Seminar 10: Wittgenstein—The Limits of Intelligibility

A Note on the Logic of the Tractatus

In the *Tractatus*, all propositions are said to be truth functions of elementary propositions. Each proposition p is constructible by applying truth-functional operators to elementary propositions, collecting the results and continuing to apply truth-functional operators until p is generated. Although Wittgenstein didn’t work out all the details, the sketch he provided can be filled out in a way that yields a powerful logical system. Whereas standard logical systems have truth-functional operators ‘~’, ‘&’, ‘∨’, ‘→’, ‘↔’, Wittgenstein had a single operator, ‘N’, for joint negation. Unlike the usual operators, which always attach either to a single sentence, as in [~S], or to a pair of sentences, as in [(A&B)], Wittgenstein’s ‘N’ can apply to any number of sentences – [N(A)], [N(A,B)], [N(A,B,C)]... to produce a complex sentence that is true if and only if all its argument sentences are false. Generality is expressed by prefixing ‘N’ to a bracketed expression that represents all propositions of a certain sort. Sometimes the propositions to which ‘N’ applies are enumerated by listing the them. Sometimes it is given by a formula containing a variable ‘x’ that ranges over metaphysical simples, in which case the propositions on which ‘N’ operates include all those that arise from the formula by replacing ‘x’ with a name of an individual. Since we don’t know how many individuals there are, we don’t know how many propositions ‘N’ operates on in such a case. What we do know is that it operates on all of them.

We can express the resulting system as follows: Atomic formulas are finite sequences of names or variables plus a predicate. If F₁,...,Fₙ are formulas of L₁ and G is a formula of L₁ in which the variable v occurs free, then [F₁,...,Fₙ] and [(v[G])] are set representatives in L₁, the occurrence of v to the left of G being called a *generality indicator*. (Nothing else is a set representative.) If S is a set representative in L₁, then [NS] is a formula of L₁. (There are no other formulas.) When v is used to form a set representative, it binds all occurrences of v within G that are not already bound in G. Occurrences not bound in this way are free. A sentence of L₁ is a formula in which no variables have free occurrences. An atomic sentence is true in L₁ if and only if its predicate applies to the objects named by its logically proper names. A sentence [NS] is true in L₁ if and only if all sentences corresponding to the set representative S are false in L₁. If S = [(v[G])], then a sentence corresponds to S if and only if it arises from G by substituting occurrences of a single name for all free occurrences of v in G. If S = [(F₁,...,Fₙ)], then a sentence corresponds to S if and only if it is one of the Fs.

All propositions expressible in the 1st-order predicate calculus are expressible in L₁. Some examples:

1. \[\neg \exists x \, Fx \quad N(x(Fx)) \]
   \[\exists x \, Fx \quad N(N(x(Fx))) \]
   \[\forall x \, Fx \quad N(x(N(Fx))) \]
   \[\neg \exists (Fx & Gx) \quad N(x(N(N(Fx), N(Gx)))) \]
   \[\exists (Fx & Gx) \quad N(N(x(N(N(Fx), N(Gx))))) \]
   \[\exists (Fx & \neg Gx) \quad N(N(x(N(N(Fx), Gx)))) \]
   \[\neg \exists (Fx & \neg Gx) \quad N(x(N(N(Fx), Gx))) \]
   \[\forall x \, \neg (Fx & Gx) \quad N(x(N(N(Fx), Gx))) \]
   \[\forall x \, (Fx \to Gx) \quad N(x(N(N(Fx), Gx))) \]
   \[\forall y \, \exists x (Rxy) \quad N(y(N(x(Rxy)))) \]

2. ‘(y[xy])’ is true iff ‘N(x[Rxa])’, ‘N(x[Rxb])’, ‘N(x[Rxc])’, and so on, are false. That will be so iff ‘\neg \exists x Rxa’ is false, ‘\neg \exists x Rxb’ is false, ‘\neg \exists x Rxc’ is false and so on. That is true iff ‘\exists x Rxa’ is true, ‘\exists x Rxb’ is true, ‘\exists x Rxc’ is true, and so on. That is so iff for every y it is true that \[\exists x Rxy \] i.e. iff ‘\forall y \exists x (Rxy)’ is true.

Next we confront a troubling observation. Suppose there are infinitely many tractarian objects and hence infinitely many elementary propositions. Then, since every set of elementary propositions is logically
independent of every other set, every set of elementary propositions will determine a proposition p the truth conditions of which differ from the those of every proposition q determined by other sets. By Cantor’s Theorem, there will uncountably many different tractarian propositions. Since there are only countably many expressions of our tractarian language (or of any language without infinitely long sentences), there will be infinitely many tractarian propositions that can’t be expressed.

It is not clear that the damage can be repaired. In seminar 9, I argued that instead of viewing elementary propositions as bare syntactic structures, Wittgenstein should have taken them to be uses of those structures. E.g., let ‘Rab’ be short for the atomic sentence that consists of the symbol ‘R’ immediately followed by name ‘a’, which is immediately followed by the name ‘b’. Let ‘Rxy’ be the same, except that ‘x’ and ‘y’ are variables. Call any name or variable a term. Let it be a linguistic convention that any structure consisting of ‘R’ immediately followed by a term t₁ that immediately precedes a term t₂ is used to represent the object t₁ is used to designate as bearing the relation R* to the object t₂ is used to designate. It is also a convention that one may use variables as temporary names for any object one wishes. This gives us indefinitely many uses of atomic formulas as elementary propositions in addition to uses of atomic sentences, which also are elementary propositions.

Although we can do for predicates and predicate designations (relations) what we did for names and name designations (individual simple objects), this won’t, by itself, solve the problem. It is tempting to suppose in addition, that for each set S of elementary propositions there is a relation Rs satisfying the following condition: for every natural number n, Rs is true of an arbitrary n-tuple, n*, of tractarian simple individuals iff some elementary proposition in S consists of n-place tractarian predicate P_n followed by a sequence of tractarian names designating n*. If P is a predicate variable an agent could use it to stand for Rs -- but this would still not allow us to form a tractarian sentence that is true iff all the members of S are true. One might try adding proposition variables, but short of adding to the tractarian language a unique symbol for each set of elementary propositions – thereby giving the language uncountably many symbols -- there seems to be no way of expressing a tractarian proposition for each of the uncountably many sets of elementary propositions. This looks like a potential mismatch between the tractarian language and the propositions about the world that one feels ought to be expressible.

The Tractarian Test of Intelligibility

According to the Tractatus, every intelligible proposition P falls into one of two categories: either (i) P is contingent (true at some possible world-states and false in others), in which case P is a truth-function of elementary propositions and knowable to be true, or false, only by empirical investigation, or (ii) P is a tautology or contradiction that can be known to be so by purely formal calculations. Paradigmatically meaningful uses of language are those in the first category. The uses in the second category are included because they are the inevitable product of the rules needed to express propositions of the first category. For Wittgenstein, tautologies and contradictions aren’t used to state anything, or to give any information about the world, but their truth or falsity can be calculated, and understanding them reveals something about our symbol system. Thus, they can be regarded as intelligible in an extended sense.

Many uses of language, including attempts to state fundamental claims of ethics, aesthetics, and traditional philosophy, don’t fit into either category. The sentences used for these purposes often purport to state necessary truths that don’t seem to be capable of being known by empirical observation. Thus they don’t seem to fit into Wittgenstein’s first category. Since they don’t seem to express tautologies or contradictions, they don’t seem to fit into his second category either. Because his doctrine states conditions that must be fulfilled for any use of a sentence to express a genuine proposition, he has little choice but to conclude that there are no genuine propositions of ethics, aesthetics, or traditional philosophy. The language used in these domains is nonsensical; it lacks even the extended sense of meaningfulness in which tautologies and contradictions are meaningful, despite saying nothing.
We have what appears to be a powerful test that categorizes masses of apparently meaningful uses of language as nonsensical. But before we go accept this conclusion, we should investigate two difficulties in applying the test. First, Wittgenstein never gives examples of metaphysical simples or elementary propositions. This is no accident. Despite maintaining that these entities must exist in order for any of our talk to make sense, central tractarian doctrines make it impossible to specify any simple objects. This makes it hard to apply the intelligibility test. If no elementary propositions are identified, it is unclear how we are supposed to determine whether claims made in science or everyday life are contingent truth-functions of them. How are we supposed to decide whether the claims that uranium atoms are unstable, that heat is molecular motion, and that other minds exist satisfy the condition, if we don’t know which propositions are elementary?

The second difficulty involved in applying the test is that we can’t reliably apply it to a proposition unless we know its logical form. However, the logical forms of the propositions expressed by uses of sentences of ordinary language are hidden, and revealed only on analysis. This is indicated at 4.002.

4.002 Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes. The tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated.

If the logical form of the proposition is hidden, then, when confronted with a proposition one suspects must be necessary, if the sentence used to express it is meaningful at all, one may not know how to determine whether its necessity is discoverable from its logical form alone. We are told that if necessity can’t be determined from form alone, then the sentence is nonsense and no genuine proposition is expressed. But since logical form is hidden, we may not know how to apply the test.

Consider (3a).

3a. If a thing is red (all over), then it isn’t green (all over).

This seems to be a necessary truth. Is its necessity determinable from logical form alone? It would seem not to be, since the form of (3a) would seem to be something like (3b) (in standard notation), or (3c) (in Tractarian notation); and we certainly can’t determine truth from those forms.

3b. $\forall x \ (Rx \rightarrow \sim Gx)$

3c. $N(x[N(N(Rx), N(Gx))]$)

But if form alone doesn’t determine that (3a) is necessary, then intelligibility test says it is either nonsense of contingent. Neither result seems correct. Wittgenstein realized this.

6.3751 For two colors, e.g. to be at one place in the visual field is impossible, logically impossible, for it is excluded by the logical structure of color.

Let us consider how this contradiction presents itself in physics. Somewhat as follows: that a particle cannot at the same time have two velocities; i.e. that at the same time it cannot be in two places; i.e. that particles that are in different places at the same time cannot be identical.

(It is clear that the logical product of two elementary propositions can neither be a tautology nor a contradiction. The assertion that a point in the visual field has two different colors at the same time, is a contradiction.)

It seems evident that Wittgenstein neither classified (3a) as nonsense nor classified the proposition it is used to express as contingent. Rather, he took it to be meaningful and necessary. This requires him to deny that the statements that o is red and that o is green are elementary propositions, and that either (3b) or (3c) represent the real logical form of (3a).
This would be less worrisome if Wittgenstein had given a hint about what the real logical form of (3a) is supposed to be. One might think that he did, by suggesting that the analysis of propositions about color is given by a physical theory of color. But this suggestion doesn’t help. The problem is to explain color incompatibility as logical impossibility. At most, his remark might be taken to suggest that ordinary color incompatibility can be assimilated to physical impossibility – i.e. to the impossibility of (4a).

4a.  o is at place p at time t and o is also at another place p’ at time t.
But the apparent logical form of (4a) is just (4b), which is not formally contradictory; so the problem remains.

4b.  Lxpt & Lxp’t
This is just one example of a pervasive problem. Our ordinary use of language is full of conceptual incompatibilities or necessities that aren’t obviously determinable from the linguistic form of the sentences used. To solve this problem, one would have to provide analyses in which the purely formal or structural properties of logical forms revealed the conceptual relations holding among them. But Wittgenstein doesn’t give such analyses.

Another was posed by propositional attitude ascriptions like (5a).

5.  John believes (says/ hopes / has proved) that the earth is round.
The sentence the earth is round is one of (5)’s constituent parts. In the Tractatus, the only way for S to have a sentence R as a part is for S to be a truth function of R by itself, or of R plus other sentences. Examples like (5) pose a threat to this doctrine. If sentence (5) is meaningful and the logical form of the proposition it expresses is one to which ‘the earth is round’ contributes the proposition that the earth is round as a constituent, then that proposition must be among the bases of the truth-functional operations used to construct the proposition that John believes/says/has proved that the earth is round. That could be so only if replacing ‘the earth is round’ in (5) with any other true sentence preserves truth. Since truth preservation is not guaranteed, tracarian doctrines lead to the conclusion that either sentence (5) is nonsense, or it is meaningful, but its logical form is one to which ‘the earth is round’ doesn’t contribute the proposition that the earth is round. Since it is hard to envision what the logical form of such a proposition might be, it appears that Wittgenstein must say that (5) fails to express a proposition.

Wittgenstein was aware of the problem.

5.541 At first sight it looks as if it were also possible for one proposition to occur in another in a different way.
Particularly with certain forms of proposition in psychology, such as ‘A believes that p is the case’ and ‘A has the thought p’, etc.
For if these are considered superficially, it looks as if the proposition p stood in some kind of relation to an object A.
(And in modern theory of knowledge (Russell, Moore, etc.) these propositions have actually been construed in this way.)

5.542 It is clear, however, that ‘A believes that p’, ‘A has the thought p’, and ‘A says p’ are of the form “p says p”: and this does not involve a correlation of a fact with an object, but rather the correlation of facts by means of the correlation of their objects.

Here Wittgenstein claims that the real logical form of (5) is different from what it appears to be. In reality, the logical form of any example of this sort has the form (6).

6.  “p” says (that) p
Presumably, this means that the logical form of (5) is (7).
7. “the earth is round” says (that) the earth is round

Wittgenstein was probably thinking that when one believes something, one constructs a mental picture of a possible state of affairs – some representation of it. The representation is a fact, and the state of affairs represented is a possible fact. Since the one is a representation of the other, the elements in the facts are correlated with one another. In the case of (5), the expressions in the representing fact, the sentence ‘the earth is round’ or a mentalistic version of it, are correlated with things in the world that make up the possible non-linguistic fact of the earth’s being round. That, in effect, is what (5) tells us.

Still it is hard to accept Wittgenstein’s claim that (7) is the logical form of (5). (5) specifies an agent, John, and an attitude, belief. (7) doesn’t. There would be no change in (7) even if someone other than John were the agent, and the attitude reported was not belief but assertion or knowledge. Since (7) leaves out the agent and the attitude, it can’t constitute the total content of (5). Still, one might take (7) to be part of the logical form of (5). One might take (5) as saying that John has accepted a representation that says that the earth is round. On this view the logical form of (5) contains (7) as a part.

Although this may be interpretive progress, it doesn’t help with the original problem. ‘The earth is round’ has an unquoted occurrence in (7) that does not contribute truth-functional propositional content to the proposition expressed by a use of (7). If it did, we be able to replace that occurrence with an occurrence of any other true sentence, without changing truth value. But if we replace the unquoted occurrence of ‘the earth is round’ in (7) with the sentence ‘2 + 2 = 4’ -- we end up with a falsehood.

8. ‘The earth is round’ says (that) 2 + 2 = 4.

Since substitution hasn’t preserved truth value, we have the same trouble making tractarian doctrines compatible with the meaningfulness of sentence (7), and the claim that it is used to express a proposition, as we had making them compatible with the meaningfulness of (5).

So what did Wittgenstein think? He seems to thought that attitude ascriptions like (5) and meaning statements like (7) are not really meaningful, and don’t express genuine propositions. Rather, a sentence like (7) – suggested as part of the analysis of (5) – attempts to state something about the relationship between language and the world. But the relationship between language and the world cannot, according to the Tractatus, be meaningfully stated or described; it can only be shown.

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it – logical form.

In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world.

4.212 Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them. What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent. What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language. Propositions show the logical form of reality. They display it.

4.1211 Thus one proposition ‘Fa’ shows that the object a occurs in its sense, two propositions ‘Fa’ and ‘Ga’ show that the same object is mentioned in both of them.

4.1212 What can be shown, cannot be said.

In short we cannot use language to state or describe the relationship between language and the world that allows language to be meaningful, and that makes individual expressions mean what they do.

Wittgenstein is right that there is no room for statements about the relationship between language and the world in the system of the Tractatus, but he doesn’t give any independent reason to think that the view is plausible. To use and understand language you have to grasp the relation between language and the world that allows your words to have meaning. Perhaps, it may be suggested, once you have grasped that relationship, there is nothing left to state. But that isn’t convincing. All that is shown is that
someone who didn’t know a language couldn’t learn language by being told what the relation between language and the world is. Such a person couldn’t learn language that way because he couldn’t understand the instructions. It is like saying you can’t learn to read by reading a book that tells you how to read a book. This isn’t deep. Psychologists can discover the elements of reading and write them up for others to read. The same might be said for language in general.

For example, the sentence


seems both meaningful and capable of being used to state a true proposition, even though its use says something about the relation between language and the world. If I use the sentence

10. Bill is tall

to tell you about a certain man’s height, then I use the convention that the word ‘Bill’ names Bill to say something about him. My remark doesn’t state that the word ‘Bill’ names Bill. Rather, Wittgenstein would correctly say that my use of (10) shows this. He might add that no sentence, or use of a sentence, states all those facts about its own relation to the world that allow it to say what it does. That may be true. But it doesn’t follow that no sentence can be used to state any of facts about the relations between its expressions and the world that allow it to say what it does. Nor does it follow that no sentence can be used to state a fact about the relationship between some expression and the world that allows another sentence to be used to say what it does. There is no reason to deny that (11) is used to state a fact about the relationship between language and the world that is one of the facts that allows both (10) and (11) to be used to say what they do.

11. ‘Bill’ refers to Bill.

Although Wittgenstein’s doctrines about what can’t be expressed in language are overstated, they played a role in his seeming denial that sentences like (5) (7), (9) and (11) are meaningful and capable of being used to express true propositions. But this result must be qualified. In discussing attitude reports, I assumed that, if they express propositions, then those propositions contain constituent propositions expressed by their complement clauses – e.g. by ‘the earth is round’ in the case of (5). Although this assumption is extremely plausible, I can’t see that it is dictated by the Tractatus. I can’t see that it is dictated, because I can’t see that any specific analyses of any sentences are dictated. We are told that all ordinary propositions must be constructed by applying truth-functional operations to propositions about metaphysical simples, which, by design, are completely mysterious. No such ordinary propositions are analyzed in the Tractatus, nor are we given a clue about how to begin. So, if a dedicated tractarian wished to avoid the absurd conclusion that propositional attitudes sentences are meaningless, and never express true proposition, the acolyte could do so. But that is not a strength of the view.

The Limits of Intelligibility: Value, the Meaning of Life, and Philosophy

Consider the statements that happiness and friendship are good, that causing pain unnecessarily is bad, that Michelangelo’s Pieta is beautiful. Wittgenstein denies that these are contingent or empirical truths.

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. For all that happens and is the case is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental. It must lie outside the world.
Wittgenstein doesn’t explicitly say that value judgments aren’t contingent. But his rejection seems plausible. Philosophers might disagree about the truth or falsity of many foundational statements of value – that happiness alone is good, that taking an innocent life is always wrong, and that all other things being equal, lying is wrong – but it is hard to imagine these statements being true at some possible world-states and false at others; it is also hard to imagine empirical observations being needed to find out whether the actual state of the universe is one that makes them statements true, or one that makes them false. But if these value judgments are neither contingent nor knowable only a posteriori, they also appear not to be tautologies (or contradictions). Value judgments play a role guiding our actions that tautologies (and contradictions) don’t. Also, if value judgments were tautologies (or contradictions), their truth (or falsity) would discoverable by their form alone, which seems impossible. According to the *Tractatus* sentences containing evaluative words don’t express genuine propositions. They are claimed to be, strictly speaking, senseless. If one person says “Murder is always wrong” and the other says “Murder is sometimes right,” then neither has said anything true, or anything false. The point isn’t that we can’t find out which is correct. The point also isn’t that no one can prove the correctness of a moral or other evaluative belief to a skeptic. Wittgenstein’s point is more radical: moral don’t express propositions. Since there are no moral or evaluative propositions to believe, we don’t have any moral or evaluative beliefs.

6.42 So too it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

One can, of course, produce the words, “Murder” “is” “always” “wrong,” but one will not thereby have said anything more than if one had produced the words “Procrastination” “drinks” “plentitude.”

According to the *Tractatus* there are no moral propositions; no moral beliefs, and no moral questions or problems. To think otherwise is to be confused about language. Once the workings of language have been clarified, the traditional philosophical problems of value will not be solved; we will see that there never were any real problems there in the first place. From this a slogan was born: the philosophical analysis of language doesn’t solve philosophical problems of value, it dissolves them.

It might seem that someone who characterizes all of ethics and aesthetics as meaningless would take ethical and aesthetic concerns to be unworthy of attention. One imagines of someone who thinks that what is important is giving an accurate scientific description of the world. Since values don’t fit into the description, they have no importance. But Wittgenstein doesn’t fit that the picture. Although he thought of the realm of value as lacking in sense, he thought of it as important non-sense. According to the *Tractatus*, all meaningful sentences are either tautologies, contradictions, or contingent propositions that describe the way objects in the world are, or could be, combined. Such sentences are meaningful and are used to express propositions that are true or false, but Wittgenstein claimed to find them not very interesting or important. What was important, he thought, was how one lived one’s life, what attitude one took towards things, and how one acted – even thought these are matters about which it is impossible to say, or even to think, anything sensible.

6.423 It is impossible to speak about the will in so far as it is the subject of ethical attributes. And the will as a phenomenon is of interest only to psychology.

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.*

Wittgenstein is being metaphorical here, but one gets an idea of what he is saying. Consider the difference between the happy, and the unhappy, man. According to Wittgenstein, they might not differ
in what they know or believe. Both might know all there is to know about any discipline that studies the world. They might believe the same things about inanimate objects, animals, other people, and even each other. In certain cases they will express their beliefs differently. When the happy man believes that he is catching a cold, he will express this belief using the words “I am catching a cold,” whereas the unhappy man will express that belief about the happy man using the words “You are catching a cold.” /although their words are different, their beliefs are the same. Still, one man is happy and one is unhappy. The happy one wakes up in the morning with anticipation and a sense of well being. He delights in his surroundings and his activities, and treats other people in a kind and considerate way. The unhappy man feels and behaves in the opposite way. The difference between them is at the level of value. It has nothing to do with what they think, or believe, or what they know to be true.

This picture is at odds with a venerable conception of philosophy. Philosophy has sometime been thought of as a discipline that shares the highest aspirations of both science and religion. As highest science, its task has been thought to consist in the discovery of the most fundamental truths about reality, and the place of human beings in it. As the deepest religion, its task has been taken to be the discovery of what excellence and happiness in human life consist in, and to tell us how to achieve them. These goals – describing reality and learning how to live the best life – have been thought to be not only compatible, but mutually reinforcing. The idea that excellence in the art of living is the result of knowing important truths about reality, oneself, and others, has been presupposed. Wittgenstein challenges this idea. For him, the truth about how to live is not a deep and difficult mystery for the philosopher, or anyone else, to discover; it is also not a simple matter we somehow know in advance. Excellence in living is not a matter of truth or knowledge at all. It is a matter of one’s attitude to life. What attitude one adopts may be the most important thing in life, but it’s not a matter of learning facts.

In sum, Wittgenstein adopts the paradoxical view that (i) if meaningful sentences are used to express genuine propositions, which are either true or not, then what is expressed has nothing to do with value, and is not very significant to life, and (ii) if a sentence is used with the intention of stating something important about how we should live, then it will fail to express anything that can even be thought. These views also applied to religion, and to everything else connected to the meaning of life.

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.

6.51 Skepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked.

For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something can be said.

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.

For Wittgenstein, ethics, religion, and talk about the meaning of life is relegated to the unthinkable and the unsayable. The same is true of philosophy. Just as the most basic ethical claims are neither tautologies nor contingent statements of empirically knowable facts, so philosophical claims are neither tautological nor contingent statements of empirical facts. Like ethical sentences, they are nonsense. There are no meaningful philosophical propositions, no genuine philosophical questions, and no philosophical problems to solve. It is not that the problems are so difficult that we can never be sure we have discovered the answers. There are no philosophical problems.

What then is responsible for the persistence of the discipline, and for the illusion that it is concerned with real problems for which answers might be found? The answer is linguistic confusion. According
to Wittgenstein, all the endless disputes in philosophy are due to confusion about how language works. If we could ever reveal the true workings of language, these confusions would die out, and we would see things correctly. When we did, we would see there is no place in the world for philosophy, just as there is no place for ethics. That doesn’t mean there is nothing for philosophers to do. There are no propositions the truth of which they have to discover. But there are plenty of propositions for philosophers to clarify. Wittgenstein believed that everyday language disguises thought by concealing true logical form. The proper aim of philosophy is to strip away the disguise and illuminate that form.

These views marked the beginning of what later called the **linguistic turn in philosophy**.

4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science.

4.111 Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences.

4.112 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.

For Wittgenstein philosophy was to be linguistic analysis. He gives a clear statement of what he takes analysis to be in his first post- *Tractatus* paper in 1929.

   The idea is to express in an appropriate symbolism what in ordinary language leads to endless misunderstandings. That is to say, where ordinary language disguises logical structure, where it allows the formation of pseudo-propositions, where it uses one term in an infinity of different meanings, we must replace it by a symbolism which gives a clear picture of the logical structure, excludes pseudo-propositions, and uses its terms unambiguously.

This conception of philosophy leads to a natural question about the *Tractatus*, where, it is obvious, Wittgenstein did not follow his own advice about philosophy. He did not produce a precise symbolism and use it to give analyses of sentences of ordinary language. Rather, he practiced the kind of philosophy that the *Tractatus* condemns as nonsensical. The *Tractatus* is filled with sentences that purport to make statements that are neither descriptions of contingent facts nor tautologies the truth of which is determined by their formal structure alone. So, Wittgenstein’s use of language in the *Tractatus* can only be judged to be nonsense by his own criteria.

Wittgenstein realized this.

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.

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.)

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

There are three ways of viewing this position. On one view, the *Tractatus* as a whole is self-defeating and / or self-contradictory, despite its illuminating insights on many points. Thus, the Tractarian system must be rejected, and we should strive to find ways of preserving its insights while avoiding its clear inadequacies. That was not Wittgenstein’s view.
On the second view, the *Tractatus* is acceptable as it stands. In it, Wittgenstein deliberately violates the rules of language in trying to show us both what those rules really are and to reveal what the most basic knowledge of reality consists in. In order get us to see what the rules of intelligible thought and language really are, he had to break them. In order to make the most significant knowledge of reality available to us, he had to communicate the reality that can only be shown, not by any individual proposition, but by our entire system of propositions. In order to make progress in philosophy, we must give up the illusion that there are philosophical truths to be discovered. I don’t believe that this view is coherent, but I do believe it was Wittgenstein’s view when he wrote the *Tractatus*.

Finally, there is a third view, which has come into its own among some interpreters of Wittgenstein in recent decades. On this view, Wittgenstein deliberately set out to produce a compelling but clearly incoherent philosophical work -- not to reveal any showable but unstateable truths, but to demonstrate the impossibility of philosophy. I don’t think that this interpretation withstands scrutiny.

I also don’t think is it charitable. The idea that an intentional descent into incoherence should have been expected to convince others that it constituted the upper limit of philosophical achievement strains credulity. Some might take it as given that the young Wittgenstein’s unique genius placed him at the summit of any past or future philosophy, but I doubt that even his own legendary ego was quite that large. I also don’t understand how anyone who has worked through the many problems, difficulties, and misconceptions on display in our discussion of “the single great problem” of the *Tractatus* could find such a view compelling. The most challenging difficulties are not meaningless doctrines that appear meaningful. The challenging problems are ones in which understandable and promising ideas veer off into falsehood. This is lost in an interpretation that posits intentional but universal nonsense.

Such an interpretation also obliterates the many advances in the *Tractatus*. The rejection of non-linguistic Frege-Russell propositions, the embryonic conception of propositions as uses of sentences to represent things as standing in relations to one another, the embryonic theory of propositional truth as consisting in objects being the ways that true propositions represent them to be, the theory of truth-functional operators as operations rather than names of logical objects or constituents of facts, the “semantic” analysis of the tautologies of the propositional calculus (according to which they are all on a par) as opposed to axiomatic or other proof-theoretic accounts (according to which some truths of logic are more basic than others), and the attempt to extend this semantic account to logic as a whole, were steps in the right direction. We read the *Tractatus* both to understand the historical impact of its insights, and to continue to learn from them today. All of this is obliterated in an interpretation that posits intentional and unmitigated self-refutation.

The correct view is, I believe, that the *Tractatus* is locally illuminating – both for its insights and its errors – despite being globally self-refuting. In addition to containing valuable insights, it is an object lesson in the absurdity of identifying five distinct types of truth -- necessary truth, apriori truth, truth in virtue of meaning, logical truth, logically provable truth. From my perspective, nothing was more significant in leading Wittgenstein down this disastrous path than his pre-Gödelian, pre-Tarskian conception of logic as the study, not of sentences of formal languages, but of propositions expressed in both formal and natural languages. It is the latter, not the former, that are the objects of knowledge and necessity. It is the structurally simplest sentences of the former, not the latter, that must be logically (but not necessarily or conceptually) independent, and that provide the basis for understanding and evaluating logically complex sentences.

It is a melancholy fact that the relationship between sentences and propositions is difficult, complex, and still insufficiently understood. But enough progress has been made to allow us to identify aspects of Wittgenstein’s the picture-theory and his incipient analysis of propositions as *uses of sentences* as the seminal breakthroughs they truly were. These breakthroughs were not wholly lost; they continued to play a role both in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and in the “ordinary language” school of philosophy.
he helped to inspire. But his tractarian insights were, until very recently, all but lost -- and indeed eclipsed by the unfortunate tractarian identification of necessarily equivalent propositions -- in the tradition in philosophical logic, formal semantics, and the philosophy of language leading from Frege and Russell, through the *Tractatus*, to Carnap, Kripke, Montague, Kaplan, and other influential discussions. Fortunately, that is no longer so.