

Chapter 2

THE FIRST STATION: LOGICO-LINGUISTIC (ANTI-)METAPHYSICS

It is queer that Busch's drawings can often be called 'metaphysical'. Is there such a thing as a metaphysical style of drawing then? (*Culture and Value* 75)

"The world is all that is the case." Thus begins the *Tractatus*, and thereby earns, legitimately enough, the label of being, or at the least beginning as, a work of metaphysics. Famously, that world of the *Tractatus* is made up of facts, of atomic facts, of states of affairs, and these, in turn, are constituted of objects.¹ The atomic facts are logically independent, meaning to say that "Any one [fact] can either be the case or not be the case, and everything else remain the same" (*TLP* 1.21). The objects which make up these atomic facts are otherwise independent, and, in fact, exhibit a bewildering set of relationships between them: "The thing is independent, in so far as it can occur in all *possible* circumstances, but this form of independence is a form of connexion with the atomic fact, a form of dependence" (*TLP* 2.0122). This is, or seems to be, a metaphysical description of the world, or reality. Indeed, it speaks of both – the world and reality – in explicit renderings which have rendered those two terms – "reality" and "world" – notorious objects of interpretation themselves. But before going into specific interpretative quandaries let us continue with the naïve standard story.

After describing the world (and reality), the *Tractatus* goes on to posit a thinking, speaking subject as picturing this world. First, "we make to ourselves pictures of facts" (*TLP* 2.1) and then "the thought is the significant proposition" (*TLP* 4). This two-step move to language – from the world to thought and from thought to language – is based on a detailed and well-analyzed mechanism of picturing; i.e., an intricate discussion of what it is

that makes a picture a picture *of* something. But the final result of such detail is a meaningful proposition, in language, reflecting a thought which reflects a fact which is in the world. We are, therefore, presented with a three-part relationship between world, thought and language which, based on the picturing relationship, provides an answer to the original, overall question which instigates the book, “What is the relationship between language and the world?”

Having given this answer, Wittgenstein does not shirk from the difficulties which ensue – in fact, he seems, in part, to welcome them. And he proceeds to elaborate, most strictly, on the logical properties of said world, thought, and language, that make the picturing relationship possible, nay necessary. This leads, beyond the description of the logical structure and form of facts and propositions, to the philosophy of such logic itself; i.e., to what (some would say, and we would concur) is the deepest deliberation of the century over the fundamental essence of logic itself – namely, no essence at all. “Our fundamental principle is that every question which can be decided at all by logic can be decided off-hand” (*TLP* 5.551). Which is not to say that one doesn’t have to pick up basic logical terminology – of variables, sentential operators, predicates, tautologies, truth tables, truth functions – in order to examine and pronounce on the logical structure of facts and propositions. In fact, it is precisely a strict and formal investigation that leads to the conclusion – concerning the logical form of propositions (and, indirectly, of facts) – that “the general form of truth-function is: $[p, \xi, N(\xi)]$. This is the general form of proposition” (*TLP* 6). And if this seem unnecessarily formalistic to the lay reader, let us recall that, besides being a *philosophical* tract, this is, in no uncertain terms, a *logical* one as well (as its title so explicitly manifests). That relationship between world, thought and language, which is a picturing relationship, can only be fully grasped if one understands the fit between world and language; and that fit is a logical fit. Only a logical treatise can do justice to its description and analysis.

Some famous – or notorious, it depends on one’s perspective – results emerge from this seemingly straightforward depiction of world and language, pictures and logic, which occupies the main part of the *Tractatus* (up to the first five-sixths). In no specific order let us formulate (some of) them. Most obvious, if language (and thought) picture the world (made up of facts) then language (and thought) cannot express anything “out of the world.” “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (*TLP* 5.6). In other words, much – or, as Wittgenstein would have it, very little – can be said about what cannot be said, about the limits of language (and thought, and world). Most things that philosophers have said “are not false, but nonsensical” (*TLP* 4.003).² Mathematics, on the other hand, “is a logical method” (*TLP* 6.2). Mechanics and physics, if well formulated (under constraints that

Wittgenstein spells out), are, for reason of being pictures of the world, linguistically legitimate fields of talk; ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics are not. And following immediately on the steps of illegitimate fields of talk are ephemeral musings on those subjects about which we cannot speak: the will, the meaning of life and death, the human soul, immortality. This is all mystical, “indeed the inexpressible” (*TLP* 6.522), and, while not being sayable, this can be shown, or, even more astoundingly, “this shows itself” (*TLP* 6.522). From which arises the very notorious distinction, in the *Tractatus*, between what can be said – which is meaningful – and what cannot be said but only shown – which is senseless, or nonsense, but not necessarily lacking significance.

Two far-reaching implications of both the straightforward presentation of world and language connected by pictures and logic, and the more elusive theses on the limits of world and language (and the outer-limits of ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics) find their way into the *Tractatus*, (and will figure largely in questions of its interpretations). First – the meta-philosophy of the *Tractatus*, that is to say, the status, legitimacy and possibility of doing philosophy, are all addressed in the book itself, and become Wittgenstein’s early credo, never to be forsaken in all of his ensuing work – that philosophy in the traditional sense of supplying truths about the world is not to be countenanced. Second – the status and legitimacy, indeed the possibility of the meaningfulness, of the *Tractatus* itself; about this Wittgenstein admonishes the reader in no uncertain terms: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless (nonsense), when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these proposition; then he sees the world rightly” (*TLP* 6.54). This double helix – a negatively sounding stance on (a certain kind of pervasive) philosophy and on the *Tractatus* – winds up to its final, notorious, devastating *crie de coeur*: “Wherof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (*TLP* 7).

The words above, our rendition of Wittgenstein’s words in the *Tractatus*, purport to be a neutral, that is to say a lacking-in-emphasis, unbiased “report” on the content of the book. Since these are the times of the interpretive turn we can be waylaid immediately by having to defend this report, as to its “correctness” but more so as to its pretensions – of being the basis upon which to lay our claims to a standardization of Wittgenstein interpretations. Rather than invest in this very theoretical issue – whether a story of interpretation is not, itself, vulnerable to interpretive criticism – let us simply, for the time being, presuppose that the report does indeed, as accurately and “objectively” as possible, present to the reader the framework and main points of Wittgenstein’s first book. Let us now move from report to interpretation.



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1326-3>

(Over)Interpreting Wittgenstein

Biletzki, A.

2003, X, 237 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1326-3