Instructions for Climbing the Ladder (The Minimalism of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*)

Mauro Luiz Engelmann, *Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)*

**Abstract**

I aim to present a solution to the apparent paradox of the *Tractatus* by means of a minimalist reading grounded in the idea that the correct logical symbolism alone “finally solves” in essentials the philosophical problems. I argue that although the sentences of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, rules presented in its symbolism are not. The symbolism itself expresses only a priori rules of logic through schematic variables that do not say anything. I argue that this reading correctly expresses the ladder structure of the book, and that it can account for Wittgenstein’s critique of the *Tractatus* in *Some Remarks on Logical Form*.

---

*The first footholds are always the most difficult, until acquiring the necessary coordination. The coincidence of the name between the foot and the foot makes the explanation more difficult. Be especially careful to not raise, at the same time, the foot and the foot.* (Cortázar)

---

I. Self-Defeat?

Wittgenstein writes in aphorism 6.54 that anyone who understands him must overcome (*ueberwinden*) his sentences and recognize them as nonsense after they are used to climb the ladder.¹ Note that he does not give us an option there: in order to understand the book, one *has to* (*muss*) overcome his sentences. Those who do not overcome them, therefore, do not understand his book. However, how do we do this? After all, it seems that the very sentences of the book are an extraordinary kind of nonsense: apparently, they explain (or give the argument for) why they are nonsense. As such, presumably, they should be true. However,

---

¹ I follow Goldfarb’s suggestion and translate ‘ueberwinden’ as ‘overcome’ (Goldfarb 2011).
nonsense, one must think, cannot be true and explain or justify anything. Thus, the book seems self-defeating: if its sentences are true, they must be nonsense, but if they are nonsense, they cannot be true. \(^2\)

The problem of the paradoxical self-defeat is as old as the first reception of the *Tractatus* in Cambridge and Vienna. In his *Introduction* to the book, Russell claimed that “Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said” (TLP: xxiii). \(^3\) The problem was also a major concern in the Vienna Circle. While praising the logical achievements of the *Tractatus*, Neurath complained about the metaphysical appearance of Tractarian ‘elucidations’: “it sounds as if there were a ‘something’ of which one cannot speak”. \(^4\) He concluded, along with Carnap, that “we do not need a metaphysical ladder of elucidation”. \(^5\) The issue continues to spark controversies almost a hundred years later. Arguably, it is the guiding problem in the debate generated by the ‘New Wittgenstein’. \(^6\) The current situation of the debate is roughly the following. Although Hacker’s “traditional” reading is problematic because it reinforces the “paradox” with the supposition that the *Tractatus* presents or is committed to “ineffable metaphysical necessities”, \(^7\) the “resolute” solution to the problem is not convincing, for it fails to address what one might think are “positive insights” of the book. \(^8\) The resolute solution, as it were, throws away the baby with the bath water, as White pointed out. \(^9\) Here, the “baby” is logic. However, in spite of disagreements, one might picture the present state of affairs in the following way: It seems correct to say with Diamond that the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* is “exiguous”, but the book must also allow for “positive insights”, as McGinn urged. \(^10\)

Independently of how one evaluates the details and correctness of various readings of the *Tractatus*, one must assume that there are some obvious criteria for the correct interpretation of the book. First of all, an

---

\(^2\) The first conditional is formulated in Moris and Dodd (2009); the second is derived from Diamond (1996), who argued that nonsensical sentences can neither show something, nor be true in a peculiar way.

\(^3\) I will use the following abbreviations: *Tractatus* or simply TLP for *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*; NB for Notebooks 1914–1916; SRLF for *Some Remarks on Logical Form*; PR for *Philosophical Remarks*; LO for Letters to Ogden; PI for *Philosophical Investigations*; WVC for *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*; MS for manuscript; WiC for *Wittgenstein in Cambridge*.

\(^4\) Neurath (1931: 60).

\(^5\) Neurath (1931: 60). Arguably, a major reason for Carnap to distinguish between the material and the formal mode of speech in *Logical Syntax* was the problematic status of Tractarian elucidations (see §§73–81).


\(^7\) Hacker (1986: 54).


interpretation is not correct unless it avoids paradoxical self-defeat. This should be shown in the simplest possible way, for Wittgenstein told Russell that the book was “as clear as crystal”. One must show how the ladder can be climbed, given that the sentences of the book are simply nonsense. However, in light of the most recent stage of the debate, at least three other conditions should be fulfilled. The strategy of elimination of the apparent self-defeat must also explain the relative position of each group of propositions of the Tractatus, for the book is meant to work as a whole according to a number system. This is required by the very ladder structure of the book. Moreover, a strategy to eliminate self-defeat must account for Wittgenstein’s recognition of grave mistakes in the Tractatus at the time that he wrote Some Remarks on Logical Form. Otherwise, Wittgenstein’s return to philosophy in 1929 will appear mysterious, as Hacker pointed out. Finally, the fulfilment of the conditions above should preserve “positive insights”.

In this paper, I intend to present a minimalist approach, which I hope might be regarded as correct in an “overlapping consensus” among traditional, resolute, and readers who are not satisfied with either alternatives. My strategy here is not to collect insights of various interpretations, but rather to take into account the requirements derived from various interpretations proposed above, and to offer a platform on which various points of view can agree. In section II, I present the fundamental traits of the logical point of view of the Tractatus, according to which the use of a logical symbolism alone should account for the final solution of philosophical problems. In section III, I show how this point of view, if it is correct, avoids the apparent paradoxical self-defeat. One must distinguish the nature and the role of the aphorisms of the book – which are nonsense – and the rules expressed by means of

11. Letter from 13.3.1919 (WiC: 89).
12. Other conditions should be added, but those go beyond the scope of this paper (see Engelmann 2018a). One must explain, for instance, how the Tractatus indeed stops metaphysics. Besides, one must find a way to accommodate Wittgenstein’s personal Weltanschauung (a general strategy for this is introduced in Engelmann (2016)).
15. The idea of a minimalist reading was introduced in Engelmann (2013, chapter 3). I am here applying Rawls’ idea of an overlapping consensus (see, for instance, Rawls 2001: 32–38). I aim at a possible reconciliation of readings of the Tractatus, and I intend to offer a platform from which further interpretational questions might be answered in the future (for instance: What is the role of each group of propositions (1.n, 2.n, etc.)? What is the conclusion of the Tractatus (notably, the significance of the movement from 6.1n to 6.5n and 7)? What is the worldview underlying the Tractatus?).
16. Perhaps some interpreters will not accept the terms of the debate set in this paper. If so, these cases need to be addressed in a different place. Addressing such concerns is beyond the scope of this paper, however.
schematic variables and an operation in its symbolism – which are not nonsense. Of course, the symbolism is meant to deliver “positive insights” into the nature of logic and language. In section IV, I provide a *uebersichtliche Darstellung* of the whole “ladder” in order to show that the argument developed in sections II and III perfectly fits its ladder structure. In section V, I explain why the minimalist reading can account for Wittgenstein’s critique of the book in 1929.

II. The Logical Point of View: “The Hardest Thing There Is”

The *Tractatus* assumes the distinction between two groups of rules employed in descriptions of facts: arbitrarily determined, which could in principle be different, and essential rules, which are given in the essence of descriptive sentences (models). Sentences (*Saezze*) that describe reality depend on signs arbitrarily determined by arbitrary rules, but a non-arbitrarily determined a priori logical form is presupposed and expressed by means of those signs. Such a distinction appears already when Wittgenstein takes the first steps towards the *Tractatus*:

> What is unarbitrary about our symbols is not them, nor the rules we give; but the fact that, having given certain rules, others are fixed = follow logically (NDMN, 114).

The rules that structure what “follows logically” are non-arbitrarily determined rules given together with many arbitrarily determined conventional rules in our language. So Wittgenstein begins with this assumption and intends to clearly express the nature of “follows logically”. This ‘beginning’ has two senses: he begins there throughout the *Tractatus* and in assuming it in the investigation that leads him to the philosophy of the book. His investigative method is precisely this: “My method is not to sunder the hard from the soft, but to see the hardness of the soft” (NB, 44). In order to understand the nature of what “follows logically”, the “hard”, one must begin with ordinary *Saezze*, where the hard and the soft appear together. Therefore, Wittgenstein’s point of departure was that ordinary language is working properly and that certain rules are given in how we use language. Once Wittgenstein had *seen* the

17. The importance of this distinction has been pointed out by Winch (1987) and more recently by Shieh (2014).

18. In a sense, however, logical rules are arbitrary, namely, in the sense that they cannot be justified. Wittgenstein uses this sense of ‘arbitrary’ later in order to argue that rules of ‘grammar’ are arbitrary (see, for instance, PR: §§4, 7). I discuss this in (2018b). Because of Wittgenstein’s later use of ‘arbitrary’ I emphasize the arbitrary in the *Tractatus* as arbitrarily determined.
hardness of the soft, he presented it in the various notational devices of the *Tractatus*. Notations of the book show only signs that express essential “hard” rules of logic given a priori. It is easier to gather the logical form of ordinary language sentences “when they are expressed in an appropriate symbolism” (LO, 50). Wittgenstein’s symbolism (notation) is, really, as he says years after finishing the *Tractatus*, “nothing other than word language rendered in schematic form”. So the symbolism of the *Tractatus* allows us to see the hard, i.e., “the logic of our language” (TLP: preface).

With this goal in mind, Wittgenstein adapted Frege’s idea of an appropriate symbolism, a *Begriffsschrift*. Frege claims that in *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* “one finds theorems . . . proved with signs (Zeichen) whose whole I call conceptual notation (Begriffsschrift”). Of course, Wittgenstein did not devise his symbolism for grounding arithmetic as Frege and Russell did, but for showing the “logic of our language” in a perspicuous way (TLP: preface, 3.32n). This points to the fact that the use of notational devices in the *Tractatus* is also connected with the works of Bolzmann and Hertz, who were certainly among Wittgenstein’s greatest influences. Hertz claimed, for instance, that a correct presentation of the system of mechanics could “reflect essential relations” and avoid “superfluous and empty relations”. One of his fundamental goals in *The Principles of Mechanics Presented in a New Form* was to stop us from “asking spurious questions” concerning the essence of fundamental concepts.

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

450 *Philosophical Investigations*

21. Note that in spite of some ambiguities, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* uses synonymously symbolism (TLP: 4.31, 4.4611, 5.452), notation (Notation) (TLP: 3.342, 5.474, 5.512, 5.514, 6.1203, 6.122, 6.123), sign-language (Zeichensprache) (TLP: 3.325, 3.343, 4.1121, 4.1213, 6.124) and system of signs (TLP: 5.475, 5.555). In a letter to Ogden, he explicitly asks him to translate *Zeichensprache* as symbolism (LO: 25). However, when Wittgenstein talks about the symbolism or notation for generality, he uses the expression *Allgemeinheitsbezeichnung* (see LO, 49). In this case, what he has in mind is a notational device that is part of the whole symbolism. So Wittgenstein says that he wants to eliminate identity from “our notation” and this will take place by means of a specific notation (NB: 33–4). Moreover, he equates symbolism and *Begriffsschrift* (TLP: 3.325, 4.1272, 4.1273, 4.431, 5.533, and 5.334). This is also clear in a letter to Ogden, when he discusses the translation of 5.5563 and talks about “propositions written down, say, in Russell’s symbolism or any other “Begriffsschrift’” (LO, 50). *Begriffsschrift* (‘conceptual notation’) is always meant as the whole symbolism, and not just part of it as in the case of “notation for generality”. In the *Tractatus*, he says, for instance, that “the sign of identity, therefore, is not an essential constituent of the conceptual notation (der Begriffsschrift)” (TLP: 5.533; I added ‘the’ to the translation).
Some of those concepts turned out to be only “side wheels turning emptily (leergehende Nebenräder)”\textsuperscript{26} This should remind one of Wittgenstein’s use of Occam’s razor in the \textit{Tractatus} (TLP: 3.328, 5.47321). Indeed, Wittgenstein does with logic by means of the presentation of a logical symbolism something analogous to what Hertz does with mechanics by means of his perspicuous system. Wittgenstein’s symbolism, which is a \textit{new form of presentation} of logic, reflects essential relations, avoids superfluous ones and is meant to stop us from asking spurious questions. In this way, arguably, Wittgenstein meant to accomplish what Boltzmann thought was “the central task of philosophy”: to make clear why one cannot answer metaphysical questions, but only show that it is senseless to \textit{ask} them. Boltzmann thought that metaphysical questions are not difficult questions whose answers might surpass our intellectual capacity, but regarded “the existence of such problems and questions themselves as an illusion”.\textsuperscript{27} Boltzmann’s idea, of course, resonates in various passages of the \textit{Tractatus} (TLP: preface, 4.003, 6.5n).

Let us look at the tool that Wittgenstein uses to accomplish such a task, namely, the symbolism of the \textit{Tractatus} (the expression of the “hard”), and how it is shown in language, where the “hard” and the “soft” appear together. Many ordinary sentences appear as basic sentences, i.e., they do not appear to be a composition of connectives and quantifiers. In the basic sentences arbitrarily determined rules of language obey the non-arbitrarily determined rules of logic. The a priori rules of logic are primitives (indefinables) supposedly given in the essence or “nature of the proposition (Satz)” (TLP: 5.471). The \textit{Tractatus} assumes that propositions have a “logical prototype”, which is not determined arbitrarily and structures “the hard”:

\begin{quote}
\noindent If we turn a constituent of a proposition into a variable, there is a class of propositions all of which are values of the resulting variable proposition. In general, this class too will be dependent on the meaning that our arbitrary conventions have given to parts of the original proposition. But if all the signs in it that have arbitrarily determined meanings are turned into variables, we shall still get a class of this kind. This one, however, is \textit{not dependent on any convention, but solely on the nature} of the proposition. It corresponds to a logical form – a logical prototype (\textit{Urbild}). (TLP: 3.315; my emphasis)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Hertz (2002: 79). Wittgenstein uses a similar expression (\textit{leerlaufende Raeder}) in 1930 (PR: §1).

\textsuperscript{27} Boltzmann (1905: 167). Compare this with \textit{Tractatus} 4.003: “[…] we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind [philosophical questions], but can only point out that they are nonsensical”. It is quite interesting that Boltzmann’s favourite philosophical target is Schopenhauer (Boltzmann 1905: 185–200). This fact should be taken into account when one analyses the influence of Schopenhauer on Wittgenstein.
The “logical prototype”, a “logical form”, does not depend on any convention, i.e., it does not depend on any arbitrarily determined rule. It is supposedly given in the very nature of the proposition, which is “a function of the expressions contained in it” (TLP: 3.318). Of course, the symbolic expression of such a prototype was introduced by Frege.28 Wittgenstein’s insights concerning Frege’s idea are fundamentally two. First, “in the proposition (im Satze) we hold a prototype (Urbild) up against reality” (NB: 33). This means that the prototype determines projections (I return to this below). Second, a prototype is expressed by variables that do not say anything, but present a schema of the logical role of its symbols. So the basic logical prototype is something like \( \phi x^n \), where \( \phi \) is any n-ary function (a “propositional variable”) and \( x \) its n arguments. Of course, we can also take \( \phi x \) or \( \phi xy \), etc. each as a “particular prototype” (NB: 46). The Tractatus assumes that such a prototype (or prototypes), such a minimal form or schema, is given a priori:

We portray the thing, the relation, the property, by means of variables and so show that we do not derive these from particular cases that occur to us, but possess them somehow a priori (NB: 65; my emphasis).

Note that the variables indicate the a priori character of symbols. The a priori prototype is not derived from anything, but implicitly given in ordinary sentences (TLP: 3.315). This is because the rules expressed in the symbols of the prototype determine how the arbitrarily determined rules of our ordinary projections are used. It is the “logical pattern” that constitutes picturing (TLP: 4.014). The prototype operates implicitly in sentences by means of “internal relations” (rules) of a projection (TLP: 4.0141).29 These rules determine, as a whole, contextually, the fact of projection:

28. As is well known, Frege invented a quite simple and tremendously fruitful analogy between the logical roles of words in sentences and the logical roles of function and argument in equations. The replacement of a word-name for a variable in a sentence gives us a function-word in the same way that the replacement of a number for a variable in an equation gives us a mathematical function. So the function ‘\( x + 2 = 4 \)’ is similar to ‘\( x \) is married’ and to ‘\( x \) is married to Ana’.

29. It is quite explicit in the Tractatus that “internal relations” in projections are rules. After indicating that an “internal relation” holds between language and world in TLP 4.014, Wittgenstein explains the idea (quite in accord with the numbering system of the book) in the following sentence, TLP 4.0141: “There is a general rule by means of which the musician can obtain the symphony from the score[…] That [the rule] is what constitutes the inner similarity between these things […] And that rule is the law of projection […] It is the rule for translating this language […]”. McManus (2006) has a quite different take on internal relations. However, he does not explain TLP 4.0141. My claim here is simply that in projections internal relations are rules (see also McGinn 2009). This might be the case of other uses of ‘internal relation’ in the Tractatus, but this is not something that I need to discuss here.
The fact that there is no sign for a particular prototype (Urbild) does not show that that prototype is not present. Portrayal by means of sign language does not take place in such a way that a sign of a prototype goes proxy for an object of that prototype. The sign and the internal relation to what is signified determine the prototype of the latter; as the coordinates together with the ordinates determine the points of figure (NB: 46). 30

So the only facts in language that can project facts in reality are those that are in accord with the rules of the prototype and arbitrarily determined rules. Here is an example:

The reason why, e.g., it seems that “Plato Socrates” might have a meaning, while “Abracadabra Socrates” will never be suspected to have one, is because we know that “Plato” has one, and do not observe that in order that the whole phrase should have one, what is necessary is not that “Plato” should have one, but that the fact that “Plato” is to the left of a name should. (NDMN: 116).

In order to project a sentence comparable with reality, a model (Bild), we implicitly need to use the symbols function and argument together, contextually, for they organize the projection of facts. The employment of those symbols by means of arbitrary rules determines the projection of a fact by means of a fact in language (TLP: 3.14n). The fact that Plato is wise, for instance, is represented by the fact that the word ‘Plato’ appears to the left of the propositional function ‘x is F’, an expression of the prototype, together with the specific arbitrarily determined rules of language. 31 Therefore, an arbitrary rule can determine the meaning of a name and another rule can determine a predicate (something that symbolizes a propositional function). We could have other arbitrarily determined rules in our language, for instance, the arbitrary rule could be that ‘Plato’ to the right of a predicate says something or that ‘x is wise’ means ‘x is terrific’. However, they are not actual rules of our language; they are not rules “that we give” (NDMN: 114). Thus, although arbitrarily determined rules could be in principle different, they are binding. We are committed to them, i.e., they are fixed by our ordinary uses of language. This is why, one must think, ordinary rules of projection used to picture facts are ‘internal relations’ (TLP: 4.0141).

So the method of comparison of a descriptive Satz is determined in language. When we follow it, our sentences are true or false, for “the being true or false actually constitutes the relation of the proposition to reality” (NDMN: 113; my emphasis). If signs do not express something

---

30. In Anscombe’s translation, Urbild is ‘proto-picture’.
possibly false or true, no projection took place (no model is modelling, no picture is picturing anything). Of course, if we do not follow the rules of projection that give meaning to signs of our language, we talk nonsense like “x is wise Socrates” or “Socrates is identical” (TLP: 5.4733). In such cases, our signs do not express a sentence that can be true and can be false simply because they do not follow our arbitrarily determined rules of projection grounded in the logical prototype. Obviously, the signs in those sentences do not have meaning.

Thus, the a priori prototype portrayed by variables must articulate basic sentences: elementary sentences and ordinary non-quantified sentences. However, it is not sufficient to express the unity of descriptive sentences according to the Tractatus, for ordinary descriptive sentences conceal elementary ones and, thus, logical symbols. Such a concealment takes place by means of complicated “tacit conventions” (TLP: 4.003). It consists in the fact that forms are “projected by means of a definition into a name” (NB: 69). Of course, it is Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions that allows us to see how forms are projected into names by means of definitions and, thus, the “real logical form” of a sentence (TLP: 4.0031). It is Russell who provides a clue about what is implicitly given in a sentence and must be made explicit.

The propositional function-argument prototype by itself is accordingly not sufficient to express the “hard” (“follows logically”) in language. Evidently, neither quantification nor logical constants are expressed by the prototype alone. Any two facts $p$ and $q$, for instance, can be projected in 16 ways, all grounded in the possibility of truth and falsehood of sentences $p$ and $q$ and the rules of logical connectives (TLP: 4.31, 5.101). In such a case, we will have 14 ways of projection into the world (descriptive sentences) and two limiting cases: tautology and contradiction. Of course, this is shown in truth-tables (TLP: 5.101). So it is not immediately clear how the prototype connects with the whole “logical scaffolding” of language (see TLP: 4.023). In order to show the logical unity of language, we need elementary instances of the logical prototype and a way of construction of molecular propositions. According to the Tractatus,

32. See also TLP: 3.327.
33. One must take into account that “the tacit conventions on which the understanding of everyday language depends are enormously complicated” (TLP: 4.003).
34. The whole passage in NB, 69, runs as follows: “But logic as it stands, e.g., in Principia Mathematica can quite well be applied to our ordinary propositions, e.g., from ‘All men are mortal’ and ‘Socrates is a man’ there follows according to this logic ‘Socrates is mortal’ which is obviously correct although I equally obviously do not know what structure is possessed by the thing Socrates or the property of mortality. Here they just function as simple objects. Obviously the circumstance that makes it possible for certain forms to be projected by means of a definition into a name, guarantees of itself that this name can then be treated as a real one.”
once we have those elements, we have what is required for the general form of propositions, i.e., a way to foresee and generate all possible complex forms of propositions, including the *Saetze* of logic, tautology and contradiction.

As the prototype of basic propositions, the general form is a primitive sign, a variable-rule, given in the “very nature” of propositions (TLP: 5.47, 6). In a certain sense, the operation is already given with the prototype, for any descriptive sentence, i.e., any value of the prototype, can be negated (TLP: 5.47). However, it is not expressed by it alone and a new symbol needs to be added to the symbolism. $N$ is, according to Wittgenstein, the operation of negation that has the right multiplicity to replace symbolically all logical connectives (also quantification, presumably, as shown in 5.5n).\(^{36}\) Note that “the general propositional form is a variable” (TLP: 4.53). The operation varies over what the propositional variables (propositional functions) determine (T: 5.501).

In the “description”, as Wittgenstein says in *Tractatus* 4.5, of the general form of propositions it is assumed that the logical prototype expresses the possible forms of elementary propositions (TLP: 4.24). The general form shows, in its turn, that the operation $N$ can generate all complex forms (TLP: 6). An operation, Wittgenstein writes, is “that according to which signs can be constructed according to a rule” (NB: 90; my emphasis).\(^{37}\) The introduction of the rule $N$, according to the *Tractatus*, signalizes that now we have all essential elements of the form of any sentence. This includes the limiting cases of empty “logical laws” and contradictions. A contradiction, for instance, might be constructed as follows. Since $N(p) = \sim p$ and $N(p, q) = \sim p \& \sim q$ (TLP: 5.51), we have $N(N(p), p) = \sim \sim p \& \sim p$. Of course, $N$ applied to the whole again gives us a tautology. In this way, the hard, i.e. what follows logically, is completely shown in the symbolism, for supposedly inferences have ultimately a tautological character (TLP: 6.1201). Of course, the tautological character of inferences is something shown in the truth-table notation. One can really see it there, for if $q$ follows from $p$, if $p$ is true, $q$ is also true (in all possibilities).

As long as one accepts that propositions are expressed by means of function and argument (“propositional variable” in Wittgenstein’s jargon), as Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein did, nothing in the presentation of

---

35. This supposedly grounds the idea that there is no proposition whose form cannot be foreseen or constructed (TLP: 4.5) and gives the limits of language.
36. For an account of the right multiplicity of $N$ concerning quantification see Floyd (2001).
37. One should not underestimate the centrality of the notion of ‘rule’ in Wittgenstein’s philosophy at the time of the *Tractatus*. It should be of no surprise that the topic is very relevant in the *Philosophical Investigations*.
the “hard” in language is the product of an arbitrary determination, for
the logical prototype, truth-tables, and the operation $N$ are symbolic
expressions of what is given a priori, supposedly, “in the very nature of
proposition” (TLP: 3.315).

The signs of the symbolism of the *Tractatus* are, therefore, essential
signs. “Logic,” Wittgenstein says,

is not the field in which we express what we wish with the help of
signs, but rather in which the nature of the absolutely [intrinsic/essen-
tially] necessary signs (die Natur der naturnotwendigen Zeichen) speaks for
itself (TLP: 6.124).

Thus, supposedly, the a priori structure of language shown in the
symbolism of the *Tractatus* is the “hard” in language expressed solely by
means of a priori rules employed with schematic variables. This is
Wittgenstein’s way of expressing the nature or essence of proposition

The essential, the “hard”, is what is shown, and what is shown is
shown in the symbolism. Years after finishing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein
clearly expressed the idea to Waismann:

> The difference between saying and showing is the difference be-
> tween what language expresses and what is in grammar. The reason for choos-
> ing the expression ‘it shows itself’ was that one sees a connection in the
> notation. 38

The point about the showing symbolism is explicitly made in the
*Tractatus*:

> 4.121 Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them
> [...]
> 4.1211 Thus ‘$fa$’ shows that the object $a$ occurs in its sense, two propo-
> sitions ‘$fa$’ and ‘$ga$’ show that the same object is mentioned in both of
> them [...]
> 4.1222 What can be shown, cannot be said.
> 4.1213 Now, too, we can understand our feeling that once we have a
> symbolism in which everything is all right, we already have the correct logi-
> cal point of view. (my emphasis in 4.1213). 39

The correct logical point of view, from which we see “the world
aright” (TLP: 6.54), is exhausted by a “symbolism in which everything
is all right”. Nothing more is required than presenting the correct sym-
bolism (TLP: 5.475). Note that once we have found it, we are able to
see the “hardness” of logic in the “softness” of our language, and we

39. The translation was slightly modified. Following Ogden’s translation, which
Wittgenstein carefully read and approved, I translate ‘Zeichensprache’ as ‘symbolism’.  

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons Ltd
have reached the point “in which the answers to questions are symmetrically combined – a priori – to form a self-contained system” (TLP: 5.4541). As Wittgenstein writes later, here we have found the “utterly simple”, which is “the hardest thing there is” (PI: §97). We have made clear “a realm subject to the law: Simplex sigillum veri” (TLP: 5.4541). That is, we have found the “truth itself in its entirety” (TLP: 5.5563; emphasis added).

III. No Paradoxical Self-Defeat

I have presented a minimal story about the Tractatus and its symbolism. How can such a story avoid self-defeat? First of all, one must note that neither variables, nor the operation $N$ say anything. The same point applies to truth-tables, the a-b notation rules (TLP: 6.1203), and the notation to eliminate identity introduced in the book (TLP: 5.53n). That is, the whole logical symbolism of the Tractatus is a mere articulation of a priori rules expressed by means of variables (TLP: 4.1272-4, 4.53, 5.24–2).40 Those rules are not nonsense, simply because they cannot say anything – even if they might appear to do so. The symbolism can only show the rules of our language. If those rules foresee the form of any proposition and determine what is sense and nonsense, i.e., the limits of language, the Tractatus is not self-defeating or paradoxical when Wittgenstein calls his sentences unsinnig (TLP: 6.54). Of course, the sentences of the Tractatus, which are nonsense, are not identical with the rules of the logical symbolism (notations) of the book. Thus, the most obvious sense of “he who understands me . . .” (TLP: 6.54) is “he who understands Wittgenstein’s symbolism (notations) and its role throws away the nonsense.”41 The one who understands the logical symbolism overcomes the sentences of the book and throws away the nonsense because he understands “the logic of our language” (TLP: preface, 4.003). Therefore, it is the very logical symbolism of the book that precludes self-defeat in the Tractatus.

Note that the logical symbolism also “shows that it shows” or, as Wittgenstein prefers to say, it “shows itself” or “speaks for itself” (TLP: 4.126, 6.124). However, this is not an extraordinary achievement. The point is that “rules are equivalent to the symbols; and in them their sense

40. Very early on (end of 1914), contra Russell, Wittgenstein thought that “it is the variables and not the sign of generality that are characteristic of logic” (NB: 11).

41. Another sense of “understanding me” is understanding the Weltanschauung of the author, which underlies the Tractatus. I tackle Wittgenstein’s Weltanschauung in Engelmann (2016).
is mirrored” (TLP: 5.514). The logical symbolism by means of its several devices (notations) does not say, but shows that it shows simply because a priori rules expressed by means of variables and an operation cannot claim anything (although Russell, for instance, might believe that they claim something). Take, for instance, a truth-table and try to find out what the propositional variables \( p \) and \( q \) are saying. Nothing, of course, for \( p \) and \( q \) are not sentences at all. Variables only indicate that any sentence can take their place. Thus, by means of variables, truth-tables show only formal properties of language. What does a logical form, a prototype, that determines projection like \( \phi x \) claim? Nothing, again, for no sentence is yet expressed or instantiated with those variables. What does the \( N \) operator say? Again, nothing, it “shows itself in a variable; it shows how we can proceed from one form of proposition to another” (TLP: 5.24; Ogden’s translation). It is only the result of an application of \( N \) to real sentences (not to variables) that says something (TLP: 5.25). Wittgenstein’s notation for the elimination of identity works similarly. Essentially, it only introduces rules for how one notation is replaced by another (TLP: 5.53n).\(^{42}\) In Wittgenstein’s jargon, variables and rules can only show the structure of sentences and possible connections of sentences.

So the whole logical symbolism is neither true, nor false of something, nor is it nonsense, but rather the expression of a priori rules that structure language and do not say anything. What is neither true, nor false, nor nonsense in the *Tractatus*, is what shows. Indeed, from the logical point of view of the book, as Wittgenstein told Russell in a letter, the distinction between saying and showing is nothing less than the “cardinal problem of philosophy” (WiC: 98). It is cardinal because it defines the whole project of indicating the hardness of the soft, as argued above. In a previous letter, Russell had agreed that “logical propositions are tautologies” (WiC: 96). Wittgenstein’s answer was that the case of tautologies was “only a corollary” of the saying/showing distinction. This is because tautologies are just a case of what shows, for what shows is the whole logical symbolism, which cannot say anything. That is the guiding insight of the book (also of its very structure, as we will see in section IV). The point of the insight is that, in principle, the symbolism standing alone is enough for us to understand “the logic of our language” (TLP: preface, 4.003).

If this is so, one might wonder about the role of the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus*. The obvious answer is that they are connected with the notations of the book. They might help us to grasp the

\(^{42}\) If this is correct, Russell’s contextual definition of definite descriptions has the same status.
symbolism and its philosophical results. But how can nonsensical sentences help us with the notations? There is no paradox here as long as we keep in mind three aspects of nonsensical sentences in the Tractatus. First, they do not show; what shows is the symbolism. In principle, we could grasp just the symbolism alone. This is why the notion of ‘showing itself’ is “cardinal”. Second, if the logical symbolism that shows is understood, the elucidations are superfluous, redundant, ‘tautologous’ remarks. Third, as such they are not ‘truths’ or ‘metaphysical necessities’. As we will see, the fact that Wittgenstein calls them ‘nonsense’ is meant to stop us from thinking that they are more than empty signs. In what follows I articulate further those aspects.

If nonsensical sentences help us to have a clear view of the expression of fundamental rules implicitly given in our language (rules that are not nonsense) by means of notations that say nothing, they can only bring us to what we supposedly already know, for any competent speaker must tacitly master the simple a priori rules of logic. Without the well-known logical competence, presumably, we would not be able to speak and discuss in any language. In spite of our competence, we lack the correct, perspicuous, expression of the logical rules given in language. As it were, we do not see clearly “the hardness of the soft”. However, seeing and expressing “the hard” is not a simple task, for even Russell’s and Frege’s logical symbolisms failed in many ways (TLP: 3.325). Because we lack a correct symbolism, we fail to understand the well known. If we do not understand it, even if we know it implicitly, we also misunderstand the “logic of our language” (TLP: preface, 4003).

Nonsensical elucidations in the book, thus, bring one to see explicitly in the logical symbolism what one implicitly already knows well. As such, those elucidations are superfluous. They are also superfluous for a second fundamental reason: the only thing that matters is the showing symbolism itself. Note that it is the very showing logical symbolism of the book that makes elucidations superfluous, for they are not needed if we have grasped what is shown in it, and they do not bring us beyond what the symbolism itself shows.

43. Later in 1937, when Wittgenstein criticized the whole project of the Tractatus, he made the following point: “it was essential that we, in an important sense, did not want to find out anything new, but wanted only to understand the well-known” (MS: 157a, 47).

44. There is a long tradition of interpretations of the Tractatus that assume that one must distinguish some sentences that frame the book (“syntactical remarks”) and others that are manifest nonsense (usually those in 1.n and 2.0n). This tradition extends at least from Black (1964: 378–386) to McManus (2006: 59). What I am saying here is quite different. Sentences of the Tractatus are nonsense as a whole (if you wish, einfach Unsinn), while the symbolism itself is not nonsense.
The talk about ‘superfluous remarks’ is, indeed, Wittgenstein’s. In dicta-
tions to Moore in 1914 he first says that “M is a thing can’t be said; it is
nonsense” (NDMN: 109). In the next page, he makes the following point:

Even if there were propositions of the form “M is a thing,” they would
be superfluous (tautologous) because what this tries to say is something
which is already seen when you see “M” (NDMN: 110; my emphasis).

It is clear that “M is a thing” is not to be taken as a “non-contingent
or metaphysical necessity”, but as a superfluous ‘tautology’, i.e., a redun-
dant remark. After all, it is the symbolism itself that eliminates an expres-
sion like “M is a thing” (TLP: 4.1211, 4.126). It makes “M is a thing”
superfluous because it shows that ‘thing’ is expressed by an argument
variable and not by a predicate. That is, it is superfluous because it is
redundant when we see that M occupies the place of a variable x. One
must keep in mind that the symbolism is “word language rendered in
schematic form”.\(^{45}\)

Wittgenstein’s use of ‘tautology’ as a superfluous remark before the
Tractatus reappears one year after the remark quoted above: “Is it a ta-
tology to say: Language consists of sentences? It seems it is.” (NB: 52). In
the Tractatus one finds the superfluous (‘tautological’) remark “language
is the totality of propositions” (TLP: 4.001). It is a ‘tautology’ made
superfluous by the general form of propositions. The symbolism of the
book makes equally superfluous “the world is the totality of facts” and
“language is the totality of propositions”.\(^{46}\) Thus, one can take the non-
sensical sentences of the Tractatus that help us understand the logic of
our language as superfluous or ‘tautological’ remarks that remind one of
“1 is a number” or “there are objects” (TLP: 4.1272).\(^{47}\) All those non-
sensical sentences might fascinate philosophers, but they are superfluous
nonsense. Occam’s razor seals the destiny of nonsensical ‘tautological’
redundancies as soon as we see that “logic must look after itself” (TLP:
5.473, 5.47321). If one understands the book and its author, i.e. if one


\(^{46}\) One must notice that, formally, ‘fact’ is proposition, ‘object’ is name, and ‘state of
affairs’ is elementary proposition. Thus, “language is the totality of propositions” (TLP:
4.001) is the equivalent in language, as it were, of “the world is the totality of facts”
(TLP: 1). Thus, aphorisms 1.n and 2.n are meant to be superfluous as well. In order to
deal with aphorisms 1.n and 2.n we must understand, I think, that in the book Wittgen-
stein takes it as a given that world, language, and thought are already articulated. I.e., the
Tractatus does not aim at explaining the “conditions of possibility” of such an articulation;
it’s aim is solely to present (show) such an articulation by means of a notation (symbolism).
The symbolism makes explicit what is implicit in language. I come back to these issues in
section IV.

\(^{47}\) Note that in 4.1272 Wittgenstein writes unsinnig, but does not correct Ogden’s
translation in which one reads senseless – see Lugg (2003, 2013).
understands the symbolism, one can leave behind the redundant nonsen-
sical sentences.

The superfluous or redundant nonsense of the Tractatus might give
the impression of deep “metaphysical necessities”. However, Wittgen-
stein called them nonsense, I take it, precisely to make us aware that we
should not understand them in that way. In fact, he envisioned a strategy
to stop us from thinking that his sentences were “metaphysical necessi-
ties” in the Tractatus. Tautologies and ‘tautologies’ (redundancies) are
both empty, but they differ in role and in what they achieve. If he had
called his sentences ‘senseless’, this would already be a clear indication
that we should not think that they are metaphysical necessities. How-
ever, he did more than that. In order to avoid confusion, he called the
propositions of logic senseless and ‘tautologies’ nonsense. The real, logi-
cal, tautologies are given in the essence or nature of proposition – for
which we have a symbolism. Nonsensical sentences, however, are ‘tauto-
logical’ merely because they are in principle superfluous/redundant. The
superfluous remarks are like tautologies in that they say nothing, but they
are not (real) logical tautologies, for they are not part of the symbolism
that expresses the logic of our language. So they are called nonsense in
order to help readers to avoid taking sides with what can be thrown
away. ‘Nonsense’ should really make it clear that they have no value in
themselves. We should not think highly of the “formal concepts” that
appear in the book: “it would be just as nonsensical to assert that a
proposition had a formal property as to deny it” (TLP: 4.124).

Of course, later Wittgenstein came to see that many of his sentences in
the Tractatus were not really superfluous redundancies, but rather the expres-
sion of “grave mistakes” (see PI, preface). It is quite obvious, for the later
Wittgenstein, that he was wrong in thinking that his sentences were somehow
trivial and made redundant by his notational devices. In fact, he did not have
the correct symbolism in the Tractatus (I come back to this in section V).
Here, however, what matters is the point of view of his first book.

IV. The Rungs of a Ladder

We will see now that the very ladder structure of the book is meant to
make clear that the sentences of the book are superfluous remarks that we
should throw away after the ladder is climbed. In a letter to von Ficker
from December 1919, Wittgenstein explained that printing the number-
ing system of his propositions was “imperative”; without it, the book

would be an “incomprehensible jumble”. In the same letter, he made clear that only the numbering system would give “perspicuity (Uebersichtlichkeit) and clarity” to the book. Bazocchi correctly observed that this remark applies to the organization of each group of aphorisms, and that propositions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are the ones that guided the construction of the book out of remarks written in notebooks. However, Wittgenstein’s idea of a numbering system is also quite relevant in a deeper sense. It is especially important for the understanding of how the whole “ladder” is supposed to be climbed. According to the numbering system of the Tractatus, all sentences of the book are, directly or indirectly, elucidations of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 (of course, 7 is the result of the book). So it must be useful to see how these sentences work as a whole. Let us look at the uebersichtliche presentation of the whole ladder taking into account how its rungs are connected. The connection is italicized and underlined:

1. The world is everything that is the case.
2. What is the case, the fact, is the existence of atomic facts.
3. The logical picture of the facts is the thought.
4. The thought is the significant proposition.
5. Propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions.
6. The general form of truth-functions is: \([p, \xi, N(\xi)]\).
7. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.

A bird’s eye view indicates how each group of aphorisms connects to the next by means of an informal definition or ‘equivalence’. Using Wittgenstein’s own vocabulary before the Tractatus, one might say that those aphorisms are tautologies in the sense of ‘redundant remark’: “a definition is a tautology” (NB: 18). If one takes seriously the ladder metaphor, each of those equivalences present two major formal concepts that work like vertical side rails that sustain and connect the rungs (the ‘equivalences’). Moreover, they also indicate that we should move from the lowest (TLP: 1) to the highest (TLP: 6) rung of the ladder. Sentence 7, one must suppose, expresses the result of the ladder, the author’s final exhortation.

‘Proposition’ (Satz), one sees, gives the unity of the whole, as the parallels thought/proposition, atomic facts/elementary propositions and world/general form of propositions indicate. So the essence of descriptive

50. Uebersichtlichkeit, Wittgenstein says later, is what our ‘grammar’ lacks (see PR: §2; PI: §122).
51. See Bazocchi (2008).
52. The final sentence indicates where one is after the ladder is thrown away. Here, I do not intend to elucidate the result of the book. Such a task goes beyond the scope of this paper.
sentences gives the clue for the essence of thought and the world, if we follow the informal equivalences of the ladder up and down, as it were. Later, Wittgenstein says that “proposition, language, thought, world, stand in line one behind the other, each equivalent to each” (PI: §96). Of course, the “rung” equivalences (or definitions) are not logical equivalences. They are redundancies that give us a way to replace gradually, when we get to higher rungs of the ladder, more obscure notions by the “absolutely simple” and “as clear as crystal” central piece of the symbolism of the book: the general form of propositions (PI: §97). Therefore, in the Tractatus Wittgenstein does not state that propositions 1.n and 2.n are necessary propositions about the essence of the world, but that to give the general form of propositions is to give “the essence of all description, and thus the essence of the world” (TLP: 5.4711). So, “transitively”, the essence of the world is expressed in \([p, \xi, N(\xi)]\). This form, we have seen, also generates the limiting cases of propositions, tautologies and contradictions. In this way, it also shows “the formal properties of language and the world” (TLP: 6.12; my emphasis).

The ‘equivalences’ provide us with an analogy that organizes the book, as Wittgenstein reminds us when he mentions Grimm’s Die Goldenkinder: “Like the two youths in the fairy-tale, their two horses, and their lilies. They are all in a certain sense one” (TLP: 4.014). If one wants to find the ground of that analogy, the only answer one gets is that in any projection a priori logical forms are employed (see section II). General rules of logic determine projection (TLP: 4.01n).

One must notice that ‘the world’ or ‘the thought’ are not really explained by means of the general form. For the form itself is not a proposition at all. It is an empty form, and it only shows the ‘essence’ of propositions. From the formal picture we cannot infer anything, since it does not say anything. So when we reach the highest major rung (TLP: 6) before the result of the book (TLP: 7), we can look back and take the reverse path by seeing how the essence of sentences (a fundamental rule)

53. Wittgenstein uses ‘crystal’ in reference to the Tractatus in at least two occasions. The first in a letter to Russell where he says that nobody will understand the Tractatus although “it is all as clear as crystal” (WiC: 89; letter from 13.3.1919). In the second occasion, in the Philosophical Investigations, ‘crystal clear’ is an explicit reference to the logic presented in the symbolism of the book: “This order [logical order], it seems, must be utterly simple. It is prior to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness may attach to it. – It must be of the purest crystal. But this crystal does not appear as an abstraction, but as something concrete, as it were the hardest thing there is (Tractatus Logico-philosophicus 5.5563).” (PI: §97; my emphasis). At the time of the Tractatus, Wittgenstein thought that he had discovered the nature of the “crystalline purity of logic” (PI: §107). He thought that he had discovered it, of course, by finding “the hardness of the soft” in ordinary sentences. As we saw in section II, even the prototype was taken as the hard in the soft that is “prior to all experience”.

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons Ltd
expresses the essence of thought and the essence of the world. So we grasp the essence of the world and thought to the extent that language has an essence shown in the empty general form, and not in nonsensical sentences such as “the world is the totality of facts” and “language is the totality of propositions”. Essence is grasped in logical rules, and not in supposedly ‘metaphysical necessities’. Note that ‘world’ and ‘fact’ are formal concepts and are, therefore, “represented in the notation by variables” (TLP: 4.1272). Progressively, formal concepts such as ‘world’, ‘fact’, ‘object’ are replaced by a purely formal symbolic presentation of the formal concepts ‘sentence’ and ‘language’. So clarity is gained in the progression from world, thought, and proposition to the general form of propositions (from unclear to “crystal clear”). One sees things clearly if one sees things logically, i.e., by means of a perspicuous symbolism.

Thus, the general form appears in the last main aphorism (the highest rung of the ladder) before silence is demanded in aphorism 7 in order to make us revaluate all other rungs of the ladder. Transitively, the ladder of the *Tractatus* shows how the “metaphysical” formal concepts are expressed in the notation as well. This makes clear that we cannot describe the essence of the world with propositions, but that essence is shown by means of logical rules. The general point of the ladder is: if you want to grasp the essence of world and thought, all you really get is an empty form. This indicates how the *Tractatus* can indeed dispense with metaphysical theories: “All theories that say: “This is how it must be, otherwise we could not philosophize” [...] etc., etc., must of course disappear” (NB, 44).55 In the end, according to the ladder structure, it is the general form, the highest rung before the end (TLP: 7), that really shows with the help of other notational devices. Fundamentally, it shows that we can generate two kinds of sentences with the operation $N$: bipolar and logical ones. This means that only logical-tautological empty necessity is essential to (any) language. Thus, one sees “the world rightly” through the lens of the logical symbolism, which shows that “logic is a mirror-image of the world” (TLP: 6.13). Note that the image that logic gives of the world is an empty “formal picture”, a picture that shows (TLP: 4.1212).56 If not

---

54. So early in his “middle period” Wittgenstein writes about his ‘grammar’: “… and philosophy as a custodian of grammar can in fact grasp the essence of the world, only not in the propositions (*Saetze*) of language, but in rules for this language…” (PR: §54).

55. I deal with this issue in “The *Tractatus* and the logische Eiederung of Philosophy” (in preparation).

56. Logic presupposes that its formal picture is somehow fulfilled, that logic and world are “connected”. “Their connection” is, however, solely “that names have meaning and elementary sentences sense” (T: 6.124). Since there are no kinds or types of names expressed in the notation, we should not find them in the “ontology” of the book either, for otherwise we misleadingly think that logic has a “subject-matter” and that the logical symbolism of the *Tractatus* does not express a “mirror-image” of the world.
earlier, “now, too, we understand our feeling that once we have a symbol-
ism in which everything is all right, we already have a correct logical point of
view” (TLP: 4.1213). Therefore, one can indeed talk about an “exiguous
metaphysics” in the Tractatus, if one means a “metaphysics of symbolism”
or, as Wittgenstein says later, a “mythology of symbolism” (PR: §24).

V. Discovering Mistakes: Remarks on Logical Form and a “Mythology of
Symbolism”

I will finish this paper by sketching how a minimalist interpretation
accounts for the fact that Wittgenstein discovered grave mistakes in the
Tractatus. Wittgenstein claims in Some Remarks on Logical Form that only
“actual analysis” could reveal the structure of logical forms that appear in
elementary propositions (space and colour, for instance). However, as
one should expect from the author of the Tractatus, the “method for
tackling” the question of analysis in 1929 still was the correct
Begriffsschrift: “The idea is to express in an appropriate symbolism what in
ordinary language leads to endless misunderstandings” (SRLF: 163).

The relevant turning point is that Wittgenstein came to the conclu-
sion that constructions such as the conjunction “A is blue and A is red”
are not empty contradictions, as he assumed in the Tractatus (TLP:
6.3751). Of course, he assumed this because all necessity should be
expressed as such in his symbolism. According to Wittgenstein in 1929,
however, those sentences are nonsense (SRLF: 171). They should be con-
tradictions according to the symbolism of the Tractatus, but that symbol-
ism does not show it. Moreover, that symbolism does not show that the
simultaneous attribution of truth to the conjuncts is indeed nonsense.
The real logical forms present in those sentences, space and colour, are
not even part of the “old” symbolism. Not showing what needs to be
shown and not excluding nonsense are deficiencies of a symbolism.

57. Emphasis added. Following Ogden’s translation, Zeichensprache is translated as sym-
bolism.
58. Resolute readers have discussed whether the symbolism of the Tractatus is to be
thrown away as a part of the metaphysics of the book (see Kuusela 2011). In this paper,
they might find reasons for thinking that the symbolism is indeed not claiming anything
and can be used without the assumption of ineffable nonsense. However, if the symbolism
can be used, the “piecemeal view of nonsense” might be abandoned, for such a strategy,
introduced relatively late in their interpretation, might not be needed anymore. Similarly,
a traditional reader might accept the minimalism of the Tractatus and abandon the idea of
“metaphysical necessities” as a problematic and superfluous addition. I hope that inter-
preters who look for a third alternative might find in this paper useful tools for their
interpretation.
59. For more details on Wittgenstein’s early middle period see Engelmann (2013:
chapter 1), Engelmann (2017, 2018b and 2018c).
Thus, Wittgenstein thought in 1929 that he needed to create a supplementary notation in order to show symbolically how nonsense not excluded by the *Tractatus* (and misleadingly presented as ‘contradiction’) could be excluded from language. That is, the supplementary notation should restrict the old notation of the *Tractatus* at the elementary level. The new notation should be a ‘phenomenological language’ (i.e., a phenomenological *sign language*, a symbolism) in which forms not presented in the *Tractatus* should be introduced (for instance, colour and space). The supplementary notation should, therefore, fix the “deficiency” of the old one:

It is, of course, a deficiency of our notation that it does not prevent the formation of such nonsensical constructions [like the first line of the truth-table in “A is blue & A is red’], and a perfect notation will have to exclude such structures by definite rules of syntax (SRLF: 170–1; my emphasis).

Wittgenstein indeed created a draft of such a notation in 1929. It included the system of coordinates and the colour octahedron. The system of coordinates shows that one cannot attribute two colours (if they are not a mixture) to the same region of the visual space. Thus, such an attribution is nonsense. The octahedron, on its turn, shows which mixtures are phenomenologically allowed and which are prohibited nonsense (phenomenologically, there is no mixture of red and green, for instance).

Already in 1929, however, Wittgenstein realized that his new symbolism did not work properly. Once he saw this, he gave up the idea that the symbolism was essential in philosophy. At that point, he understood the danger of “giving a mythology of symbolism” (PR: §24). This brought him to the phenomenological ‘grammar’ of *Philosophical Remarks* (1930) according to which what is fundamental is the presentation of rules, and not the symbolic way they are presented. Wittgenstein thought that the ‘rules of syntax’ do not need to be expressed in a *special sign-language*, a symbolism (WVC: 80). Supposedly, the ‘rules of syntax’ achieve the same as the phenomenological language, for they restrict the “truth-functional connections” simply by means of “rules that originate from the inner syntax of propositions and prohibit propositions from ascribing different coordinates to reality [for instance, “A is blue and A is red’]” (WVC: 80). At this point, of course, Wittgenstein had already

---

60. For a simple example of the system of coordinates see SRLF; for examples of the colour octahedron see MS 105: 98 and PR: §221.
61. Also: “A recognition of what is essential and what inessential in our language if it is to represent, a recognition of which parts of our language are wheels turning idly, amounts to the construction of a phenomenological language” (PR: §1).
given up his ladder metaphor: “Anything that I might reach by climbing a ladder does not interest me”. 62

Such were, roughly, the first steps of Wittgenstein’s long struggle after returning to philosophy. As far as I can see, those steps show that the discovery of mistakes in the *Tractatus* is in agreement with the reading proposed in this paper. What Wittgenstein realized was that he was wrong in the *Tractatus* when he thought that he had discovered the real simplicity of the hard in our language. In fact, the simplicity of logic was just a symbolic oversimplification of logic. 63

Mauro Luiz Engelmann
Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)
Departamento de Filosofía
Av. Antonio Carlos, 6627
Belo Horizonte (MG) – 31270-901
Brazil
mauroengelmann@gmail.com

References


63. This paper was written with the support of CNPq (Brazilian Research Council for Scientific and Technological Development). I thank IEAT (Institute of Advanced Transdisciplinary Studies – UFMG) for a period of research leave. Many ideas of this paper are part of a longer paper that has been circulating in various forms in the last years. I have profited from comments of several readers: Andrew Lugg, Craig Fox, David Stern, Juliet Floyd, Max Weiss, Sebastien Gandon, and Thomas Ricketts. I thank them all. I also thank Rupert Read and Craig Fox for comments and critiques on the not-quite-final version of this paper. Part of this paper has appeared in several talks: at University of Quebec Montreal, Universidad de Antioquia, University of Sao Paulo, and Trinity College Dublin. I thank all audiences for insightful feedback.


© 2018 John Wiley & Sons Ltd