

REMARKS ON WITTGENSTEIN'S  
USE OF THE TERMS "SINN",  
"SINNLOS", "UNSINNIG",  
"WAHR", AND "GEDANKE" IN  
THE *TRACTATUS*

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### I. Sense and contingency

In *TLP* 5.525 Wittgenstein makes a tripartite distinction: "Certainty, possibility or impossibility of a state of affairs are not expressed by a proposition ('Satz') but by the fact that an expression ('sondern dadurch dass ein Ausdruck') is a tautology, a significant ('sinnvoll') proposition or a contradiction."<sup>1</sup>

In 4.464 Wittgenstein says: "die Wahrheit der Tautologie ist gewiss, des Satzes möglich, der Kontradiktion unmöglich." Ogden: "The truth of tautology is certain, of propositions possible, of contradiction impossible." I think we can here for "certain" ("gewiss") substitute "necessary" ("notwendig").

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1. When discussing the *Tractatus*-terms "Sinn", "sinnlos", "unsinnig", "wahr", and "Gedanke" in English one must take utmost care with their translation. I am here following Ogden. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus by Ludwig Wittgenstein with an Introduction by Bertrand Russell, F.R.S.* London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., LTD, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1933. First published in the series *International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method* in 1922. Reprinted (with a few corrections) in 1933.

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A. Pichler, S. Säätelä (eds.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, pp. 98–106, Frankfurt a.M.: ontos verlag 2006, © ontos verlag, Georg Henrik von Wright.

I shall throughout use “Satz” or “sentence” where Ogden uses “proposition” – and “sinnvoller Satz” or, in English, “meaningful sentence” for Ogden’s term “significant proposition”.

Of tautologies Wittgenstein says that they are senseless (“sinnlos”), but not nonsensical (“unsinnig”); “they are part of the symbolism”, he says in 4.4611, “in the same way that (‘ähnlich wie’) ‘0’ is part of the symbolism of arithmetic.” They are a sort of extreme case in the operation with otherwise meaningful sentences. Wittgenstein does not make a corresponding statement about contradictions – but I think we have the right to infer that they too are senseless though not nonsensical.

Since a meaningful sentence is neither necessary nor contradictory, it is contingent. This means that it and its negation are both possible. Or: the negation of a meaningful (“sinnvoll”) sentence is also a meaningful (“sinnvoll”) sentence. It is important to note that, on the *Tractatus* view, meaningful sentences are contingent. I am afraid that this is something which commentators have not always clearly observed.

## 2. Sense and truth-value

A meaningful (“sinnvoll”) sentence has what may be called a *bipolar* relation to truth (truth-value). It *can* be true and it *can* be false.

Tautologies and contradictions have what I shall call a *unipolar* relation to truth. The tautology is true (Wittgenstein says (4.461) “bedingungslos wahr” (“unconditionally true”)) and cannot be not-true, and the contradiction is false and cannot be true.

There are also sentences which have what I shall call a *zeropolar* relation to truth. These are sentences which are neither true nor false (void of truth-value). For example moral, aesthetic, religious and other valuations, and also norm-giving (“deontic”) sentences like commands, permissions, and prohibitions.

## 3. Senseless truths?

If a sentence has a unipolar relation to truth it is senseless (meaningless) but also true if it is a tautology, and false, if it is a contradiction.

To admit that a sentence can be both true and void of sense may seem awkward but is consistent with Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus*. And his argument is no muddle.

In order to remove the impression of awkwardness here one might take the view that tautologies and contradictions are not "real" sentences. This possibility too Wittgenstein seems to have considered. In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., p. 167) he says of the tautology  $p \supset p$  that he sees in it a "degenerate proposition which is on the side of truth". ("Ich sehe in ihm einen degenerierten Satz, der auf der Seite der Wahrheit ist.") (I assume that any other tautology of propositional logic would also do.) Similarly, one could then call a contradiction a degenerate sentence "on the side of falsehood". One can defend these locutions by reference to the way the tautologous and contradictory nature of a sentence (in propositional logic) emerges from a truth-table. This fits Wittgenstein's idea that tautologies (contradictions) although they are senseless are not nonsensical ("unsinnig").<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Thoughts

4: "Der Gedanke ist der sinnvolle Satz." Ogden: "The thought is the significant proposition."

3.3: "Nur der Satz hat Sinn." Ogden: "Only the proposition has sense."

3.12: "Das Zeichen, durch welches wir den Gedanken ausdrücken, nenne ich das Satzzeichen. Und der Satz ist das Satzzeichen in seiner projektiven Beziehung zur Welt." Ogden: "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."

3.5: "Das angewandte, gedachte, Satzzeichen ist der Gedanke." Ogden: "The applied, thought, propositional sign is the thought." Wittgenstein's distinction between "Satzzeichen" and "Satz" recalls the distinction between sentence and proposition which for example Moore was keen to observe. The "Satzzeichen" is a physical phenomenon which is given a

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2. The reader will have noticed that my use of the terms "senseless" ("sinnlos") and "nonsensical" ("unsinnig") may be seen as in some ways differing from the use of these terms in the *Tractatus*. I use "nonsensical" as an extreme case of "senseless".

“Sinn” by being applied or thought in a projective relation to the world. If thoughts are meaningful sentences and meaningful sentences are contingent(ly true or false), then thoughts are contingent. In the last paragraph of the Preface to the book Wittgenstein says that the *truth* of the thoughts which his book communicates seems to him “unassailable and definitive” (“unantastbar und definitiv”). Which thoughts? This is not clear to me. Is the *Tractatus* a collection of contingent sentences? Certainly not. Is it even true that the *Tractatus* communicates thoughts (“Gedanken”)? I am not clear in which sense the book can claim to communicate unassailable and definitive truths or thoughts.

Here seems to be some kind of muddle or, maybe, inconsistency – and the question is how we shall deal with it. It has struck me that Wittgenstein could have left out the troublesome sentence without loss to the message of his book. The rest of the paragraph where it occurs can stand by itself.

## 5. “Legitimately constructed proposition”

In 5.4733 Wittgenstein, with a reference to Frege, uses the term “legitimately constructed proposition” – in German “rechtmässig gebildeter Satz”. Every such sentence, he says, must have a sense, “and if it has no sense this can only be (‘nur daran liegen’) because we have given *no meaning* (*Bedeutung*) to some of its constituent parts.”

Here several critical questions arise. In which sense of “must” must every legitimately constructed proposition have a sense? Must it have a bipolar relation to truth, in which case it is contingent? Maybe a unipolar relation will suffice, in which case it is either necessarily true (“certain”) or necessarily false, i.e. contradictory? Or can it even have a zeropolar relation to truth, i.e. be neither true nor false? If the relation to truth is unipolar, the sentence is senseless (“sinnlos”) but at the same time true or false and not nonsensical (“unsinnig”).<sup>3</sup>

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3. In this context also belongs the observation that normative and evaluative sentences have a characteristic *ambiguity*. They can be used to *express* a subject’s will or its approval (disapproval) of something or to *state that* something is willed or valued. In the second case the sentence has factual meaning, says something which is true or false. On this ambiguity rests the possibility of logical relations between norms and also between valuations.

How shall we understand Wittgenstein's words that if a sentence has no sense, this can *only* (my italics) be because we have given no meaning to one of its constituent parts? As an example he mentions "Socrates is identical". It has no sense – here = "is nonsensical" – because "we have given *no* meaning to the word 'identical' as *adjective*" (L.W.'s italics). This is easy to understand. But does the same hold for all nonsensical sentences, viz. that they have a constituent part without "Bedeutung"? Moreover, are all sentences which are neither true nor false nonsensical – for example "Bach is a greater composer than Vivaldi" or "you must not smoke here"? And if they are, does it mean that they contain some constituent part without meaning?

"Socrates is identical" is a clear example of a sentence which has no sense (is "sinnlos") because of the fact that it has a part, viz. the word "identical" which, in the context of the sentence, has (been given) no meaning. If we substitute for it, say, the word "Chinese" we get a meaningful contingent sentence (which happens to be false).

The sentence "Socrates is identical", moreover, is not only senseless ("sinnlos") but also nonsensical ("unsinnig"). The question may be raised: why is this sentence pattern not only senseless but also such in the stronger sense of being nonsensical? An answer – not given by Wittgenstein, however – is that the sentence is ungrammatical, not a correctly formed sentence of the English language. In this it differs from other types of sentence with what I called a zeropolar relation to truth, for example value judgements and norm formulations. "I like this picture" is, as an expression of a valuation, neither true nor false – and so is "smoking prohibited" as norm formulation.

But the two last-mentioned sentences are grammatically well formed. We understand them – they have a use in our language. "Socrates is identical" is unintelligible and useless. Sentences which are neither true nor false but are well formed and have an established use in language are, although senseless according to the *Tractatus* not nonsensical (according to the view I am taking here). So much for the notion of a "rechtmässig gebildeter Satz."

## 6. Nonsensical *Tractatus*

In the famous penultimate remark (6.54) of the book Wittgenstein tells us that one who understands him will recognize his sentences as nonsensical ("unsinnig"). The sentences are like a ladder which we have to climb –

“durch sie – auf ihnen – über sie” (Ogden: “through them, on them, over them”). “Er muss diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig.” (Ogden: “He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.”)

One is struck by the word “world” here. The opening sentence of the *Tractatus* is the familiar 1: “The world is everything that is the case”, i.e. all contingent truths. Is the world which we are supposed to see clearly, the world of contingent facts, the “so-sein” of which Wittgenstein says in 6.41: “... alles Geschehen und So-Sein ist zufällig”? (Ogden: “... all happening and being-so is accidental.”) Is not what we “see”, when we have surmounted the *Tractatus* sentences, their nonsensicality? But one could also say that, having thrown away the ladder, we see the world of contingent truths, i.e. the world of sense, so to say *undiluted by the philosopher’s nonsense*.

That would agree with 4.114: “Sie (sc. die Philosophie) soll das Denkbare abgrenzen und damit das Undenkbare. Sie soll das Undenkbare von innen durch das Denkbare begrenzen.” And 4.115: “Sie wird das Unsagbare bedeuten, indem sie das Sagbare klar darstellt.” This does not mean that philosophy (or the *Tractatus*) will make us see which sentences are true and which ones are false. To determine this is the task of what Wittgenstein calls the “Naturwissenschaften”, the empirical sciences. The task of philosophy is to elucidate the nature of sentences and thus separate what belongs to the world of sense (“das bestreitbare Gebiet der Naturwissenschaft”) (4.113), (Ogden: “the disputable sphere of natural science”), from that which makes no sense (is nonsensical).

I think this is how we have to understand the idea that “surmounting” the sentences of the *Tractatus* we come to see the world, i.e. that which is the case, clearly. But the question remains how we shall understand the nonsensicality of the Tractarian sentences. Are the sentences then not “legitimately constructed”? And if they are not, is this because they contain constituent parts without meaning (“Bedeutung”)? It is hard to see that this were the case. The sentences of the *Tractatus*, unlike Wittgenstein’s sample sentence “Socrates is identical”, are grammatically well formed and in that sense “legitimately constructed” (“rechtmässig gebildet”). The reason why they are nonsensical must lie elsewhere. I think we should look for it in the context of what Wittgenstein says about the pictorial nature of language and correspondence between the picture and the pictured. The sentences of the

*Tractatus* are obviously *not* pictures of a language-independent reality. Nor are their ultimate constituent parts “einfache Gegenstände” (“simple objects”) which “hang on one another like members of a chain”. The sentences of the *Tractatus* do not describe states of affairs (4.023). Therefore they do not *say* anything. I assume that, on the *Tractatus* view, norm formulations and value judgements do not say anything either. For some time – in the heyday of logical positivism – it was a fashion to say that such sentences were “a-logical” or “a-theoretical”. This was another way of saying that they are senseless or nonsensical (“sinnlos” or “unsinnig”). (One did not always observe the distinction.) From the point of view of ordinary language this was an unnatural *façon de parler*.

It would make good sense to say that norm formulations and value judgements have no *factual meaning*. But surely they “say” something in an ordinary and familiar sense of “saying”. If this were not so, we could not understand them and use them the way we do. It would be natural to say that such sentences have a *normative* and an *evaluative* meaning, and that therefore, although senseless, they are not nonsensical.

Sentences with factual meaning say that something or other is the case – and invite us to compare what they say with the way things are (reality). Things are different with the sentences of the *Tractatus*. They have no place in this realm of sentence meanings (factual, evaluative, normative; this is not meant to be an exhaustive enumeration). They are senseless in the stronger sense of nonsensical. This is so because they are not sentences in the *Tractatus*-meaning of the term. They are attempts to say something which cannot be said, attempts to transgress the limits of language as marked by the picture theory. Although grammatically well formed and in some sense “intelligible”, they have no established use in ordinary discourse (unlike valuations and normative sentences). They are just “plain nonsense”. But fighting one’s way through them will *show* us something by taking us to a platform from where we “see the world of so-sein, of contingent fact, rightly”.

This, I would say, is the moral sense of Wittgenstein’s book. But is this not a very meagre achievement? So it seems – but Wittgenstein says himself that a merit of his work is that it makes us see how little has been achieved when all the problems of philosophy have been solved. This is not an expression of modesty – but of insight.

Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* thought that he had solved, or rather done away with, all problems of philosophy once and for all. He says in the Preface “Ich bin also der Meinung, die Probleme im Wesentlichen endgültig gelöst zu haben.”

(Ogden: “I am therefore of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved.”) The problems have their origin in attempts to transcend the boundaries of the “sayable”, i.e. the contingently true or false. Their solution is to see the futility of the attempt.

Wittgenstein of the *Untersuchungen* took a somewhat different view of philosophy. Its problems are linguistic confusions which cannot once and for all be put right but will again and again puzzle the reflective mind. Their “solution” is to free us, temporarily, from the mental discomfort they cause.

Perhaps one can say that Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* took an “absolutist”, Wittgenstein of the *Untersuchungen* a “relativistic”, view of the philosophical enterprise. But the difference is hardly fundamental.

Another difference between the “two Wittgensteins” has to do with the philosopher’s language. In *Untersuchungen* § 120 Wittgenstein writes “wenn ich über Sprache (Wort, Satz, etc.) rede, muss ich die Sprache des Alltags reden.” But the language of the *Tractatus* is anything but “the language of every day”. In *Untersuchungen* § 108 he says “Die Philosophie der Logik redet in keinem anderen Sinn von Sätzen und Wörtern, als wir es im gewöhnlichen Phänomen der Sprache; nicht von einem unräumlichen and unzeitlichen Uding.” I think we must understand this (also) as a statement of self-criticism.

Finally, some remarks about my own inclinations when thinking about these matters.

I would agree to the idea that meaningful sentences (“sinnvolle Sätze”) are contingent and that necessary and impossible sentences are senseless (void of sense) but not nonsensical (“unsinnig”). I would avoid the locutions “necessarily true” and “necessarily false” and consistently say “necessary” and “impossible” (or “contradictory”). My reason for doing so is that – in my opinion – the sense in which necessary sentences are true and contradictory sentences false is very different from the sense in which contingent sentences are true or false. We attribute truth-value to the latter on the basis of a *comparison* between a linguistic picture and reality. Contingent truth is agreement, falsehood disagreement between what is said and what is the

case. But necessary sentences are not true because they agreed with something “outside” language; nor are contradictory sentences false because of their disagreement with facts.

Because of these differences between the contingent and the not-contingent, I think it clarifying to drop the terms “true” and “false” altogether as attributes of that which is (logically) necessary and impossible. The last two terms cover, I think, a great many different and distinguishable cases. But I shall not go into this topic here.

By a “thought” (“Gedanke”) I would understand – with Wittgenstein – the sense of a contingently true or false sentence. Non-contingent sentences which are void of truth-value (are neither true nor false) do not *say* anything factual. But if they are grammatically well formed and have a settled use in ordinary language they may *show* something of interest to the philosopher.