How could he try to whistle it?

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Introduction

At the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that anyone who understands him should see that the propositions of the book are nonsensical. Furthermore, he asks us to reject them if we want to see the world aright. There is no consensus about this concluding remark. Should we take it at face value? Should we reject it? What is its real meaning? Why does he say such a thing? It is an important issue to understand the book itself. But it is important to understand the second Wittgenstein too since the *Tractatus* is the principal target of the *Investigations*. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein apparently tries to avoid such a situation. The questions related to remark 6.54 are related to a more general problem about the nature of Wittgenstein's philosophy, its place in the history of philosophy, and its inheritance. This problem can be expressed in the following ways: Did he really show that we could not produce a scientific metaphysics? Did he really show that metaphysical propositions are nonsensical?

First, I will briefly present three facts. Second, from these facts I will raise the problem. The three facts are the following: 1) The *Tractatus* is an attempt to construct and apply a method of analysis of ordinary language in order to distinguish between sensical and nonsensical propositions and to pass over silence what is nonsensical. 2) The analysis of ordinary language does not work and cannot work. 3) Even though the analysis of ordinary language is impossible, Wittgenstein applies the concept of nonsense to different areas such as mathematics, ethic, aesthetic, natural sciences, religion, and philosophy.

2.   **Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy**[1]

Philosophy is neither a natural science (In Philosophy we cannot make hypothesis and test them) nor a meta-empirical science. The purpose of philosophy is not to build general theories or to construct philosophical propositions in order to describe the essential and necessary features of reality, but it is to logically clarify thoughts. "Philosophy is not a body of doctrines but an activity". Its aim is to "set limits to the much disputed sphere of natural sciences."[2]

The main thesis of the book, which is expressed in the preface, is that problems of philosophy are based on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language. The only thing one can do with philosophical propositions is to eliminate them because they do not have a clear sense. As he says in the preface:

> "What can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence."[3]

When one meets some philosophical problem, as for example "Does the external world exist?" one is tempted to give them some solutions which consists in philosophical propositions. Generally, when, one is confronted with such questions, one does not find a unique apparently suitable answer but several contradictory answers, even though; all the sources of argumentation are dried up. In these cases, there are three different possibilities. Firstly, one can cut short the discussion in favour of one of the possible answers. Secondly one can conclude that things are contradictory. Thirdly, one can investigate the foundations of our theses in order to find the point(s) of tension or disagreement. The last possibility is the one chosen by Wittgenstein. The correct method in philosophy is:

> "To say nothing except what can be said, propositions of natural sciences […]. Whenever, someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions."[4]

With the logical clarification of thoughts, one should be able to

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[1] See the preface, Wittgenstein *TLP*, 4.002 to 4.0031, Wittgenstein *TLP*, 4.111 to 4.116, Wittgenstein *TLP*, 6.5 to 7.
[2] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 4.113.
[3] See also Wittgenstein *TLP*, 4.116 and in Wittgenstein *TLP*, 7.
[4] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 6.53.

eliminate metaphysical propositions; so that the propositions of natural sciences would enter into considerations. So the solution of a philosophical problem is not a philosophical proposition but the disappearance of the problem[5] and of its apparent solutions. We can notice here that his conception of philosophy implies our actual ability to practice logical analysis. Then, we must be able to give an end to the explanation of the sense of a proposition. Otherwise, the idea that metaphysical propositions are nonsensical is completely empty.

3. The project of analysis of ordinary language

The project of logical analysis aims at distinguishing sensical from nonsensical propositions. This project is based on three premises: 1) Sometimes ordinary language deceives us because its apparent logical structure is not necessarily its real logical one. 2) One has the idea of a perfect logical language in which nonsense is intrinsically excluded. Such a language is the *ideography*. 3) The translation of ordinary language into logical language is a means of drawing a frontier between sensical and nonsensical propositions.

Wittgenstein writes that in "… everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification – and so belongs to different symbols – or that two words that have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way."[6] If one is tempted, he says in 3.324, to assert some philosophical propositions, it is due to the fact that the apparent logical structure of ordinary language is not necessarily the real logical one, as the signs we use to express thoughts do not necessarily and immediately reflect what they mean.

The logical imperfection of ordinary language is not something inevitable. In order to avoid it, one must use a perfect logical language. A perfect logical language consists in "… a sign-language that excludes them by not using the same sign for different symbols and by not using in a superficially similar way signs that have different modes of signification: that is to say, a sign-language that is governed by logical grammar – by logical

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[5] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 4.003.
[6] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 3.323.

syntax."[7] Such a language is symbolic logic. Symbolic logic is the universal grammar of every possible language. For Frege and Russell, in quite different ways, logic was conceived as a science. It was presented as an axiomatic, with its primitive symbols and propositions. For Wittgenstein, there is no *real* primitive symbol or propositions in logic. The only logical constant is a form, and not the name of a logical entity. Logical propositions are tautologies or contradictions that do not depict fact, but the frontier of the world. Consequently they are empty of sense. Logic is not the description of a mechanism, thoughts' mechanism. It is not a branch of natural sciences like psychology or biology. Logical laws are not subject of the evolution. They express the norms of thoughts, so, for Wittgenstein, there are no thoughts outside logical rules. We can notice the fact that the criticism of ordinary language depends on the idea of a perfect logical language. Without this idea, why should we *blame* our ordinary language?

What is the difference between a sensical and a nonsensical proposition? A fundamental point of the theory of proposition is that a proposition is not a name. He writes: "Situation can be described but not *given names*."[8] A reason why a proposition cannot be a name is that a proposition can be false, not a name. One can assert or deny a proposition. Its sense must not be destroyed if the fact described by a proposition does not exist. I can say "Toby is bald", and it is perfectly intelligible, whatever is the case in the world. But one cannot assert or deny a name, because in the first case the proposition would be redundant, and in the second case, it would be self-contradictory. According to that conception of name, a sign is immediately related to the object that gives it its meaning. So if a sign is a real name it cannot fail to denote an object otherwise, the sign is simply gibberish like 'Tcheu', and the proposition in which it is used is self-contradictory.

A proposition has a sense if and only if it has *truths-conditions*. Moreover, one understands it if and only if one *knows* what is the case is when it is true and what the case is when it is false. One can understand a proposition without knowing if it is now true or false. The sense of a proposition is independent of the world in that manner. But in another sense,

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[7] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 3.325.
[8] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 3.144.

it is not independent because, for him, it is necessary that a proposition can be true or false. He said: a proposition is necessarily bipolar. To know if a proposition is true, one must compare it with reality. Understanding a proposition means knowing the totality of its use. In other words, when one understands a proposition one cannot fail while using it even if what he says is true or false. In order to understand it, one must get its constituents and their meaning, the objects they *mean*, and to know an object, to understand a name, is to know the totality of its possibilities of occurrence in states of affairs.[9]

To represent something, a proposition must be a picture of a fact. And it is a picture of a fact if and only if the proposition has the same number of elements than the fact it represents. It is also possible to say that it must have the same logical form. The logical form is not a further element. Logical form does not exist apart from the elements of the proposition. The elements of the propositions are not externally related, like in Russell's theory, by a logical form with which we must be acquainted and that guarantees the possibility of the combination of the elements (particulars or universals). In Russell's theory, the logical form is a completely general proposition which informs us about the ontological status or logical type of the constituent of a proposition and of the order of their combination. Logical form is neither an object nor a fact, so one cannot *name* or *describe* it. *The logical form is absolutely indescribable*, it can only be *shown.* The ineffability of the logical form is absolute. It says that, the proposition p does not *describe* what its sense is but *show* it, and no proposition q can do this. It does not say that the proposition p cannot describe what its sense is, but another proposition q can describe the logical form that p *shows*.

In the logical form of a judgment, Wittgenstein does not include a *subject* as constituent. It is another difference between W's theory of proposition and Russell's one. In Russell's theory, the subject synthesizes all the constituents (Particulars, Universals and the logical form) by means of a *relating relation*.

A meaningless proposition is a proposition in which at least one element (and this element must be a primitive element, a complete symbol) lacks meaning. When such a case appears, the whole proposition lacks logical

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[9] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 2.012 to 2.0123.

form and has as much sense as "tcheuntchewa tobicha" which is gibberish. It has absolutely no sense, or denotes no reality. In that frame, all propositions must describe contingent fact. No proposition can be true *a priori*. Why an *a priori* proposition is nonsensical and cannot be synthetic? We briefly tackle the point when we explain the difference between a name and a proposition. Examples of such propositions are:

(1)   "Redness is a colour."

(2)   "Material beings exist in space and time."

These propositions try to assert necessary features. These propositions try to say that certain things have certain properties. But either these propositions are true and are redundant because, a competent speaker must know it if he/she understands the meaning of their subject, or these propositions are false and meaningless because the properties they try to attribute to their subject are internal properties. Internal properties are constitutive of the identity of a concept. So for Wittgenstein, it is not possible to assert or deny intelligibly essential features (internal properties or relations) of facts or objects, for if such a proposition is true, it is redundant (a priori true), and if it is false it is self-contradictory.

Other propositions can be seen as attempt to negate necessary features. For example:

(3)   "Redness bleeds."

(4)   "God is a good pianist."

Propositions (3) and (4) try to say something about objects we cannot say without destroying the identity of the objects.

So Wittgenstein's project of elimination of metaphysical propositions does not aim at supporting the view that there is only contingent attributes or relations (as Russell did). There are necessary features, but we cannot prove that such or such things have these properties. We must see it in our sensical use of language. He tries to show to the metaphysicians and to the Sceptics that necessary features cannot be asserted nor denied intelligibly. His position has a price. He needs to assume the idea that there is between Language/Thought and the World an absolute harmony. Wittgenstein reject both Realist and Anti-Realist approaches of metaphysics and deny that there can be *a priori* knowledge of the essential features of reality (whatever we

thing about reality). His anti-metaphysical approach is mixed: He thinks both that metaphysical statements are meaningless, and that there is *something* (the substance of the world) that we are not able to know.

4.   The failure of the project of logical analysis of ordinary language

The success of the project is based our ability to clarify the propositions of ordinary language. This implies that our language is based on simple objects introduced by conventions (elucidations) that determine the meaning of name. The existence of objects is a necessary condition. What is an elucidation? Wittgenstein wrote:

> "The meaning of primitive signs can be explained by means of elucidations. Elucidations are propositions that contain the primitive signs. So they can only be understood if the meanings of those signs are already known."[10]

Wittgenstein's explanation is, I think, circular. It says that to clarify the meaning of a constituent of a proposition, one must use a proposition containing the sign we want to explain. But to understand the elucidation, one must understand the sign we indeed search to explain.

We can use here another argument based on Wittgenstein's criticism of the ostensive definition. Briefly, W's argument says that an ostensive definition is ambiguous outside a language. An ostensive definition cannot introduce the meaning of primitive signs if the pupil does not know the function of the word in our language. For example, to understand an elucidation like "This is red", one must know that red is the name of a colour and not the name of a shape or of a sound. To understand an ostensive definition, one could say that the pupil must be aware of the kind of thing we speak about.

Another reason to think that the analysis does not work is based on an historical fact. When Wittgenstein tried to give a solution to the problem of colours (*Remarks on logical form*, *Philosophical Remarks*), he never found the elementary propositions but he abandoned the idea that the elementary propositions are mutually independent.

It is difficult to see how we could actually do the clarification of our

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[10] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 3.263.

language. We cannot find the elementary propositions. Therefore, it seems impossible to draw the frontier between sensical and nonsensical propositions. The idea of an absolute harmony between language/Thought and the World leads him into difficulties. To succeed in eliminate assertions about metaphysical features of Reality, we need a kind of knowledge (knowledge of the logical form of objects or propositions), which is, according to him, impossible.

5.   Applying the theory of proposition

Other consequences of the distinction can be seen. In the last pages of the book, Wittgenstein applies his theory of symbolism to different subjects such as mathematics, ethic, moral, aesthetic, natural sciences, religion and philosophy. In each case, he says that propositions are nonsensical. Especially, in 6.54 Wittgenstein writes a very famous and baffling remark:

> "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as step – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
>
> He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright."[11]

So, if one understands Wittgenstein, believes that he is right, one must see that his propositions are nonsensical, that they are neither true nor false, and cannot be true or false, which is not comfortable.

6.   The paradox

We have seen three facts: 1) The *Tractatus* has a project: to draw the frontier between sensical and nonsensical propositions and to eliminate nonsensical propositions. To succeed, the author needs to analyse ordinary language. 2) The project does not work, so it is not possible to draw the frontier. 3) Nevertheless Wittgenstein claims that some propositions are nonsensical. As a result, we lack determination for the use of the concept of nonsense, but meanwhile the concept is being used. If the correct method in Philosophy is the analysis of ordinary language, if this is the manner to recognize

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[11] Wittgenstein *TLP*, 3.263.

nonsensical propositions, and if analysis does not work, how can he say that such or such proposition is nonsensical? How can he say that his own propositions are nonsensical? It seems that analysis is impossible and in the same time that it is effective. The alternative seem to be the following: either the analysis of ordinary language does not work and the propositions of the *Tractatus* are not nonsense, or the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsense and the analysis work.

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