

‘The general propositional form is a variable’ (*Tractatus* 4.53)

PETER M. SULLIVAN

Wittgenstein presents in the *Tractatus* a variable purporting to capture the general form of proposition. One understanding of what Wittgenstein is doing there, an understanding in line with the ‘new’ reading of his work championed by Diamond, Conant and others, sees it as a deflationary or even an implosive move – a move by which a concept sometimes put by philosophers to distinctively metaphysical use is replaced, in a perspicuous notation, by an innocent device of generalization, thereby dispersing the clouds of philosophy that formerly surrounded the concept. By asking how Wittgenstein supposed his variable to work, and what work he imagined it was fit for, the paper questions the adequacy of that understanding.

1. Context

My topic is Wittgenstein’s treatment of the general form of proposition in his *Tractatus*. Any rounded account of that would, though, be too big a task for a short paper, and I’m approaching it here from just one angle. Looked at from this angle it presents itself as an obstacle to an interpretative approach to the *Tractatus* which originates in the work of Cora Diamond, and is currently the most influential in the field. So before I begin on the topic proper I should briefly set the context by describing this ‘new’ approach, and how it is supposed to differ from the ‘traditional’ interpretation against which it defines itself. (It does not matter here whether this ‘traditional’ interpretation is one that real people have endorsed or whether it is simply an artefact designed to serve as a foil for the ‘new’ approach.)

According to a ‘traditional’ interpretation, then, the *Tractatus* is supposed to have advanced a view of the essence of thought or language, and of the reality it describes, which precludes its own expression. To take an easy and familiar instance, the *Tractatus* holds that ‘there is only *logical* necessity’ (TLP 6.37) – that apart from narrowly logical tautologies the only intelligible claims are contingent. But *that* there is only logical necessity isn’t something that just happens to be so, and nor is it a tautology. So, if those two are the only kinds of intelligible claims there are, there is no intelligible claim to the effect *that* they are. Now, when that same issue cropped up again as an objection to 1930’s positivism, it was reasonably enough taken to be a *reductio* of the position. But on the ‘traditional’ interpretation the *Tractatus* is supposed to have found a way to treat the *modus tollens* there is in any *reductio* as a *modus ponens*: one somehow appreciates that there is only logical necessity, and that *therefore* one cannot express that there is; one is *shown* that it is so, and accepts the consequence that one cannot *say* what one is shown. Generalizing from the instance, the logical conception that the book instils is supposed to be one that an understanding reader will appreciate cannot be meaningfully conveyed: he will eventually recognize that the philosophical propositions that have instilled this conception are largely nonsensical, and so understand why he ought not to add to such nonsense; he’ll no longer even try to say what he has been shown, but will maintain a contemplative silence – or maybe he’ll go off to torment children in a primary school.

According to the ‘new’ interpretation, a ‘traditional’ reading has completely missed the point of the book. As far as it goes, a ‘traditional’ reading can be near enough right. But the final aim of the book is achieved only when one recognizes that a ‘traditional’ reading’s last move is vulnerable to just the same complaint as the ones that precede it. The idea that one must silently appreciate that there is only logical necessity, without attempting to say it, undermines itself just as immediately as does any statement to that effect. Wittgenstein’s aim was not to press the philosophical impulse into exile, but to bring it to an end. That will be achieved only if we finally accept that, at least as the ‘traditional’ reading tried to understand the saying–showing contrast, there is simply *nothing* we are shown but cannot say.

A central plank in the ‘new’ interpretation’s argument for this conclusion is the idea Wittgenstein later expressed by saying, ‘When a sentence is called senseless, it is not ... its sense that is senseless’ (1953, Sect. 500). The ‘new’ interpretation stresses that Wittgenstein already had that idea in the *Tractatus* (TLP 5.473 ff.). It concludes that when one eventually recognizes the sentences of the book to be nonsense, as Wittgenstein says one must, one cannot be recognizing them to convey a kind of sense that defies expression; it must instead be a matter of recognizing that they convey nothing at all.

Evidently, that leaves the ‘new’ interpretation with the job of explaining what kind of work those sentences *can* do, or what Wittgenstein imagined himself to be doing in setting them down. The questions I will be raising here focus on what I believe to be the most promising proposal the ‘new’ interpretation has so far made to meet that commitment.

2. The ‘replacement strategy’ described, and a question posed regarding it

The proposal is made in a passage in Cora Diamond’s essay, ‘Throwing away the ladder’, one of the core texts of the ‘new’ interpretation. It is a passage that represents Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* as following through thoroughly and knowingly with an idea about the status and role of distinctively philosophical concepts implicit in Frege, if perhaps never completely acknowledged by him. Diamond says:

We can then look at some of Frege’s logical work as providing replacements for certain parts of the philosophical vocabulary, in particular predicates like ‘function’, ‘concept’, ‘relation’. These are replaced by features of a notation designed to make logical similarities and differences clear. For Wittgenstein the provision of replacements for terms in the philosophical vocabulary is not an incidental achievement but a principal aim, and, more importantly, it is the *whole* philosophical vocabulary which is to be replaced, including that of the *Tractatus* itself. (1988, p. 183)

The principal example of this kind of replacement in the *Tractatus* is the replacement of formal concept words by variables. Wittgenstein says:

Formal concepts cannot ... be presented by a function [i.e. a propositional function or predicate] ...
The expression of the formal concept is ... a propositional variable ...

Every variable is the sign of a formal concept.

So the variable name 'x' is the proper sign of the pseudo-concept *object*. (TLP 4.126–4.1272)

A simple example of the strategy of replacement occurs when the work of a non-philosophical use of the term 'concept', as in 'There is a concept under which Aristotle and Boethius both fall', is taken over in a logical notation by a variable with a distinctive pattern of logico-syntactic behaviour, ' $\exists F(Fa \wedge Fb)$ ', a pattern we make philosophical use of the term 'concept' in trying to describe. The philosophical point of the strategy of replacement is well described in another passage from Diamond's essay, where she uses the term 'object' instead of 'concept' as her illustration:

'A is an object' is no more than an innocently meaningless sentence like 'Socrates is frabble'; it *merely* contains a word to which, in its use as predicate noun, no meaning has been given. But we inflate it, ... we think of ourselves as meaning by it something which lies beyond what Wittgenstein allows to be sayable. We think it has to be rejected by him because of that. We think of there being a content for it which, according to his doctrines, no sentence can have. But this conception of what we cannot say is an illusion created by our taking the word 'object', which works in meaningful English sentences essentially as a variable, and putting it into other sentences where it has a wholly different grammatical function. (1988, p. 197)

The point of the strategy of replacement is to expose that illusion as an illusion, and so eventually to free us from the idea that there is anything that cannot be said.

Now at some broad level of generality it seems to me impossible not to agree with the drift of these passages from Diamond. At that broad level one might say that it was Wittgenstein's intention to expose as completely empty the use of language to get outside language so as to describe, explain or justify its internal structure; also, that one central way he aimed to display this emptiness was by pointing to the very different grammatical ways in which formal concept-words occur in meaningful ordinary statements and in the philosophical remarks that aim to describe or explain them, at the same time reminding us that the mere fact that the same words occur in both ordinary and philosophical statements is no guarantee that the meaning they bear in the first of these roles can be carried over to provide a meaning for them in the other. At a still more hand-waving level one might even say that this replacement strategy is part of Wittgenstein's effort to show us how to be internal realists, where internal realism is what empirical realism becomes when both transcendental realism and idealism are shown equally to be, not merely untenable, but completely, and simply, nonsense. So while I might have, and indeed do have, some reservations about some of what Diamond and Conant and others have tried to make of the line of thought expressed in these passages, my stance here is of someone broadly sympathetic to it.

My question, given that broadly sympathetic stance, is how far the line of thought can be carried. More particularly: How far can we see Wittgenstein's treatment of the central and most difficult of his formal concepts, the general concept of a proposition, as exemplifying the replacement strategy?

Superficially the prospects are good.

The general propositional form is a variable. (TLP 4.53)

This comes immediately after Wittgenstein's first formulation of the general form of proposition by the pro-propositional, 'Such and such is the case' (TLP 4.5), a formulation seemingly deliberately designed to disappoint the philosophical expectations that earlier parts of the same paragraph have so effectively conjured up. A reading in accordance with the replacement strategy offers to make sense of the dramatic shape of this paragraph. Its drift would be that all this lofty, external, seemingly-philosophical talk about 'the essence of proposition', 'the essence of all description', and thereby 'the essence of the world' (TLP 5.4711) is to dissolve, to leave no more substantial residue than the intra-systematic character of a device of generalization, a variable.

But it seems to me that there are special problems with this kind of idea in this central case: that's to say, even if this general style of interpretation were to succeed fully in giving us a persuasive and philosophically satisfying account of Wittgenstein's treatments of the other formal concepts – 'function', 'concept', 'object', and so on – there are special problems with the idea that the formal concept-word 'proposition' is to be replaced by a variable suited for intra-systematic use. Not the least of these problems is that the variable Wittgenstein offers for this role seems simply not to have any intra-systematic or, as I'll say, any 'object-language' use. Perhaps a lesser problem, but one whose textual grounding is less a matter of inference and to that extent more certain, is that Wittgenstein made no effort at all to indicate how that variable might have any important object-language use: he just doesn't seem to be bothered with that. I'll explain shortly how these problems arise and why I think they might be important. But before that I should explain why I've been talking of the case of the formal concept *proposition* as the central case. What's central about it?

3. Three reasons for the centrality of the question

(i) In the first place, it is central in providing an obvious difficulty for the whole line of thought that surrounds the replacement strategy. A nice illustration of this occurs in a recent and, I think, so-far unpublished paper by Tom Ricketts, which pursues the strategy in the context that Diamond identified as its source, that of Frege's remarks about the distinction of object and concept. In that paper Ricketts poses very sharply the problem that the replacement strategy aims to avoid. If those remarks of Frege's about the contrasting and complementary natures of concepts and objects had for him any kind of standing significance, if they had any more than a transitory or elucidatory role in inducting someone into the ways of his Begriffsschrift notation, there would, Ricketts says, be a threat

of incoherence at the core of Frege's philosophy of logic. Frege's universalist conception of logic commits him to the expressibility of every truth within the framework of Begriffsschrift.

There is, however, no expression in Begriffsschrift for those thoughts Frege aims at in sentences like [‘No concept is an object’], that use ‘object’ and ‘concept’ as contrasting predicates. There are then truths, truths Frege points towards in his elucidation of the concept-object distinction, that are not expressible in Begriffsschrift, contrary to his core commitment. (unpublished, pp. 35–6)

Ricketts thus sets out to diffuse the threat posed by these remarks about concepts and objects, in what seems to me one of the most persuasive and articulate attempts to pursue the replacement strategy. He concludes the relevant part of his discussion as follows:

The master of the Begriffsschrift [i.e. someone on whom Frege’s remarks have had their intended elucidatory effect] is free to discard the contrasting use in Frege’s elucidations of the predicates ‘object’ and ‘concept’, of ‘saturated’ and ‘unsaturated’, as so much hand-waving. There is no residue that goes unexpressed in Begriffsschrift. (unpublished, p. 43)

And so, Ricketts presumably intends us to conclude, Frege’s fundamental commitment to the universality of the Begriffsschrift is rescued from incoherence.

There is, though, a big frog at the bottom of this glass, to which Ricketts does not draw our attention. Any reason there was for supposing Frege’s ‘universalist commitment’ to be threatened by his remarks about concepts and objects was already a reason for supposing that commitment to be threatened by itself: that every truth is expressible in the Begriffsschrift is not itself expressible in the Begriffsschrift.¹ One just doesn’t need any other seemingly significant, external philosophical remark to generate a collision with this commitment, since it is in collision with itself: the problem is that it must be, but cannot be, one of those truths of which it speaks.

The relevance of the point is this. Even if Ricketts’s Fregean aims can allow him to neglect this frog, Wittgenstein, whose philosophical work grew out of attempts to understand precisely the kind of paradox-threatening vicious circle that this universalist commitment involves, certainly could not have done. Wittgenstein could certainly not have pursued the replacement strategy, as Ricketts would have us do, without recognizing that the notion of *every truth*, or *every proposition*, is the severest obstacle it faces.

¹ If this point were presented simply as a criticism of Ricketts, it would be enough to present it as a consequence of the conceptual austerity of the Begriffsschrift: Frege’s language includes no way of referring to its own formulae, nor any semantical vocabulary; and according to Ricketts this austerity is essential to it. To give the point wider application, though, we should imagine those limitations to lapse, so that we have in the language a formula (U) reading ‘For any proposition p there is a formula F such that F means that p ’. The argument for the point would then run as follows: *if* the language to which U belongs is universal, U will state that fact; but if it is not, that will not obstruct the assertibility of U; something that remains assertible even if not A cannot express the commitment that A ; so U does not express the commitment that the language to which it belongs is universal. As Charles Travis reminded me, there are arguments resembling this one that it would be wrong to accept. One runs: that ‘rabbit’ means rabbit is something our language does not enable us to express, since “‘rabbit’ means rabbit’ would be assertible in our language whether or not ‘rabbit’ meant rabbit. How is one to distinguish sound arguments of this rough pattern from dubious ones? The difference lies, I think, not in the arguments themselves, but in their dialectical contexts. That ‘rabbit’ means rabbit is a truism, hence a truth, hence a truth our language allows us to express. “‘Rabbit’ means rabbit’ will, however, be ineffective if more than a truism is required. That will be so if the dialectical context opens up a contestable issue for whose resolution any such ‘commitment’ as Ricketts ascribes to Frege is called for.

(ii) To put the second point impressionistically, the formal concept *proposition* is central for Wittgenstein. That there *must be* a general form of proposition is, as it were, the *a priori* demand that drives his philosophical researches from the beginning; it was, for instance, because the picture theory seemed to satisfy this demand that Wittgenstein so eagerly embraced it. The demand functions in Wittgenstein much in the way the demand for unity of consciousness functions in Kant's Transcendental Deduction. In both cases, the fundamental premise is not so much that there *is* this thing, but that there *has to be*, and the whole argument is driven by the need to show how there *can* be. To characterize the general form of proposition becomes, in the *Tractatus*, the single focus of philosophical ambition. Much more should be said about how and why it does so, but I'll not try to do that here. I can afford in this context just to make the point without development or defence, since it ought to be common ground between any 'traditionalists', who suppose that Wittgenstein himself shared those ambitions, and those who suppose his intention was to dispel them.

(iii) Thirdly, and I'm afraid self-indulgently, the case is the central one for me, because it points to an inadequacy in an earlier paper of mine on the issue (Sullivan 2000). In that paper I suggested that we should view some of the distinctive features of the *Tractatus*'s philosophy of logic as serving to protect the coherence of there being a single general form of proposition from the threat posed to it by Russell's type-theory. Explaining very quickly how that paper left an unresolved difficulty will lead me back to the problems for the replacement strategy that I mentioned above.

The ramified type-theory that Russell adopted in the face of the paradoxes rules out there being a general form of proposition. The totality of all propositions is, paradigmatically, an illegitimate totality according to that theory, since any statement about all propositions would, viciously, have to be a member of the totality of which it spoke, and so presuppose itself. In the earlier paper I suggested that Wittgenstein aimed to avoid this consequence by dividing between the paradoxes that Russell's theory resolves. The division is just the one we find in Russell's *Principles*, where he first expounded his paradox. There Russell presents the paradox as coming in three versions: the famous Class version; a lesser known Property version; and a third Proposition version, often neglected in recent discussions, and built around the notion of a class assertion, a proposition that asserts the truth of every member of a class of propositions meeting some specified condition or sharing some property.²

² The propositional version of the paradox was sketched and left unresolved by Russell in the final section of the *Principles* (1903, Sect. 500). It is less familiar and needs some preliminary setting up; and although it does not depend on the notion of a class, it is convenient to use that notion in a preliminary explanation. Thus, for any class of propositions m there is, or seems to be, a proposition $\wedge m =_{\text{def}} \forall p(p \in m \rightarrow p)$. (For instance, if b includes every proposition asserted by policeman B , then $\wedge b$ amounts to 'Everything policeman B said is true'.) It is, or appears to be, an intelligible question whether $\wedge m \in m$. (For instance, if policeman B says 'Everything policeman B says is true', then $\wedge b \in b$; otherwise not.) Call any proposition $\wedge m$ a class-assertion. If $\wedge m \in m$, then $\wedge m$ is a self-class-assertion (SCA). If $\wedge m \notin m$, then $\wedge m$ is a non-self-class-assertion (NSCA). Now, let $r = \{\wedge m: \wedge m \notin m\}$, i.e. the class of NSCA's. Then,

Wittgenstein's way with the Class version is just Russell's: he counts class talk as no more than a way of talking, so reduces it to the following Property version. That version of the paradox is blocked by the simple type-structure already endorsed by Frege and taken over by Wittgenstein, which stratifies propositional functions while leaving propositions all of a single type. But it is the third, Propositional version that forced Russell, after 1906, to adopt the ramified structure. So, if Wittgenstein had an alternative way of dealing with the Propositional version of the paradox, he could stop short of that move, and so retain a single general form of proposition. I claimed that Wittgenstein did indeed have an alternative. His conception of a proposition as a fact rules out there being properties of propositions, propositional functions which take propositions as their arguments,³ and then the idea central to the Proposition version of the paradox, that of a class assertion, doesn't even get off the ground.

That earlier paper didn't, though, pay enough attention to a very real oddity in Wittgenstein's position, one that is highlighted by his claim:

The generality symbol occurs as an argument. (TLP 5.523)

What that claim means is that one appreciates the range of a generalization in understanding how a symbol for one of its instances would figure in a propositional context as argument to the propositional function quantified. But the way Wittgenstein avoids the Propositional paradox is through the claim that a proposition *never* 'occurs as an argument'. It follows that a variable ranging over propositions never 'occurs as argument'. And from that it seems to follow that the very way in which Wittgenstein protected the general form of proposition, and ensured that propositions constitute a legitimate totality over which a variable may range, rules out there being, in the object-language itself, any such variable.

It is this conclusion that seems to pose a problem for the replacement strategy. If there is no object-language variable expressive of the general concept of a proposition, that very strongly suggests that Wittgenstein's concern to protect the conception of *all propositions* is in the service of an *intrinsically* 'meta-linguistic', or external philosophical project.

$\hat{r} \in r$ iff $\hat{r} \in \{\hat{m}: \hat{m} \notin m\}$ iff $\hat{r} \notin r$,
that is,

\hat{r} is a SCA iff \hat{r} is an \hat{m} such that $\hat{m} \notin m$ iff \hat{r} is a NSCA.
Doing without inessential mention of classes now: for any property of propositions M we have, or seem to have, a proposition $\hat{M} \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \forall p(M(p) \rightarrow p)$. Define a property of propositions R such that $R(\hat{M})$ iff $\neg M(\hat{M})$. Then, in particular, $R(\hat{R})$ iff $\neg R(\hat{R})$.

³ An easier but less illuminating route to the same conclusion would cite the following: 'propositions occur in a proposition only as bases of the truth-operations' (TLP 5.54); and 'Truth-functions are not material functions' (TLP 5.44).

4. The argument

In fact, though, the argument just given for that conclusion is much too quick. It considers only one possible style for a variable ranging over propositions, when the *Tractatus* recognizes three.

What values the propositional variable can assume is determined.
The determination of the values *is* the variable. (TLP 3.316)

The values of the variable must be determined.
The determination is the description of the propositions which the variable stands for.
How the description of the [values] takes place is inessential.
We may distinguish three kinds of description: 1. Direct enumeration ... 2. Giving a function fx , whose values for all values of x are the propositions to be described. 3. Giving a formal law, according to which those propositions are constructed. In this case the [values] are all the terms of a formal series. (TLP 5.501)

The argument above shows that a variable ranging over all propositions cannot take the second form. But what of the other two?

Because direct enumeration would be impossible unless there were only finitely many propositions, something Wittgenstein avoids committing himself to, only the third method, which gives the values of a variable as the terms of a formal series, is feasible. And of course this is exactly what Wittgenstein offers:

The general form of truth function is: $[p, \xi, N(\xi)]$.
This is the general form of proposition. (TLP 6)

This specifies the totality of propositions inductively: it says that propositions are all those generated by truth-operations from the elementary propositions. The specification will therefore be determinate if the basis of the induction is determinate. And that is to say that we can understand how we have in $'[p, \xi, N(\xi)]'$ a variable ranging over all propositions precisely if we can understand how its initial contained variable, ' p ', functions as a variable ranging over all elementary propositions. So how is that contained variable to achieve its effect?

Method 1, enumeration, is ruled out for the same reason as before: there is to be no commitment to finiteness. Method 2 likewise: a proposition, we saw, never 'occurs as argument'; *a fortiori*, neither does an elementary proposition. Method 3 is impossible: a formal series is generated by an operation which gives expression to a structural relation between its basis and result (TLP 5.22); lacking such inter-relations, elementary propositions do not constitute a formal series.

Perhaps, though, one might think that there is another way:

If we change a constituent part of a proposition into a variable, there is a class of propositions which are all the values of the resulting variable proposition ... if we change all those signs, whose meaning was arbitrarily determined, into variables, there always remains such a class.

[A variable determining a class of propositions in this way] corresponds to a logical form, to a logical prototype. (TLP 3.315)

A ‘prototype’ formed in this way from an elementary proposition will be a variable ranging over all elementary propositions of the same form as it. Out of such material we could construct a variable ranging over *every* elementary proposition if the forms of elementary propositions could be enumerated or specified by some series. But Wittgenstein turns his face against any such possibility:

The enumeration of any special forms would be entirely arbitrary. (TLP 5.554)

There cannot be a hierarchy of the forms of the elementary propositions. Only that which we ourselves construct can we foresee. (TLP 5.556)

The *application* of logic decides what elementary propositions there are. What lies in its application, logic cannot anticipate. (TLP 5.557)

If I cannot give elementary propositions *a priori* then it must lead to obvious nonsense to try to give them. (TLP 5.5571)

Yet that, it seems, is precisely what the contained initial variable in ‘ $[p, \xi, N(\xi)]$ ’ tries to do. The containing variable then has no place in significant language. Again, it seems to follow that the significance it had for Wittgenstein is not that of an internal, object-language replacement for the philosophical concept of the general propositional form.

Suppose, though, that this argument can be resisted. Suppose, that is, that I’ve overlooked some account of how the values of this variable are to be determined that would give it a place in the object language. There would still remain the problem of explaining what intrasystematic work one is supposed to do with the variable *if* it can be formed.

There is in the *Tractatus* only one developed example of how a variable of this inductive kind is to be put to work.

If we want to express in logical symbolism the general proposition ‘*b* is a successor of *a*’ we need for this an expression for the general term of the formal series: $aRb, \exists x: aRx.xRb, \exists x,y: aRx.xRy.yRb, \dots$. The general term of a formal series can only be expressed by a variable, for the concept ‘term of this formal series’ is a *formal* concept. (This Frege and Russell overlooked; the way in which they express general propositions like the above is, therefore, false; it contains a vicious circle.)

We can determine the general term of the formal series by giving its first term and the general form of the operation, which generates the following term out of the preceding proposition. (TLP 4.1273)

Thus, if Ω is specified as an operation taking us from one term of this series to the next, then that *a* stands in the ancestral of *R* to *b* is expressed: $NN [aRb, \xi, \Omega(\xi)]$.⁴ No obvious use for a

⁴ Here ‘N’ is Wittgenstein’s joint negation operator, which denies each value of the propositional variable that follows it. Doubled-up its effect is that of (a finite or infinite) disjunction.

variable ranging over *all* propositions, $[p, \xi, N(\xi)]$, can be envisaged on this model, since any genuinely useful generalization would have to include some restriction on its range, and as we have seen the variable cannot ‘occur as argument’ to any function that would effect the restriction. Applying truth-operations to the unrestricted variable, as in ‘ $N[p, \xi, N(\xi)]$ ’ and ‘ $NN[p, \xi, N(\xi)]$ ’, merely gives us pointlessly elaborate formulations of contradiction and tautology respectively (‘Nothing is the case’ and ‘Something is the case’). What else might one do with it?

5. Conclusion

What should one conclude? To begin with, I should concede that neither of the arguments given in the previous section is apodictic. They are arguments by exhaustion – arguments of the ‘*What else?*’ variety – to the effect that there is no way of constructing a variable ranging over all propositions, and no way of putting it to worthwhile use even if one could. In both cases it would be foolhardy to claim that there couldn’t be a way I’ve overlooked. That is why in section 2 I left myself a fall-back position: *if* there’s a way of doing either of these things, it is at least plain that Wittgenstein took no trouble to indicate what it might be. For general interpretative morals that fall-back conclusion is virtually as good as the stronger one.

I’ve already twice suggested that the conclusion tells against the replacement strategy, and because of that it might be welcomed by ‘traditionalists’. That Wittgenstein was so concerned to secure the status of this variable, yet so unconcerned to secure any object-language place for it, or any object-language work for it to do, might encourage us to think in terms of a division between what holds *within* the scheme of the *Tractatus* and what makes Wittgenstein accept that scheme, or between what is expressible *within* the language described in the *Tractatus* and the philosophical thinking informing that description. There *has to be* a general form of proposition, though it doesn’t much matter that no generalization within the language exploits it. It *has to be possible* for a language to represent the facts in such a way that what *would be said* by utterly general principles of logic goes without saying. From thoughts like those it’s only a short step to say that what Wittgenstein was concerned to defend was a kind of intelligible form which, though it isn’t described by any significant proposition, is *manifest in every proposition*.

But whatever there might be to say in general for such a ‘traditional’ reading of the *Tractatus*, it seems to me that this issue shouldn’t encourage it. What Wittgenstein is most concerned to secure, in insisting that there be a general form of proposition, is the *unity* of language, the possibility of integrating in thought whatever can be thought. To secure the unity of language is to secure the unity of the subject whose language it is, and the unity of the world it represents.⁵ Rush Rhees struggled to explain this in some posthumously edited notes (1998, Ch. 3). The generality of logic, he said, is for Wittgenstein principally a matter

⁵ For an exposition that emphasizes the centrality of this theme, see Potter (2000, Ch. 6); also Sullivan (2002, Sect. 3).

of there being *a single* question, what it is to say anything, or what it is to make sense. That this *is* a single question consists centrally in the fact that the question confronts the very perspective from which one says things and makes sense. It is therefore of the essence of the question that it would be evaded by any response that required a shift from inside the language to an eternal view of it. As Rhees brilliantly, if a bit portentously, expressed this: ‘*Abbilden ist kein metalogischer Begriff*’ – Representation is not a meta-logical concept (1998, p. 59).⁶ I don’t know how to make tractable all that that remark involves. But two implications seem relatively clear. First, that the ‘traditional’ story, on which the nature of representation is apparent only to some (voiceless) meta-perspective, simply abandons any attempt to capture what it involves. But secondly, that the ‘new’ interpretation’s rejection of such a perspective can be at most a preliminary to any serious effort to do so.⁷

Department of Philosophy
University of Stirling
Stirling FK9 4LA
Scotland
p.m.sullivan@stir.ac.uk

PETER M. SULLIVAN

References

- Diamond, Cora 1988: ‘Throwing away the ladder: how to read the *Tractatus*’, in her *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge Ma.: M.I.T. Press 1991, pp. 179–204. Originally published in *Philosophy*, 53.
- Potter, Michael 2000: *Reason’s Nearest Kin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rhees, Rush 1998: *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, ed. D. Z. Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricketts, Tom, unpublished: ‘Concepts, objects and the context principle’.
- Russell, Bertrand 1903: *The Principles of Mathematics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sullivan, Peter M. 2000: ‘The totality of facts’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 100, pp. 175–92.

⁶ Part of what makes for the brilliance of this, and justifies the seeming portentousness of resorting to German, is that in that language representation – *abbilden* – precisely *is* a meta-logical concept. *Abbilden* is what one does (e.g.) in constructing a model of arithmetic in set-theory: the von Neumann ‘numbers’ (e.g.) are a *Bild* (model) of the numbers. In saying that, though, one is doing neither arithmetic nor set-theory. To think of picturing, and of language’s relation to the world, as consisting in something reportable from, or wordlessly apparent to, a perspective that stands to language and reality as that remark stands to set-theory and arithmetic would therefore be to evade the question, how *my* language represents.

⁷ Thanks to Michael Potter and Ian Proops for discussion of the central argument of this paper; also to James Conant and Charles Travis for their responses to a talk based on it at a symposium in Paris in 2002.

- 2002: 'On trying to be resolute: a response to Kremer on the *Tractatus*'. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 10, pp. 43–78.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. C. K. Ogden. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.