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Nonsense and the General Form of the Sentence

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Abstract. In his paper 'The Bounds of Nonsense' Adrian Moore defines sentences for Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* as those items to which truth-operations apply, and understands this as a disjunctivist theory. I consider whether this view can plausibly be attributed to Wittgenstein, whether it is compatible with the way Wittgenstein draws the distinction between propositions (narrowly construed) and nonsensical pseudo-propositions, and whether it is compatible with the more general philosophy of the *Tractatus*. Understanding the *Tractatus* in the way suggested by the disjunctivist definition of sentences transforms the way we read the text.

Keywords: Sentence, proposition, nonsense, disjunctivism, form, syntax, realism, idealism, clarity.

1. THE CLAIMS

In his fascinating paper (Moore 2019), Adrian Moore presents two (connected) striking claims which he takes Wittgenstein to be committed to in the *Tractatus*:

(1) Sentences are those items to which truth-operations apply (Moore 2019, 63)

(2) Sentencehood has no independent essence of its own (Moore 2019, 64)

I want here to consider what these claims mean, whether Wittgenstein can be taken to accept them, and what difference that makes to our understanding of some of the central themes of the *Tractatus*.

2. BROAD AND NARROW DEFINITIONS

First, the background. Adrian begins with a familiar tripartite classification which distinguishes between these three categories:

thoughts

tautologies and contradictions

nonsensical pseudo-propositions

Thoughts are bipolar: they are true or false, and if true could have been false, and if false could have been true. This means they have *sense*; they picture reality. *Tautologies* and *contradictions* are true (if they're tautologies) or false (if they're contradictions), but they're not bipolar. They are *senseless*, though not nonsensical. *Nonsensical pseudo-propositions* are neither true nor false: they are *nonsensical*.

A question arises immediately. How are we to describe the three kinds of thing which the tripartite classification classifies? That is, how are we to distinguish all of these

three kinds of thing from other things for which the issues which divide them are simply of no concern (things such as trees and continents and nationalities, for example)?

One word we might use is "proposition". But someone might think that only *thoughts*, in Wittgenstein's sense, are propositions: neither tautologies and contradictions, on the one hand, nor nonsensical pseudo-propositions, on the other, are, strictly speaking, propositions, on this view. This would be a *super-narrow* definition of "proposition". It seems clear that Wittgenstein himself does not adopt this definition. Alternatively, we might think that we could usefully count both thoughts, on the one hand, and tautologies and contradictions, on the other, as propositions, while denying that nonsensical pseudo-propositions are propositions. This would be to adopt what we might now call a *narrow* definition of "proposition", in line with what Adrian calls the *narrow interpretation* of Wittgenstein's use of the term. Or again, we might adopt a *broad* definition of the term "proposition", and count even nonsensical pseudo-propositions as propositions, in line with what Adrian calls the *broad interpretation* of Wittgenstein's use of the term "proposition".

Adrian then proposes to use the word "sentence" to cover all three of the categories: that is, in a way which coincides with the broad definition of "proposition", but without taking a stand on the term "proposition" itself. (Though "sentence" is in fact a natural translation of the word "Satz" in the German text of the *Tractatus*–that is, of the word which "proposition" translates in the established English translations.)

3. DISJUNCTIVISM

It is a consequence of Adrian's view that the actual choice of word here is not all that important. One of the morals to be drawn from Adrian's paper is that it is also not all that important whether the Narrow or the Broad interpretation is right about the use of the word "proposition" in the (English) text of the *Tractatus*. (In my view, there are quite significant literary reasons for that too: the *Tractatus* presents itself as a kind of scientific treatise, but it is in many ways more appropriately thought of as a kind of poem. The kind of poem it is means that it is legitimate, and in some circumstances simply right, for the same word to be used slightly differently at different points.)

Two things, however, are important. The first is the distinction between the things which the narrow interpretation counts as propositions and the things it doesn't: that is, the distinction between the first two of the three categories, on the one hand, and the third, on the other. And the second is between the things which the Broad interpretation counts as propositions and the things it doesn't: that is, the distinction between all three of the specified categories, on the one hand, and everything else (such as trees, continents, and nationalities), on the other.

The first distinction is what Adrian calls the *principal distinction*: it is the distinction within the class of what he calls *sentences*, between those which are not nonsense and those which are. Let us call the second distinction the *background distinction*. It is the

background distinction which Adrian in effect defines by the two claims which I quoted at the outset:

(1) Sentences are those items to which truth-operations apply;

(2) Sentencehood has no independent essence of its own.

Adrian notes an obvious objection to claim (1):

(TON) Truth-operations apply only to items that are truth-valued (p.9).

That might seem to make claim (1) define, not *sentences* (as Adrian understands the term), but *propositions*, on the *narrow* definition of "proposition". But (TON) depends on a *narrow* conception of "truth-operation". We could instead understand it broadly, and claim this:

(TOB) Truth-operations apply only to items that *appear to be* truth-valued.

If we adopted (TOB), claim (1) would be tantamount to this:

(1*) Sentences are those items which appear to be truth-valued.

What is it for something to *appear to be truth-valued* in whatever way is required to make (1*) true, given that sentences, which (1*) defines, are supposed to be exactly those items which fall into one of our three initial categories? Here Adrian proposes that we may contrast what we can call a *highest-common-factor* with a *disjunctivist* approach, using those terms in a way which is borrowed from the philosophy of perception.

The highest-common-factor conception can be formulated as follows:

(HCF) To *appear to be truth-valued* in the way relevant to (1*) is to have some common essence *E* distinct from either (i) being truth-valued or (ii) merely appearing to be truth-valued.

The disjunctivist conception can be formulated as follows:

(D) To *appear to be truth-valued* in the way relevant to (1*) is just either (i) to be truth-valued, or (ii) to merely appear to be truth-valued.

Adrian's claim (2) is a rejection of the highest-common-factor view, and an endorsement of disjunctivism. To spell his view out precisely: he takes (1), understood by way of (TOB)–that is, as (1*)–and (D) to define sentencehood. We might call this view, in full, the *disjunctivist truth-operation view* of sentencehood. I will call it the *disjunctivist view*, for short.

4. THREE QUESTIONS AND TWO FORMS OF DISJUNCTIVISM

At this point three questions naturally arise:

(A) Does Wittgenstein hold the disjunctivist view?

(B) Is the disjunctivist view compatible with the way Wittgenstein draws the principal distinction?

(C) Is the disjunctivist view compatible with the philosophy of the *Tractatus* in general?

In addressing these questions I think it will be helpful to have in mind two different forms of the disjunctivist view. Remember Adrian's claim (2), which is his commitment to disjunctivism:

(2) Sentencehood has no independent essence of its own.

This is neutral between two ways of understanding the significance of the disjunctivist view. To get a grip on this, we need to elaborate the notion of essence here a bit. Sometimes people take the essence of something to be no more than the set of its essential properties, where a thing's essential properties are simply those without which it could not exist as the thing it is: this is a purely modal conception of essence. But historically essence has generally meant much more than that: the essence of something, on this more traditional understanding, is what *makes* it the thing it is. On this second conception, the essence of something is explanatory, and not purely modal.

I think it's most revealing if we take "essence" in Adrian's claim (2) in this second, richer way. Now we can see two ways in which (2) might be true:

(2a) The disjunctivist view gives the explanatory essence of sentencehood;

(2b) There is no explanatory essence of sentencehood; the disjunctivist view just states what all sentences have in common.

Call (2a) an expression of a *strong disjunctivist view*, and (2b) an expression of a *bland disjunctivist view*.

For a parallel here, consider the case where the idea of disjunctivism has its home: perceptual experience. A disjunctivist claim there comparable to the disjunctivist truth-operation view of sentencehood might be put like this:

(PD) Perceptual experience is either (i) being evidently in touch with an independent reality, or (ii) merely seeming to be in touch with an independent reality.

I think we would expect (PD) to be offered as a characterization of the *explanatory* essence of perceptual experience: being in touch with an independent reality is what perception is all about. It would be bizarre to claim that (PD) simply states what all perceptual experience has in common, but says nothing about what makes it what it is.

I will be considering the disjunctivist view as a claim about the explanatory essence of sentencehood: that is, I will be interested in the strong disjunctivist view. (I don't know if this is what Adrian intended.) The reason is that this makes my three questions–(A), (B), and (C)–more interesting.

5. DOES WITTGENSTEIN HOLD THE DISJUNCTIVIST VIEW?

Recall that the disjunctivist view holds that Adrian's claim (1), understood by way of (TOB) defines sentencehood. Here is the key claim again:

(1) Sentences are those items to which truth-operations apply.

The most direct support for the claim that Wittgenstein accepts this comes in 5 and 5.3 of the *Tractatus*. Here is the first of those remarks:

> 5 Propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.)

And here is the first sentence of the second:

> 5.3 All propositions are results of truth-operations on elementary propositions.

(The rest of 5.3 makes clear, what is anyway obvious, that a truth-operation can be applied to any proposition.)

Remark 6 gives formal expression to that point, using the *N* operator to give what Wittgenstein there calls both "the general form of the truth-function" and "the general form of the proposition". One might then reformulate the point of 6 (slightly clumsily) like this:

> 6* The general form of the proposition is that it is either the basis or the result of truth-operations on elementary propositions.

Of course, we are talking about propositions here, and we shouldn't rush to assume that propositions are *sentences*, in Adrian's sense: that is, we shouldn't rush to assume that the broad interpretation of "proposition" (to include the third of our original categories, as well as the first two) is correct. So let us suppose for the moment that "proposition" is defined narrowly, so that it applies just to the first two of our original three categories. Clearly, 5 and the first sentence of 5.3 apply to all propositions in this sense. And if we understand "result of a truth operation" narrowly–that is, as applying just to items which have a truth-value–then they will apply only to propositions in this sense.

But do they give the *explanatory* essence of propositions, in this narrow sense of "proposition"? There is some reason to think that they are meant to. This is because of the key point about remark 6, which I have formulated as 6*. Remark 6 is about form, and form is a key concept in the *Tractatus*. If we assume (not an obvious assumption, as I have already suggested) that the word "form" is used in the same way throughout the *Tractatus*, then form here, as elsewhere, is possibility of combination. Here are two key remarks:

> 2.0141 The possibility of its occurrence in atomic facts is the form of the object.

> 2.151 The form of depiction is the possibility that the things are combined with one another as are the elements of the picture.

What I think this shows is that form is basically concerned with syntax: in language, with precisely syntax; and in the world, with some worldly counterpart or analogue to syntax.

The reason why this seems to help the thought that 5 and 5.3 are at least meant to give the explanatory essence of propositions is that it is very natural and plausible to think that the explanatory essence of *sentences*–on an entirely everyday understanding of the term "sentence"–is something to do with their syntax. There is clearly something special about sentences–still in that ordinary sense–which makes it possible to consider, even if one were in the end to reject it, something like Frege's context principle: the principle that it is only in the context of a *Satz* (a sentence, a proposition) that words have meaning (Frege 1884/1980: §62). The simple thought is that a sentence can be complete in a way that a mere list cannot: words can be added to or subtracted from a list quite arbitrarily, while still leaving us with a list; but they cannot be added to or subtracted from a sentence quite arbitrarily, while still leaving us with a sentence.

What remarks 5 and 5.3 of the *Tractatus* tell us, and remark 6 expresses formally, is that every proposition is either the base of a possible application of truth-operations or the result of the application of truth-operations. The immediate importance of this for that place in the *Tractatus* is what it shows about truth-functions. But for our purposes, what matters is what it shows about propositions: since everything which is the result of the application of truth-operations is also the (possible) base of an application of truth-operations, the claim of remarks 5, 5.3, and 6 is just this slight (propositional) variant of Adrian's claim (1):

(1p) Propositions are those items to which truth-operations apply.

Remark 6 can now be understood to tell us this: (1p) gives the form of propositions. That is, the syntax of propositions is defined by the fact that they are those items to which truth-operations apply. We might reformulate this again: the distinctive syntactic completeness of propositions (*Sätze*) is defined by the fact that truth-operations apply to them (informally: that they can be combined truth-functionally).

So much for *propositions*, on an understanding of that term which does not involve our assuming that there are any propositions which have no truth-value. Adrian's claim (1)–and hence the disjunctivist view as a whole–is about *sentences*, in the precise sense which includes things in all three of our original categories. So what about sentences, in this sense? Here is a plausible thought: if there is anything which unifies the category of sentences, in this precise sense, it is the same thing as what unifies the category of sentences on an everyday understanding of the term. But if anything unifies the category of sentences on an everyday understanding of the term, it is their syntactic completeness–or apparent syntactic completeness. But remark 6 of the *Tractatus* seems to say that the distinctive syntactic completeness of *propositions*–understood in such a way as not to suppose that there are any propositions which have no truth-value–is due to the fact that truth-operations apply to them. That seems to mean that remark 6

of the *Tractatus* is only plausible if the distinctive syntactic completeness–or apparent syntactic completeness–of *sentences*, in Adrian's sense, is due to the fact that *propositions*, understood in the narrow way, are items to which truth-operations apply (i.e., (1p)).

There are two ways of making that plausible:

(a) Sentences are items which appear to be propositions (in the narrow sense);

(b) Truth-operations apply to things which appear to have a truth-value.

In effect, if we take a *narrow* (TON) view of truth-operations–if we think they apply only to things which have truth-values–then we can adopt (a); while (b) is just the *broad* (TOB) view of truth-operations.

I think there is little more than a terminological difference between these two approaches. What this means is that remark 6 of the *Tractatus* is only plausible if Adrian's claim (1)–sentences are those items to which truth-operations apply–gives the explanatory essence of sentencehood, in both his and the everyday understandings of "sentence".

But we should note both the point we've reached and the route we've taken to get here. In order to take remark 6 as giving the explanatory essence of sentencehood, I have had to take the core of the explanatory essence of sentencehood to be a matter of syntax. This is because 6 is about *form*, and form in the *Tractatus* is, in general and speaking a little roughly, syntax; and because syntax seems to be the core of the explanatory essence of the ordinary notion of sentence, which I've used to move from a claim about propositions, in the narrow sense, to one about sentences, in Adrian's sense.

This has a particular consequence in the context of the *Tractatus*. The central thesis of the philosophy of language of the *Tractatus* is that sentences have the same form as the world. That means that both sentences and the non-linguistic world have something like a syntax: both sentences and what makes sentences true are facts. This means that having the distinctive syntax of sentences does not distinguish between sentences and other facts. But being items to which truth-operations apply does distinguish between sentences and other facts. In effect, by suggesting that sentences have the syntax they have in virtue of being items to which truth-operations apply, we have not only offered an explanatory account of the essence of syntax: we have also provided a mark which distinguishes sentences from other facts. (We may then suggest that other facts are items which have the syntax they have in virtue of being items which make sentences true.)

The account which this gives us of the explanatory essence of sentencehood also seems clearly disjunctivist: there is no *other* essence of sentencehood which might be doing the work. The distinctive character of sentences derives entirely, on this account, from the fact that propositions, defined narrowly, are items to which truth-operations, also defined narrowly, apply; it can only also characterize other sentences–those which have no truth-values–in virtue of those other sentences appearing to be things which have truth-values.

I think this means that remark 6 of the *Tractatus* is only plausible if the disjunctivist truth-operation view of sentencehood is right. That's close to a Yes to my question (A).

6. IS THE DISJUNCTIVIST VIEW COMPATIBLE WITH THE WAY WITTGENSTEIN DRAWS THE PRINCIPAL DISTINCTION?

What Adrian calls the principal distinction is the distinction between sentences which have truth-values and nonsensical pseudo-propositions. Wittgenstein famously explains how he understands the basis of what seems to be this distinction in the opening sentences of 5.4733:

> Frege says: Every legitimately constructed proposition must have a sense; and I say: Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed, and if it has no sense this can only be because we have given no *meaning* to some of its constituent parts. (Even if we believe that we have done so.) Thus "Socrates is identical" says nothing, because we have given *no* meaning to the word "identical" as *adjective*.

This seems to allow that there can be propositions–at least that there can be sentences, in Adrian's sense–whose syntax is fixed, even though they have no sense and no truth-value, because no meaning has been assigned to some of their constituent parts. For example, "Socrates is identical" is a sentence, but says nothing, and "identical" within it is an adjective, even though no quality (as we would put it) has been assigned as its meaning.

The mere fact that there can be sentences which have syntax, in a sense, without having sense or truth-value, is unproblematic once we have accepted Adrian's flexibility about the possibility of a broad interpretation of the term "proposition", combined with a disjunctivist account of what I have called the background distinction. What calls for a little thought is the way this is worked out in detail. The key thing here is that Wittgenstein's whole account of language takes the meaning of sentences to be compositional: indeed, he takes this to be an argument for his picture theory of sentences (4.02). What this means is that a sentence can only be a sentence and lack sense in virtue of some of its constituent parts lacking a meaning. The question is how we can understand a sentence having constituent parts with a distinctive syntax–for example, "identical" in the sentence "Socrates is identical" being an adjective–if they have no meaning. The core problem is this: where does the syntax of the parts of a sentence come from?

A way of raising the problem is to look back at the notion of form as it applies to sentences. In the last section I mentioned these two remarks:

> 2.0141 The possibility of its occurrence in atomic facts is the form of the object.
>
> 2.151 The form of depiction is the possibility that the things are combined with one another as are the elements of the picture.

2.0141 describes the form of a constituent of a sentence-like item (a fact) in terms of the way it can combine with other such constituents within the whole: we might call this an *external* form–it is a matter of an item's way of combining with things which are, in a way, external to it. 2.151 describes the form of a sentence-like item (a picture) in

terms of the way that its constituents can be combined with one another: we might call this an *internal* form–it is the matter of the way things *within* an item can be combined with each other.

If we hold onto this picture, we expect constituents of sentence-like items to have *external* forms, and sentence-like items themselves to have *internal* forms. But sentences themselves must also have external forms: sentences can combine with other sentences to form sentences. And it is, of course, the *external* form of *Sätze* (sentences, propositions) which remark 6 of the *Tractatus* characterizes. The question, then, is this: how can the external form of sentences determine their internal form? How does the fact that sentences are those items to which truth-operations apply (Adrian's claim (1)) determine their internal syntax?

There is a connection between this issue and the terms in which what is fundamental about sentences (as opposed to, say, lists) is characterized. In the last section I characterized what is distinctive about sentences as being that they have a certain completeness. But there is a tradition according to which what is distinctive is that they have a certain unity. Very roughly, the completeness characterization looks to *external* form, while the unity characterization looks to *internal* form. The difference between these approaches is not a superficial one: it has to do with what is taken to be fundamental. Put simply, the view that what is distinctive of sentences is that they have a certain unity takes the parts of sentences to be basic, and sentences to be unifications of those parts. In contrast, the view that what is distinctive of sentences is that they have a certain completeness takes whole sentences to be basic, and the parts to be derived in some way from them, as abstractions, or as commonalities between ranges of whole sentences.

It is clear that Wittgenstein takes whole sentences to be basic: this is evident in his clear commitment to a strong form of Frege's context principle (see 3.3; 3.311), as well, of course, as in remark 6 of the *Tractatus*. So it is clear that Wittgenstein must take the external form of sentences, at least when characterized in terms of truth, to determine their internal form. What is not clear is how it can do that.

I will offer no solution here: we are on the very edge of one of the deepest issues in philosophy (one which is also relevant to the comparison with Kant which Adrian makes in his Appendix–surely no accident). What I will do is simply show the constraints which an attempt to work out a Wittgensteinian response must face.

First, it seems implausible that the mere idea of abstracting from, or finding commonalities between, whole sentences can itself explain the particular character of particular parts of speech: the adjectival character of "identical" in "Socrates is identical", for example. This seems to mean that it is important that *truth* is involved in what determines the form of sentences: sentences are complete in whatever way is required for them to be *true*. Since truth requires some kind of relationship between sentences and the world, that relationship itself may be brought in to explain the particular character of particular parts of speech.

But, secondly, the particular character of particular parts of speech cannot just be borrowed or copied from the character of counterpart items in the world. So "identical" cannot be an adjective, for example, just because it is a *quality* which it purports to be correlated with. The reason is that if *qualities* had the relevant character independently of any relation to sentences, then worldly *facts* would have a fact-like character independently of their relation to sentences. And if worldly facts had a fact-like character independently of sentences, then it would be their correspondence to possible worldly facts which ultimately determined the syntax of sentences. The syntax of sentences would be as it is in virtue of the independently intelligible character which they share with independently fact-like worldly facts–and not in virtue of their being such that truth-operations apply to them. And that would undermine the thought that, for Wittgenstein, the disjunctivist truth-operation view gives the explanatory essence of sentences.

It seems to follow from this that if we are to make sense of the particular syntactic character of particular parts of speech we need to find some way of understanding what is involved in sentences being true, which is not merely a mapping between them and independently fact-like items in the world. But nothing yet stops it being the case that the internal form of sentences is determined by their external form–at least if their external form is determined by the fact that they can be true or false.

7. IS THE DISJUNCTIVIST VIEW COMPATIBLE WITH THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE *TRACTATUS* IN GENERAL?

Kant has already been hanging in the background. He now comes closer to the front of the stage. Let us begin by considering whether the disjunctivist view is compatible with the philosophy of language of the *Tractatus*. The central plank of the philosophy of language of the *Tractatus* is the application to language of a general theory of representation. The general theory of representation is expressed in these two remarks:

> 2.161 In the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that the one can be a picture of the other at all.
>
> 2.17 What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner – rightly or falsely – is its form of depiction.

The application of this view to propositions (sentences) is made clear in this remark:

> 3.21 To the configuration of the simple signs in the propositional sign corresponds the configuration of the objects in the state of affairs.

This means that the form of the proposition (sentence) must also be the form of reality. And just as reality consists ultimately of *facts* (1, 1.1), so also:

> The propositional sign is a fact (3.14).

How are we to make sense of this if the disjunctivist truth-operation view of sentences is right? It looks as if we cannot accept either of the two simplest ways of understanding how the form of language might be the same as the form of the world. One of these is a simple realist approach, which supposes that the world comes already composed of facts, articulated in objects, and language simply borrows or inherits this structure from the world: language is propositional because the world is. We have already seen that this is incompatible with the idea that the disjunctivist view gives the explanatory essence of sentencehood.

The other simple way of understanding the fact that language and the world have the same form is a simple idealist view, which supposes that language is in itself already propositional, and that a world with propositional structure is somehow created as a counterpart of it. But again, it is hard to see how that is compatible with the thought that being a possible base of *truth*-operations is the explanatory essence of sentencehood, and as we have seen, it seems to offer no way in which the particular syntactic character of the constituents of sentences can be explained.

This means that we are forced into something like the following picture, if we accept the disjunctivist view of the essence of sentences: there comes to be language with a propositional structure in virtue of sentences being held to be true or false of a world which is not in itself propositionally structured (is not already divided into facts); and that propositional structure is then projected back onto the world, to present it as a world that can be described. This is a familiar picture: it is a familiar form of Kantianism, and it faces a familiar problem. The problem is that it is hard to see how we are to make sense of–in particular, how we are to describe–the world which is not itself propositionally structured which lies at the base of this picture. The difference now is that the problem can be precisely located: its source is the central thesis of the *Tractatus*' philosophy of language, the thesis that language and world must have the same form, if language is to be capable of picturing, describing, the world at all. It is this thesis which makes it so quickly impossible to describe the world as it seems to have to be in itself, not being in itself propositionally structured.

It is a delicate question whether the impossibility here is in fact the impossibility which led Wittgenstein to claim that the propositions of the *Tractatus* were nonsense (6.54). If there is an argument that the propositions of the *Tractatus* must be nonsense, it looks as if it is the argument about form which appears in the following remarks:

> 2.172 The picture, however, cannot depict its form of depiction; it shows it forth.
>
> 2.173 The picture represents its object from without (its standpoint is its form of representation), therefore the picture represents its object rightly or falsely.
>
> 2.174 But the picture cannot place itself outside its form of representation.

And the point is applied to propositions (sentences) in 4.12:

> Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it – the logical form.
>
> To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world.

If this argument is the basis of Wittgenstein's view that philosophical propositions must be nonsensical, it seems that he must think that philosophical propositions are about form–in particular, the form of reality. (This is quite a plausible account of the problem with "formal concepts" at 4.1271-4.1272; and it seems naturally extended to the 6.4s and 6.5s.)

On the other hand, some of the imagery, both of the core argument here and of, for example, 5.61, and perhaps some parts of the Preface, seems to me to make good sense when applied to the predicament which the same-form conception of language puts one in over that kind of Kantian picture. In particular, the language of what is "inside" and what is "outside" seems to me to fit that predicament well. This imagery seems less precisely apt if the only source of philosophical impossibility is the impossibility of representing form.

There seem to be layers upon layers of modality here. At the base there is what one might call *combinatorial modality*. This is clearly expressed in these two claims:

> 2.022 It is clear that however different from the real one an imagined world may be, it must have something – a form – in common with the real world.
>
> 2.023 This fixed form consists of the objects.

We may put the thought here as follows. All possible worlds contain the same objects. Different non-actual worlds differ from each other and from the actual world only in how those objects are combined in facts. The possibilities of combination are determined in (perhaps by) the objects: the essence of the objects is the limit of the possibilities of their combination, and therefore of the range of alternative possible worlds.

At this base level we seem to have the following claim: the only possibilities are possibilities of combination, and the only necessity is that just these are the possibilities. There are two kinds of combination here, corresponding to the forms of objects and of facts: there are the ways in which objects can be combined in facts; and it seems there should be the ways in which facts can be combined with each other–which are the same as the ways in which sentences (propositions) can be combined with each other (that is, truth-functionally).

These possibilities of combination intersect quite interestingly with familiar kinds of contingency and necessity. Every possible combination of objects which forms a *Sachverhalt* (an atomic fact, or state of affairs) is a possible fact; and every actual such combination is a contingent fact. Things work a little differently for combinations of facts: in fact, it looks as if the way they work has to be described at the level of sentences. The truth-tables determine that some truth-functional combinations of sentences will

represent possible facts–these are form the first of Adrian's original three categories–while others will be tautologies, and others again contradictions. These latter two, which form the second of Adrian's original three categories, represent no facts–there are no necessary facts, and no impossible facts–but have a modal status which clearly exploits broadly the same modality as that in virtue of which actually existing *Sachverhalten* (atomic facts, states of affairs) are contingent.

But then we can go one level up. The central thesis of the philosophy of representation of the *Tractatus* is that every picture–every representation–must have the same form as the reality it represents. This generates what we may call *representational modality*: because it is impossible for a representation to represent its own form, it is impossible for a representation to represent the *form* of any reality which it can represent. So in particular, it is impossible for us to describe or talk about combinatorial modality, since combinatorial modality is, precisely, form. This representational modality–the *impossibility* of representing form–seems to be different from combinatorial modality.

But the impossibility which arises from considering the consequences of accepting the disjunctivist view of the essence of sentences seems to be different again. The core claim of the philosophy of language of the *Tractatus* is that the form of sentences is the form of reality–the only reality which can be described. But the disjunctivist view of the essence of sentences seems to force us to think–or try to think–that there is a reality which does not have the form of sentences, and so a reality which, if the philosophy of language of the *Tractatus* is right, cannot be described. And this "cannot" seems to express an impossibility which is neither combinatorial modality nor representational modality.

There may be a concern that noticing these layers of modality is inconsistent with one of the famous and important claims of the *Tractatus*:

> There is only *logical* necessity. (6.37)

And to the extent that the position is made more complicated on the disjunctivist view, there might be thought to be reason to doubt that the disjunctivist view of the essence of sentences is true to the spirit of the *Tractatus*. I think neither of these points is quite right: I think it will become clear why in the section after next.

8.CLARITY

The larger aspect of the philosophy of the *Tractatus* which provides a reason to adopt the broad interpretation of the term "proposition" is the work's commitment to what we might call *clarity*. This commitment appears in the following remark:

> 3.33 In logical syntax the meaning of a sign ought never to play a role; it must admit of being established without mention being thereby made of the *meaning* of a sign; it ought to presuppose *only* the description of the expressions.

The same thinking seems to be present in this important claim:

> It is the characteristic mark of logical propositions that one can perceive in the symbol alone that they are true; and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic. (6.113)

And the point of this seems to be to deliver this result:

> 6.122 Whence it follows that we can get on without logical propositions, for we can recognize in an adequate notation the formal properties of the propositions by mere inspection.

This has extra significance in the light of the famous claim I mentioned at the end of the last section:

> There is only *logical* necessity. (6.37)

The big philosophical idea seems to be this. All formal properties, and hence all modality, can be made visible in the logical syntax of sentences, and so be recognizable by "mere inspection". This idea is what I mean by the *clarity* to which the *Tractatus* is committed.

The question is: what does the disjunctivist view do to this commitment to clarity? The first thing to note is that there is no incompatibility between the two. The issue turns on what is involved in "the description of the expressions", as 3.33 puts it. The disjunctivist view and its "highest-common-factor" alternative give different accounts of this. The highest-common-factor view thinks there is some way of describing the syntax of signs which does not in the end depend on the fact that sentences are things which have or seem to have truth-values. The disjunctivist view thinks there is no such truth-independent way of describing the syntax of signs. But something can be identified as belonging to the class of things which either have or seem to have truth-values independently of actually fixing, or even considering fixing the meanings (referents) of its constituent parts. Even on the disjunctivist view, form can be identified by "mere inspection".

But I think the disjunctivist view does make a difference to how the desire for clarity looks. Remember that the core of the disjunctivist view is this:

> (D) To *appear to be truth-valued* [in the way relevant to defining syntax] is just either (i) to be truth-valued, or (ii) to merely appear to be truth-valued.

Whereas the highest-common-factor alternative is this:

> (HCF) To *appear to be truth-valued* [in the way relevant to defining syntax] is to have some common essence *E* distinct from either (i) being truth-valued or (ii) merely appearing to be truth-valued.

These two approaches give a different sense of what is open to "mere inspection" in an adequate notation. On the highest-common-factor view, "mere inspection" reveals a genuine independent essence of sentences, syntax presenting itself as it is. On the

disjunctivist view, on the other hand, what "mere inspection" reveals is nothing but appearance–appearing to be truth-valued. And what is achieved by "mere inspection" seems to be indifferent between the two options–between the inspected item's actually being truth-valued, and its merely seeming to be truth-valued.

It seems extraordinary that Wittgenstein should care so little whether these sentences really have a truth-value or merely seem to. But I think it can be made sense of. It's worth looking again at this remark:

> 6.122 Whence it follows that we can get on without logical propositions, for we can recognize in an adequate notation the formal properties of the propositions by mere inspection.

So far we've been concerned with the second clause here, and have simply passed over the first. But the first now takes on a new significance, if the disjunctivist view is right: if we take it seriously, Wittgenstein was not interested in tautologies–his concern was to identify them in order to dismiss them and pay no more attention to them. And for that purpose, it really does not matter whether a given sentence is really a tautology, or merely something which would be a tautology if it had a truth-value at all. Whereas other people–Ramsey, for example (Ramsey 1931: 4-5) –thought Wittgenstein had provided a way of identifying tautologies which was useful for logic, and might support a positive philosophy, Wittgenstein's own concern seems to have been to be able to set them aside. It seems that for him insisting that the only necessity is logical necessity is a way of saying that no necessity (which can be articulated) is really interesting (philosophically, at least).

9. WHERE WE END UP

If we take the disjunctivist view to be true to the spirit of the *Tractatus*, I think we end up with our view of the work subtly transformed, although perhaps in a direction which some of us should anyway have anticipated. I offer here a synoptic and partial sketch of the way the work seems when viewed in this way.

The work's founding claim is, I think–at least for this partial sketch–the core idea of the picture theory: the idea that picture and pictured must share a common form–that is to say, that the ways in which the elements of the picture can be combined must be the same as the ways in which the elements of the pictured reality can be combined.

That founding claim has two sides to it. First, it involves a commitment to the view that the only modality which is officially acknowledged is what I've called combinatorial modality: the possibilities of combination of objects and facts (or names and sentences), and the necessity that these possibilities are possibilities. And secondly, because no picture can depict its own form, it ensures that those combinatorial possibilities, and that they are necessarily possibilities, cannot be depicted, because no picture can depict

its own form. So the founding decision opens up a certain space–the space in which possibilities of combination would be visible as such–only to simultaneously shut it off.

Because the ways in which sentences can be combined are all truth-functional, on the theory of the *Tractatus*, it is inevitably possible to produce sentences which have a distinctive modal status–they are necessary or impossible–while still having a truth-value. The modality of these sentences, the tautologies and contradictions, is a kind of precipitate of combinatorial modality, and since these sentences do indeed have truth-values, Wittgenstein can now claim that "the only necessity is *logical* necessity" (6.37).

If we suppose that the disjunctive view of sentences is true to the spirit of the *Tractatus*, two additional complications are added. First, we cannot think of the isolation of tautologies and contradictions as a contribution to any positive philosophy: they can only be identified in order to be set aside and forgotten. And secondly, we cannot adopt either a simple realist or a simple idealist view of the relation between the syntax of sentences and the ways in which objects in the world can be combined: rather, it seems, a world for sentences to describe must be constructed along with the creation of sentences–out of materials which do not themselves have the form of language. But of course, the same-form assumption which founds the picture theory immediately also prevents us from describing either these pre-linguistic materials or the construction from them of a world of language. Once again, we have the distinctive pattern of a space being opened up, only to be at the same time shut off.

If this is right, then the disjunctive view of sentences simply presses harder a characteristic move which is already to be found in the work–given the founding claim that the form of the world and the form of language must be the same.

It is possible also to understand all this as an argument–or at least a vindication–of the founding claim itself. Wittgenstein does offer an argument of sorts for that claim. The picture theory is first announced here:

> 4.01 The proposition is a picture of reality.
> The proposition is a model of the reality as we think it is.

And the remark which follows up on that is this one:

> 4.02 This we see from the fact that we understand the sense of the propositional sign, without having had it explained to us.

I take it that the idea is that the compositionality of meaning requires the picture theory: that is, it requires elements of reality to be associated with elements of sentences, with both elements having just the same possibilities of combining to form facts. I think this argument is quite plausible, if the choice is between the picture theory and some other view which holds that linguistic items are meaningful in virtue of being associated with parts of reality.

But I think the consequences of the founding claim of the theory which we have been looking at are at least part of the attraction of the theory for Wittgenstein.

It is hard to read the *Tractatus* without thinking that he is *pleased* to have reduced all acknowledgeable necessity to logical necessity, and then to have been able to push it to one side; and also *pleased* to have shut off all discussion of issues which involve a larger, philosophical modality. And yet I think it is also hard to read the work without feeling that a mystical view of life was attractive to him, and so as revealing its author as someone who does not regret the fact that the core claim of the picture theory seems immediately to open up for some kind of contemplation the very space which it shuts off from discussion. I think it only enhances this view of the *Tractatus* if we see the work as being guided by the disjunctivist view of sentencehood.

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