Seminar 9: Wittgenstein—The Single Great Problem of Philosophy

Comparing the conceptions of philosophy of Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, we find Moore’s to be traditional, Wittgenstein’s radically new, and Russell’s in between. In accord with the traditional, but at variance with the tractarian, conception, Russell aimed for an all-encompassing theory of the whole universe. In accord with the tractarian, but at variance with the traditional, conception, Russell’s aim was not to produce new knowledge of the world unavailable outside of philosophy. The relation between his system of logical atomism and our pre-philosophical knowledge was supposed to parallel the relation between his logicized version of arithmetic and our ordinary knowledge of arithmetic. The logicist reduction wasn’t aimed at giving us new arithmetical knowledge, but at validating that knowledge and exhibiting its connections with other mathematical knowledge. Similarly, Russell’s logical atomism wasn’t seen as adding to our ordinary and scientific knowledge, but as validating it and exhibiting the connections holding among its various parts. Russell says in Our Knowledge of the External World that “Every philosophical problem, when it is subjected to the necessary analysis and purification, is found to be not really philosophical at all, or else to be, in the sense in which we are using the word, logical.” (33)

For Russell philosophy’s task was to provide conceptual analyses, which were creative logical analyses.

“[P]hilosophical propositions …must be a priori. A philosophical proposition must be such as can neither be proved or disproved by empirical evidence…[P]hilosophy is the science of the possible…Philosophy, if what has been said is correct, becomes indistinguishable from logic.”

Since Russell thought that a priori and necessary connections were logical connections, he took the task of explaining them to motivate a search for definitions, as in the reduction of arithmetic to logic, or decompositional analyses, as in his analysis of statements about the external world in terms of statements about perceptible simples. Although the resulting description of reality came from philosophical analysis, the raw material for the description came from observation, commonsense knowledge, and empirical science.

This seemingly modest view was not far from Wittgenstein’s more thoroughly deflationary conception. But my statement of Russell’s view, which parallels his own, isn’t entirely accurate. His “analyses” of statements about the world weren’t even approximately equivalent to the statements being analyzed. Hence, his resulting atomist system was less an analysis of our pre-philosophical world-view than a proposal to replace it with a revisionary metaphysics dictated by a conception of what reality must be like if it is to be knowable. Wittgenstein’s system harbored its own tension between what we pretheoretically think, on the one hand, and what the world and our thoughts must really be like, on the other, if our thoughts are to represent the world.

If this sounds like the Tractatus offers a transcendental metaphysics, there is no denying that it does. But that metaphysics is very spare, and not intended to be informative in the way Russell’s atomism was. The Tractatus begins with abstract metaphysics, but its metaphysical simples are never identified and no analyses of science or commonsense truths are given. There is no attempt to state an informative worldview in which traditional philosophical problems are solved by stating ordinary knowledge in its true logical form. The heart of the Tractatus is its conception of how thought and language must represent reality.

Its leading idea is the rejection of propositions as conceived of by Frege, Russell, and Moore. These are replaced by a new analysis of representational language. Wittgenstein saw this as the single great problem of philosophy, to be addressed in the Tractatus. Thus, in the Notebooks 1914-1916 he says:

My whole task consists in explaining the nature of the proposition. (p. 39)

The problem of negation, of conjunction, of true and false, are only reflections of the one great problem in the variously placed great and small mirrors of philosophy. (p. 40)
Don’t get involved in partial problems, but always take flight to where there is a free view over the whole of the single great problem. (p. 23)

The one great problem, explaining the nature of propositions, was the problem of explaining the essence of representational thought and language. For Wittgenstein this was philosophy’s the only real task.

In performing that task, he assumed that for a thought to tell us anything intelligible about the world, it must tell us something about which possible state the world is in. He took it to follow from this that all intelligible thoughts must be contingent and a posteriori. Since he believed that philosophical propositions are never either one, he concluded that there are no genuine philosophical propositions. Since he believed all necessary and a priori connections were logical connections, he could have tried to give illuminating logical analyses of scientific and everyday statements, had he shared Russell’s belief that the metaphysical simples that ground all analysis could be informatively identified. But he didn’t.

Wittgenstein was convinced that it is impossible to informatively identify them. Hence, he viewed his task not as solving the problems of philosophy, but as disposing of them.

Why then do the first few pages of the Tractatus consist of metaphysical pronouncements, which even he found problematic? Because he saw no way of communicating the limits of intelligibility without violating them in the process. That’s why the Tractatus is full of tractarian transgressions. The meager metaphysics at the beginning was a reflex of his views about how uses of sentences represent the world.

His intention wasn’t to do metaphysics, but to end it by revealing how it violates what is essential to all intelligible thought and language.

Atomic Facts and Metaphysical Simples

For Wittgenstein the world is made up of all atomic facts, each of which consists in metaphysically simple objects standing in a relation to one another. Although we can’t know what the simples are, we can know that there must be such simples. For suppose there were none. Then the simplest elements in language – logically proper names – would refer to composite objects; e.g. a name n might refer to an object o, made up of a, b, and c composed in way R. Then it would be both necessary and a priori that n exists only if R relates a, b, and c. Since the meaning of n is simply its referent, it would follow that knowing that n means what it does, and hence knowing the meanings of sentences containing n, would require knowing the proposition that a, b, and c are combined in way R. Because tractarian propositions are meaningful uses of sentences, this would require having proper names a*, b*, and c* for a, b, and c, and using them in a proposition to say that a, b, and c stand in relation R. If there were no simples, this process could be repeated for a, b, and c. So knowing that they exist and that sentences about them are meaningful would require knowing the existence of still further objects. This would, in turn, require the meaningfulness of still further names for those objects and the truth of further atomic propositions about how they are combined. The process could be repeated for every name and every atomic sentence. The result extends to all complex sentences since in the Tractatus the meanings of all complex sentences depend on the meanings of atomic sentences. So, if there were no metaphysically simple objects, one couldn’t know the meaning of any sentence, or even whether it had a meaning. Since unknowable meanings are not meanings, the idea that there are no metaphysical simples leads, together with other tractarian assumptions, to the absurdity that no sentences are meaningful. This is Wittgenstein’s reductio.

The resulting picture posits a parallel between language and reality. Linguistically simple expressions stand for metaphysical simples. Linguistically simple sentences, which are names standing in relations to one another, stand for atomic facts, which are metaphysical simples standing in relations to one another. Since complex sentences are truth functions of atomic sentences, a world of atomic facts is supposed to be all that is needed to determine the truth of all meaningful sentences.
In the *Tractatus* metaphysically simple objects are the building blocks out of which everything in else is made up. All change in time is the result of old combinations of simples breaking down and new combinations being formed. Even though simples are the source of all change, they are themselves eternal and unchanging. Wittgenstein extended this traditional atomist picture in a new way. His simples are also the source of all conceptual or logical possibility. Just as all variation in time is due to recombination of unchanging simples, variation in *logical space* between one possible state of affairs and another is due to possible variations in how the same simples are combined. The simple objects exist at all possible world-states. To say that something isn’t the case, but could have been, is to say that although the basic objects aren’t combined in a certain way, they could have been so combined.

What are these objects like?

2.021 Objects form the substance of the world. Therefore they cannot be compound.

2.0231 *The substance of the world can only determine a form, and not any material properties. For it is only by means of propositions that material properties are represented – only by the configuration of objects that they are produced.*

2.0232 Roughly speaking: objects are colorless.

2.0233 Two objects of the same logical form are – apart from their external properties – only differentiated from one another in that they are different.

Here, we are told that simples are the substance of the world and that these objects can only determine a form; which means they only have possibilities of combining in different ways. They don’t determine “material properties” like shape and color because they don’t possess those properties themselves and they don’t determine which other things do. To say that these properties come into being with “the configuration” of objects is to say that these properties are relations among the simples. To be red, or to be circular, is to be made up of simples that stand in a certain configuration. Thus the simples themselves can’t be red or circular; they are colorless and shapeless. Finally, two metaphysical simples that have the same possibilities of combining with other objects have no *intrinsic* properties that differentiate them. They may have different *relational* properties because they happen to be combined with different objects. But apart from that there are no intrinsic properties to distinguish one from the other.

According to the *Tractatus*, a priority and necessity are simply *logical necessity*, which is determined by the form of sentences alone. Whenever q is a necessary consequence of p, a formal proof of q from p can be given; whenever p and q are inconsistent, the negation of one can be formally derived from the other. Thus one atomic proposition is never a necessary or a priori consequence of another, and atomic propositions are never incompatible with one another. So no atomic sentence/proposition *Ha* logically entails, or is logically incompatible with, another atomic sentence/proposition *Gb*. For if there were a logical relation between the two, it would *not* be a matter of the structural relations between the two propositions, but rather would arise from their subject matters. Since logic has no specific subject matter of its own, this can’t happen. Rather, the logical relationships among different sentences/propositions are always discoverable from their form alone. Thus in the *Tractatus* when p and q are atomic propositions it is possible for both to be true, both false, or for one to be true while the other is false. Similarly, the existence of one atomic fact is always independent of the existence of any others.

These doctrines throw light on what atomic propositions really say about metaphysical simples, and what atomic facts are possible. Wittgenstein provides an example of the kind of argument we can use.
6.3751(a) 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.

(c) (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.)

There can be no meaningful atomic proposition that *a is red* that says of a particular object that it is red, for if there were, its truth would be incompatible with the truth of the proposition that *a is green*. So, the propositions -- that *a is red* and that *a is green* -- can’t be atomic. There is also no possible atomic state of affairs that *a is red*, since this state of affairs wouldn’t be independent of the possible state of affairs that *a is green*. Next consider the following.

1a. a is to the right of b.
   b. b is to the right of a.
   c. a is to the right of a.

2a. a is heavier than b.
   b. b is heavier than a.
   c. a is heavier than a.

3a. a is exactly two inches away from b.
   b. a is exactly one inch away from b.
   c. a is exactly one inch away from a.

4a. a is touching b.
   b. b is touching a.

The (a) and (b) statements are not independent of each other. In the first 3 cases they are incompatible. In the 4th case they are necessary consequences of one another. Similarly, (c) in the first 3 cases is necessarily false. These fact plus Tractarian doctrines about atomic propositions entail that the statements in each example can’t be atomic. We could produce the same argument for virtually any statement involving spatial relations, temporal relations, relations involving measurement, or relations of size or degree. So no statements of these types can be atomic in the *Tractatus*. Atomic propositions can’t attribute ordinary properties to metaphysical simples, nor can they attribute relations involving space, time, measurement, or degree to these objects. This leaves little or nothing we can imagine that they can say. This is an incredible result. According to Wittgenstein, atomic propositions are the building blocks out of which all meaning is constructed. But if his doctrines are correct, we can’t conceive of any atomic sentences, or the contents they have. So, he must say that all our talk about the world reduces to talk about simple objects that have no properties we can identify and that can’t be combined in any way we can imagine; instead they combine in ways we can’t comprehend.

These views are among the darkest, and most implausible in the *Tractatus*. Other doctrines -- about truth, meaning, propositions, the nature of logic, necessity, and possibility were more interesting

**The Picture Theory of Meaning: Atomic Sentences/Propositions Picture Atomic Facts**

Atomic sentences are combinations of names that *picture* or represent possible states of affairs.

2.01 An atomic fact is a combination of objects.
2.1 We picture facts to ourselves.
2.11 The picture presents the facts in logical space, the existence or non-existence of facts.
2.12 A picture is a model of reality.
3.1 In the proposition the thought is expressed perceptibly through the senses.
3.12 The sign through which we express the thought I call the propositional sign. And the proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.
3.2 In propositions thoughts can be so expressed that to the objects of the thoughts correspond the elements of
the propositional sign.

3.202 The simple signs employed in propositions are called names.

4.0311 One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are connected together. And so the
whole, like a living picture, presents the atomic fact.

In the tractarian system, each name names a single object, which is its meaning, and each object is
named by a single name. The way names are combined in an atomic sentence represents a way the
objects named could be combined. Atomic sentences are said to picture possible facts (or states of
affairs) that might (loosely and informally) be taken to be their meanings.

2.201 The picture depicts reality by representing a possibility of existence and non-existence of atomic facts.
2.202 The picture represents a possible state of affairs in logical space.
2.221 What a picture represents is its sense.

Wittgenstein’s picture analogy can be illustrated using two examples. The first is a courtroom model of
a traffic accident in which toy cars stand for real cars. Putting the toy cars in certain spatial arrangements
represents real cars in those arrangements. The spatial properties and relations of the model allow it to
represent spatial properties or relations of the real cars. The 2nd example is a representational painting of
a barn. By making a certain part of the canvass red, one represents the barn one is painting as red.

What about language? According to Wittgenstein, an atomic sentence can represent a non-linguistic
state of affairs only in virtue of the sentence and the state of affairs sharing a common form. This form
can’t, in general, be a spatial one or a material one involving properties like color. The form shared by
an atomic sentence and the state of affairs it pictures or represents must be an abstract logical form.

2.171 A picture can depict any reality whose form it has. A spatial picture can depict anything spatial, a colored
one anything colored, etc.

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.

2.18 What every picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality, in order to be able to represent
it at all—rightly or falsely—is the logical form, that is, the form of reality.

A picture whose pictorial form is logical form is called a logical picture.

2.182 Every picture is also a logical picture. (On the other hand, not every picture is, for example, a spatial
picture.)

3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.

The general idea is simpler than it sounds. An atomic sentence is a linguistic fact, a structured
combination of names; a state of affairs is a non-linguistic fact a structured combination of objects. In
order for the linguistic fact to represent the non-linguistic fact, something about the way the names are
combined in the sentence must correspond to how the objects are combined in the state of affairs.

3.14 The propositional sign consists in the fact that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way.
The propositional sign is a fact.

3.142 Only facts can express a sense, a class of names cannot.

3.2 In propositions thoughts can be so expressed that the objects of the thoughts correspond the elements of
the propositional sign.

3.21 The configuration of the simple signs in the propositional sign corresponds to the configuration of objects
in the state of affairs.
What can be said about the required correspondence between the relation in which names stand in the sentence and the relation in which the objects named are represented as standing? It is mainly a matter of linguistic convention. It is a convention that certain ways of putting names in specific relations to one another (in speech or writing) to form a sentence represent states of affairs in which the objects designated by the names stand in certain relations. For example, in the sentence

5. Los Angeles is south of San Francisco.

‘Los Angeles’ stands in the relation immediately preceding the words ‘is south of’, which immediately precede ‘San Francisco’. Combining the names in this relation represents the object, Los Angeles as standing in the relation being to the south of to the object, San Francisco. In setting up a language one adopts conventions specifying (i) which objects different proper names designate, and (ii) which non-linguistic relations holding among the objects named different linguistic relations holding among the names in a sentence stand for. For an atomic sentence and the atomic fact it represents to share a logical form is for the atomic fact to be a combination in which objects stand in a relation $R_n$, for the atomic sentence to be a fact in which names stand in a relation $R_o$, and for linguistic conventions to stipulate (i) which objects the names stand for and (ii) that placing the names in the relation $R_o$ represents the objects named bearing the relation $R_n$ to one another in the (possible) atomic fact.

**Truth, Meaning, and Truth Functionality**

*What makes an atomic sentence representational – i.e., meaningful?* Some philosophers answer that the meaningfulness of a sentence consists in its standing for an entity that is its meaning. Wittgenstein disagrees. For him, an atomic sentence is meaningful iff it is possible for the objects designated by the names in it to be related in a way that corresponds to the way in which the names in the sentence are related. To know the meaning of the sentence is not to be acquainted with any abstract entity. It is to know what the world would have to be like if the sentence were to be true. When the sentence is an atomic sentence it is true iff it corresponds to an atomic fact. When the sentence is non-atomic, its truth or falsity is determined by the totality of atomic facts. There are no negative, disjunctive, or other molecular facts to which true, truth-functionally-complex sentences correspond. The truth or falsity of non-atomic sentences is always determined by the truth or falsity of atomic sentences.

Atomic facts are all the facts there are. There is nothing to any possible world-state over and above the atomic facts that would exist if the world were in that state. We can also express this linguistically. Let $A$ be the set of all atomic sentences, and $f$ be an assignment of truth values to members of $A$. For each sentence $S$ in $A$, $f$ assigns $S$ truth or falsity. The set of sentences to which $f$ assigns truth represents a complete possible world-state. A different assignment would represent a different possible world-state. Now consider every possible assignment of truth values to members of $A$. One will assign truth to every atomic sentence, one will assign falsity to them all, and for every possible combination between these extremes, there will be an assignment that gives that combination of truth values to the sentences in $A$. In the *Tractatus* each possible assignment represents a possible world-state (a way the world really could be) and each possible world-state is represented by a possible assignment.

**Meaningfulness Without Meanings**

Wittgenstein took sentences to be the primary meaningful expressions, while taking the significance of sub-sentential expressions to consist in the contributions they make to the meaningfulness of sentences in which they occur. But he didn’t identify what it is for a sentence to be meaningful with its expressing a non-linguistic entity that is its meaning. *For him nothing is the meaning of a meaningful sentence.*

The view endorsed by Frege, Moore, and Russell, but repudiated in the *Tractatus*, was that declarative sentences express propositions that are (i) the meanings of those sentences, (ii) the referents of embedded clauses [that $S$], (iii) the primary bearers of truth and falsity, and (iv) the things an agent
asserts, believes, or knows when the report \([x \text{ asserts/believes/knows that } S]\) is true. Unlike these philosophers, Wittgenstein didn’t specify what sentential clauses \([\text{that } S]\) refer to, or what one asserts, believes, or knows when one asserts, believes or knows something. He does speak of propositions, which he seems to identify with meaningful sentences. But what are they? Presumably, they are sentences used, or understood, in a certain way. But what, exactly, are sentences used or understood in a certain way? Let ‘Los Angeles’ and ‘San Francisco’ be names and let the linguistic structure that consists of the former name immediately preceding ‘is south of’, which in turn immediately precedes the latter name be a tractarian sentence. The truth conditions of this sentence depend on what it means, which in turn depends on conventions governing its use. Suppose the conventions governing the names are that ‘Los Angeles’ is to be used as a logically proper name for the city Los Angeles and that ‘San Francisco’ is to be used as a logically proper name for the city San Francisco. Suppose that the convention governing the relation \(\_\text{immediately precedes } \text{is south of}\), which itself immediately precedes is that structures in which two names stand in this relation are to represent the object designated by the first of name as being to the south of the object designated by the second name. In virtue of these conventions, one who uses the linguistic structure predicates being to the south of San Francisco of Los Angeles, thereby representing the latter as being south of the former.

Because of this Wittgenstein would say that sentence (5) bears this truth condition. What is this truth bearer, exactly? I have been treating it as the structure consisting of ‘Los Angeles’ immediately preceding ‘is south of’, which immediately precedes ‘San Francisco’. This description doesn’t mention the conventions governing the names or the syntactic relation that relates them. So, it is natural to think that although the sentence is governed by these conventions, it could have been governed by other conventions, and so could have meant something else. Then although sentence (5) does bear the truth condition being true if and only if Los Angeles is south of San Francisco, it doesn’t do so essentially. Had the conventions governing it been different, it would have had a different truth condition.

Viewed in one way, this is no surprise. Surely, there is something – the bare syntactic fact in which ‘Los Angeles’ stands in the relevant syntactic relation to ‘San Francisco’ -- that is used by speakers to represent Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco. It could have been used differently, and so could have meant something else. This syntactic object does have the truth condition, but it could have had a different one. But it would be surprising to be told that the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco is true if and only if Los Angeles is south of San Francisco, but it could have been true even if Los Angeles hadn’t been south of San Francisco. That result will follow if: (i) the proposition is identical with sentence (5); (ii) sentence (5) is the bare syntactic fact described; (iii) sentence (5) could have been governed by a convention different from the one that actually governs it; (iv) a sentence that represents objects as standing in a certain relation is true iff the objects do stand in that relation.

These assumptions are inconsistent with (6).

6a. Necessarily, the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco is true if and only if Los Angeles is south of San Francisco.

b. For all world-states \(w\), the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco is true at \(w\) if and only if at \(w\), Los Angeles is south of San Francisco.

Consider a world-state \(w^*\) at which sentence (5) represents San Diego as being east of San Antonio, even though, at \(w^*\), San Diego is west of San Antonio. Using the previous paragraph we get the result R.

R. If \(w^*\) were actual, sentence (5) would be false, even though Los Angeles was south of San Francisco. This can’t be, if (6a,b) are true and the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco = (5).

Is there better view that avoids this result? Suppose we take propositions to somehow incorporate both their bare syntactic structures and the conventions that govern their use by an individual or a community.
Let the syntactic form of (5) be as before and the conventions governing its use be: (a) that ‘Los Angeles’ is to be used as a logically proper name for Los Angeles, (b) that ‘San Francisco’ is to be used as a logically proper name for San Francisco, and (c) that structures consisting of a name standing in the relation _immediately precedes ‘is south of’, which itself immediately precedes_ to another name are to be used to represent the object designated by the 1st name as being to the south of the object designated by the 2nd. **We identify the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco with a use of (5) in accord with these conventions to represent Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco.**

For this to work, there must be an entity – a use of the sentence in accord with these conventions. What is it? Since to use S is to do something, a use of S is a cognitive act – one performed by agents who use S in the same way. It is the act of using the names ‘Los Angeles’ and ‘San Francisco’, to designate Los Angeles and San Francisco, while using the relation the names stand in to represent the item designated by the first name as being south of the item designated by the second. This use – this act—represents Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco, in the sense that any possible agent who performs it represents Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco. Since to do that is to represent the two cities accurately, the use, i.e., the act, is properly be said to be true. Moreover, it has its truth conditions essentially.

**How well does this account of propositions fit the Tractatus?**

This reconstruction preserves some central tractarian themes. (i) It explains the meaningfulness of a sentence, identified as a syntactic fact, without positing an entity independent of the sentence as the meaning that agents must cognize to understand it. (ii) It identifies the proposition (the meaningful use of the sentence) as an entity the truth of which is defined in terms of its representational accuracy. (iii) The constituents of the sentence – the names and the syntactic relation – are isomorphic to the constituents of the atomic fact that make the use of the sentence true. (iv) The conventions governing the sentence are the product of the syntactic structure of the sentence plus the conventions governing its parts; no extra convention governing the sentence as a whole is needed. (v) The proposition (i.e. this use of the sentence) has its truth conditions essentially.

Although this account of propositions is tractarian in spirit, it is not exactly what Wittgenstein had in mind. For example he took propositions to be facts – which acts are not.

2.14 The picture consists in the fact that its elements are combined with one another in a definite way.
2.141 The picture is a fact.
2.21 The picture agrees with reality or not; it is right or wrong, true or false.

Next Wittgenstein tells us about the relationship between propositions and propositional signs.

3.12 The sign through which we express the thought I call the propositional sign. And the proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world.
3.13 To the proposition belongs everything which belongs to the projection; but not what is projected. Therefore, though what is projected is not itself included, its possibility is. In the proposition, therefore, its sense is not yet contained, but the possibility of expressing it.
3.14 The propositional sign consists in the fact that its elements, the words, are combined in it in a definite way. The propositional sign is a fact.

For Wittgenstein, propositions aren’t supposed to be identical with propositional signs, which are “bare syntactic structures or facts.” The **sense of the proposition** is the **possible fact** that consists of the objects designated by its names being combined as they are represented as combining. This is a misleading way of putting the point because, for Wittgenstein, nothing is both a fact and merely possible. He tries to register this by indicating that propositions never contain their senses. They can’t because (i) there are no facts for false propositions to contain, and (ii) we must grasp the sense of a proposition before we know its truth value. This clarifies 3.13. There, what is projected is the sense of the proposition--the
possible fact. Although it is not “included” in the proposition, the rest of the projection is – the conventions governing the names and the relation in which they stand in the proposition. What is it to say that these conventions are “included” in the proposition, which “is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world”? The language is obscure, but what Wittgenstein is getting at is not; the conventions are what one must know in order to understand how the propositional sign is used.

But on the crucial matter of what exactly a proposition is, he was confused. One confusion is between a propositional sign -- which is a syntactic structure consisting of symbols standing in a certain relation to one another – and an imagined further entity the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world. To think there are two entities here is analogous to thinking that in addition to the man Scott, there are other distinct entities, Scott-in-his-relation-to-the Catholic-Pontifical-University of Peru, Scott-in-his-relation-to-the-philosophy-department-at-USC, Scott in-his-relation-to-his-wife, Scott in-his-relation-to-his-children, etc. There are, no such extra creatures here, just misleading ways of talking about the fact that I am visiting the Catholic University, my home institution is USC Philosophy, I am married, and have children. The same point applies to Wittgenstein’s talk of propositions versus propositional signs. The passages are intended to distinguish meaningful (interpreted) sentences from uninterpreted sentences, or sentences-plus-their-meanings from sentences-minus-their-meanings. This is a mistake. These aren’t two kinds of sentences, but two ways of speaking about sentences. Thus although Wittgenstein rightly denied that propositions are propositional signs, he failed to clearly identify them with anything else, and made it seem as if there were no other plausible candidates. He would have done better to identify them with uses of sentences.

The Big Picture on the “Single Great Problem” of the Tractatus

Wittgenstein took “the single great problem” to be the analysis of propositions, which, in turn, was a theory of representational thought. The first misstep was the (qualified) identification of propositions with symbolic artifacts of representational systems, of which language is the most important. This led him to take propositions to be (a certain kind of abstraction from) sentences, or more properly, uses of sentences. There are two main problems with this idea.

First, propositions can’t be identified with bare syntactic forms . Nor are there composite entities consisting of such forms plus whatever might be called their meanings. Second, there is, I suspect, nothing of significance that is essential to all and only those artifacts that can be used to represent reality other than the fact that they are, or can be, so used. What is essential to thought is that agents represent things as being certain ways, not what, if any, instruments they use they use in doing so.

Any organism with thoughts capable of being true or false represents things in the world as being certain ways. Sometimes the agent does so by employing symbolic systems. So, we must retain the idea that some propositions are uses of sentences to represent things as being certain ways. In the simplest cases, they are uses of names and verb phrases to predicate properties and relations of individuals. But there is no reason to think that every time one perceives something and judges it to be dangerous, or thinks of something and takes it to be dangerous, or sees a pair of things and judges one to be bigger and more dangerous than the other, one does so by employing names or other symbols. Agents perform a variety of representational cognitive acts. Sometimes they do so linguistically, in which case the propositions they affirm may be uses of sentences -- cognitive acts one performs by using symbols in a certain way. Sometimes they do so non-linguistically, in which case the predications or other cognitive acts are not linguistically mediated, which means that the propositions they affirm aren’t either. As 4.0312 suggests, Wittgenstein would not have acknowledged this.

4.0312 The possibility of propositions is based on the principle that objects have signs as their representatives.
In short, representation is not inherently linguistic or symbolic. Thus it is not surprising that there is no essence of representation to be had in the tractarian study of language.

In one way, this criticism of the *Tractatus* takes us a step toward Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, when he rejected the idea of discovering the essence of thought by identifying the referential essence of language. But in another way it points in a different direction. The criticism here is not the later Wittgensteinian critique that there are no significant a priori limits to the variety of uses of language, also known as *language games*, though that too has merit. The point here is that there is no a priori requirement that representational thought be linguistic or symbolic.

**Atomic Propositions: Representation, Truth Conditions, Individuation**

The tractarian account of atomic propositions is an incomplete realization of three valuable insights. (i) Ordinary declarative sentences are representational, not because they stand in some relation to a primitively representational abstract object (a Fregean or a Russellian proposition), or because they name some bit of reality, but because of how they are used. (ii) Talk of these sentences being true or false is grounded in the fact that sentences are used to represent various things as bearing certain properties and standing in certain relations to one another. (iii) The truth conditions of the use of an atomic sentence are read off of, or derived from, the representational properties of that use -- where a use of a sentence is true at a world-state if and only if were that world-state actual things would be as that use represents them to be. This embryonic theory leaves open the possibility that *different propositions* may be true at all the same possible world-states, and so have the same truth conditions.

It also leaves questions about the individuation of (atomic) propositions open. Treating the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco as atomic, we ask *Which sentence is such that a particular use of it is identical with this proposition?* There is no more reason to identify it with a use of the English sentence (5) than there is to identify it with a use of any other sentence employing different names and/or different structural relations in which the names stand to one another to represent the two cities as standing in the same relation. Since all such uses of these sentences represent the same entities as being the same ways, they are representationally identical.

Since each is a cognitive act of using a sentence to represent Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco, we can identify another candidate for the proposition we are looking for – the cognitive act of using *some sentence or other* to represent Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco. Since anyone who uses a sentence in the indicated manner, performs this more general representational act, it is a proposition that *every agent* employing one of the sentences in this way thereby entertains. In fact, we could drop all reference to sentences. Consider the cognitive act of predicating being south of San Francisco of Los Angeles, *by any means whatsoever*. Isn’t it the best candidate for *the proposition that Los Angeles is south of San Francisco*? If it is not possible perform this act without using a sentence, then it is identical with the act of using some sentence to do so. If it is possible to perform it without using a sentence, then it is the proposition we seek.

One tractarian doctrine can be read as pointing in this direction (provided we restrict our attention to atomic propositions expressed solely by uses of atomic sentences). The doctrine is that logically equivalent propositions – thought of as propositions with the same truth conditions -- are identical.

5.141 If *p* follows from *q* and *q* follows from *p* then they are one and the same proposition.

If this is so, then the proposition we have been looking for can never be identified with the use of any one sentence. If our proposition is defined in terms of uses of sentences at all, it is the act of using some sentence or other to represent Los Angeles as being south of San Francisco -- no matter which words are used or what structural relation they stand in. If, as I believe, no symbolic medium is necessary, it is the minimal act of predicating being south of San Francisco, by any means whatsoever. On this, quasi-tractarian view, neither individual sentences, nor uses of individual sentences are ever propositions,
thereby making interpretive trouble for the tractarian doctrine that propositions are facts consisting of expressions standing in structural relations.

**Truth-Functionally Complex Propositions**

Suppose atomic propositions are acts of predicating properties of objects, thereby representing them as having the properties, often or always by using sentences to do that. Shouldn’t negations and disjunctions then be acts of negating and disjoining propositions, thereby representing things as being certain ways, often or always using sentences to do that? Here is one way this might work. We begin with the idea that for any proposition p that represents things as being so-and-so, there is a property being such that things are so-and-so, the predication of which of any object represents whatever p represents. For example, let p be the proposition that o is F. Given this, we may contemplate the unusual property being such that o is F, which is possessed by everything, if it is possessed by anything. Since to predicate this property of anything is to represent o as being F, anyone willing to predicate it of anything should be willing to predicate it of everything. Using this fact, we identify the negation of p as the proposition that predicates not being such that o is F of everything. One who uses the sentence ‘Not o is F’ in this way predicates the property of everything, thereby representing each thing as it really is just in case o isn’t F. The same story can be told for conjunctions and disjunctions. Let p be as before and let q be the proposition that o* is G. The conjunction of p and q is then the act of predicating being such that o is F and o* is G of everything, which can be performed by using the sentence [o is F and o* is G], while the disjunction of p and q is the act of predicating being such that o is F or o* is G of everything, which can be performed by using the sentence [o is F or o* is G].

Thus, we say the same thing about negations, conjunctions, and disjunctions as we do about atomic propositions – namely, that they represent tractarian objects as being certain ways, and so are true (false) if the objects so represented are (are not) as they are represented. The truth or falsity of these propositions will then be a function of the truth or falsity of their atomic constituents, but there won’t be two theories of truth, one for atomic and one for truth-functionally compound propositions; nor will there be two theories of meaning. On this reconstruction, entertaining, asserting, or believing a truth-functionally compound proposition doesn’t require one to predicate being true (or being false) of constituent propositions, or even to possess the concept of truth. On this way of reconstructing the *Tractatus*, entertaining, asserting, or believing a truth-functionally compound proposition – as it would seem even some non-linguistic, non-self-conscious animals can do -- doesn’t require an agent to predicate being true (or being false) of constituent propositions, or even to possess the concept of truth.

Consider the alternative in which the negation of proposition p predicates falsity of p, the conjunction of p and q predicates being jointly true of the pair, and the disjunction predicates being true of at least one of the pair. These propositions directly represent, not tractarian simples as standing in relations, but simpler propositions as being true or false. On this view, there is one theory of truth for both atomic and non-atomic propositions; a proposition is true if and only if things are as the proposition (directly) represents them to be. But now we allow not only objects in the world to be represented by virtue of being targets of predication, but also propositions about the world. This doesn’t fit the *Tractatus*.

The problem begins with the question **What are we saying when we say that a proposition is true**? My answer has been *That things are as the proposition represents them to be*. Wittgenstein is not entirely happy with this answer because he doesn’t recognize the legitimacy of the question. He thinks that *nothing* can be intelligibly said or stated about the properties of propositions, the relations they bear to other propositions, or the relationship between propositions and the world (in virtue of which the former represent the latter). In part for this reason, he took a jaundiced view of *truth*, rejecting, in effect, if not in practice, the idea that ‘true’ expresses a property that can be intelligibly predicated of anything. Thus, in the *Notebooks* he says that ‘‘p’’ is true’ says the same thing as ‘p’. He would have been equally happy to say that the proposition *p is true* is the same proposition as *p*. 
Although this makes both forms seem equally legitimate, that was not his view. This is clear in the passage from the Notebooks where he says that ‘‘p is true’’ (or ‘the proposition that p is true’) is a pseudo-proposition, because it attempts to say something that can only be shown. Contrasting p with ['p’ is true] – and implicitly with [the proposition that p is true], the commentator Max Black sums up the significance of this discussion for the Tractatus as follows.

(a) ['p’ is true] must be regarded as misleading and to be excluded from formulation in ‘a correct ideography’ [the ideal object language envisioned in the Tractatus]. For there is no place in Wittgenstein’s conception of language for talk about propositions, as seems to occur in (a) [i.e. in ‘p’ is true]. All significant propositions refer to the world by having their components stand proxy for objects in the world, but a proposition is not an object, and any method of symbolization that suggests the contrary must be incorrect. There is no room for a ‘meta-language’ in Wittgenstein’s theory. (Black 1964, p. 218)

Black is right. According to the Tractatus, (I) there can be no truth predicate of propositions, and (II) no propositions predicate anything of propositions. Propositions are facts that are logical pictures of other facts. If they are elementary propositions, then they are combinations of names of metaphysical simples. Since propositions aren’t simples, there are no elementary propositions about propositions. So, any propositions about propositions must be truth functions of elementary propositions about other things.

Consider (I). Suppose that p is the proposition that aRb, and q is the proposition that p is true, which predicates truth of p. Since q isn’t elementary, it is a truth function of elementary propositions. Since elementary propositions are ‘logically’ independent of one another, q must be a truth function of p. For Wittgenstein, to the extent we can conceive of q as a proposition at all, p and q are consequences of each other. But then, by 5.141, q is the atomic proposition p, which merely predicates R of a and b, and so doesn’t predicate truth or anything else of any proposition. So there is no truth predicate of propositions.

Next, consider (II). We know that if there are propositions about other propositions – i.e. propositions that predicate things of other propositions – they can’t be elementary propositions, but must instead be truth functions of those. This time let q be the proposition that p is F, where it is arbitrary which property is thereby predicated of p. For there to be such a proposition q, the existence of p must be truth-functionally determined by elementary propositions. Since p is a fact that represents a as bearing R to b, the existence of p requires the truth of Claim C.

Claim C: There are names a* and b* which, as a matter of linguistic convention, designate a and b respectively; a* stands in some structural relation R* to b*, and it is a linguistic convention that for one name to stand in R* to a second name is for the structure to represent the object designated by the first name to stand in R to the object designated by the second.

But, according to the Tractatus, Claim C can’t be a truth function of elementary propositions because there is no such complex proposition C at all. This startling claim is a consequence of the tractician doctrine that the facts about the relationship between language and the world, in virtue of which (our use of) language represents the world, can’t be stated in language. More generally, there are no propositions that predicate properties of propositions. The result is astounding. According to the Tractatus, which says so much about propositions, there are no genuine propositions about propositions. Paradoxically, if the Tractatus is to be believed, nothing can be intelligibly said about them! Since some propositions are negations, conjunctions, and disjunctions of other propositions, these truth-functional compounds can’t be propositions that state the truth or falsity of other propositions.

The doctrine that one can’t intelligibly predicate truth of either sentences or propositions is unfortunate, and can hardly be taken seriously by anyone giving a semantic theory of referential uses of language, or a philosophical theory of the nature of representational thought. Because Wittgenstein attempted to do both, and because talk of truth conditions and truth functionality is pervasive in the Tractatus, we are faced with two interpretative possibilities. One, suggested by Black, is to reconstrue some at least of
Wittgenstein’s discussions of truth conditions and truth functionality, providing them with interpretations according to which truth is never predicated of sentences or propositions. The other is to avert our eyes from the obviously incorrect doctrines about truth and reference until we are forced by the final few pages of the *Tractatus* to include it in the scope of the paradoxical tractarian conclusion that most of its central doctrines are unintelligible. My reading is a blend of these two strategies.

Propositions that predicate truth of other propositions can’t be expunged from what is expressed by what are, in effect, sentences of the tractarian metalanguage. So, I will continue to say that negations are true whenever the negated propositions aren’t true, and so on. But, if possible, one shouldn’t interpret sentences of the imagined *ideal tractarian object language*, capable of underlying so much of our ordinary language, as predicing truth, falsity, or anything else of propositions. This will limit what we today regard as its expressive power. But it *must* include sentences expressing negative, conjunctive, and disjunctive propositions. Thus, it would seem, we can’t regard the negation of p as a proposition that predicates *being false* of p. Nor can we take conjunctions or disjunctions of p and q be propositions that predicates, truth, falsity, or anything else of p and q.

Fortunately, the account of truth-functionally compound positions based on properties like *being such that o is F* remains intact. The only other alternative is nakedly austere (and mysterious). It simply asserts that the negation of the proposition p is the *unique proposition* that must be true if and only if p is not true, that the conjunction of propositions p and q is the *unique proposition* that must true if and only if p and q are jointly true, and that the disjunction of p and q is the *unique proposition* that must true if and only if either p is true or q is. You will doubt these characterizations, if you think, quite reasonably, that propositions can fail to be identical even if they are necessarily equivalent. For example, you may think that you know some necessary truths but not others. You may think you can believe or assert a proposition p without believing or asserting every necessary consequence q of it, even though you can’t believe or assert a conjunction without believing or asserting both conjuncts. This combination of views is inconsistent with the claim that necessarily equivalent propositions are identical. Similarly you might think you can believe or assert a necessary falsehood without believing or asserting every proposition (and its negation). As before, this is impossible if necessarily equivalent propositions are identical.

If, for these reasons, you reject the identity of necessarily equivalent propositions, you will reject the austere (and mysterious) characterizations of negations, conjunctions, and disjunctions. But this was not Wittgenstein’s view. He identified necessarily equivalent propositions. This doesn’t directly require accepting the mysterious and austere analysis of negation, conjunction, and disjunction, but it does require us to consider it a little more closely. *Since the analysis says nothing about negations, conjunctions, or disjunctions representing objects as being one way or another, for them to be true can’t be for them to represent objects as they really are.* Hence accepting the analysis requires positing two theories of truth – one in which truth is defined as representational accuracy for atomic propositions and one in which it is defined for truth functional compounds in terms of the truth or falsity of atomic propositions. Two theories of meaning are also needed. *To know the meaning of an atomic sentence is to know which things it represents as being which ways; its truth conditions follow from this.* By contrast, to know the meaning of a truth-functionally compound sentence must be to know how its truth or falsity is determined by the truth or falsity of atomic sentences.

This brings with it three worries. First, if negative, conjunctive, and disjunctive *propositions* can be defined only by using a truth predicate, regarded by Wittgenstein as suspect, how can one explain the ability of supposedly “ideal” tractarian agents to identify negations, conjunctions, and disjunctions without employing “pseudo-propositions”? Second, if understanding negative, conjunctive, and disjunctive *sentences* requires knowing their truth conditions, which in turn amounts to knowing that they are true iff various atomic sentences or propositions are true, then mastery of even an “ideal” language will require knowing pseudo-propositions. How can that be? Third, any theory that identifies
understanding some sentences of a language with knowing their truth conditions must invoke a conception of truth in which $S$ and ['$S$ is true'] are not a priori consequences of one another – since if they are a priori consequences of each other, then knowing the triviality that snow is white iff snow is white would be sufficient for knowing that ‘Snow is white’ is true iff snow is white, and hence for understanding ‘Snow is white’. Wittgenstein had no such conception of truth.

In sum, his strictures make trouble for any interpretation of truth-functionally compound propositions that tries to tell a defensible story that is fully consistent with the text. There is a defensible reconstruction according to which these propositions are certain kinds of cognitive acts. The acts are uses of sentences that directly represent tractarian metaphysical simples as having properties that are parasitic on atomic propositions, and possessed by every object if and only if the are possessed by any object. This fits tolerably well with the most important insights on which the tractarian account of atomic propositions is based, even if it isn’t exactly what Wittgenstein had in mind.