

# WHAT IS THE *TRACTATUS* ABOUT?

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## I

The *Tractatus* is in many ways a perplexing and obscure book. But it presents a philosophical system of the world, and thought about the world, that is disturbingly simple. In barest outline the system is this.<sup>1</sup>

The world, as that to which thought answers, and that whose layout settles whether one thinks truly or falsely, whatever one thinks, comprises everything that is so.

Among things that are so, some are simple, in the sense that for them to be so is just that: their being so is not a matter of further, more basic or more immediately comprehensible things being so, and thus no illuminating elucidation is possible of what it is for them to be so or of how it is that they are so. That something like this is so is an *elementary* fact.

For anything else that is so, an elucidation is available: what it is for such a thing to be so is a matter of certain more basic things' being so; how it is that they are in fact so is that some specific selection of more basic things are so; and if these things in turn are only *more* basic, the same will apply again. Thus it holds of anything at all that is so that its being so consists, finally, in the obtaining of certain elementary facts.

Amongst facts, elementary facts are simple. But for any fact to obtain is for things to be a certain way, and in that sense any fact is complex. Supposing it to be an elementary fact that Stirling is north of Edinburgh, one cannot in any illuminating way spell out what it is for that to be so. But one can, as I just did and will again, spell it out: for that to be so is for Stirling to be north of Edinburgh. What one mentions in spelling that out are the things that must be a certain way for this fact to obtain. They are *objects*.

For this reason objects – those things whose being a certain way constitutes the fact – might be termed the constituents of elementary facts. But this would be altogether different from the sense in which – as one might also say – elementary facts are the constituents of whatever else is so. What that means, recall, is

that any such thing's being so consists in certain elementary facts' being so. But there is nothing, except itself, in whose being so an elementary fact consists. So to talk of the constituents of an elementary fact cannot be to allude to anything's being so. It is inviting, then, to say that an object is not anything that is *so*, or *is the case*; it just *is*. But even to say *that it is* would seemingly be to say that something is so, and thus the invitation is best declined.

To think is to think that something is so; it may be – nothing essential yet turns on whether it is – to say, or to write, that it is so. To think that something is so when it is so is to think truly. Whether one thinks truly or not, of course, one still thinks. But again, if one does think truly, then what one thinks to be so is precisely what is so. Thus a thought needs at once to be independent of, and to be internally related to, the fact that obtains if it is true. Both needs are met, in part, by the objects: even if one thinks things to be a way they are not, it is still *these* things one thinks to be that way. For the rest those needs are met by the notion of the *form* of thought: the *way* these things are thought to be, *the way one thinks them*, is a way those things could be, and will be if one thinks truly. Thus to think that anything is so is to prefigure, in one's thinking, its being so: it is to *picture* it. Objects and form are both involved in this, but not independently. To prefigure in one's thinking a possibility for these things is, tautologously, to prefigure what is a possibility for them. The internal connection between one's thinking and how one thinks things to be – between the picture and what it pictures – is the possibility that things are as they are thought to be; the independence of one's thinking from how things are lies in this connection's requiring no more than that possibility.

For things to be as they are, then – for them to be as they might truly be thought or said to be – is for them to be in one of the ways they could have been. For an elementary fact, this is, simply and uniquely, for them to be so rather than, as was also possible for them, not so. For anything else that is so – for anything whose being so consists, as things are, in the obtaining of certain elementary facts – is for some such selection of elementary facts to obtain as might constitute its being so. It may be that for a certain non-elementary fact only one selection of elementary facts could do that, but this is not in general the case. In general, that is, the selection of elementary facts which, as things are, constitutes the obtaining of a non-elementary fact is just one of those which might have done so. Thus to think that a certain non-elementary fact obtains is to think that things are in one of those various ways and not in any of the other ways they might have been.

The ways things might have been constitute, in the extended mathematical sense, a space: all ways in which objects might have been combined with one another constitute a totality of elementary states of affairs; all ways of dividing this totality into those that obtain and those that do not constitute the totality of possible worlds; and all ways of dividing that totality into those which accord with one's thinking and those which do not constitute the totality of thoughts. One might use the terminology of *logical space* to speak, in different connections, of any of these totalities.

What holds of thinking in general holds in particular of thought that is overtly conducted in speech or writing. A proposition is a thought. A proposition to the effect that something is basically or elementarily so is an elementary proposition. It consists of names, whose immediate combination in the proposition itself prefigures, and in that way contains the possibility of, the named objects' being so combined; the proposition is true if those objects are so combined, and otherwise false. A non-elementary proposition is true if certain selections of elementary propositions are true; otherwise it is false. It is, in the now-standard terminology, a *truth-function* of elementary propositions.

As thoughts, propositions display the same duality of independence from, and internal connection with, the reality they describe. Their independence, metaphorically, is a freedom to determine at will the logical space which surrounds the facts; the connection, as before, is already contained in this: the space thus freely determined surrounds the facts. However, because overt thinking issues in something readily grasped – an utterance or inscription – but which, considered just as such, lacks this duality, it provides a standing temptation to neglect or to distort the duality. The notion of entailment or inference will do to provide an example of this.

Co-ordinate with the internal relations between propositions and what they represent are internal relations amongst propositions. Suppose  $P$  is true if any one of such-and-such selections  $\{P\}$  of elementary propositions are true, and correspondingly for  $Q$  and  $\{Q\}$ ; and suppose  $\{P\}$  is included in  $\{Q\}$ . Then  $P$  entails  $Q$ . Now, that  $P$  entails  $Q$  is not anything that is so, in the way we first thought of this. It is not the obtaining of some elementary fact, nor yet something whose truth consists, as things are, in the obtaining of a certain selection of elementary facts. To think or say that anything is so, as we have so far understood this, is to exploit the space of possibilities surrounding the facts to represent that space as determined, or occupied, in such-and-such a way. But that  $P$  entails  $Q$  is not a matter of logical space's being filled out in this way or that. It has to do with, if anything, the geometry of the space – that is, with the totality of ways in which it might be filled out. Even so, this seems to be something worth reporting, and so something we can report. Yet to imagine that we can report this in the way we have so far understood reporting – as a matter of saying that, of the ways things could be, they are *this* way – would be to imagine that what we just called the geometry of logical space is also a matter of the way some space is filled out; that is, it would be to imagine that the geometry of logical space is just one of those it might have had; or, again equivalently, it would be to imagine a broader space of merely-possible-possibilities of which what is actually possible is just one determination. That  $P$  and  $Q$  can be apprehended merely as signs helps to sustain these imaginings; since, so conceived, any relation between the two is merely external, and might indeed have been otherwise. But this will not of course serve to make such imagining coherent, since equally, so conceived,  $P$  and  $Q$  lack that internal relation to reality which is co-ordinate with the one's entailing the other.

What we have just seen in connection with entailment is a single and simple illustration of a kind of phenomenon which the *Tractatus* holds to be characteristic of philosophical discourse. It might be termed a characteristically philosophical kind of ‘double-think’. We can approach the kind by successively more general descriptions of the instance. First, and most specifically, the double-think consists in a double-take on propositions: we regard them as mere signs to get the freedom to report on a relation between them as something that is just so; but we must also regard them as intrinsically meaningful symbols for the relation we report to be entailment. Second, and less specifically, this instance involves a double-take on possibilities and facts: for  $P$  to entail  $Q$  is for a transition from  $P$  to  $Q$  to be truth-preserving in *all* the possibilities; to present it as a fact that  $P$  entails  $Q$  is to present those possibilities as *just some* of the ways things could have been. Third, and most generally, the double-think concerns one’s own perspective as reporter. Logical space is a framework for description that provides at once for thought’s connection with and independence from reality. It constitutes, Wittgenstein says, one’s standpoint on reality. What the double-think amounts to in these terms is the idea of a standpoint on that standpoint, which on the one hand makes itself independent of the first, but on the other retains the first’s connection with the facts; otherwise put, it is the idea of an external perspective on thought whose object is, nonetheless, the perspective of all thought.

In other instances the specific descriptions would have to be different, of course, but the most general description would still apply. What is most characteristic of philosophy is to lapse through such double-thinking into nonsense. What makes such nonsense characteristically philosophical is not the kind of nonsense it is – nonsense is just nonsense – but the kind of ambition that leads someone to engage in it, and the kind of way someone engaging in it hides it from himself that that is what he is doing; the ambition is to achieve a standpoint *on* thought to complement, or in a certain sense to complete, the standpoint *of* thought; the covering illusion is that when one attempts to drag one’s words to a new location and a new application, one’s words will in turn drag their meanings with them. The proper, critical task of philosophy is, generally, to dispel that illusion; specifically, to expose as such the various pieces of nonsense that have sheltered under it; and finally, to still the ambition that leads to the production of such nonsense.

## II

That outline, as I remarked, is very simple. The first, by no means negligible but still tractable aspect of the difficulty Wittgenstein’s book presents is to fill in the outline, locating and interrelating the book’s various detailed discussions. But in calling the outline ‘disturbingly’ simple I had in mind a subsequent and less tractable difficulty. Suppose the hard work done, the system filled out, every detail located. Now what is one to do with it?

Here is one line of response. The system begins with an account of what kind of facts there are, or of what it is for anything to be so. From this there immediately follows an account of what kind of reports there are, of what it is to say that anything is so. From this it follows in turn that some of the things we are moved to advance – such as, for instance, that one proposition entails another – are not genuinely reports: because of what it is for anything to be so, and hence of what it is to say or think that anything is so, there is no fact on whose obtaining such a seeming-claim could report; in view of what kinds of fact there are, there is no such fact; because of what a report essentially is, there is no such report. But now at this point we first encounter the question: what of the premises of these inferences? About the seeming-claim that  $P$  entails  $Q$  we remarked that it does not present logical space as filled out this way rather than that, but concerns itself with the geometry of the space. Just the same must hold of the premises from which we reached that conclusion. That anything that is so consists finally in the obtaining of a certain selection of elementary facts is not something which consists finally in the obtaining of a certain selection of elementary facts. In seemingly-reporting that any report will present one of various selections of elementary facts, rather than any other, as obtaining we are not issuing such a report. Thus, in view of what a report is, there is no such report. And because of what kinds of facts there are, there is no such fact as there being just these kinds of facts.

From this realization the response we have been considering splits into two.

- 1 The subsequent development of the first branch is brief and apparently straightforward. It argues as follows. Since the system itself implies that, in advancing it, one does not say what is so, no one advancing the system could say what is so. Presuming that the point of any system is to say what is so, this first development concludes that the system must be rejected.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 Developments of the second branch are both more complex and more various, but they have in common the aim of distinguishing between the roles of the statements that constitute the system and those on which it comments. The questions which then immediately arise are where, and how, this dividing line is to be drawn. It is enough at this stage to limit our attention to two extremes among the possible answers to these questions.
  - 2a One answer, so one development of this second branch, employs a notion of *factual* discourse. It holds (i) that the thoughts and statements the system concerns are those belonging to factual discourse; (ii) that the system itself is not advanced as a contribution to such discourse; (iii) that what it is for a thought or statement to be ‘factual’ is defined by the system. It thus provides an intelligible account of the significance of the system, but one which disables its critical thrust. All that remains of that, on this account, is that there is no factual description or explanation of the nature, structure, conditions or purposes of factual discourse. But that, if it is not objectionable, is empty. It would be

objectionable if it ruled out substantive empirical investigation – by the human sciences hard and soft – of the character and conditions of actual thought. If it does not rule that out, the critical claim reduces to the tautology that no description or explanation of factual discourse can be both necessary and contingent. The upshot of this first answer, then, is to preserve the system at the cost of its interest.<sup>3</sup>

- 2b The answer at the opposite extreme aims to reverse this, sacrificing the system while retaining its interest. It countenances no division *within* discourse, so its separation of the system from what it concerns is inevitably a denial that the system amounts to a form of discourse in any sense. Even so, the presentation of the system has a point. We grasp that point just in recognizing that the system – and any system like this one except perhaps that its indulgence of the ambition to describe or explain the essence of thought is less self-conscious and less knowing – cannot amount to a form of discourse, and so cannot itself be thought.<sup>4</sup>

If we are to be faithful to Wittgenstein's own concluding description of how his book can be helpful, then we will have to find a way of accepting something from this last account. But it seems plain that, coming where it does, it comes too late. That is to say that from the point of divergence noted above, the first, uncompromising rejection of the system is more honest. How the last account fails to be completely honest becomes obvious – if it is not already so – when we ask what could be meant there by describing Wittgenstein's presentation of his system as 'knowing', or how the point we grasp from its presentation extends to 'any system like' his. Knowing *what?* Alike in what respect? Evidently, the answer in each case is to be drawn from the system itself, or from what was presented as the system up to the point of realization that the system condemns itself. The subsequent denial that the system amounts to a form of discourse is in that way shown still to rely on the system's own account of what discourse is. That is again a kind of double-think.<sup>5</sup>

There are labels in Wittgenstein – the labels 'say' and 'show' – that might be (and have been) drawn over *this* instance of double-thinking to give it a superficial respectability. The system (the newly so-dressed story would run) does not and cannot *say* that by reason of which it can say nothing. Rather, the remarks that constitute the system impotently gesture towards what is *shown* – shown, in the first instance, by ordinary thoughts and sayings which lack any higher pretensions, and shown again by the inevitable shortfalls of remarks which attempt to describe what the first achieve.<sup>6</sup> But the cover these labels provide here is transparently thin. Showing, as it figures in this story, is patently a matter of showing *that something is so*. So long as that is the case, 'show' will serve only as an alternative to 'say' when, without it, we would openly and obviously contradict ourselves. Aside from that in itself ineffective change of word, we are still maintaining something of the general pattern: because of what it is for anything

to be so, there is no such fact as that ...; because of what it is to say anything, there is no such statement as the statement that ... But nothing of that shape can be maintained.

This suggests an important corollary regarding the notion of nonsense, and hence for the idea that it is characteristic of philosophy to lapse into nonsense. Taken straight, as it were, nonsense is simply, and open-endedly, a failure to make sense. When, however, there is in play some specialized or theoretically developed conception of what it is to make sense, it is natural to parse ‘nonsense’ as *non-sense*, and so to mean (or to seek to mean) by it, determinately, a failure to achieve whatever on that specialized conception counts as making sense. It is essential to what I called a fully honest acceptance that the system itself is nonsense that, in this acceptance, ‘nonsense’ must be taken straight, and cannot be understood in the second of these ways: it cannot be understood to acknowledge that the system fails to meet specific standards of meaningfulness laid down by the system itself. That, again, would be double-think. And of course the same must hold, though less convolutedly, of any other-directed accusation of nonsense that encounter with the system leads one to issue. If it is to be fully honest, such an accusation of nonsense cannot mean anything of the kind: failure to meet such-and-such specific standard for meaningfulness. This is not to deny that we may be led by the system rightly to issue such an accusation. There are various intelligible models for this. For instance, a piece of nonsense appropriately displayed may well serve us an object of comparison, and lead us to recognize as similarly nonsensical something we previously thought we understood. But what does have to be given up is the notion that accusations of this kind are theoretically informed and unified.<sup>7</sup>

We have been considering difficulties that face variants of the second general way of moving past the realization that the system fails by its own lights to state what is the case, namely by dividing in some way between what the system conveys and what it systematizes. Those difficulties might lead us to reconsider the first broad alternative, taking that realization to amount to the crucial step in a kind of *reductio*.<sup>8</sup> Despite its apparent simplicity, there are again different ways of filling out this idea.

A genuine argument by *reductio* establishes a positive result. For instance, a renowned Pythagorean argument, by deriving a contradiction from the hypothesis that there is some rational number which when multiplied by itself yields 2, establishes the clear and significant result that there is no rational square-root of 2. The line of thought we are now considering, though reasonably called a kind of *reductio*, is not exactly of that kind. It does not purport to show that some hypothesis implies its own falsehood, and thereby to establish the negation of that hypothesis. Instead, the core of the argument is that Wittgenstein’s system, adopted as hypothesis, implies its own meaninglessness. To show this is not to establish the negation of the hypothesis, or the falsehood of the system, since something meaningless has no significant negation, and can no more be false than true. Instead, what the argument shows is that the hypothesized system fails

to be true. But what kind of result is that?

The question again points to a tempting kind of double-think. It is tempting to hold, that is, that it is what the system *says* that is meaningless; or else, that it is what the system *would* say, if it said anything, that is meaningless. The second of these is only less obviously incoherent than the first. If the system is meaningless there is nothing that it says; and if there were something it would say, then *that* could not be meaningless. What makes this particular bit of double-thinking tempting despite the obviousness of these points is that without it our effort in exploring the system brings too slight a reward: without it, that is, all we seem entitled to conclude is that a certain series of words fails to be true.<sup>9</sup> Whilst that may be a clear result, it is clearly not much of a result. Perhaps this result would be made to seem less meagre if it could be shown that there was something special about that particular series of words. More specifically, suppose we could establish the following: that if there is a successful theory of such-and-such a kind, then that theory will take the form ... (where the dots are to be filled by a specification of that series of words). In that case our result would become the more significant one, that there is no successful theory of that kind. This points to an abstract possibility, but it is hardly promising. It is far from obvious, for instance, how in any interesting case the various parts of an argument like this could be cotenable: how the theory's claim to be the best of its kind could fail to be undermined by its necessarily failing to be true.

### III

We have found no way of proceeding beyond what I called the point of realization (the self-application of the system's strictures) that holds out any real prospect of our being able to make something of the book – or at any rate, of our being able to do so without lapsing into just the kind of double-thinking that the book seems keen to expose. This strongly suggests that something went wrong at an earlier stage. But what? All that occurred to that point, or rather all that we imagined occurring, was the careful and detailed setting out of the system and the acknowledgement of its immediate consequences. If there was any mistake in that, it is hard to see what else it could have been apart from our treating what Wittgenstein offers us *as* a philosophical system. But now is there any other option? Here it is useful to quote a passage I have already mentioned.

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has climbed through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

(*TLP* 6.54)

Two aspects of what Wittgenstein says here are immediately relevant to our puzzle. First, Wittgenstein speaks of a reader who has been helped by the book

in the way he intends as one who understands *him*, not one who understands his propositions.<sup>10</sup> In this way he carefully avoids offering any ground for an accusation of double-think. It is perfectly intelligible that the utterance of nonsense may serve in some context to convey a point which the utterance itself does not express, and in such a case to appreciate that point will be to understand the utterer, though not his utterance. Second, Wittgenstein describes here the way an understanding reader will be helped, not by his *system*, but by his *propositions* – plural. This suggests that the difficulties we have found in providing room for the intellectual efficacy of the book might be evaded by a shift of perspective towards a more piecemeal approach.<sup>11</sup> So far we have imagined that as readers and interpreters we must first get hold of the whole system, with all its parts in rational interconnection, and only then raise questions about its purpose and status. The problems we have encountered in answering those questions are a direct consequence of this approach, which concedes too much to our initial understanding of the system for us later to repudiate that understanding with full honesty. If what we are finally to recognize is correct – if Wittgenstein’s propositions are really nonsensical – then it cannot be required that we should, en route to that recognition, understand them. What we should rather expect is that, at various points as we work through the book, and in various ways, the seeming-claims that seemingly-constitute the ‘system’ will frustrate our every effort to find in them a stable sense consistent with their apparent intent: they will, as Goldfarb expresses it, ‘fall apart’ in our hands as we try to work with them (1997: 66 and 71). They will be nonsense, not because of what they say, *a fortiori* not because of what they claim sense to be, but just because we cannot work with them in the way we imagined.

To adopt this more piecemeal approach is not to treat each piece of nonsense in isolation; nor is it to abandon the responsibility to develop the interconnections Wittgenstein indicates between his remarks and to supply the argument which he omits. To avoid double-thinking we must insist that a verdict of nonsense can only be an acknowledgement of one’s failure to interpret certain words, and not a comment on the interpretation reached. But this verdict – that the words mean *nothing* – is no more available at the beginning of the interpretive effort than any other. One interprets a meaningful remark in part by fixing its inferential relations, as well as other less readily systematized connections, with other remarks: what it follows from and what follows from it; which options it closes down and which it leaves open; how it works in context to resolve a possible ambiguity elsewhere in a train of thought; and so on indefinitely. This same process must be gone through, and the same kinds of connections traced, in the case of remarks that eventually defeat interpretation. This would not be feasible if those remarks were such as to strike us as mere gibberish, or were, like the rustlings of leaves or the remnants of chewing gum scattered across a London pavement, configurations without even the physiognomy of meaning. So it is not at all incidental that we are presented with words, that these words occur in the pattern of sentences, and that those patterns license certain transforma-

tions but not others. Making those transformations and interweaving those patterns might be described as pursuing a line of thought which, because of where it leads (or because it leads nowhere), will then be judged not to have been a line of thought at all. But despite the suggestion of that slanted description, the pursuit described is not engaged in the kind of double-thinking we have been concerned to avoid. It is no more than an acknowledgement that what we have before us is, after all, a text.

Once that is granted it will be apparent that only pedantry would be served by constantly marking one's distance from, or lack of commitment to, the line of putative or quasi-thought being pursued. One *could* say: if '...' is the expression of a thought, then we should expect '—' also to be one; or, Wittgenstein writes '\*\*\*'. But there is no serious reason to prefer such coy formulations to their less cluttered equivalents: if ... then —; or, Wittgenstein holds that \*\*\*. Operating in the material mode will of course imply that, when the remarks explored lack significance, so will some of those by which they are explored. So what? We follow Berkeley tracing the lines of thought running through Locke's remarks on substance; following Berkeley doing this involves constantly assessing whether Berkeley makes the best sense that is to be made of Locke's words; only if we agree that he has done so will we countenance Berkeley's conclusion, that Locke's words are 'without a meaning in 'em'. This is so much a part of the common experience of philosophy that to find an impassable paradox in it would be worse than absurd. Do we imagine ourselves purer than the Bishop? (Wittgenstein perhaps did; but then it was in his nature to distort integrity into a vice.)

#### IV

The double-thinking approach – which pretended to concede the meaninglessness of Wittgenstein's words while grasping what they 'show' to be the case – did at least promise to find a point for all this nonsense. The piecemeal alternative just sketched can avoid what is wrong with that, but can hardly be recommended over it unless it too can find some point – perhaps not in Wittgenstein's words, but certainly in his having written them. But if there is nothing but nonsense in the nonsense, nothing it shows to be so, no kind of quasi-thought whose quasi-truth it leads us to acknowledge, what could the point be?

One could make it intrinsic to a piecemeal approach to refuse this question, holding that it demands in response a generalization that we could not endorse without falling again into the double-thinking the approach rejects. But I think it would be wrong to refuse the question in that way. In the first place, it is clear that there is something *unitary* in the way the book sets out to expose philosophical error and illusion, and something right in the idea that it promises a single solution to philosophical problems. Those who have contrasted Wittgenstein's early and later thought in this respect cannot be charged with groundless invention: they have the plain meaning of Wittgenstein's Preface (especially its second paragraph) on their side. In the second place, it would be a mistake to assume

that the only generalization we could offer would begin in some such fashion as, 'Any claim that attempts to say that ...' Nonsense generalized is still nonsense, of course. But a remark *about* a piece of nonsense, about its motivation and intended role, can be straightforwardly significant, and nothing we have said rules out there being illuminating generalizations from such remarks.

The question of the point of all this nonsense is thus a reasonable one. And while a response to it should properly arise from, and certainly could only be justified by reference to, the various results of the piecemeal exploration of the text, we might as a preliminary shortcut ask: What would we be left with if the double-thinking approach to which this nonsense constantly tempts us were in fact the only possible approach? What species of philosophy would it be that left us maintaining such as the following:

- that empirical reality is limited by the totality of objects;
- that however the world is its being that way consists in those objects' being configured in one of the ways possible for them;
- that all genuine thought is contingent and consists in representing objects as configured in one or another of those ways;
- that we can nonetheless somehow appreciate, or be shown that, these things are so;
- that our appreciating or being shown such things is not in the proper sense knowledge, and that in attempting to voice what we thus appreciate or are shown we are attempting the impossible, to say what is ineffable;
- that what we thus attempt, impossibly, to say concerns not the layout of reality but its essential form;
- that the essential form of reality is also the essential form of thought;
- that it is only in virtue of this inexpressible essential commonality of form between thought and reality that we can describe reality;
- that this is so is in turn something that we can appreciate by, or are shown in, reflection on the nature of thought;
- that the proper response to this reflection is to acknowledge and respect the constraints on thought imposed by its essential commonality of form with reality, to abandon the confusions that inevitably result from the attempt to overstep these constraints in describing their source, and to say only what can, non-philosophically, be said?

Now *what kind* of a philosophical vision is that?

It is, of course, a vision according to which there is *something* that cannot be said. But that really isn't much of an answer. The purpose of the question was to make clear to ourselves what kind of philosophical vision we recognize to be untenable in rejecting the double-thinking required to sustain it. The answer just offered, while true, is next to useless for that purpose. Suggesting it as the key to a reading of Wittgenstein's text would be still weaker than offering, as a full account of what we appreciate in reading some such richly drawn nightmare as

*Erewhon*, the take-home message that utopias are impossible. That only just makes for a passing mark in high-school, but at least it does say more than that there is *something* we recognize to be impossible. Perhaps it is true that to say anything very much more helpful we would need to begin to attend to some of the detail of Butler's text in a way that, for the present exercise, we are not attending to the detail of Wittgenstein's. But even within present constraints we should at least be able to do as well as that high-school answer.

In the vision we just sketched the possibility of thought is grounded, and its limits thereby determined, by something that transcends those limits and therefore cannot itself be thought. The vision is thus of a transcendental philosophy. Of what nature is this grounding, this unitary source of the possibility and limits of thought? The vision settles this by the manner in which it holds that source to be recognized through appreciation of internal features of thought itself. The limits of the thinkable world are set by its requirement to be *thinkable*.<sup>12</sup> More particularly, the vision has it that the world is limited by its requirement to be thinkable in its totality and as a totality. The method of the vision's working out identifies the source of the world's limits with the ground of its unity, and each of these with the requirement to satisfy the mind's need to sustain its conception of itself as the unitary focus of everything that can be thought. The vision is therefore a vision of transcendental idealism. So what we come to recognize in rejecting the double-thinking inherent in our every attempt to sustain the vision, to explore the grounding it demands, is the untenability of transcendental idealism. As a take-home message this is, of course, no more an adequate substitute for engagement with the detail of Wittgenstein's text than is the minimally passing comment mentioned above about the message of Butler's. Unlike the key to interpretation just canvassed, however, it does at least tell us something of what the book is about.

But now isn't that exactly the problem with it? Can one move even this far beyond what 'resolute austerity' allows without falling back once again into double-thinking, double-thinking that we are shown that transcendental idealism is false yet not shown anything? No, and yes, respectively. The dialectic above having been run through, there is really no need to run through it again. If Wittgenstein's book is successful it will show us – show us, in an unproblematic sense of demonstrating in practice for us – that transcendental idealism is untenable. It will show us that by bringing us to appreciate and to reject the double-thinking involved in holding that, while transcendental idealism cannot be formulated within the limits it itself imposes, we are none the less shown by what is so formulable, and by the nonsense produced in the effort to say what is so shown, that transcendental idealism is true.

For the book to be successful in this end we of course have to know what transcendental idealism is. But this need not and should not be equated with understanding what transcendental idealism says. Knowing what transcendental idealism is is perfectly and straightforwardly compatible with holding that there is no intelligible thought that its advocates have managed to formulate. Knowing

what the position is, to put it very blandly, is a matter of being able to recognize the character of a brand of philosophical theorizing, the pressures and explanatory demands that lead to it, the kind of ambition that makes one responsive to those pressures. We do not have to count it an intelligible theory to count it an intelligible phenomenon. So there need be no double-thinking at all in knowing what transcendental idealism is. It is a state of understanding manifest in various recognitional and other abilities. As with any complex state of understanding, there would no point in trying to draw up a definite list of the abilities that would manifest it. But were one to try, then one that should certainly be on the list is the ability to recognize transcendental idealism as at the centre of Wittgenstein's concerns in the *Tractatus*.

### Notes

- 1 Since the following outline is intentionally uncontroversial, I will not litter the exposition with textual references.
- 2 This is the reaction Geach had in mind when speaking of 'Ludwig's self-mate' (Geach 1977: 54).
- 3 This response is intended to represent the 'traditional' interpretation spoken of by Diamond, Conant, Kremer and others. Though the 'traditional' interpretation is, in my view, largely a construction of its critics, there are appeals to the notion of 'factual' discourse in e.g. Pears (1986) and Kenny (1973) that invite this summary.
- 4 Very partially and roughly this represents a 'new-Wittgensteinian' response, as exemplified in Diamond (1991), Conant (2000) and Kremer (2001).
- 5 In recent literature the charge of double-thinking is most commonly made *by* the 'new-Wittgensteinian' interpretation (in the above scheme, (2b) *against* the 'traditional' reading (2a)). One important and evidently correct point made by the 'traditional' counter-attack (e.g. Hacker 2000, §3) is that 'new-Wittgensteinians', just as much as their rivals, need an account of how Wittgenstein's words are to be effective in bringing about *any* realization. (Sullivan (2002, §4) criticizes Kremer (2001) on this ground.)
- 6 It would of course be a mistake to equate this second 'showing' – something supposed to be effected by the failure of philosophical discourse – with the first – something supposed to be effected in the success of non-philosophical discourse. Conant (2000) has been greatly concerned to combat such a mistake; I do not believe the mistake to be as widespread as he does – see e.g. Hacker's criticism of Black on this issue, at (1986: 25) and again at (2000: 356).
- 7 I do not believe it follows from this that the understanding borne by 'nonsense', when it is said that the system itself is nonsense, is *untouched by* one's encounter with the system, nor therefore that it would be right to insist that the system may be counted nonsense only on a 'pre-theoretical' understanding. (Indeed, I doubt whether, 'pre-theoretically', the notion of nonsense is committed enough to do any interesting work.) Nonsense is a failure to make any kind of sense, and the most relevant apparent ways of making sense will be suggested by – i.e. will emerge in one's efforts to make sense of – the system itself.
- 8 Although I have located the 'new-Wittgensteinian' interpretation on the second branch, some of its advocates are also drawn to compare Wittgenstein's strategy to an argument by *reductio*; see e.g. Kremer (2001, §VIII).
- 9 Sullivan (2002, note 31) makes this point in criticizing certain formulations in Conant (1989, 1992 and 2000).

- 10 Diamond and Conant have stressed this point; it had also clearly been recognized by some ‘traditionalists’ (e.g. Hacker 1986: 26).
- 11 This step is recommended, and the need for it compellingly argued, by Goldfarb (1997: 70–1).
- 12 As Anscombe made the point, in a delightful translation of *TLP* 5.61: an *impossible* thought is an impossible *thought*.

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