

# The Ghost of a Theory of Language in the *Tractatus*

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The *Tractatus* seems to promise a theory of language, which can clarify the relations between language and the world. At the same time, the terminology of the work remains indeterminate and as a result, the supposed theory, which constitutes part of the paradox of the work, does not allow any correlations between the elements of language and elements of the world. Therefore, it is not clear how language could have sense, something that a theory of language would explain us. However, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seems to be interested in something deeper than in simply formulating a theory.

*Keywords:* *Tractatus*, theory, analysis, object, form, mysticism

## Introduction

Following the remarks of the *Tractatus*, it is possible that we create a feeling that we have to think of a theory of language which is based on the idea of analysis which can lead us to the fundamental elements of language, namely, names, and by extension to the fundamental elements of the world, that is, objects. At the same time, one wonders whether Wittgenstein advances a theory in the *Tractatus* at all, given that this terminology is so opaque. While the whole architecture of Wittgenstein's terminology in the *Tractatus* is based on the notion of the "object", he does not clarify this term, leading one to wonder whether the position he advances is entirely unfalsifiable. In this article, I will claim that even if we isolate those remarks in the *Tractatus* which seem to compose a theory of language, we cannot assert that Wittgenstein actually formulates such a theory, i.e., the "picture theory of propositions", specifically because of the unclarity of his notion of the "object". For that reason, I contend that Wittgenstein's supposed theory of language actually constitutes a part of a larger paradox, which is itself meant to create a space for a special kind of mysticism.

## A Theory Has to Be Falsifiable

In the *Tractatus* (*TLP*)<sup>1</sup>, Wittgenstein examines the relationship between language and the world and formulates his so-called "picture theory of propositions". He mainly grounds this theory on the crucial idea that "[a] proposition [Satz] is a picture [Bild]<sup>2</sup> of reality" (*TLP* 4.01). This leads him to introduce the notion of "correspondence"; that is, the idea that for a proposition to be a picture of reality, the elements of that proposition must correspond to the elements of the picture of reality (or, the corresponding state of affairs (*TLP* 2.141; 4.0311;

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of quotations from the *Tractatus* used in this article are taken from Pears and McGuinness' translation which will be indicated as *TLP*. Quotations from Ogden's translation will be indicated as *TLP\**.

<sup>2</sup> The German term "Bild" is translated in English both by Ogden, and Pears and McGuinness as "picture". We can keep the term "picture" as a corresponding English term for the German "Bild" provided we acknowledge that the German term stands for both pictures and models.

4.023)). The idea of “correspondence” itself presupposes a theory, according to which there be a relationship at all between the elements of language (names) and the elements of the world (objects)<sup>3</sup>.

At this point, let us evoke the condition of falsifiability, such that to be legitimate, any theory, in the ordinary sense of the term, must make substantial commitments that can nevertheless be falsified. Popper expresses this idea as follows:

All the statements of empirical science (or all “meaningful” statements) must be capable of being finally decided, with respect to their truth *and* falsity; we shall say that they must be “*conclusively decidable*”. This means that their form must be such that *to verify them and to falsify them* must both be logically possible. (Popper, 2002, p. 17)

In other words, in order for a theory to be falsifiable, it must run the risk of being false, either through experience or through reason. This condition constitutes, or at least appears to constitute, a reasonable condition of any philosophical theory<sup>4</sup>. But, the *Tractatus* seems to promote a theory that is radically unfalsifiable, since it would be impossible for someone to find a counter example by which it could be false even in principle. This has to be explained.

### The Impossibility of Examples of Objects

According to the “picture theory of propositions”, an elementary proposition represents a state of affairs (*TLP* 4.031) if both share a common logical form (*TLP* 2.15; 2.151; 2.2). The notion “form” requires elements, or more specifically, invariable elements (*TLP* 2.023; 2.026; 2.027): the elements of an elementary proposition, i.e., names (*TLP* 4.22) and the elements of the corresponding state of affairs, i.e., objects (*TLP* 2.01). According to the *Tractatus*, elementary propositions require names and those names must correspond to objects (*TLP* 3.203; 3.22). But the unclarity of the notion “object” does not allow for any correlation between the elements of language and the elements of reality. Hence, it is not clear how there could be any sense to language, since according to the *Tractatus*, in order to know the sense of an elementary proposition, we must know the referential meaning of all of its names (*TLP* 4.026).

Among other things, a theory of language requires that the elements of language refer to things in such a way that those things necessarily constitute its logical syntax. The logical syntax is determined by the forms of symbols (*TLP* 3.33), which must correspond to things, or in the case of the *Tractatus*, objects. A language has to adopt a symbolism whose signs show the forms of symbols (*TLP* 3.326). This presupposes a sign system (*TLP* 3.23) with which we can create symbols. According to the *Tractatus*, it is impossible to refer to forms by using a sign system since the “sign” is arbitrary (*TLP* 3.322). Thus, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein does not provide any examples that would clarify the notion of the logical syntax of language, which is meant to be determined by the forms of symbols, since the forms of symbols correspond to unclarified things; that is, objects.

### The Unclarified Identity of Objects

Wittgenstein does not provide any examples of objects in the *Tractatus*, but only of some of their properties. He seems to leave us with merely a list of characteristics that some objects must fulfil. To name a few, he refers to

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<sup>3</sup> In the *Notebooks (NB)*, Wittgenstein appears to conceive of a theory of language (see *NB*, p. 17, 23.10.1914; p. 19, 27.10.1914; p. 55, 3.06.1915), while in his later work, in the *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* and in *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle (WVC)*, he abandons the idea of such a theory completely (see *PI* I: §109 and *WVC*, pp. 116-117).

<sup>4</sup> In this article, I avoid the discussion that for a theory to be legitimate, it needs another theory to verify it and so on, as I maintain that this would lead to an infinite regress.

the kinds of things which are simple (*TLP* 2.02), that compose the substance of the world (*TLP* 2.0201), that are in a sense colourless (*TLP* 2.0232), that are fixed (*TLP* 2.0271), that stand<sup>5</sup> for names, and which we cannot contend they either exist or do not exist, whatever those characteristics mean. Essentially, we only know some characteristics of an unknown thing. Hence, we are inclined to construct certain possible ways in which the *Tractatus* could be possible. But it seems to be the case that nothing could fulfil these requirements for objects. Nonetheless, the fact that the identity of objects remains unclarified does not mean that objects do not have an identity.

### The Impossibility of the Analysis of a Sentence

The unclarity of the notion “object” is inextricably related to the idea of analysis, which Wittgenstein also leaves unclarified. This is one of the reasons why the *Tractatus* does not give any examples of objects, since the logical analysis of the sentence has not yet been carried out. This means that the sentences of ordinary language are not fully analysed and thus that they are subject to further analysis. Clearly, the major difficulty is not only that something remains undetermined, but also that there is absolutely no way for it to even be elucidated in the first place. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein perceives the term “object” as functioning as a linguistic device which facilitates our capacity to speak about how names function. The notion “object” seems to be, rather, a pseudo-concept which functions as the correlate of a name, i.e., a concept of the form. In particular, he states:

Thus the variable name “x” is the proper sign for the pseudo-concept *object*.

Wherever the word “object” (“thing”, etc.) is correctly used, it is expressed in conceptual notation by a variable name.

For example, in the sentence, “There are 2 objects which ...”, it is expressed by “ $(\exists x, y) \dots$ ”

Wherever it is used in a different way, that is as a proper concept-word, nonsensical pseudo-propositions are the result.  
(*TLP* 4.1272)

Thus, we can neither have an apriori nor an aposteriori analysis. Whatever would constitute an aposteriori analysis would be the result of an investigation<sup>6</sup>. Such an investigation is impossible, which would allow us to analyse an ordinary sentence and to reach an elementary proposition, knowing thus its constituents which would refer to things of the world. Since we cannot postulate an elementary proposition, it is impossible to know the corresponding state of affairs that it would represent. We could refer to an elementary proposition if its elements were determinate. Since objects are not clarified, it is impossible for them to correspond in any way with the ultimate constituents of language. That is why the relation between language and the world cannot be elucidated through specific examples. We cannot identify any form prior to an analysis<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, there is no case in which we can identify something with a tractarian object without making a statement about its form. Therefore, if we cannot make falsifiable statements about the forms of objects, then we cannot identify them. Thus, we have a solid reason to claim that it is, strictly speaking, impossible to provide any examples of objects. While analysis is impossible, Wittgenstein holds that: “The meanings of primitive signs can be explained by means of

<sup>5</sup> When Wittgenstein refers to tractarian objects, he uses the German term “bestehen” (*TLP* 2.0121) and not the German term “existieren”. Although both of these terms are usually translated as “exist”, the term “bestehen”, among others, states a relation of connection and it is in this way that we should perceive it in the *Tractatus*.

<sup>6</sup> Later, in his article “Some Remarks on Logical Form” (*RLF*), Wittgenstein, contends: “[w]e can only arrive at a correct analysis by, what might be called, the logical investigation of the phenomena themselves, i.e. in a certain sense *a posteriori*, and not by conjecturing about *a priori* possibilities” (*RLF*, p. 32).

<sup>7</sup> Later, Wittgenstein acknowledges that it was a mistake to believe that we can reach atomic sentences through logical analysis (*PG*, pp. 210-211).

elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known” (*TLP* 3.263).

At this point, “elucidations” appear to be propositions, such that their being understood facilitates the possibility of determining the identity of names (a name is a primitive sign (*TLP* 3.26)) and objects<sup>8</sup>. The plausible question that arises here is as follows: How can the meanings of the primitive signs be explained through elucidations, since elucidations contain primitive signs? In his effort to transcend this difficulty, Wittgenstein maintains that the meanings of signs in elucidations must already be known. Here, we have to accept that this position does not allow us to understand the functions of language, since the *Tractatus* does not account for a kind of proposition-elucidation which can be understood.

Beyond the fact that we cannot know the form of an elementary proposition, either apriori or a posteriori, we can neither know the general form of propositions which would show us the possible combinations of names, nor the possible combinations of a given elementary proposition with other elementary propositions. Thus, we cannot know the possible combinations of objects or the possible combinations of a given state of affairs with other states of affairs. In order to reach the general form of propositions, we need examples of elementary propositions which would thereby require examples of the names of objects. Hence, without having the general form of propositions, we cannot designate the frame of possibility, something which a theory of language would require. Indeed, before we examine the “picture theory of propositions” in the context of the paradox, we have to accept that the fact that we cannot assess the “picture theory of propositions” on an empirical level constitutes a difficulty which we will have to either also accept as a constituent part of a theory or that we will have to use as the base of an apriori rejection of it.

### **The *Tractatus* Cannot Be Falsifiable**

Since any assertion about the form of the object is impossible, it is also impossible for the “picture theory of propositions” to present a false description of form. Since a theoretical description is impossible, a falsifiable description of the form of an object is also impossible. As a result, a falsifiable statement about which of the objects can be combined is also impossible. By focusing on the supposed theory, it is impossible to postulate an idea that will describe how things cannot be. The *Tractatus* is written in such a way that it does not allow us to make a mistake. Essentially, it is impossible for necessarily false statements to exist, or for something that has meaning while being necessarily false to exist.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein makes certain assertions which could be taken to constitute particular assertions of a broader theory. Taken together, however, they do not in any way lead to a theory, given that what they formulate together cannot be falsified. If it is not possible to say what objects are<sup>9</sup>, then we cannot know their corresponding-relevant names. Thus, the supposed names can only refer to objects arbitrarily, and this reference is devoid of any meaning. According to the *Tractatus* “[i]n order to know<sup>10</sup> an object, I must know not its external but all its internal qualities” (*TLP*\* 2.01231). But, in no case are we allowed to know the internal qualities of an object. In examining the *Tractatus*, one might get the sense of the illusion of a theory, perceiving

<sup>8</sup> Behind this idea there is Augustine’s theory, which Wittgenstein mentions in the *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* I: §1).

<sup>9</sup> In 1949, Norman Malcolm asked Wittgenstein if, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, he had thought of an example of an object and Wittgenstein said to him that as a logician, it was not his business to answer this question (Malcolm, 2001, p. 70).

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein explained to Ogden (in *Letters to C. K. Ogden* (*LO*)) that he prefers the verb “know” (“kennen”) which expresses a kind of limited knowledge (I know it without necessarily knowing anything about it) rather than the verb “I am acquainted with” which expresses a kind of a broader knowledge (*LO*, p. 59).

ordinary words as names in the tractarian sense<sup>11</sup>. Subsequently, it is possible to realize that ordinary words are not names; therefore, the notion “name” remains unclarified. This may lead us to think in greater depth about the relation between language and the world.

### Beyond the Ghost of a Theory

Beyond the fact that the *Tractatus* cannot be falsifiable, it seems that Wittgenstein does not intend for his work to be understood<sup>12</sup> (which a theory would require), but for something else. On a first level, I claim that the *Tractatus* was deliberately written in such a way that it simply cannot be understood. This claim is supported by the paradox which makes up the final remarks of the work. Specifically, if we take the *Tractatus* to be true, then we have to accept that it is nonsense, as the book claims itself to be (*TLP* 6.53; 6.54). On the other hand, if we perceive the *Tractatus* to be nonsense, again, as the book claims itself to be, then it cannot be true because nonsense cannot make any meaningful claims (*TLP* 6.54). Nonsense cannot meaningfully speak either about nonsense or about sense. Hence, the *Tractatus* can neither be true nor nonsense. Therefore, the idea that the *Tractatus* expounds any theory of language collapses.

On a second level, I maintain that the tractarian paradox opens up a space for a special type of mysticism. Taking into consideration that the *Tractatus* draws our attention to what language “shows”, Wittgenstein seems to believe that there is something in the *Tractatus* to see but that it is not a theory of language. In particular, he states:

Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it—or at least similar thoughts.—So it is not a textbook.—Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it. (*TLP* Preface, p. 3)

Perhaps, he is encouraging the reader to follow his same steps or, put otherwise, to climb the same or, at least, a similar ladder as the one he did (*TLP* 6.54). In this way, we arrive at a special kind of understanding of the book. The book, as Wittgenstein himself claims, is not a textbook. Thus, it is not a book that has been written to reveal any philosophical conclusions. The *Tractatus* postulates assertions that could constitute parts of a theory, but these assertions taken together do not constitute a theory. Nevertheless, this affords the reader with the opportunity to think<sup>13</sup> of the difficulties that may result from attempting to formulate a theory of language; difficulties which Wittgenstein seems to have encountered while writing his book. This seems to lead him to focus his interest in a special way on the “correct method in philosophy” (*TLP* 6.53) and not on writing a philosophical theory of language (*TLP* 4.112)<sup>14</sup>.

As Wittgenstein states in the *Tractatus*, philosophy attempts to say that which cannot be said (*TLP* 6.5; 6.53). Accepting this limitation appears to lead Wittgenstein to encourage a special kind of silence—a state of mysticism which cannot be sententially represented (*TLP* 6.522) and which has to do with the possibilities of

<sup>11</sup> Additional evidence which supports the idea of an illusory theory can be found in Wittgenstein’s remark about the method we should have to follow in the case that we wished to know whether a picture is true or false (*TLP* 2.223). It is about a theoretical process since it is impossible to determine what objects are. Hence, something like that would have sense only in the case where we could complete an analysis, something that is impossible to do.

<sup>12</sup> In one of his letters to Ogden, on the 5th May 1922, before the *Tractatus* was printed, Wittgenstein writes: “Rather than print the *Ergänzungen* [additions] to make the book fatter leave a dozen white sheets for the reader to swear into<0> when he has purchased the book and can<n>’t understand it” (*LO*, p. 46).

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein’s tendency to expect his reader to think on his own can also be in his later work, namely, in the Preface of the *Philosophical Investigations* where he says: “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own” (*PI* Preface).

<sup>14</sup> Later, he refers to the impossibility of any kind of theory and encourages the description of things without explaining them (*PI* I: §109), since it seems that he strongly upholds the incompleteness of logical analysis, which he develops in the *Tractatus*.

things. Russell, in one of his letters to Ottoline Morrell in 1919, writes: “I had felt in his book [*Tractatus*] a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, he seriously contemplates becoming a monk” (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 82).

Mysticism does not entail saying anything to support what it supports. According to the *Tractatus*, the mystic focuses on the fact that there is a world and not on how the world is—how things are in the world (*TLP* 6.44). The mystic in the *Tractatus* is that which is shown by form, which constitutes the possibility of combination without determining something specific—without a combination being determined by a judgement. Ostensibly, Wittgenstein perceives thought to be something which restricts, while perceiving mysticism as something that goes beyond thought, thereby leading to the supposition that to see the world aright means transcending sense. According to Wittgenstein, the reader is in a position to see the world aright only when he discards the ladder he has climbed, and only if he transcends the remarks of the work (*TLP* 6.54) which he should previously perceive as nonsense. Parts of this nonsense are also the remarks which compose the supposed theory postulated in the work. Therefore, the reader needs nonsense—the supposed theory—in order to transcend it, overcoming in this way the limits of philosophy and creating a mystical feeling about the world.

### Concluding Remarks

I have established that the theory which Wittgenstein supposedly postulates in the *Tractatus* cannot be subjected to falsification, because what it proposes is necessarily true. The indeterminacy of the notion “object” does not allow for any correlations between the elements of language and the elements of the world, in any possible world. Consequently, it is not at all clear how language could be possessed of sense. Although the theory in the *Tractatus* does not admit of possible falsification, this does not mean that the supposed theory stops functioning, even if it gives to rise to certain difficulties. The supposed theory constitutes part of the whole paradox which creates the presuppositions for a special kind of feeling—a mystical feeling—without judgments, which encourages a greater consciousness of language and of the world.

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