

## Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Topics and Questions

0 It may be most helpful to begin with a very brief exposition of some of the basic aspects of Wittgenstein's early **'logical' variant of 'transcendental idealism'** ( ? ). Since I am preparing this in some haste in the early morning of our last pre-strike class day, I will allow myself to omit the number-references to Wittgenstein's text. Since the work itself is short, I hope they will not be too hard for you to find, if you need them.

On the quasi-Kantian construal I outlined in class,  
Wittgenstein's **'world'** ( "Welt" )

$W = \langle W, R_1, \dots, R_n, \dots \rangle$

is a **'universal' structure**, which consists first

0.1 of an infinite class  $W$  ( the 'world's "Substanz" ) of atom-like **'things'** ( "Dinge", elements of  $W$  ).

This **'universal' class of 'things'**, is **organised**, by

0.2 infinitely many

**elementary relations properties and 'states of affairs'** ( "Sachverhalte" )

$R_1, \dots, R_n, \dots$

'Composing' assertions from these, in turn, with the aid of certain techniques of formal logic, we can generate

0.3 infinitely many

**logically more complex 'facts'** ( "Tatsachen" ) and **'situations'** ( "Sachlagen" ) ( for example: that  $R_1(a)$  and  $R_2(a,b)$  'are the case' in  $W$ , but not  $R_1(b)$  ).

Roughly, at least, the **'universal' structure  $W$**  may then be assimilated to a **'logical'** ( **"model-theoretic"**, in contemporary jargon ) **elaboration of**

0.4 **Kant's structure of 'transcendentally identified ( 'scientific' ) "Experience"**, which I called  **$E$**  in an earlier set of sheets on the **Prolegomena**.

To some extent, therefore,  **$W$**  might also be assimilated to ( or at least compared with ) ( **substantial aspects of** )

0.5 **Leibniz' 'world'** ( which he earnestly hoped god has chosen as the 'best' of possible 'worlds', god knoweth how );

and perhaps therefore with

0.6 **Spinoza's 'universal' structure of deus sive natura**.

I wrote **"substantial aspects of"** before 0.5 to note that **ethics** are explicitly **excluded** from Kant's  **$E$**  and Wittgenstein's  **$W$** . Leibniz, by contrast, left the merely-human aspects of his ethics ( though not, of course, god's divine 'choices' for us ) **'inside'** his world, and Spinoza asserted that his deterministic ethics must be immanent to the invariant structure of **deus sive natura**.

Despite Wittgenstein's early technical interests at the Technical University in Berlin and the University of Manchester, he was always deeply suspicious of science and **'scientism'**. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore that he effectively **subordinated** the **'scientific' aspects of Kant's  $E$**  to its ( alleged ) **"logical" structure** in his  **$W$** . It is **"logic"** and its ( allegedly ) **unique and determinate language** which Wittgenstein considers **"constitutive"** of  **$W$** , not **"science"**.

**"Logik"** and its **Sprache** at this stage consisted for Wittgenstein of **two different principal aspects of  $W$** ;

0.7 a newly-developed **formalism of propositional and quantificational logic** ( whose details we will not worry about ); and

0.8 the **relational structure of  $W$**  ( for example, whether a given relation  $R$  is a property of things, or a binary relation between things ).

Common to both these aspects is that they ( allegedly ) can only be **"shown"** ( **"gezeigt"** ). They cannot be **"expressed"**, or **"said"** ( **"ausgesprochen"**, oder **"gesagt"** ).

These meta-assertions, in turn, are interrelated in various ways with Wittgenstein's claims ( derived in part from study of the writings of Gottlob Frege ) about the **"sense"** ( **"Sinn"** ) and **"reference"** ( **"Bedeutung"**; your text, I believe, has **"meaning"** ) of **"sentences"** ( **"Sätze"**; your text has **"propositions"** ) in this allegedly unique and universal **"language"**.

The **"sense(s)"** of sentences roughly correlate with the ways in which they are

'built-up' out of ( finite parts of ) the universal language, and the ways in which they can be interpreted in other sentences in other parts of the language and in W ( cf. the brief discussion of "Bilder" or "pictures" below ).

The "reference", by contrast, is determined by direct correspondence with W. Such 'reference' correlates things in W with names ( for example ), and 'truth-value' with sentences.

Some assertion/sentences are "meaning-" or "sense-ful" ( "sinnvoll" ). Somewhat like Humean "matters of fact" and Kant's "synthetic judgments", they make contingent assertions about "facts" ( the "Tatsachen" above ) in W.

Others -- "tautologies", for example, like "p implies p"; and "contradictions" like "p and not-p" -- are "senseless". Whether they are irrefutable or incoherent, they tell us nothing informative about 'the world', namely W.

Still others -- conspicuously including most sentences uttered by academic and professional philosophers, among them the reluctant Wittgenstein -- are ( allegedly ) "nonsensical" ( "unsinnig" )

Closely related to these 'metatheoretic' notions and properties ( which require some hypothetical overview over W to formulate ) are certain 'object-theoretic' counterparts ( which have a "sense" within W ).

Most prominent of these semi-'internal' notions is that of the "picture" ( "Bild" ).

Roughly speaking, this notion itself 'represents' ( within W? ) any representation or encoding within W of one "fact" or "situation" in W ( which becomes a 'semantic' 'original', in this context ) by another ( which then assumes the syntactical role of its 'picture' ), in ways which respect certain acceptable ( but unspecified ) modes of 'encoding'- or 'correspondence'-within-W

Very roughly, but more or less accurately, we can then characterise "nonsense" or "Unsinn" ( "nonsensically"? ) as follows.

"Unsinn" is what arises when one tries to talk about 'global' or 'universal' aspects of 'the ( whole ) world' W, but makes use of representations, encodings and correspondences that only make sense ( have a Wittgensteinian "Sinn" ) within W.

As the heuristic analogies with Kant sketched above may suggest, this notion of "Unsinn" makes it almost inevitable that a great many things Wittgenstein himself considers very deep -- "too deep for words", as Tennyson put it -- are Wittgensteinian "nonsense".

These would include, for example, not only the 'self' ( cf. 5.6-5.641 ), but all of ethics ( cf. 6.421-6.423 ).

Against the background of this longish ( but abbreviated ) sketch of Wittgenstein's basic ideas, one can ask two slightly briefer questions ( or at least I will try to keep them briefer. Otherwise I won't finish ).

1 Another related motivation for Wittgenstein's reservations about "Unsinn" is the hovering problem of Russell's paradox, which I sketched in class.

Might one try to formulate cognate paradoxes, but in Wittgenstein's preferred 'tractarian' terminology?

What if one tries to consider, for example, 'the' ( ? ) Bild of all and only all Bilder that do not 'picture' themselves?

Does this lead to some sort of paradox? Or 'just' a 'prime Bild' ( "Urbild"? ), which must therefore 'picture' itself? Or perhaps a bit of both?

( Recall Descartes' attempts to derive a 'proof of the existence of god' from arguments about 'merely objective' vs. 'formal' reality )

2 One can interpret Wittgenstein's remarks in 6 about "Unsinn" and "das Mystische" ( "the mystical"; cf. 6.45 ) as assertions that Kantian "ideas of pure reason" are not just undecidable or underdetermined, but ineffable, literally ( ? ) un-sayable.

Correlatively, perhaps, a number of metalogical results strongly suggest

2.1 that certain 'global' notions for a given theory ( 'truth', for example, is one, and 'definability' is another ) are inexpressible in those theories; and

2.2 that the only way to have a theory-relative overview of such notions ( as it were ) is to 'define' them in more comprehensive 'metatheories', but then they no longer have the unicity Wittgenstein demands ( there will be many 'truths', and many 'definabilities' ).

from it might be -- an observation which several of you made very pointedly in your papers, and which Kant developed with considerable acuity in his comments about the "psychological idea" ( cf. 330 and 333-335 ).

Might Kant, in turn, have predictable but inherent problems of a similar sort, this time with his **allegedly well-defined structure(s)-of-experience E?**

Might such problems, further, be related in intrinsic ways to **another** problem for Kant's view ( also raised in class ) -- that there might be **many such 'structures' E of ( human ) 'experience' and 'cognition'?** And that these might vary both **'synchronically'** ( in a given generation, say ), and **'diachronically'** ( in shifting patterns that evolve with time )?

What could, in short, render **'a priori', 'necessary' or 'apodictically certain'** Kant's apparent conclusion ( assumption? ) that there **'must' be one uniquely "a priori", universally "necessary" and "apodictically certain" mode of ( human ) "cognition"?**

And why should **this** conclusion, for example, be any more plausible than **Descartes'** conclusion ( assumption? ) that the **"ego"** that emerges from his 'cogito'-argument **'must'** be more or less what he thinks it is, or have anything to do with what 'we' think 'we' are?

Or more plausible than **Hume's** apparent conclusion ( assumption? ) that there **'must'** exist a single uniform **"human nature"**, and that this uniformity justifies the "preestablished harmony" he claims for remarkably strong notions of **"Custom" and "Habit"** at first **Enquiry**, p.54?

Might Kant, in summary, have discovered an argument which **might well show that**

2.3 'internal' doubts about the 'existence' of some sort of cognitive structure(s) for our doubts would imply in some way that **some** such structures **do 'exist', but**

**might not show** what he **really** wants, that

2.4 the structure(s) of 2.3 are **intersubjectively valid, uniform, and definable**, in 'internally' determinate ways?

( Compare his careful attempts to align his metaphysics with the assumptions and conclusions of Newtonian science, and his claims of "completeness" for the "tables" of "judgments", "concepts of the understanding", and "principles of natural science" which appear at marginal 302-303 ).

3 At 328, Kant remarks that "

. . . das absolute Ganze aller Erfahrung ist aber selbst keine Erfahrung, dennoch ein notwendiges Problem für die Vernunft. . . .

. . . the absolute whole of all possible experience is itself not an experience", but a necessary problem for reason all the same. . . .

and adds that

. . . Vernunftbegriffe auf die **Vollständigkeit**, d. i., die kollektive Einheit der ganzen möglichen Erfahrung und dadurch über jede mögliche Erfahrung hinausgehen und transzendent werden.

". . . concepts of reason aim at **completeness**, that is, the collective unity of all possible experience, and thereby go beyond every given experience, and become transcendent".

( emphasis mine )

Kant mentions such **"completeness"** again at 331-332, where he argues that Die reine Vernunft. . . fordert nur Vollständigkeit des Verstandesgebrauchs im Zusammenhang der Erfahrung. Diese Vollständigkeit aber kann nur eine Vollständigkeit der Prinzipien. . . sein. Gleichwohl, um sich jene bestimmt vorzustellen, denkt sie sich solche als die Erkenntnis eines Objekts, dessen Erkenntnis in Ansehung jener Regeln

vollständig bestimmt ist, welches Objekt aber nur eine idee ist, um die Verstandeserkenntnis der Vollständigkeit, die jene Idee bezeichnet, so nahe wie möglich zu bringen. Pure reason. . . demands only completeness of the use of understanding in the context of experience. This completeness can only be. . . the completeness of principles. All the same, in order to conceive it distinctly, reason thinks to itself such [completeness] as the recognition of an object, whose recognition in consideration of those rules is completely determined, which object is, however, only an idea, [formed] in order to bring the conceptual recognition of completeness, which characterises that idea, as near as possible.

I have quoted these long passages in order to consider some fairly obvious parallels, and raise a few questions to which ( it seems to me ) they give rise.

- 3.1 **What is the relation**, first ( if it is well-defined ), **between**
- 3.1.1 the **"completeness"** Kant relegates to the level of unsecured and undecidable 'ideas of reason' in these passages, and
- 3.1.2 the **"completeness"** he associates with the **'apodictic certainty'** and **'synthetic apriority'** of the ( **essentially unique** ) structure E of the **phenomena**, ( introduced above in 2 )?

For example, when he talks about his unique ( a priori, apodictically necessary ) "constitutive" structures of Experience, he calls them **"durchgängig bestimmt"** ( "throughgoingly determined" ), and regards their "Vollständigkeit" as an **"unschätzbaren Vorteil"** ( "inestimable advantage" ).

- 3.2 What is the difference ( if any ) between the **"durchgängige Bestimmtheit"** of these, and the **"vollständige Bestimmtheit"** ( "complete determination" ) of the properties we merely **project** in 331-332 onto our "ideas of pure reason"?

3.3 Along similar lines: is the very notion of **"apriority"** itself perhaps **transcendent**? After all, its ( essentially ) defining property is that it is attached to what goes **"vor aller Erfahrung"** ( "before all experience" ). What are we to make of this, if 'the' ( ? ) notion of **"the whole"** of experience is itself ( as in 328 above ) a **transcendent idea of pure reason**?

3,4 Might Kant's whole **'transcendental'** project, in short -- to define what he calls in 350-365 ( cf. especially 361-362 ) a **"boundary-determination"** ( **"Grenzbestimmung"** ) for experience ( essentially by specifying, in some metatheory, the allegedly unque and determinate structure I called E above in 2 ) -- be itself an **illusory project of reason**, of the sort he himself discusses in 328 and 351, or at best a **regulative idea(1)** of the sort he briefly mentions in 350?

3.5 Might **'the'** boundary between **"concepts of the understanding"** and **"ideas of reason"** be itself a shifting ( underdetermined, non-apodictically certain, not necessarily a priori. . . ) **idea of pure reason**?

3.6 Is there ( in short ) an **inherent limit** to our ability to judge whether there is an **inherent limit** to our ability to judge?

( And if there were, how could **'we'** be able to **'judge'** **'where'** that **'limit'** to **'our'** ability to **'judge'** should **'be'**? )