

Philosophy

<http://journals.cambridge.org/PHI>

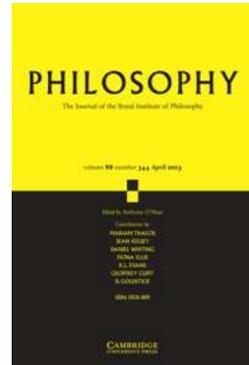
Additional services for **Philosophy**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Why the *Tractatus*, like the Old Testament, is ‘Nothing but a Book’

K.L. Evans

Philosophy / Volume 88 / Issue 02 / April 2013, pp 267 - 298

DOI: 10.1017/S0031819113000053, Published online: 19 March 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0031819113000053

How to cite this article:

K.L. Evans (2013). Why the *Tractatus*, like the Old Testament, is ‘Nothing but a Book’. *Philosophy*, 88, pp 267-298 doi:10.1017/S0031819113000053

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

Why the *Tractatus*, like the Old Testament, is ‘Nothing but a Book’

K.L. EVANS

Abstract

In *The Education of the Human Race*, G. E. Lessing helps his readers understand why the propositions of the Old Testament are pseudo-propositions, or why they do not resemble the significant propositions of natural science but the *tautological* propositions of mathematics and of logic. That is, the so-called propositions of the Old Testament do not teach readers whether what actually happens is this or that; rather what they teach us is to imagine expressions by substitution in such a way as to throw their structure into relief. One of Lessing’s most attentive readers was Wittgenstein. Or perhaps only Wittgenstein would have been able to grasp so immediately Lessing’s insight that the tautological or pseudo-propositions of the Old Testament invite thinking *only* when readers use them to understand ‘what is the case’ in the pictures (the thoughts) the propositions have—logically—constructed. Thus in this essay I use Wittgenstein’s reading of Lessing to throw light on his work in the *Tractatus*. Rather than take up the new logician’s interest in completely analyzing expressions (which would include settling the way a referent is referred to in an expression), Wittgenstein insists in the *Tractatus* that the expressions we use, even those that seem to be propositions or that contain assertions, are in fact designed to be elucidatory *without* saying anything about the nature of the subjects that figure in them. Wittgenstein’s great insight was to see that the propositional signs of our language are able to bring something to mind *without* saying what is a representation of what.

‘I have been reading Lessing (on the Bible)’ Wittgenstein notes in 1930.¹ He then cites some lines from *The Education of the Human Race* in which G. E. Lessing describes what he calls the ‘style’ of the books of the Old Testament, which is ‘sometimes plain and simple, sometimes poetical, throughout full of tautologies, but of such a kind as practiced sagacity, since they sometimes appear to be saying something else, and yet the same thing; sometimes the same thing over again, and yet to signify or to be capable of signifying at

¹ From the manuscript material left by Wittgenstein published as *Culture and Value*, tr. Peter Winch, ed. G. H. Von Wright (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 8.

the bottom, something else'.² The Old Testament's many tautologies are for Lessing what supply its 'negative perfection', the essential quality that comes from 'not throwing difficulties or hindrances in the way to a suppressed truth'. The tautologies have rhetorical purpose since in addition to what Lessing calls the Old Testament's 'positive perfection', what 'hints' and 'allusions' it manages to throw off, they are what give it 'all the properties of excellence which belong to a Primer'.³ A Primer must excite curiosity and occasion questions, through its poetical parts, but Lessing insists it cannot mislead, which is why it is full of *tautologies*—formulas that are true whatever the truth or falsity of their basic components. The most distinctive characteristic of a Primer, Lessing notes, the identifying feature it shares with the Old Testament, is that in it what can be said is said clearly and what cannot be said is passed over in silence:

A Primer for children may fairly pass over in silence this or that important piece of knowledge or art which it expounds, respecting which the Teacher judged, that it is not yet fitted for the capacities of the children for whom he was writing. But it must contain absolutely nothing which blocks up the way towards the knowledge which is held back, or misleads the children from it. Rather, all the approaches towards it must be carefully left open; and to lead them away from even one of these approaches, or to cause them to enter it later than they need, would alone be enough to change the mere imperfection of such a Primer into an actual fault.⁴

No wonder Lessing made good reading for the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the most important part of which

² G. E. Lessing, *The Education of The Human Race*, tr. F. W. Robertson (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1872), 42. All additional references come from this short text. Here I rely neither on the translation Peter Winch offers in *Culture and Value*, nor on the translation H. B. Nisbet offers in the Cambridge edition of Lessing's *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, since neither of these translations allow that the *lines themselves* 'practice sagacity'; these translations consequently dilute or effectively dilute Lessing's suggestion that the lines were intentionally crafted to produce the effect they do.

³ 'By a "hint" I mean that which already contains any germ, out of which the, as yet, held back truth allows itself to be developed', Lessing writes. 'By allusion I mean that which was intended only to excite curiosity and to occasion questions. As, for instance, the oft-recurring mode of expression, describing death by "he was gathered to his fathers"' (41).

⁴ Lessing, 21–22.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

lies in what had *not* been written.⁵ Wittgenstein took note of Lessing's remarks on the Old Testament because he too had finished a book designed above all to educate – or as Lessing puts it, 'begin from the beginning' with a select, benighted audience. And by not blocking the way toward it, he too had taken care to leave open the path to a held-back truth.

The chosen audience for the book Wittgenstein had written consisted of philosophers who misunderstood the logic of language. As Wittgenstein hints in his Preface to the *Tractatus*, this misunderstanding has to do with the question of 'what can be said' in our language. In principle, what makes it possible for an indicative or declarative sentence to 'say something' is the sentence's propositional content (or *proposition*, as philosophers use the term): 'what is asserted' when a declarative sentence is used to say something true or false. However the essential character of propositional signs is in the *Tractatus* the subject of debate, since the philosophers who Wittgenstein charges with misunderstanding the logic of language think of propositional signs in terms of their propositional content, their capacity for saying something, and Wittgenstein, in contrast, thinks that the interesting thing about propositional signs is how many of them do not 'say' anything at all. For Wittgenstein, what needs to be shown *is* shown by a propositional sign, but not because a speaker has used it to settle something about the world – used it to say something false or true.

Thus of particular significance to Wittgenstein, I would like to suggest, was the implication throughout Lessing's work that the Old Testament's many tautologies 'say' *nothing*, but even so are intellectually indispensable – instructive, illuminating – to an audience who grasps them rightly. What Lessing says about the Old Testament's tautologies corresponds to Wittgenstein's own directive near the end of the *Tractatus* that readers who understand him do so despite the fact that the seven separate sentences (*einzelnen Sätze*) on which his book is built say nothing.⁶ Reading the *Tractatus* with

⁵ Wittgenstein offers this description of the *Tractatus* in a letter to Ludwig von Ficker, wherein he explains that his work 'consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one... In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it'. See B. F. McGuinness's appendix to Paul Engelmann's *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 143–4.

⁶ We can say that the *Tractatus* is built on these seven separate sentences because as Wittgenstein points out, *n1*, *n2*, etc., are comments on no. *n*; *n.m1*, *n.m2*, etc., are comments on no. *n.m*; and so on.

understanding means acknowledging that these sentences have no way of referring to anything in the world (so are in *this* way ‘senseless’) *and* that their careful arrangement affords readers a perspicuous view:

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

He must surmount *diese sätze*; then he sees the world rightly.⁷

Since the lesson that declarative sentences can be both senseless and elucidatory is not, on the whole, in keeping with the kind of instruction most readers expect to find in works of philosophy, readers of the *Tractatus* are reminded by it of Wittgenstein’s promise that his first book of philosophy offers an instance of writing that is ‘strictly philosophical and at the same time literary’, or that the book he has written is ‘not a textbook’⁸ – a promise generations of Wittgenstein’s readers have struggled to fully understand.

But before seeing how Wittgenstein’s remarks on Lessing illuminate what kind of book the *Tractatus* is, it is useful to get a handle on what Lessing actually says. Of particular interest to Wittgenstein in *The Education of the Human Race* is Lessing’s idea that rather than demonstrate His Mightiness to a people whom He wished to educate, God provides them with a special kind of book, a Primer, one fitted for the capacities of those for whom he was writing. Only by these means could he offer an education suitable to the ‘future Teachers of the human race’, since only ‘a people so brought up’

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1999 [Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1922]), 6.54. In this essay I intentionally rely on the translation by Ogden (assisted by Frank P. Ramsey) as opposed to the more recent translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. However, since both Ogden and Pears and McGuinness translate Wittgenstein’s *sätze* as ‘propositions’, and it seems to me that discovering how to think of Wittgenstein’s *Sätze* comprises the central work of reading the *Tractatus*, I have kept this term in the original German. In subsequent quotations from the *Tractatus* rendered in English I’ll use the standard ‘proposition’ for *Sätze*, though this essay should make clear why I find the translation misleading.

⁸ Wittgenstein’s description of his writing as literary is found in his account of the work to a prospective publisher, Ludwig von Ficker. Quoted in G.H. von Wright, *Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 81. The promise that the *Tractatus* is not a textbook appears in Wittgenstein’s preface to the work.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

could become teachers themselves.⁹ At the heart of Lessing's conception of the Old Testament as a Primer is his suggestion that this work doesn't verify but acts as a substitute for 'the miracles which [God] performed for the Jews, the prophecies which He caused to be recorded.' Such proofs as engendered confidence in Him were not adequate to educate a *whole* people, Lessing writes, who would 'not for a long time elevate themselves' to a true conception and who were thus offered in place of confirmation of God's Divinity the means by which to develop their faculties for thinking.¹⁰ Only by thinking through philosophically troublesome concepts could members of the nation become teachers, but this exercising of the mind Lessing associates with the 'child-like education' made possible through obedience and the searching examination of an astute introductory text; with the work of *reading*, not the use of reason:

Even if the first man were furnished at once with a conception of the One God; yet it was not possible that this conception, imparted, and not gained by thought, should subsist long in its clearness. As soon as the Human Reason, left to itself, began to elaborate it, it broke up the one Immeasurable into many Measurables, and gave a note or sign of mark to every one of these parts. Hence naturally arose polytheism and idolatry. And who can say how many millions of years human reason would have been bewildered in these errors, even though in all places and times there were individual men who recognized them as errors, had it not pleased God to afford it a better direction by means of a new Impulse?¹¹

⁹ After introducing the idea that God wished to educate the Hebrew people, 'a race of slaves...not permitted to take part in the worship of the Egyptians', and not simply reveal Himself to them, Lessing writes: 'But, it will be asked, to what purpose was this education of so rude a people, a people with whom God had to begin so entirely from the beginning? I reply, in order that in the process of time He might employ particular members of this nation as the Teachers of other people. He was bringing up in them the future Teachers of the human race. It was the Jews who became their teachers, none but the Jews; only men out of a people so brought up, could be their teachers' (Lessing, 13).

¹⁰ 'The miracles which He performed for the Jews', writes Lessing, 'the prophecies which He caused to be recorded through them, were surely not for the few mortal Jews, in whose time they had happened and been recorded: He had His intentions therein in reference to the whole Jewish people, to the entire Human Race, which, perhaps, is destined to remain on earth forever, though every individual Jew and every individual man die forever' (Lessing, 17).

¹¹ Lessing, 5

K. L. Evans

Reading confronts us as a task or activity, an effort of understanding we feel ourselves required to make. With the advent of the Old Testament, then, man's natural tendencies – to measure, to determine, to evaluate, usually in relation to a standard he has himself introduced – are thus obstructed by a *book*: the kind of book, moreover, that doesn't record history or describe reality so much as ask readers to reposition *themselves* in order to actively extend their understanding.

We are in the habit of calling books that require understanding 'literature', although calling the Old Testament a work of literature needn't exclude the possibility that its author is God. It *is* the case, however, that works of literature make use of expressions that are misread if taken literally. Literary books cannot be confused with those books 'treating of actual men and events'. As Herman Melville has written, since literary taste is that which 'less heeds the thing conveyed than the vehicle'.¹² A literary work's value is determined by the fact that the writing has been authored and is therefore to be looked *at*, if something is to be understood, and not through, as if to a pre-existing reality the writing simply reflects. As Plato first pointed out, the *techne* required to formulate accurate descriptions of reality belongs to the scientist, not the writer – which is why literature is used wrongly when we fail to see that the form of a literary work (and through it an author's formulation of a particular experience; a subject *as it is seen*) is of equal or greater import than the various issues or topics with which it deals, what Melville calls the 'thing conveyed.'

Wittgenstein, like Lessing before him, is clearly attracted to the idea that the form of the Bible has everything to do with the reason for which it has been made. This theme also animates much of the work of O. K. Bouwsma, Wittgenstein's colleague and friend, who as his editors note is sensitive to the power of Scripture to redirect a reader's energies, to offer 'reminders for orienting one's intelligence when it is confused by the philosophically troublesome concepts of faith, belief, proof, and evidence'.¹³ As J. L. Craft and Ronald Hustwit observe, 'God is a writer or consignor of writers, and now there is a book that is a collection of stories, history, songs, poems, parables, laws, eyewitness accounts, teachings, proverbs, prophecies,

¹² This is the description of literary works Melville offers in *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*, Editors Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 62.

¹³ O. K. Bouwsma, *Without Proof or Evidence*, edited and introduced by J. L. Craft and Ronald E. Hustwit, (Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1984), ix.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

and letters. What is the reader to do with this book? What is its purpose? How do its various forms of literature and concepts relate to the realization of that purpose? How is a reader to find out?"¹⁴

Drawing Wittgenstein to Lessing is the latter's preoccupation with the remarkableness of the book God has sent to mankind; the kind of book that teaches man what *literature*, rather than history or science, teaches him; the sort of resource for thinking that Wittgenstein himself hoped to generate. To put Lessing's interest in the Old Testament differently, and to tie it to a strain of philosophy interested in literature's practical use, we might say that reading an *authored* work, as opposed to one that is merely descriptive or explanatory, that only exists in the context of a priority to which it must always refer, blocks a reader's desire to see through the text to the matter being discussed and instead encourages her to attend more readily or with more understanding to a view that would not have been possible within her own limited horizon. When a reader struggles to understand what an author says, she understands not his person, his 'psychology', nor simply his view; rather she tries to discover *the relation in which he stands* to his subject. She can then consider whether this way of looking at a subject has some soundness or validity for her, too. The power of an authored work is thus 'coterminous with its power' to call into question a reader's habitual, settled ways of thinking, as Bernard Harrison explains is true of all literature:

to invite the reader to look again at the practices and associated presumptions that we ordinarily take for granted, as unalterably inseparable from the living of whatever version of human life it is that we happen to lead, in whatever human world we happen to inhabit, under the strange, oblique, uncanny light that a powerful contrary imagination can cast upon them.¹⁵

It isn't familiarity with new subjects that a proper use of literature encourages so much as the possibility of a new self, which is why we read literature not to escape from the world but in order to learn how to act properly in it.

The idea that readers of an authored or literary work must move themselves around in order to understand it (and that the Old Testament was in this way the first of its kind) unites the interests of literature and philosophy, much as it unites the interests of

¹⁴ Ibid., viii.

¹⁵ The lines of Bernard Harrison's are from his new as yet unpublished work *What Is Fiction For? Literary Humanism Restored* forthcoming from Indiana University Press.

Wittgenstein and Lessing. For Wittgenstein as for Lessing, the Old Testament's importance has to do with the *education* it offers readers, not what it 'says' about reality, or what, in the way of the propositions of natural science, its declarative sentences are able to convey. This is what Wittgenstein can be seen to have grasped when, after reading Lessing, he wrote in his diary: 'With the Bible I have nothing but a book in front of me. But why do I say "nothing but a book"? I have a book in front of me, a *document* which, if it remains alone, cannot have greater value than any other document. (This is what Lessing meant.)'¹⁶

When Wittgenstein calls the Bible 'nothing but a book' he is not declaring, as might be supposed, against this book's Divine origin. Rather he is agreeing with Lessing that the books of the Old Testament neither transmit knowledge nor offer any argument that serves to establish the truth of something. Even the Old Testament does not offer proof of God's divinity, for example; what is more, the idea of verifying belief is wholly foreign to it. What doctrines contained therein, like the doctrine of the Unity of God, which as Lessing says 'in a way is found, and in a way is not found, in these the books of the Old Testament', teach man 'nothing which he might not educe out of himself, only quickly and more easily'.¹⁷ The philosophical activity or education the Old Testament *elicits* from its readers thus contrasts with the philosophical work conventionally associated with it – that of presenting the reader with a doctrine. Lessing's suggestion that, as Wittgenstein puts it, the Old Testament is 'nothing but a book', develops from his original insight that the tautological propositions that fill its pages will be construed wrongly if the reader thinks her task is to determine their truth value because they form the basis of a belief or theory.

To fully appreciate the service tautologies perform in the Old Testament, it is useful to turn to the moment in the *Tractatus* when, as part of his discussion of the truth and falsity conditions for declarative sentences, Wittgenstein introduces two 'extreme cases': tautology and contradiction. At 4.461 Wittgenstein writes:

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Public and Private Occasions*, ed., James C. Klage and Alfred Nordmann (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 157.

¹⁷ Lessing, 15–16. Wittgenstein glosses this notion when, after reading Lessing, he writes in his diary: 'The sermon can be the precondition of belief, but in itself it cannot aim to impel belief. (If these words could attach one to belief, other words could also attach one to belief.) Believing begins with Believing' (*Public and Private Occasions*, 159).

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

The tautology has no truth-conditions, for it is unconditionally true; and the contradiction is on no condition true.

Tautology and contradiction are without sense (*sinnlos*).

(Like the point from which two arrows go out in opposite directions.)

(I know, *e.g.* nothing about the weather, when I know that it rains or does not rain.)

Wittgenstein then clarifies the particular way in which tautology and contradiction 'lack sense' when he comments at 4.611 that,

Tautology and contradiction are, however, not nonsensical (*unsinnig*); they are part of the symbolism, in the same way that '0' is part of the symbolism of Arithmetic.

As Wittgenstein explains, tautologies can't be used or are 'senseless' with the connotation of *useless* (*sinnlos*) because they cannot say anything about the actual world. Because they cannot say anything they are as Kant has promised empty, void of consequence, 'of no avail or use'. As in Wittgenstein's example, the tautological proposition that it rains or does not rain says nothing about the weather.¹⁸ Nevertheless, tautologies *do* play a role in meaningful discourse, as they number among the (ever-expanding) well-formed sentences that make up language. Tautologies do not 'say anything', but as well-formed propositional signs they contribute, the way '0' contributes to Arithmetic, to language's expressive possibilities.

Like Wittgenstein, Lessing has a special interest in the identifying properties of tautological propositions – namely, that they can be recognized by their form alone (as Wittgenstein notes at 6.127, 'Every tautology itself shows that it is a tautology') and that the unconditional truths they reveal do not have anything to do with experience. Tautologies have attracted Lessing's attention because he understands that if the propositions of the Old Testament are tautological, they are also purely logical. What conclusions they offer are reached through calculation, not experiment. The propositions of the Old Testament are in other words not like the propositions of natural science but like the propositions of *mathematics* – which, precisely because what they shed light on can't be confirmed by experience

¹⁸ Wittgenstein's remarks at 4.462 further support the opening claim of 4.461 that tautology and contradiction *show* that they say nothing, or do not stand in a 'presenting relation' to the actual world: 'Tautology and contradiction are not pictures of the reality (*der Wirklichkeit*)' he writes. 'They present no possible state of affairs. For the one allows *every* possible state of affairs, the other *none*'.

any more than it can be refuted by it, are better described as equations.

Lessing's rather astonishing insight seems to be that the Old Testament is not full of arguments or attempts to persuade but equations. Equations are operations intended to show up the substitutability of different expressions (for example 2×2 on the one side of the = sign, 4 on the other) without changing their truth-value and without making any other kind of assertion. Because the results of equations are self-evident or do not require explanation or proof, it is understood that equations do not 'say anything' or convey any information about reality. Thus the crucial point of Lessing's view that the Old Testament is 'throughout full of tautologies' is this: when Lessing suggests that the Old Testament's propositions are tautological or function like equations, he is saying that these propositions lack what philosophers call 'assertoric force' or 'propositional content'. They do not stand in what Wittgenstein calls a 'presenting relation' to actual reality. Because they function like equations, the tautological propositions of the Old Testament are pseudo-propositions.¹⁹

On the other hand, although tautological propositions present no possible state of affairs, it is possible by means of these operations involving no more than interchanges of expressions to reveal a pattern of meaningful relationships or *enable* meaningful propositions to be stated. That is what Wittgenstein's friend Paul Engelmann argues when he compares tautologies to mathematical equations. 'A tautology is not a meaningful proposition (i.e. one with a content),' writes Engelmann, 'yet it can be an indispensable intellectual device, an instrument that can help us – if used correctly in grasping reality, that is in grasping facts – to arrive at insights difficult or impossible to attain by other means'.²⁰ As Engelmann reports,

Mathematics, according to Wittgenstein, is a method of logic, and – like all logical propositions – its expressions are tautologies.

Logic *enables* meaningful propositions to be stated, but there are no meaningful propositions of logic itself. Mathematics

¹⁹ See the *Tractatus*, 4.462: 'In the tautology the conditions of agreement with the world – the presenting relations – cancel one another, so that it stands in no presenting relation to reality' and 6.2: 'The propositions of mathematics are equations, and therefore pseudo-propositions'.

²⁰ Engelmann's explanation of why an equation is a mathematical tautology forms part of his explication of the *Tractatus*, as he had it from Wittgenstein when they spent time together in Olmutz in 1916. Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 105–106.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

constitutes a method that does not teach us anything new about the content of propositions. What it does teach us is to manipulate expressions by substitution in such a way as to throw their structure into relief and to cast it in the desired form, which was latent in the original meaningful proposition...

It is possible, then, by means of these operations, involving no more than such interchanges of expressions, to arrive at final forms of expressions which are psychologically more effective than the original expressions in revealing a pattern of relationships. This is precisely what constitutes the value of mathematics to science.²¹

As we might also say, pseudo-propositions or propositions that function as equations are valuable components of language. Like equations, we use them to reveal patterns of relationships, which they do *without* our having to know or say about the sentence what is a representation of what—without, in other words, our having to analyze the sentence. Of course it is also the case that pseudo-propositions or equations are only valuable if we do *not* conceive of them as propositions that ‘say something’.

Perhaps only Wittgenstein could have seen so immediately that for Lessing, the propositions of the Old Testament work the way equations do. If the tautological propositions in this book, like the equations in mathematics, are pseudo-propositions, then they don’t teach readers anything that has to do with what we might call the ‘content’ of the proposition, anything that has to do with whether what actually happens is this or that. What they do teach us is to ‘imagine expressions by substitution in such a way as to throw their structure into relief,’ as Engelmann explains. We see, for example, the way in which ‘God is the maker of all things’ has the same structure as $2 \times 2 = 4$, and so why the unconditional truth this equation offers is not accessible to investigation through the senses.

Consider the kind of proposition one does *not* find in the Old Testament, a proposition that has a content or says something or is either true or false, for example, ‘There is a God.’ Lessing’s assessment of the Old Testament turns on the difference between a proposition like this one, a proposition that says something, i.e.,

²¹ Ibid., 105–6. I am indebted to the philosopher David Charles McCarty and Yeshiva University undergraduate honors student Leah Goldberg for helping me to understand the ways in which tautologies have the qualities of equations $p(q)$ but do not have an entirely symmetrical relationship with equations ($p = q$) as I mistakenly assumed in an early draft of this paper.

the kind of proposition found in the natural sciences, and a proposition that says nothing, the kind of tautological proposition of which the Old Testament is full. Tautological or pseudo-propositions like 'God is the maker of all things' say nothing because the sentence isn't sustained by the way its terms pick out existing entities but, as it were, by the force of its own style. As a result we say that the pseudo-propositions of the Old Testament are content-less or void of consequence; there is no thing or referent that they denote. And yet as separate or individual declarative sentences they can be effectual at revealing patterns. They have what Lessing calls a 'negative perfection', or do nothing to block the path to truth. Because they are not a means by which a person offers or obtains information about the world, it is fair to call these pseudo-propositions 'senseless'—but we must remember that all that really means is that what lessons one draws from them are not related to the way the pseudo-proposition's terms pick out existing entities but the way its predicate modifies its subject. Readers of the pseudo-proposition 'God is the maker of all things' are not asked, and do not need to answer, what God is; rather they are thrust into relationship with 'God' (as the maker of all things) the way they are thrust into relationship with '4' (as what has the same value as 2×2). The way each expression, 'God', and 'the maker of all things', throws the other into relief is what allows the pseudo-proposition to contribute to thought.

The lesson Wittgenstein draws from this insight is that the tautological propositions that fill the pages of the Old Testament are not propositions proper. Where, in the Old Testament, readers expect to find sentences that contain assertions (e.g. 'There is a God'), they in fact find sentences designed to be elucidatory *without* saying anything about the nature of the subjects that figure in them (e.g., 'God is the maker of all things'). And perhaps Wittgenstein sees, too, why this discovery ought to come as a relief to readers of every religious persuasion. As Lessing says, the absence in the Old Testament of a body of ideas taught to people as truthful or correct needn't make the Old Testament any less true—'notwithstanding the absence of these doctrines', notes Lessing, 'the account of miracles and prophecies may be perfectly true—but it does make it *unconditionally* true, and in *that* way, 'nothing but a book.' Each so-called proposition in the Old Testament invites thinking *only* when readers use it to understand 'what is the case' in the picture (the thought) the proposition has—logically—constructed; that is, when readers recognize it for a pseudo or *logical* proposition. As Wittgenstein writes in a comment that gives many logicians pause, 'to understand a

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

proposition means to know what is the case, if it is true. (One can therefore understand it without knowing whether it is true or not.)'²²

Thus to call the Old Testament 'nothing but a book' isn't to reduce it. It is only to insist that the education it provides is made possible by the logical form of its propositional signs—that the pseudo-propositions of the Old Testament are not the significant propositions of natural science but the logical propositions of mathematics. And because logical (what Wittgenstein calls 'philosophical'), they are not literal. Propositional signs that do not stick to the facts or adhere strictly to what can be shown to exist or to have happened must be read with what Wittgenstein calls 'understanding'. They are the kinds of propositional signs that fill the pages of *books*. Hence my suggestion in what follows that the *Tractatus*' literary quality is not simply the result of its austere poetic style,²³ but derives from its most singular feature: the way Wittgenstein makes clear in this work that a propositional sign is a 'picture', by which he means that a propositional sign is a *logical* portrayal of its meaning. When Wittgenstein demonstrates how the whole propositional sign, 'like a living picture', presents what he calls the 'atomic fact' or un-analyzable state of affairs, he calls attention to the momentous realization that the way the propositional sign shows its meaning or puts forward for consideration what it pictures is *internal*, or located within the sign.²⁴ This certainty about propositional signs changes what Wittgenstein calls 'the task of philosophy', since the effort of understanding we feel ourselves required to make can no longer involve the most philosophically taxing aspect of analyzing propositions: settling the way a referent is referred to in an expression.²⁵ Wittgenstein's great insight was to see that the propositional signs of our language are able to bring something to mind *without* saying what is a representation of what.

Thinking about the *Tractatus* in company with what Lessing says about the Old Testament has an immediate result, then, particularly when large numbers of Wittgenstein's readers continue to think of his first book not as literary or educative but as an explanatory text. When these readers mistakenly argue, what is more, that Wittgenstein went about systematically trying to draw conclusions from the basic

²² *Tractatus*, 4.024.

²³ Regarding Wittgenstein's poetic style we might say, for example, that the density and cadence of his remarks both encourage a reader's feeling of having grasped his meaning and make holding on to that feeling impossible.

²⁴ *Tractatus*, 4.031–4.032.

²⁵ *Notebooks*, 3.9.14.

premises he introduced until, cornered by his own logic, he no longer could – until he was forced to ‘abandon his own theory of meaning’, to admit defeat (on the matter of having solved the problems he had chosen to consider), to change his mind, etc., and to take up, in place of the ‘attractive but ultimately unsatisfactory’ conviction that ‘propositions were pictures of reality’, the ‘critique of language’ for which he has become so well known.²⁶

In the following remarks I entertain the very different view that Wittgenstein *never* held that the world was the dominant partner in its relations with language, and so had no need to fundamentally change his impression of the logic of our language. I show how he too writes a book designed to educate, particularly those philosophers who he thought had failed to grasp the nature of propositional signs and thus the function and structure of language. And I suggest that the *Tractatus* is best understood when it is read as a Primer, a consciously crafted learning text, whose purpose is to encourage readers to think for themselves and provide them (by way of its sentences, what Wittgenstein calls ‘the data of philosophy’) with the means to do so.

2

Wittgenstein’s feeling that the nature of propositional signs (and thus the logic of language) has been misunderstood is triggered by one of his own characteristically reorienting questions: why, he wonders, should ‘what is said’ by a proposition be of interest to *philosophers*? For Wittgenstein, the failure to consider that question results in a glaring omission in the writing of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, the logicians with whom Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, felt himself in conversation.

Wittgenstein was stimulated to write the *Tractatus* by his study of the works of Frege and Russell, as he writes in his Preface, and thinking of Wittgenstein’s first book of logic as beginning from a formally

²⁶ This view of the *Tractatus* is relatively widespread, though in order to represent the position I have here selected phrases from David Pears’ *Paradox and Platitude in Wittgenstein’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–2, and x. The description of Wittgenstein’s ‘attractive but ultimately unsatisfactory’ view that ‘propositions were pictures of reality’ is from the back cover of D. F. Pears’ and B. F. McGuinness’ translation of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London and New York: Routledge, 1961/1974).

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

conceived response from a keenly perceptive student to his admired teachers can be rather useful to the work of reading it, since as Paul Engelmann notes, Wittgenstein ‘carefully refrained in the *Tractatus* from referring directly to the history of philosophy; he even avoided, for the same reasons, any explicit mention of the traditional problems in philosophy’ and in the work ‘confined himself – rightly in view of its form – to giving answers to questions on what he had to communicate’.²⁷

What Wittgenstein felt he had to communicate was this: when propositional signs are conceived of in terms of what they *say*, the complete analysis of propositional signs has as a necessary precondition an investigation into the relationship between *signs* (the thoughts, words, or sentences of a language) and *things* (that which they refer to or represent). That is, the way the referent is referred to in the expression feels like something the logician has to explain. However, Wittgenstein argues, this work is in excess of what is needed, or constitutes activity that goes beyond the scope of logic. Doing work in excess of what’s needed has serious consequences in logic since it introduces problems or difficulties to the matter being considered.²⁸ Consequently, and with some finality, Wittgenstein puts the matter this way: if the rules which govern expression in language can operate *at all*, if we can have correctly formed sentences that operate according to the rules or accepted structures of syntax, then any question about the way the referent is referred to in the expression – or in other words the ‘whole theory of things, properties, etc.’ on which Frege and particularly Russell had been at work – is as Wittgenstein says, ‘superfluous’.²⁹ Wittgenstein frees philosophy from theorizing about things simply by pointing out that a sentence is a *logical* portrayal of its meaning, and *only* a logical portrayal of it.³⁰

In the *Notebooks 1914–1916*, a most valuable resource for what it reveals of the working out of those ideas given definitive form in

²⁷ Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 106, 115. Wittgenstein always contended that the work of philosophy was undertaken in discussion, and the view that the *Tractatus* was intended for a very particular audience with whom Wittgenstein hoped to speak does go some way toward explaining why Wittgenstein was so depressed when both Frege and Russell failed to understand it.

²⁸ As Wittgenstein writes in *Notebooks 1912–1914*, ‘if logic can be completed without answering certain questions, then it *must* be completed *without* answering them’ (4.9.14).

²⁹ *Notebooks*, 22.8.14.

³⁰ *Notebooks*, 19.9.14 and 27.9.14.

the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein assesses critically his teachers' interest in what Russell, in his introduction to the *Tractatus*, calls 'the relations which are necessary between words and things in any language'. Frege had given legs to the logical investigation of the relation between signs and things when in an 1892 paper he distinguished between an expression's 'sense' and its 'reference' – standard translations of Frege's terms *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. If the 'reference' of an expression is the entity it stands for, its 'sense' is the way the reference is referred to in the expression; the term '*Sinn*' or 'sense' was initially introduced by Frege in order to solve the puzzle of identity.

However the strongest of what Wittgenstein evidently thought were corrections to errors made by his teachers had to do with an insight he knew had not entered either Frege's *Grundgesetze* or Russell's *Principia Mathematica*: What one wishes to express can be expressed simply by putting it in subject-predicate form. What Wittgenstein points out is that the effort to offer a complete analysis of certain expressions has neglected to account for the fact that 'logic must take care of itself', as he says, or that a propositional sign is a *logical* portrayal of its meaning.³¹ This, the leitmotiv of the *Tractatus* and its accompanying *Notebooks*, means that we are able to grasp what is the case in an expression on the basis of what Wittgenstein calls its internal agreement. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein shows why an expression's internal agreement – *not* the relationship between *signs* and *things*, but the one between *signs* and *things signified* – is what should interest philosophers. What ought to be of interest is 'how propositions hang together internally. How the *propositional bond* comes into existence'.³² Wittgenstein points out that investigating the relationship between signs and things cannot help the logician answer the question he is obliged to answer: namely, 'What is the ground of our – certainly well founded – confidence that we shall be able to express any sense we like in our two-dimensional script?' the kind of 'old, old' question about the possibility of discourse with which philosophy began and

³¹ 'Logic must take care of itself' is the first line of the *Notebooks* and appears in the *Tractatus* at 5.473. The insight that a proposition shows what it pictures before the speakers of a language subject it to any kind of assessment is as Patricia Hanna and Bernard Harrison suggest, the 'leitmotiv' of the *Tractatus* and its accompanying volume, *Notebooks 1914–1916. Word and World: Practice and the Foundations of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2–3.

³² *Notebooks*, 20.9.14.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

from which, Wittgenstein evidently believed, it could ill-afford to disentangle itself.³³

Insisting that a propositional sign is a logical portrayal of its meaning is only to say that what holds it together is an internal agreement between subject and predicate. Since what we are able to express can be expressed simply by putting it in subject-predicate form, what ought to concern the logician is not how to use sentences so as to convey truth rather than falsehood, but how sentences are capable of truth. According to Wittgenstein, a proposition may be true or not, but 'in order for a proposition to be true it must first and foremost be *capable* of truth, and this is all that concerns logic'.³⁴

The fact is, we *can* express ourselves in two-dimensional script (i.e. of the page, or without worldly referent) and Wittgenstein thinks the logician ought to be able to say how we can.³⁵ As Wittgenstein shows in the *Tractatus* and the accompanying *Notebooks*, understanding how we can express any sense we like, even when our expressions are *sinnlos* or lack the means of referring to referents, amounts to understanding the logic of our language. It means grasping, firstly, that the ability to express oneself doesn't depend on an external agreement between signs and things, but an internal agreement between signs and things signified. Secondly, that in an expression, 'sign' and 'thing signified' are logically identical.³⁶ And thirdly, that the fact that sign and thing signified are identical in respect to their total logical content is the reason logic lies 'at the bottom of all the sciences' as Wittgenstein writes in his *Philosophical Investigations*, or why there is nothing more fundamental than logic.³⁷

These circumstances, combined, lead Wittgenstein to his most startling conclusion: that 'in the proposition a world is as it were

³³ *Notebooks*, 20.9.14.

³⁴ *Notebooks*, 29.10.14.

³⁵ 'Logic takes care of itself; all we have to do is to look and see how it does it.' *Notebooks*, 13.10.14. Cf. *Tractatus*, 5.473.

³⁶ As Wittgenstein writes in the *Notebooks*, 'the logical identity between sign and thing signified consists in its not being permissible to recognize more or less in the sign than in what it signifies.' (4.9.14) Or, since a sign is only a sign if it has sense, a sign and the situation it purports to represent – how things stand if the sign has sense – must be indistinguishable in respect to their total logical content.

³⁷ *Philosophical Investigations*, §89. That logic lies at the bottom of all the sciences is also what Wittgenstein means to indicate when he writes in the *Tractatus* that language itself prevents any logical mistake. 'That logic is apriori consists in the fact that we *cannot* think illogically' (5.4731).

put together experimentally'.³⁸ What allows the propositional sign to picture a state of affairs doesn't depend on the way some parts of it refer to things outside of the sentence, things that exist in the world, as it were, but the way the parts of the sentences (parts to which we have *given* meaning, and in this way made representative) combine. If it seems like there are some exceptions to this principle, for example those sentences Wittgenstein calls the 'sentences of natural science' (*Sätze der Naturwissenschaft*), sentences like 'this chair is brown', it is because these sentences are not truly *propositional signs*, that is, sentences whose subjects and predicates are combined in such a way so as to form a *definite* picture. To put it bluntly, the sentences of natural science are not properly part of what we call 'language', since it is impossible to discover the ground of our confidence that in such cases we have expressed ourselves in the sense we mean. Wittgenstein reminds us that,

A proposition like 'this chair is brown' seems to say something enormously complicated, for if we wanted to express this proposition in such a way that nobody could raise objections to it on grounds of ambiguity, it would have to be infinitely long.³⁹

³⁸ *Notebooks*, 29.9.14: 'In the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally'. Cf. *Tractatus*, 4.031: 'In the proposition a state of affairs is, as it were, put together for the sake of experiment'. If this idea is as essential to the work of the *Tractatus* as I believe it to be, we ought to give serious consideration to what is misleading about the way Pears and McGuinness translate this line: 'In a proposition a situation is, as it were, constructed by way of experiment'. The strangeness of this translation has to do with the way Wittgenstein's remark has been put in the service of empiricism. One does not construct a proposition *by* experiment, or by way of worldly trials. Rather, and as Wittgenstein's says, a proposition is put together experimentally, which is to say it is put together *without* checking it against reality. We can assume Wittgenstein employed this non-empirical use of 'experiment' because it was the version he learned from Claude Bernard, whose *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* Wittgenstein considered required reading for students of logic. 'In teaching man' writes the great 19th century physiologist, 'experimental science results in lessening his pride more and more by proving to him every day that primary causes, like the objective reality of things, will be hidden from him forever and that he can only know relations. Here is, indeed, the one goal of all the sciences'. Claude Bernard, *An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (New York: Dover Publications, 1957), 28.

³⁹ *Notebooks*, 19.9.14 That the signs of our language do indeed have *definite* meanings is, Wittgenstein insists, perhaps their most interesting feature. Moreover the scandal that the sentences of natural science should

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

As a result, such sentences are, as Wittgenstein notes, of no interest to philosophy.⁴⁰ In other words, the sentences that have traditionally held the *most* interest for philosophers, those in which the eligible noun phrases have a certain semantic function, namely, that of referring to something, Wittgenstein disqualifies on the grounds that they have no grounds, no foundation, *in logic*.⁴¹ What Wittgenstein tries to interest philosophers in instead is the grammar of the subject-predicate form. Grammatically, a subject-predicate sentence consists of any noun phrase and verb phrase in combination; *combination* being the limiting condition for sense.

As Wittgenstein is able to show in the *Tractatus*, the internal agreement of the subject-predicate form is what allows the proposition to be expressive – what gives the whole proposition the feeling of an assertion. But as Wittgenstein carefully explains, ‘The proposition only asserts something, in so far as it is a picture’.⁴² As a result, instead of saying ‘This proposition has such and such sense’, we should say, ‘This proposition represents such and such state of affairs’.⁴³ Understanding Wittgenstein’s claim that a proposition is a picture means understanding that in remarks like these, the phrase ‘state of affairs’ describes the situation that comprises the *picture*, not a situation in the world – what is commonly conceived of as *what* is pictured. That is what Wittgenstein means when he says that ‘The proposition is a picture of its state of affairs, only in so far as it is *logically* articulated.’⁴⁴

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein shows what is fundamentally misguided about trying to analyze a propositional sign with a view to determining what each of its parts correspond to. There is no point in trying to discover the way a referent is referred to in an expression since, as we have already said, ‘if *everything* that needs to be shown

be so unclear in this regard – a critical point Wittgenstein learned from Frege – is what ought to make them utterly uninteresting to philosophers. Though it is clearly mischievous to say that the sentences of natural science are not properly part of what we call ‘language,’ I mean here to indicate that a scientist’s view of language is – in broad strokes – a view according to which the central business of language is to make true or false assertions.

⁴⁰ *Tractatus*, 6.53.

⁴¹ To be fair, it was from Frege that Wittgenstein first learned to distinguish propositions proper (the ‘sentences of natural science’) from elucidations; it was *Frege* who taught Wittgenstein to think about sentences.

⁴² *Tractatus*, 4.03.

⁴³ *Tractatus*, 4.031.

⁴⁴ *Tractatus*, 4.032 italics added.

is shown by the existence of subject-predicate sentences', or 'if syntactical rules for functions can be set up *at all*', then 'the whole theory of things, properties, etc, is superfluous', and 'the task of philosophy' is not what Wittgenstein's principal teachers had supposed. So it is by this considered step that Wittgenstein begins his campaign against 'the whole theory of things', or launches a study of signs that spells out, unassailably and definitively, the end of semantics. What Russell calls 'the relations which are necessary between words and things in any language' is precisely what Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, is determined to be quiet about.

As might be expected, Wittgenstein's decision to remain silent on a subject that proved so troublesome to his teachers – the attempt to put forward a complete analysis of a propositional sign – has become the subject of increasingly confused inquiry. Though as I see it, Wittgenstein's 'silence' is *not* one of his book's mysteries, but the result of his straightforward or business-like approach to solving problems, even, or especially, when solving philosophy's problems.

After stating with some precision his book's *raison d'être* in the opening lines of his Preface,⁴⁵ Wittgenstein offers a brief explanation of its overall conclusion: 'What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.' Regrettably, a few readers are so gripped by this hint and what they take to be the inexplicable curiosity of the phrase that they forget it appears as a gloss on what it means to misunderstand the nature of propositional signs. The 'misunderstanding of the logic of our language' to which Wittgenstein obliquely refers in his Preface involves thinking that propositional signs stand in need of complete analysis, and consequently that the logician's task is to explain the way the referent is referred to in the expression. Not only is this task quite hopeless, as Wittgenstein points out, since in order to analyze the proposition 'in such a way that nobody could raise objections to it on grounds of ambiguity', the analysis 'would have to be infinitely long'; it is also misconceived, given that the real question is how propositions hang together internally. Accordingly, performing a complete analysis of propositional signs is what Wittgenstein will not do; what, as he says, he will be 'silent' about where others are 'just gassing'. Philosophers' general inability to know what to do with this, the most famous of Wittgenstein's hints, is regrettable, as I've suggested, for the reason that *not* understanding that the

⁴⁵ 'This book deals with the problems of philosophy and shows, as I believe, that the method of formulating these problems rests on the misunderstanding of the logic of our language.'

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

Tractatus is strictly a 'study of sign-language', as Wittgenstein puts it,⁴⁶ an investigation of the logical identity of sign and thing signified, makes it possible to believe with Bertrand Russell that Wittgenstein is interested in 'the relations which are necessary between words and things', as Russell writes in his misleading introduction to Wittgenstein's book, and thus to misunderstand this book completely.

Though the feeling of having misunderstood the *Tractatus* can seem either incidental or inevitable, for Wittgenstein, not understanding his book is synonymous with not reading it. More exactly, the possibility of *understanding* his book is the purpose for which it was written. In this way, Wittgenstein's opening note that his book's 'object would be attained if it afforded pleasure to one who read it with understanding' prefigures his promise to von Ficker that his first book of logic offers an instance of writing that is 'strictly philosophical and at the same time literary'. Wittgenstein's account of the purpose of his work suggests that the reason he has authored a *book* was not to 'spare other people the trouble of thinking', as he writes in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, but to offer someone the opportunity of making understanding the object of their reflection.⁴⁷ Reading with understanding precludes complacency, passivity, and self-satisfaction since it requires that one struggle to understand an author—the great value of books being that they have not made themselves. Though Wittgenstein did hold this view of books' practical use, many of the philosophers with whom he wished to speak did not, with the result that few of Wittgenstein's contemporary readers understood that his book was designed to cultivate and educate, rather than simply inform, or that its desired effect wasn't to add to philosophers' stockpile of information about the world.

What I mean to suggest is that Wittgenstein had some experience with writing's too heavy responsibility, the burden of authorship. 'It is VERY hard not to be understood by a single soul!' Wittgenstein tells Bertrand Russell, when none of the people he admired understood a word of his *Tractatus*. Of course Russell also

⁴⁶ *Tractatus*, 4.1121.

⁴⁷ In his Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: 'I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own'. What should be clear to readers is the trouble Wittgenstein took, in both his books, to demonstrate the way in which understanding is itself an educative or corrective practice – that the *event* of understanding is not only something that philosophy needs to defend, but is itself a way of doing philosophy.

failed to read the *Tractatus* with understanding, and although Wittgenstein could not publish his book without it, he hated Russell's introduction: 'There's so much of it that I'm not in agreement with', Wittgenstein tells Russell, 'both where you're critical of me and also where you're simply trying to elucidate my point of view'.⁴⁸ It was precisely this kind of failure to know or be able to explain the nature of his work that goads Wittgenstein to remark that his book's object would be attained if it afforded pleasure to one who read it with understanding. The opening note of Wittgenstein's book consequently sounds a warning not present in the Old Testament, since it reminds readers that in every book after the first Book, the question of an author's readership has itself become a kind of problem, the object of an intense concern.⁴⁹ 'Reading' the Old Testament means undergoing its lessons, becoming drawn into it as an event. (The first of the Old Testament's lessons, for example, is that what makes coming to an understanding possible is language: that *language* is the medium where understanding takes place.) But because they wrongly conceive of language as the business of making true or false statements, Wittgenstein's audience is divided, unhearing. The people he writes *to*, those who understand him, are not those he writes *for* or hopes to educate: those who misunderstand the logic of our language. In no way obedient to his writing ('hearing' and 'obeying' being the same word, in many languages) Wittgenstein's audience is thus free to ascribe to him, for example, the view that 'propositions were pictures of reality', and so turn his carefully wrought sentences into the sentences of natural science; sentences that aim to accurately describe the way things are; sentences with which *Wittgenstein* felt he had nothing to do.

3

Logic, as Wittgenstein's teachers practiced it, had undergone a marked change from the depth-grammatical investigation Plato undertook into a study of certain features of the natural world. But when Wittgenstein insists that 'logic must take care of itself' – the

⁴⁸ As quoted in Ray Monk, *How To Read Wittgenstein* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 33.

⁴⁹ For more explicit discussion of the burden of authorship, see Kenneth Dauber's analysis of American writing from its beginnings to the Civil War, *The Idea of Authorship in America: Democratic Poetics from Franklin to Melville* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

basis of his discovery that a proposition is a picture – he reverses this trend. Wittgenstein’s way of working in philosophy is thus not in keeping with that of the new logicians, which is what Wittgenstein makes clear when, in his first book of logic, he refuses to maintain his teachers’ distinction between written or spoken sentences and the special kind of sentences philosophers like to call ‘propositions’.

A common view in philosophy is that a proposition is neither just what is specified by ‘sentence’ and nothing more, nor some entity other than a sentence. A proposition is a certain sort of sentence used in a certain sort of way. In fact some modern logicians argue that we needn’t be concerned with the *sentence*, a mere linguistic entity, but with the proposition, since the proposition is that part of a sentence that *says* something. The proposition is the propositional sign or sentence in its projective relation to the world.⁵⁰ However a sentence that is also a proposition, a sentence conceived of in terms of what it says, is a sentence thought to ‘contain its sense’, as Wittgenstein notes critically in the *Tractatus*. Wittgenstein has to insist that a proposition is a picture because, as it turns out, a proposition contains only the *form* of its sense – it cannot contain its sense.⁵¹

Of course, a sentence that contains its sense is exactly what Russell means by a ‘proposition’. In order to distance himself from this view of propositional signs, Wittgenstein does something ingenious: he begins the *Tractatus* with a sentence. He begins the *Tractatus* with a propositional sign that is not, as philosophers conceive it, a proposition. He begins the *Tractatus* by saying ‘The world is everything that is the case’ – knowing, as he later says, that this is a proposition that *says* nothing. He uses the occasion of his first sentence to show what he *cannot* say.

Or as Lessing’s remarks on the Old Testament help us to see, Wittgenstein begins his *Tractatus* with a *tautology*, a pseudo-proposition. In this way Wittgenstein makes visible or brings into view what kind of book he has *not* written – namely, a comprehensive treatment of a subject or basis for study that starts, as Russell suggests, ‘from the principles of Symbolism and the relations which are necessary between words and things in any language’ in order to show how ‘traditional philosophy and traditional solutions arise out of ignorance of the principles of Symbolism and out of misuse of language’.⁵² In contrast to Russell’s expectations,

⁵⁰ *Tractatus*, 3.12.

⁵¹ *Tractatus*, 3.12–3.141.

⁵² Bertrand Russell, ‘Introduction’ to the *Tractatus*, 7, tr. Ogden.

Wittgenstein's writing highlights how mistaken is the notion that words and things are necessarily related, and relies on his own study of language – the language we habitually employ; the language we do not as Russell says 'misuse' but as Wittgenstein says '*misunderstand*' – to prove why. Wittgenstein's decision to write the kind of book which affords pleasure to those who 'read it with understanding' is made clear by his aggressive opening sentence, one that shows what it cannot say and so can't be what philosophers often take it to be: a proposition in the conventional sense, used to prove other propositions put forward in support of a particular point of view.

In the *Monist* lectures, Russell gives an account of the way *he* begins work in philosophy – and so, presumably, how he thinks philosophical work ought to begin: 'I propose...always to begin any argument that I have to make by appealing to data which will be quite ludicrously obvious'.⁵³ Russell is predisposed to imagine that Wittgenstein also begins the *Tractatus* with what he thinks is a truism, a truth 'so obvious that it is also laughable to mention', as he says – or that Wittgenstein's claim that 'the world is everything that is the case' is axiomatic, the basis of the philosophical thinking to come.

Certainly, if Wittgenstein thought his first proposition was self-evidently true, the *Tractatus* would indeed begin the way a textbook does, at the point from which the study of a subject begins. If a textbook, its excellence would be measured by such criteria as the relevance of evidence, the force and coherence of reasons and argument, and the probity and soundness of justification – or both the work and its appraisal would reveal what Walter Okshevsky (borrowing an expression from Richard Rorty who borrows it from Heidegger) calls an "epistemologically-centered" prejudice'.⁵⁴ If Wittgenstein believed his first proposition was axiomatic, then philosophers would be right to think of the work as a treatise, the kind of systematic treatment of a subject that erects itself on the basis of its first proposition or uses as the means of proving subsequent propositions the self-evidence of its earliest and most elementary propositions. In

⁵³ Bertrand Russell, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell: The philosophy of logical atomism and other essays, 1914–19* (London: George Allen & Unwin), 163. Also quoted in Patricia Hanna and Bernard Harrison, *Word and World*, 74. Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Notebooks* suggest that he was both amused and dismayed by Russell's sense of what was self-evident or what 'goes without saying'.

⁵⁴ Walter C. Okshevsky, 'Wittgenstein on Agency and Ability: Consequences for Rationality and Criticalness,' *Philosophy of Education*, 1992. See also Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 11.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

this way a treatise garners support for its conclusions from an initial or original appeal to 'ludicrously obvious' data, or demonstrates the flawless efficiency that allows it to be systematic. Its end recasts its beginnings as the beginning of an end,⁵⁵ or turns an arbitrary commencement (undertaken midstream, as it were, since based upon what Frege calls the philosopher's 'mere moral conviction, supported by a mass of successful applications') into the specific point at which an argument is thought to begin.⁵⁶ A philosophical treatise, as a result, often contributes to the confusion it was manufactured to settle.

In order to avoid this problem, Wittgenstein begins the *Tractatus* with an insight he felt readers had to work toward, not an idea that at the outset could be easily accepted. We suspect this because the terms Wittgenstein uses to make his claim, as Michael Morris nicely points out, are terms readers have no notion of, prior to achieving some grasp of all the rest of what he says. 'If the claim were a definitional beginning to the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, we would expect the terms which are used to state the definition to be clear themselves, in advance of the philosophy which follows. But they are not. We do not yet understand what something "that is the case" is. We will know very shortly (in 1.1) that it is a "fact", and not a "thing"; but at this stage we have little idea what the difference between "facts" and "things" is, and this is something which cannot really be made clear independently of the general conception of language which follows in later sections'.⁵⁷

Saying that Wittgenstein doesn't begin his work in logic the way Russell would begin it, however, isn't to say that the *Tractatus* offers no argument, or that it embodies a rejection of a way of working in philosophy in which views are expressed, sometimes most vehemently. On the contrary, Wittgenstein's first book of logic 'builds up like Euclid', as the critic William Empson has written, about another book that contains an argument some critics seem unable to feel, even when the author tells them he is making one.⁵⁸ His remarks are epigrammatic,

⁵⁵ This reorienting phrase is from Kenneth Dauber's essay, 'Beginning at the Beginning in Genesis', from his co-edited volume (with Walter Jost) *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 331.

⁵⁶ Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, second revised edition, (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1980), 1.

⁵⁷ Morris, *Wittgenstein and the Tractatus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 22.

⁵⁸ Empson is writing about Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (William Empson, 'Tom Jones' in *Fielding*, ed. Ronald Paulson, Prentice Hall, 1962, 135.) His idea that a great book becomes more interesting when you

or demonstrate what Lessing would call both a positive and negative perfection (in that they contain hints out of which the, as yet, held back truth allows itself to be developed, and do not say anything that would get in the way of that truth). However, as Morris writes, 'Wittgenstein continually presents some epigrammatic claims as being logically dependent on others. If there is a logical dependence, there ought to be some argument which makes that dependence clear'.⁵⁹ No doubt the feeling that Wittgenstein is building a case is what gives the *Tractatus* its radiance.

Nevertheless, not thinking of Wittgenstein's first remark as the first remark in a treatise restores to this remark its natural tension, its air of having illuminated what cannot be asserted—snuffed out when what is proposed is thought laughably straightforward. If 'the world is everything that is the case' isn't something Wittgenstein considers self-evidently true or easily apparent but a kind of tautology, a way of *grasping* facts, then rather than prop up the rest of the work this remark becomes an indispensable intellectual device. Something is shown in the propositional sign even though nothing is said in it. Propositional signs that are also tautologies—and all of Wittgenstein's 'propositions' 1–7 are tautologies—show something but say nothing.⁶⁰

There is therefore something remarkably knowing about the way Wittgenstein begins the logical-philosophical investigation he calls his study of sign-language. Any reader able to advance from the propositional sign 1 to 1.1 will have conceded not what a world is but what a *propositional sign* is. Conceded, that is, and simply by knowing how to read it, that the constraints on sense in a propositional sign are syntactic, not semantic: that signs have signification without anything like reference to or acquaintance with things. Even before we can

attend to its thesis can still be put to useful service in relation to those philosophers (sometimes described as presenting 'a new Wittgenstein', or a 'resolute' reading) who seem unable to hear an argument in the *Tractatus*.

⁵⁹ Michael Morris, 11.

⁶⁰ The propositions/tautologies of the *Tractatus* are as follows:

1. The world is all that is the case.
2. What is the case—a fact—is the existence of states of affairs.
3. A logical picture of facts is a thought.
4. A thought is a proposition with a sense.
5. A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth-function of itself.)
6. The general form of a truth-function is $[\bar{p}, \bar{\xi}, N(\bar{\xi})]$. This is the general form of a proposition.
7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

assess what is said in the first sentence in Wittgenstein's book we verify, by showing we can read the sentence, the internal agreement on which its meaning depends—the agreement or conformity, not between what is asserted in the propositional sign and how things stand in the world, but between the propositional sign and what it signifies, where 'what it signifies' suggests what is *expressed* by a sign. The logical identity of sign and thing signified is what being able to read the proposition confirms.

This new way of reading – which is also the 'old, old' way – is what Wittgenstein sets in motion when he begins his book of logic with the kind of sentence we have come to expect from works of *literature*; the kind of sentence, that is, that one can grasp without knowing whether it is false or true, since understanding what it expresses only means knowing 'what is the case' if it is true.⁶¹

Naturally, the kind of sentence readers can understand without considering what is empirically the case is exactly the kind of sentence that most interested Lessing – for example, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'. The declarative sentence with which Genesis begins is evidently able to bring something to mind before readers affirm or deny, on the basis of whether what actually happened was this or that, what this sentence says. What makes this propositional sign capable of signifying has nothing to do with what actually happens because our ability to know 'what is the case' in the proposition if it is true, to grasp what it expresses, is decided *before* the question of whether what the proposition says is true can arise. It is clear, therefore, that this sentence derives its ability to bring something to mind not from the way its terms pick out existing entities, but from the way its predicate modifies its subject. The proposition's power to bring something to mind depends on the *arrangement* of its noun and verb phrases, not the way its meaning-bearing elements represent corresponding elements in the world – whatever is meant by 'God,' or 'the heavens' or 'the earth'.

Readers of Genesis' first sentence are unable to understand it when they think it contains its meaning; when rather than think of it as a sentence (which, like any other sentence, circles round and round on imaginary axes) they think of it as a proposition, and thus either false or true. They become equally unreceptive to Wittgenstein's first sentence when they believe it to be axiomatic rather than tautological. What these readers have failed to notice, of course, is that knowing how to use the noun phrase 'the world' in the *Tractatus*' opening line no more hinges on our ability to correlate it to an existing

⁶¹ *Tractatus*, 4.024.

entity than does 'God' in the sentence 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'.⁶² The fantasy that there are certain kinds of sentences that do more than other sentences is what from its very first line the *Tractatus* puts an end to.

4

Reading Lessing on the Bible crystallizes for Wittgenstein an idea he had, in the *Tractatus*, struggled to shape. When Lessing points out that the Old Testament is full of tautologies, propositions that, like all *logical* propositions, are properly understood only when thought of as expressions that do not say anything about reality – when he shows that the declarative sentences of the Old Testament are in fact *silent* about what cannot be said clearly – he in effect argues that even the most assertive or commanding of books is not made up of what *philosophers* call 'propositions' but what they call 'mere sentences'.

Having now considered the difference between propositions (the 'special kinds of sentences' that fill textbooks; the sentences of natural science) and the sentences of which *books* are made, it is worth noting that philosophers' habit of referring to Wittgenstein's 'propositions' more often than his 'sentences' has greatly contributed to their inability to hear his essential idea that propositional signs do not acquire their expressive possibilities through what they are able to assert. Simply because propositions have in philosophy traditionally been thought of as vehicles for saying things, and so *feel* more like vehicles for saying things, continuing to name Wittgenstein's *Sätze* 'propositions' turns Wittgenstein's innovation – his single but fundamental modification to the work of his teachers – on its head. '*Sätz*', in any case, the word conventionally translated in the English version of the *Tractatus* as 'proposition', is the word Wittgenstein uses to describe a well-formed sentence; a sentence in which a thought finds an

⁶² Perhaps that is harder to remember when, unlike the rallying call with which the *Notebooks* begin, 'logic must take care of itself', the opening declarative sentence of the *Tractatus* feels like a proposition of natural science – when what it 'says' (that the world is everything that is the case) appears to turn it into a proposition in the Russellian sense. Many readers are reassured by the idea that Wittgenstein's first proposition has assertoric content, or that unlike the tautological proposition 'logic must take care of itself' it doesn't circle round and round on imaginary axes – that it isn't sustained by the force of its own style.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

expression; that is, what speakers of English generally call 'a sentence'. As the philosopher David Charles McCarty has pointed out, in the *Tractatus*, "'Sätze'" may mean no more than "sentence".⁶³

Admittedly this is not the usual way of understanding Wittgenstein's early writing. Perhaps that is because it forces a view of the *Tractatus* that disassociates it from the tradition (one that emerges in the writing of Locke, Hume, or Russell) of using 'a critique of language' as an instrument of analysis. Here I have tried to show how Wittgenstein's work in logic involves a study of language that is not, in the usual sense, a critique of language. For although Wittgenstein famously says that 'all philosophy is "Critique of language"' (*Alle Philosophie ist 'Sprachkritik'*)⁶⁴ he puts the expression 'critique of language' in quotations, and follows this now backhanded remark with the parenthetical comment, 'though not at all in Mauthner's sense'.⁶⁵

Mauthner, as Rudolph Haller has shown, never tired of pointing out that language must be subjected to a critique, because language is a 'contingent phenomenon', subject to the 'chimeras and self-deceptions' that arise when we project our 'all-too-human concepts and categories upon nature'.⁶⁶ In Mauthner's sense, then, and in the mainly empiricist, science-oriented tradition from which he hails, a 'critique of language' presupposes the need for a criterion for meaningfulness that requires a non-analytic, meaningful sentence to be empirically viable. Such a critique, consequently, makes the words of our language 'mere memory-tags for the sensations given by our senses'.⁶⁷ This should give pause to those who are convinced that what Wittgenstein offers in the *Tractatus* is a 'critique of language' as philosophers have come to employ the term.

As an instrument of philosophical analysis, a 'critique of language' presumes that language is 'unfit for knowledge of the world'⁶⁸ because its use rests on experience. A critique of language is in a broad sense a critique of knowledge derived from the senses. But if

⁶³ David Charles McCarty, 'Undoubted truth'. *Philosophy of Education* 1992. Proceedings of the 48th Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, ed. Hanan Alexander (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 172–76.

⁶⁴ *Tractatus*, 4.0031, (tr., Ogden).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See Rudolph Haller's careful discussion of Mauthner in 'Philosophy and the Critique of Language: Wittgenstein and Mauthner', *Questions on Wittgenstein* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 57–73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

the use of language does not rest on ‘some kind of experience’, as Wittgenstein says, but on the *logic* of our language (since ‘the “experience” we need in order to understand logic is not that something or other is the state of things, but that something *is*: that, however, is *not* an experience’) then philosophy has lost the grounds for this kind of critical assessment.⁶⁹

Philosophers who continue to employ the phrase in Mauthner’s sense extend the kind of theorizing about things the *Tractatus* (indeed, all of literature) has shown to be superfluous. They continue to misunderstand why logic takes care of itself, or why the signifying ability of propositional signs has nothing to do with the relationship between meaning-bearing elements of a language and some class of entities envisaged as corresponding elements in the world.⁷⁰ And they fail to grasp how, in his first book of logic, Wittgenstein revolutionizes the study of language by redirecting it from its home in the sciences to its future in the humanities—which was, of course, also its birthplace.

Wittgenstein’s most decisive answer to the question of what literature has to teach philosophy is found where philosophers least expect it, and thus where they have in the main failed to discover it. This is not an answer that appears in the *Tractatus* (for where *in* a book is such an answer to be found?) but one that the whole of the book, the book itself, supplies. It follows that learning to see the *Tractatus* as ‘nothing but a book’ – for what its sentences are able to bring to mind, not for what they assert – right away yields the extent to which Wittgenstein’s first book of logic is an instance, as Wittgenstein has promised, of writing that is ‘strictly philosophical and at the same time literary’. If the *Tractatus* was really a textbook, then its value would depend on the way it meets with the current norms in the field of logic as currently defined – or perhaps, as a work of historical interest, the way it contributed to those norms. But since the *Tractatus* is a *book*, like many other books designed to encourage readers to restate their problems and redirect their energies, then its value depends on the fact that ‘in it thoughts are expressed’, as Wittgenstein writes in his preface, ‘and this value will be the greater the better the thoughts are expressed’.

From the first, the style of Wittgenstein’s sentences – sentences that are tautological where we expect them to be axiomatic, that

⁶⁹ *Notebooks*, 3.9.14, and *Tractatus*, 5.552.

⁷⁰ This way of describing the relationship that does not interest Wittgenstein is borrowed from Patricia Hanna and Bernard Harrison. *Word and World*, 3.

The *Tractatus* and the Old Testament

show what they cannot say – lead readers toward the conclusion that there *are* no propositions of logic or that propositional signs are of benefit only when surmounted.⁷¹ When at the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein says that readers who understand him will ‘surmount’ his individual sentences, he means that his book will be read with pleasure and understanding when his own propositional signs are used in a way that gets beyond the new logicians’ way of using them as assertions – that is, when his propositional signs are allowed to be nothing but sentences, together constituting nothing but a book.

What Wittgenstein intuits, of course, is that propositional signs or sentences that are *not* ‘more’ than sentences – the ‘propositions’ of the *Tractatus* and of logic and of mathematics – achieve more than the sentences of natural science because readers have to move themselves around in order to understand them. That is what Wittgenstein promises when he says that readers who surmount his propositions will see the world ‘aright’, as Pears and McGuiness aptly translate Wittgenstein’s ‘*richtig*’.⁷² (Though this must remain the subject of another essay, chief among the insights revealed by *surmounting* Wittgenstein’s *Sätze* – that is, reading them as *signs*, the sentences of logic, and not the propositions of science – is the clear perception that the world we live in is the world raised to a kind of ideal of itself. Seeing, as Wittgenstein will write in the *Philosophical Investigations*, that the world has *logic* at its foundation, or that logic lies beneath all the sciences, is the upshot of understanding the logic of language.) Propositions surmounted, Wittgenstein has cause to expect, become instruments that can help readers arrive at insights difficult or impossible to attain by other means. That the pseudo propositions of logic are also, and for the reason that they do not contain the means of referring to a referent, like the sentences of *literature* is an insight Wittgenstein has yet to be credited for. The *Tractatus* is literature and shows what literature is. Where else but in a book one must read or look *at* would we find an author’s promise that his readers must surmount or prevail over (*überwinden*) his sentences

⁷¹ The idea that there *are* no propositions of logic is Paul Engelmann’s summary of a point Wittgenstein repeatedly made when he verbally walked Engelmann through his work in the *Tractatus*. *Memoirs*, 102.

⁷² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: tr. Pears and McGuiness (New York: Routledge, 1961), 6.54.

K. L. Evans

if we are to understand him? Rather than saying something, sentences surmounted – climbed on or climbed over – offer perspicuous views.

K.L. EVANS (mail@klevans.org) is the author of *Whale!* (Minnesota, 2003) and the forthcoming *Melville's Moby-Dick: the Genesis of Comprehension*. Some of her recent essays on literature and philosophy can be found in *Stanley Cavell, Philosophy, Literature and Criticism*, *The Philosophy of Charlie Kaufman*, and *Wittgenstein Reading*. She lives in New York.