidently when and only when we are able to state exactly the conditions under which it is to be answered in the affirmative, or as the case may be, the conditions under which it is to be answered in the negative. By stating these conditions, and by this alone, is the meaning of a question defined.
>
> The meaning of a proposition consists, obviously, in this alone, that it expresses a definite state of affairs. One can, of course, say that the proposition itself already gives this state of affairs.‡ This is true, but the proposition indicates the state of affairs only to the person who understands it. But when do I understand a proposition? When I understand the meanings of the words which occur in it? These can be explained by definition. But in the defini-

---

*Thus they correspond roughly to what Hume calls relations of ideas (see pp. 407–408) and Kant's notion of the analytic a priori (see p. 435). Note how different a philosophy of mathematics this is from that of Kant, who believes that arithmetic, while a priori, is not analytic.

†Review the discussion of the principles of logic on p. 618.

‡Wittgenstein says, "A proposition *shows* its sense" (4.022).

---

tions new words appear whose meanings cannot again be described in propositions, they must be indicated directly: the meaning of a word must in the end be *shown,* it must be *given.* This is done by an act of indication, of pointing; and what is pointed at must be given, otherwise I cannot be referred to it.[10]

The definitions Schlick refers to are Wittgenstein's analyses of complex propositions into elementary or atomic propositions and ultimately into words that are not further definable. For Wittgenstein, as we have seen, elementary propositions are composed of names in a logical syntax. The names stand for objects. He never specifies exactly what objects the names name. He once said, much later, that when he wrote the *Tractatus,* he thought of himself as a logician and believed that it wasn't his business to identify the objects that he deduced on logical grounds would have to be there.

But for the positivists, the truth conditions for elementary sentences are given in *perception.* The simple objects designated by the indefinable words must be the kind of thing you can point to. Schlick uses the Wittgensteinian word "shown" and paraphrases it by "given." The meaning of a word must be something you can point to or indicate in some way. You have to be able to *show* me what you mean. What Schlick means by "given" is "given in sense experience." This, then, is the bite of the verifiability principle. Unless you can explain what perceptual difference the truth or falsity of your assertion would make, the proposition you are asserting is *meaningless.* Clearly, logical positivism is a kind of empiricism.*

The positivists have no sympathy for a "good" kind of nonsense, no tolerance for "running against the boundaries of language." All this they want to *exterminate.* They talk about the *elimination* of metaphysics. (One gets the image of lining metaphysical ideas up against the wall and gunning them down.) What is to be left as meaningful is science—sci-

ence alone! Out with Plato's Forms, Aristotle's entelechy, Augustine's God, Descartes' mind, Kant's noumena, Hegel's Absolute Spirit—and Wittgenstein's mystical! Out with metaphysics altogether—that attempt to know something beyond what our senses can verify. It is to be purged from human memory.* And the instrument of this purging is the principle of meaningfulness. Since none of these notions are verifiable by sense experience, they are all meaningless.

Note that the positivists are not committed, for example, to the atheist's claim that there is no God. Such a claim they consider to be as much a metaphysical statement as the claim that there is a God. Both claims are shut out from the realm of meaning altogether; if the verifiability criterion is correct, both the believer and the atheist are uttering meaningless noises. Because their claims are without sense, one cannot sensibly ask which is true: Neither one is even a possible candidate for truth. So arguments for (or against) the existence of God are completely worthless!

The positivists work at refining the verifiability principle to avoid obvious counterexamples. For instance, verifiability needn't be *direct,* as when I see something with my own eyes; it can be *indirect,* as when I rely on instrumentation, or (more important) when I test the observable consequences of a hypothesis that is not itself directly testable. It is enough, they say, for propositions to be verifiable *in principle.* They obviously want to allow for the meaningfulness of propositions that are not now verifiable only because of technological limitations. Moreover, something doesn't have to be conclusively verifiable for it to be meaningful. They draw a contrast between *strong* (conclusive) verification and *weak* verification (verification by evidence indicating that something is likely to be true or probably true). The positivists hold that weak verifiability is enough to qualify a statement as meaningful. But unless a proposition is at least

---

*Like David Hume, prince of empiricists, the positivists want to base all nonanalytic knowledge on the data our senses provide. See again the discussion of "the theory of ideas" and Hume's rule, "No impression, no idea" (p. 406).

---

*For a similar sentiment, see David Hume's trenchant remarks at the end of his *Enquiry* (p. 429). It has been said, with some justice, that logical positivism is just Hume plus modern logic.

indirectly verifiable, verifiable in principle, and weakly verifiable, it is declared to have no sense.

The third plank of the positivist platform concerns the nature of philosophy. Like Wittgenstein, they hold that philosophy is not in the business of providing knowledge about the supersensible; its task is the clarification of statements. So it is an activity, as Wittgenstein says. But they are convinced that philosophy doesn't have to be classified as nonsense. If the activity of philosophy is clarification, it has certain statable results: It issues in definitions. Much of the writing of the logical positivists is devoted to clarifying what they call "the logic of science," so they are interested in the concepts of *law* and *theory*, of *hypothesis* and *evidence*, of *confirmation* and *probability*. Much good work is produced in understanding these concepts and how they relate to each other. Under their influence the *philosophy of science* becomes a recognized and important part of philosophy; without their work in this area, it is unlikely that most academic departments would now be teaching courses in this field.*

The fate of ethical statements on positivist principles is particularly interesting. Moral judgments do not seem to be verifiable—even weakly, indirectly, and in principle. So they don't seem to meet the criterion for factual meaningfulness. That raises the question: What kind of statement is a judgment that stealing is wrong?† In an explosive book titled *Language, Truth, and Logic,* published in

---

*Like most of the distinctive theses of logical positivism, the positivists' understanding of the logic of science is now largely surpassed. It now seems too abstract, too prescriptive, and not mindful enough to how science is actually done. The complaint is, ironically, that positivists are not empirical enough about science itself. Historical studies in the past several decades have significantly modified our understanding of that important cultural institution we call science. One of the milestones in this development is Thomas Kuhn's 1962 work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

†Recall Wittgenstein's claim that in the world there is no value—and if there were a value in the world, it would *have* no value. The realm of facts excludes the realm of values. You should also look back to Hume's famous discussion of the distinction between *is* and *ought* (pp. 425–426).

1936, the English philosopher A. J. Ayer sets out the positivist view of ethics. Ethical concepts, he says, are "mere pseudoconcepts."

> Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money." In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, "You stole that money," in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. The tone, or the exclamation marks, adds nothing to the literal meaning of the sentence. It merely serves to show that the expression of it is attended by certain feelings in the speaker.
>
> If now I generalize my previous statement and say, "Stealing money is wrong," I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning—that is, expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written "Stealing money!!"—where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false. Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing, in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. For in saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making any factual statement, not even a statement about my own state of mind. I am merely expressing certain moral sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So that there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition. . . .
>
> We can now see why it is impossible to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgments. It is not because they have an "absolute" validity which is mysteriously independent of ordinary sense-experience, but because they have no objective validity whatsoever. If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false. And we have seen that sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything. They are

pure expressions of feeling and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood. They are unverifiable for the same reason as a cry of pain or a word of command is unverifiable—because they do not express a genuine proposition.[11]

This is pretty radical stuff, at least as judged by the philosophical tradition. Its ancestry lies in the views of the Sophists, that things (at least in the moral sphere) just are as they seem to the individual human being.* If Ayer is right, there are no objective truths about the good life or about right and wrong, so reason (obviously) cannot help us find them. It follows that Socrates' search for the nature of piety, courage, and justice is misguided. And all the philosophers who build on that assumption are mistaken in what they are doing. Plato's Form of the Good, Aristotle's virtues as human excellences, Epicurus' pleasure, the Stoics' keeping of the will in harmony with nature, Augustine's ordered loves, Hobbes' social contract, Kant's categorical imperative, Mill's greatest good for the greatest number—all these are not, if Ayer is right, contributions to a theory of the right and the good for humans, but merely expressions of how these individuals feel about things.†

If we use a different measure, however, Ayer's view isn't so radical. In fact, it is the underpinning of what seems to many these days the sheerest common sense. Nearly every college freshman,

---

*See the motto of Protagoras on p. 44, and the relevance of rhetoric to justice as developed by Gorgias, Antiphon, and Callicles, discussed on pp. 47–49. A major portion of rhetoric might be thought of as techniques for "expressing moral sentiments" in persuasive ways.

†It is important to note that the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* would think this turn of events about as awful as could be imagined. While he would agree that *value* is not a matter of fact, he wants to locate ethics—what really matters—in the life of the transcendental or philosophical self. Positivist ethics construes value as no more than the way some empirical self happens to feel about things. What greater difference could there be? Wittgenstein says, "God does not reveal himself *in* the world" (*Tractatus* 6.432). The positivists make each of us a little god. From Wittgenstein's point of view, if Ayer is right, all we ever get in morality is "just *gassing.*" See again Wittgenstein's views on ethics, pp. 619–624.

---

in my experience, arrives with the opinion that this view of moral judgments is so obvious that it is very nearly absurd to question it.* (That, of course, is not a very strong argument in its favor.)

Ayer's view, sometimes called the *emotivist theory of ethics,* is stated in a brash and bold fashion. Other thinkers in the same tradition qualify and complicate it to meet obvious objections, but it is good to see it stated in its bare essentials, especially since it has been so widely adopted by the public. It is important to note that the emotivist theory of ethics depends on a stark contrast between the realm of facts and all the rest. This contrast, at least as the positivists develop it, is based on the verifiability principle's adequacy as a theory of meaning. If that theory of meaning is flawed, we may not be able to get by with such a radically subjectivist theory of morality. We will reexamine the question about meaning when we turn to Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in Chapter 23.

To their credit, it should be noted that certain difficulties in the verifiability principle are noted and examined by the positivists themselves. For instance, by dividing the analytic statements of logic and definition so sharply from verifiable statements of fact, they provoke the question, What sort of statement is the verifiability principle itself? There seem to be three possibilities:

1. The verifiability principle might be a factual statement. But—by its own terms—the principle, to be factual, must itself be verifiable by sense experience. But what sense experiences could constitute the truth conditions for this principle? The possibility of seeing red roses might constitute the meaning of "Some roses are red." And experiences in a laboratory might (in a complicated and indirect way) verify "Copper conducts electricity." But what experience could show that the only meaningful statements are those verifiable by experience? As Wittgenstein was to later remark, the standard meter bar in Paris cannot be said either

---

*This fact is one of the centerpieces of Alan Bloom's complaint about today's university education, addressed in his book *The Closing of the American Mind.*

to be or not to be one meter long. A criterion cannot guarantee itself, so it seems clear that it is not factual.

2. It might be analytic, a definition of "meaningful." But it doesn't seem to capture the *ordinary* sense of meaningfulness. There are lots of unverifiable propositions we think we understand perfectly well. Consider this example: "The last word in Caesar's mind, unuttered, before he died, was 'tu.'" This seems obviously sensible and it is either true or false, but the possibility of verifying it, even weakly, indirectly, and in principle, seems zero. The fact that we cannot in any way *find out* whether it is true, does not subtract from its meaningfulness in the slightest.

3. There seems only one possibility left, given the positivist framework. If it doesn't fit either of the two main favored categories, perhaps the principle functions as a kind of recommendation that this is how we *should* use the word "meaningful," or a proposal that it would be *good* to use the word "meaningful" in this way. This understanding of the verifiability principle would associate it with the positivist view of ethical propositions. Its enunciation would express feelings of approval about this way of understanding meaning and perhaps urge others to feel the same way. But if this is what the verifiability principle amounts to, then there is no *reason* why we all should adopt it, and non-positivists can (on positivist grounds) simply say, "Well, I feel different about it." And that is not very satisfactory.

Basic Questions

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN (THE EARLY YEARS)

1. What is Wittgenstein's aim in his *Tractatus*? And what motivates that aim—that is, why does he want to do that? If he had succeeded, would that have been significant?
2. Explain how a picture is a "model of reality." In what sense is a picture itself a fact?
3. Explain the concepts of pictorial form, possible state of affairs, and logical space.
4. Why are there no pictures that are true a priori?

5. In what way does language "disguise" thought? What is the essential nature of a proposition?
6. What is the meaning of a simple name? What are atomic propositions composed of? And why is this view correctly called "logical atomism"?
7. What, then, is the world? And how is it related to logic? To language? To the truth?
8. How do truth tables work? What is truth functionality?
9. What domain does logic reveal to us? In what way does logic "show itself"?
10. Contrast contingent truth with necessary truth. How do necessary truths reveal themselves in a truth table?
11. Why do tautologies and contradictions "say nothing"? What do they "show"?
12. Explain: "A proposition *shows* its sense . . . and it *says* that 'this is how things stand.'" Give an example.
13. How is the limit to thought set?
14. Why couldn't the "important" part of the *Tractatus* be written?
15. Why must the sense of the world lie outside the world? Why cannot there be "propositions of ethics"?
16. Suppose you wrote a book entitled *The World As I Found It*. Would you appear in the book?
17. How does solipsism coincide with pure realism?
18. In what way is the world of the happy person different from the world of the unhappy person? What does it mean to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis*?
19. Could a person be absolutely safe? (Compare Socrates in his defense to the jury in *Apology* 41c–d, pp. 100–101).
20. What is the "mystical"? Why does it have absolutely nothing to do with the "occult"?
21. Why won't science solve the problems of life? Why does "the riddle" not exist?
22. What is philosophy? What is its "correct method"? What is the ladder analogy?

THE LOGICAL POSITIVISTS

1. Explain the verifiability principle of factual meaningfulness.
2. In what ways can verification be indirect? Weak? In principle?
3. What is the positivist's analysis of ethical judgments? Compare to Hume; to Kant; to the utilitarians.

4. What difficulties do the positivists identify in the verifiability criterion?

For Further Thought

The young Wittgenstein thought he had found a unique solution to the problem of the meaning of life. The solution is found in the disappearing of the problem—but not through thoughtlessness or inattention. Try to explain this "solution" in terms that could be meaningful to your own life—and then decide whether you accept it.

Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, "Logical Atomism," in *Logic and Knowledge* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Publishers, 1956), 197–198.
2. Bertrand Russell, "Philosophers and Idiots," *The Listener* 52, no. 1354 (February 10, 1955): 247. Reprinted in Russell's *Portraits from Memory* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Publishers, 1956), 26–27.
3. A brief and very readable account of Wittgenstein's life can be found in Norman Malcolm's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1958).
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961). Quotations from the main text of the *Tractatus* are identified by the paragraph numbers found in that work.
5. Paul Englemann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with a Memoir* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 143–144.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 12.
7. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 29–30.
8. Quotations from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Notebooks, 1914–1916* (Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1961) are cited in the text using the abbreviation N. References are to page numbers.
9. Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics," 8.
10. Moritz Schlick, "Positivism and Realism," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Macmillan Co., 1959), 86–87.
11. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, n.d.), 107–108.