Nonsense and Mysticism in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

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1. The problem of how to read the *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein writes in the preface to his *Tractatus*[1] that

> [T]he aim of the book is to set a limit to thought, or rather − not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable…
> It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.

And the final proposition of the *Tractatus* says that

> What we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.

Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* is thus to draw the limits to thought by drawing the limits to language. At the end of the book, this aim seems to have been accomplished.

When examining the text, we find that most of it is concerned with the character of language and its relation to the world. Wittgenstein's 'picture theory of meaning' claims that genuine propositions have sense in virtue of picturing states of affairs. Propositions can be either true or false depending on whether the corresponding states of affairs do or do not obtain. All genuine propositions are therefore contingent. Tautologies, however, ordinarily thought of as necessarily true, are, according to Wittgenstein, not true at all. Equally, contradictions are not false. Tautologies and contradictions do not represent any particular states of affairs and thus do not say anything about how things stand in the world. They are *sinnlos* (senseless). Nevertheless, Wittgenstein insists, their mere structure *shows* something about the structure of the world.

How does Wittgenstein account for the propositions of philosophy? They include metaphysical propositions about God or the soul, ethical, aesthetic or religious propositions, and propositions about the structure of language. None of these seems to picture possible states of affairs. Rather, they seem to deal with the essential properties of the world and language. All these propositions, Wittgenstein therefore claims, are mere pseudo-propositions. They do not *say* or *show* anything. They are mere *Unsinn* (nonsense).

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[1] Wittgenstein (1961a)

The limits of language are thus drawn by showing that only what can be pictured can be spoken of. All those sentences which are not tautologies but fail to picture anything are nonsensical pseudo-propositions. Furthermore, the *Tractatus* characterises a thought as a logical picture of a state of affairs (3). But every picture, and thus every proposition, is also a logical picture (2.182). It follows that if and only if something can be presented by a picture, it can be presented not only by a proposition but also by a thought. By drawing the limits to language, Wittgenstein has thereby drawn the limits to thought.

Wittgenstein's statements from the preface and his final proposition thus seem to be coherently explained by the picture theory. However, the penultimate proposition says that

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them − as steps − 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.

The propositions of the *Tractatus* are thus themselves nonsense. Even if this coherently follows from the picture theory, does this not undermine the very argument that leads to 6.54? If the whole Tractarian text really is nonsense, then it presents no picture theory. But then it presents no theory which establishes that, and why, the Tractarian propositions are nonsense. How, then, are we to read the propositions of the *Tractatus*?

The present essay is concerned with finding an interpretation of the *Tractatus* that solves this puzzle. As the criterion for adequacy of such an interpretation I propose the following. The interpretation needs to make sense of the text concerned with the problem under consideration. And yet, it should not do so at the cost of damaging the coherence of the text on the whole. I shall begin by considering P. M. S. Hacker's interpretation. His account is an example of what has been termed the 'traditional reading'. I shall show that it fails to constitute an adequate interpretation. Subsequently, I shall turn to Cora Diamond's 'new reading'. Following through the implications of this account I will show that it faces as serious problems as the interpretation it was intended to replace. Finally, I shall suggest that a key to the problem of reading the *Tractatus* can be found in Wittgenstein's notion of the 'mystical'. I propose that mysticism plays an important role in the *Tractatus*, which, if taken seriously, might solve our puzzle.

2. The 'traditional reading'

Hacker[2] argues that the Tractarian propositions should be understood as 'illuminating' nonsense. They are not 'overt' nonsense like 'Is the good more or less identical than the beautiful?'. And yet, like the latter, they violate the rules of the logical syntax of language by illegitimately using 'formal concepts' in the role of 'genuine concepts'.

Let me explain. According to the *Tractatus*, simple names are the primitive vocabulary of language. Whereas the meaning of a name determines its *content*, logical syntax determines its *form*. The meanings of simple names are the simple objects they refer to. The rules of logical syntax are the grammatical rules which determine the possibilities of combining simple names with each other. These logico-syntactical combinatorial possibilities, the form of a name, are identical with the metaphysical combinatorial possibilities, the form of the object named. All names with the same form belong to the same logico-syntactical category. Their form is the variable, or formal concept, of which the names are substitution instances. Examples of such formal concepts are 'object', 'property' and 'number'. Being variables, they cannot constitute parts of a picture of a particular state of affairs. They therefore cannot occur in meaningful propositions. It follows that language cannot *say* anything about the essence of language or the world. It can only *show* it. We cannot say, for example, that A is an object, but this much is manifest in the logico-syntactical features of the name 'A'.

Hacker argues that some nonsensical pseudo-propositions, including the Tractarian pseudo-propositions, are 'illuminating' in two ways. First, these propositions lead the reader to grasp that they *are* nonsense. Secondly, they bring her to apprehend what genuine propositions do not *say* but *show*. The piece of nonsense 'A is an object' is illuminating if it leads the reader to grasp that the sentence itself is illegitimate, and that what the sentence tries but fails to express is shown by genuine sentences like 'A is red and round'. Hacker concludes that 'what someone means or intends by a remark can be grasped even though the sentence uttered is strictly speaking nonsense.'[3] The *Tractatus*' use of nonsensical pseudo-propositions is justified by enlightening us about the limits of language and thought. Once this is achieved, however, all that is left for us to consider are genuine propositions that represent possible facts in the world.

There is an obvious problem with Hacker's interpretation. How can nonsense illuminate, given that it neither shows nor says anything? How can we *grasp* something, which is unsayable and thus unthinkable? Hacker's account explains proposition 6.54 by contradicting the claim that what cannot be said cannot be thought either. For if it is possible to grasp what is meant by the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus*, then although they are not supposed to *say* anything, they nevertheless seem to convey *thoughts*. It follows that Hacker's interpretation contradicts Wittgenstein's main aim in the *Tractatus* as pronounced in the preface: to draw the limits of thought by drawing the limits of language.

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[2] Hacker (1986); other interpretations that fall under the 'traditional reading' are Anscombe (1971), Geach (1976), Kenny (1973), Pears (1987).
[3] Hacker (1986, p26)

According to the criterion laid down above, Hacker's account fails as an adequate interpretation of the *Tractatus*.[4]

3. The 'new reading'

Diamond[5] presents her new reading as a solution to the problems facing traditional accounts. Her interpretation is based on the idea that the paragraphs of the preface and the two final propositions cited above constitute the 'frame' of the book. It contains instructions for reading the *Tractatus*. Diamond criticizes Hacker's account as 'chickening out'[6] for arguing that although the Tractarian propositions are nonsense, they nevertheless gesture at some unsayable truth. She contrasts this 'substantial' conception of nonsense with her 'austere' conception: all nonsense is plain nonsense. Apart from the frame, all Tractarian propositions are thus mere nonsense. This includes Wittgenstein's apparent claim that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but that can be shown.

Furthermore, Diamond rejects Hacker's view that, according to Wittgenstein, nonsense results from a violation of logical syntax.[7] A sentence is nonsense, she argues, *only* because one or more of its constituent words have no meaning. Wittgenstein's reason for holding this view, Diamond says, is that if a sentence makes no sense, then *no* part of it has meaning.[8] We can identify the contribution that the senses of the parts of the proposition make to the sense of the whole, only if the whole *has* a sense. No constituent sign of a nonsensical sentence therefore can mean what it does in other genuine sentences. The fact that, when hearing the sentence 'Caesar is a prime number', we automatically think of 'Caesar' as meaning a certain person is only a *psychological* fact. It does not follow from this that the sign as it occurs in the nonsensical sentence has the *logical* role of standing for a person. It cannot have this logical role in the sentence, because there is no genuine complex in which it could play *any* role. Diamond concludes that, according to Wittgenstein, the nonsensicality of nonsense sentences like 'Caesar is a prime number' is due to *our failure* to make certain determinations of meaning.

The new reading thus denies these two 'traditional' theses: there are certain kinds of sentences which are nonsense but nevertheless succeed in gesturing at what they cannot say, and these sentences are nonsense by virtue of violating the rules of logical syntax. Underlying the rejection of these two claims is what Diamond stresses as the correct understanding of Wittgenstein's conception of logic. Logic, according to Wittgenstein, is internal to thought. Thus, the world one would see through a pair of 'irremovable glasses'[9] would necessarily have the

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[4] It should be pointed out that Hacker does not attempt to fulfil my criterion. He argues that the *Tractatus* should not be read as a self-consistent work (2000, p370).

[5] Diamond (1991, 2000); other interpreters who follow Diamond in her 'new reading' are Conant (1993, 2000, 2001, 2002), Gunnarsson (2000), Goldfarb (1997), Kremer (2001).

[6] Diamond (1991, p181); Goldfarb (1997) characterises traditional interpretations as 'irresolute'.

[7] Ibid., pp95ff; cf. Conant (2001, pp38ff)

[8] Ibid., pp100ff

[9] Diamond (1991, p43)

form it has when seen through these glasses. In the same way all thought necessarily has the form of logic. Just as one could not take off the glasses, so we cannot remove logic and say things from a position outside logic. Since, therefore, there can be no illogical thought, there can be no nonsensical thought either. Something which does not conform to the logic of language is no thought at all. It follows that to say, first, that there is some truth that cannot be said but that can nevertheless be grasped, is precisely to imagine that we can take a standpoint outside logic. Since what cannot be said cannot be thought either, we would have to be outside logic to be able to grasp what cannot be said. Secondly, to say that there can be some kind of nonsensical thought which is the result of the violation of logical syntax would be to claim the possibility of illogical thought and thereby again try to obtain a position outside logic. The underlying accusation of Diamond's criticism against interpreters like Hacker is, thus, that they presuppose precisely this position.

Diamond concludes that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are plain nonsense, strings of words without any meaning that do not convey any hidden thought. But if this is so, how can they at all elucidate? How can they help us to 'see the world aright'? Without an answer to these questions proposition 6.54, and with it the aim of the *Tractatus*, remain unexplained.

Diamond[10] admits that we *can* draw a distinction between two types of nonsense. This distinction, however, is not internal but external to the nonsensical sentence. It depends on the role played by our imagination. By an imaginative act the Tractarian pseudo-propositions can lead us to understand not the *sentences* themselves – since they have no meaning that could be understood – but the *author* of these sentences – the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*. But what is it to understand someone who expresses plain nonsense? Diamond suggests that 'to understand a person who utters nonsense is to go as far as one can with the idea that there is [a thought to be understood]'[11]. By taking the psychological elements associated with the familiar signs contained in nonsensical sentences for their meaning, we actively enter an illusion. We imagine that we understand the sentences and, by so doing, we come to understand their author.

Precisely this is, Diamond claims, what the *Tractatus* self-consciously does when presenting nonsensical pseudo-propositions. The author of the *Tractatus* understands the metaphysician who speaks nonsense by imaginatively sharing her illusion that the metaphysician is really speaking sense. The aim of this imaginative activity is only transitional, however. By getting into the same position as his metaphysically inclined readers, Wittgenstein aims to lead them out of their illusion to see that where they had previously thought to have understanding of meaningful propositions, 'there was only false imagination'.[12] The propositions of the *Tractatus* can thus cure the reader of her illusion of seeing sense in the nonsensical pseudo-propositions of philosophy. It thereby shows its readers that they cannot obtain a position outside language and its logical structure. The

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[10] Diamond (2000)
[11] Ibid., p157
[12] Ibid., p159

Tractatus is not self-undermining, Diamond concludes. It is therapeutic if read correctly.

4. Making sense of transitional nonsense

Diamond's concept of transitional nonsense is central to her therapeutic reading. But how are we to understand this notion? Hacker[13] argues that, by distinguishing between transitional nonsense and plain nonsense, Diamond reinstates the distinction between two types of nonsense. Prima facie, this does not seem correct. The distinction Diamond wants to get rid of is a distinction between nonsensical sentences, which somehow manage to convey thoughts, and nonsensical gibberish, with no thought behind it. Her distinction, by contrast, is compatible with the claim that there are no inexpressible truths behind any kind of nonsense. The difference between transitional and plain nonsense, on her view, is that in the former but not the latter case, the author uses such nonsense with the imagined belief that it makes sense. But how are we to understand the claim that by actively imagining a nonsensical pseudo-proposition to be making sense, we can arrive at a different view of the world and of language?

      Diamond is very explicit about the therapeutic aim of the *Tractatus*. She is less clear about *how* the *Tractatus* is supposed to accomplish this aim. It will be helpful, therefore, to look at what other proponents of the new reading add in this regard. Conant says that

> Wittgenstein's aim in the *Tractatus* is to lead the philosopher from the original 'disguised' piece of nonsense (to which he is attracted) through this network of (apparent) logical relations to some more patently nonsensical (pseudo-)consequence.[14]

The *Tractatus* elucidates

> by first encouraging me to suppose that I can use language … [to get outside language], and then enabling me to work through the (apparent) consequences of this (pseudo-)supposition, until I reach the point at which my impression of there being a determinate supposition (whose consequences I have throughout been exploring) dissolves on me.[15]

We thus start with the premise that we can meaningfully suppose to take a standpoint outside language. We follow through the *imagined* consequences of this premise until we reach patently nonsensical consequences. We then form the *genuine* conclusion that we were mistaken about our initial supposition – but how exactly is this conclusion to be reached?

13 Hacker (2000, p361)
14 Conant (1993, p218)
15 Conant (2000, p196)

One might say that by going through the imagined argument, we reach at least two, apparent, contradicting consequences of the premise. In our imagination, it logically follows that our initial premise was mistaken. We conclude that it is meaningless to suppose that we can take a position outside language. This conclusion, however, is part of our imagined argument. It is therefore itself meaningful only in our imagination. We can either stay within the imagined illusion and thereby come to a different, only imaginatively meaningful, view of the world. The *Tractatus* would then not have accomplished its therapeutic aim of leading us out of our illusion. Or, we come out of this illusion and, looking back at what we were doing, realise that we were not thinking anything at all, that there was no argument which led to any conclusion about the limits of thought. But then we have *not* arrived at a different view of the world. We have not reached the genuine conclusion that the new reading requires and will probably go on speaking about the world as we did before.

Here one might object that while the premises are only imaginatively meaningful, the argumentative steps might well be genuine logical entailments. The *Tractatus* would thus be read as giving a reductio. By starting with the premise that we can meaningfully suppose ourselves to occupy a position outside the logic of our language, we would derive a contradiction: we can both say and not say what is nonsensical. We would then conclude the falsity of the premise: the supposition that we can get outside our language has no meaning. The conclusion would be a genuine one. It would say that our premise was nonsense and thereby lead us out of the illusion of seeing sense in nonsense. But is this possible? It seems that if the premise were plain nonsense, it could not logically entail *anything*. For the entailment of one sentence by another is dependent on the sense of those sentences. We can thus *imagine* our premise to imply other sentences, as proposed above. And yet we could give no genuine reductio argument for its nonsensicality.[16]

The *Tractatus* thus achieves its therapeutic aim neither by a genuine reductio argument nor by one conducted completely within our imagination. How, then, can we make sense of transitional nonsense? We might say that, going through the imagined consequences of our premise, we reach consequences that are so obviously nonsensical that we cannot uphold our imaginative activity of making sense of them. We, as it were, drop out of our illusion of seeing sense in nonsense and realise that none of the sentences we were considering have sense. We do not *infer* the nonsensicality of the earlier sentences from the fact that they lead to the later consequences. This logical entailment was part of the illusion of sense. Rather, when we see the nonsensicality of what we believed to be consequences of our premise, we suddenly realise that we were only caught in an illusion when we thought we were going through a genuine argument with a meaningful premise. But if this is what is supposed to happen when reading the *Tractatus*, in what does this realisation consist and what does it teach us?

An answer to this problem is proposed by Logi Gunnarsson[17]. He argues that the *Tractatus* teaches its readers to use their already existing, but latent, skill to

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[16] Cf. Gunnarsson, (2000, p43)
[17] Ibid., pp70ff

recognise sentences as nonsensical. Gunnarsson accepts Diamond's point that, according to Wittgenstein, the only reason for a sentence being nonsense is the lack of meaning given to its constituents. Consequently, the only way of recognising the nonsensicality of a sentence is to realise the meaninglessness of its constituents. The best way of illuminating the readers is therefore by leading them into the illusion of taking nonsense sentences for sense and then showing them that they had not given any meaning to the constituent words of these sentences. This should then guard them against mistaking nonsense for sense in the future.

A problem still remains, however. Gunnarsson's answer relies on part of the main body of the Tractarian text. In particular, it relies on passage 5.473-5.4733 which deals with the reason for the nonsensicality of sentences. The idea of transitional nonsense is explained as 'a consequence'[18] of the idea expressed in this passage. Hence, the passage itself cannot be nonsense. But if it has a genuine sense, it must be part of the frame. This, however, entails that we need to qualify our original conception of the frame as constituted by the preface and the final Tractarian remarks. Gunnarsson[19] argues, therefore, that the distinction between the frame and the main body of the book is not a distinction between *where* a remark occurs, but *how* it occurs. The propositions, which ultimately survive the disintegration of an illusion of sense and therefore constitute part of the frame, are simply those that we can still make sense of after reading the *Tractatus*.

The following, rather trivial, picture of the *Tractatus* now emerges: we have in it a number of sentences. Some have sense, others are nonsense. The meaningful sentences contain instructions for reading the book, including the distinction between sense and nonsense. Equipped with these instructions, the reader knows that a sentence is nonsense if at least parts of it have not been given any meaning. Possessing this knowledge, however, does not mean that one will never mistake nonsense for sense. The skill of recognising something as nonsense has to be exercised. And this is what the remaining nonsensical sentences are for.

This picture proposed by the new reading, however, is at odds with what Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* − even in those passages that, according to the new reading, are part of the frame − as well as with certain aspects of the new reading itself. First, in 6.54 Wittgenstein says that anyone who understands him will recognise his propositions as nonsensical. He does not add that certain Tractarian propositions are excluded from this claim. But, according to the new reading, the frame is supposed to give us instructions for reading the *Tractatus*. It then seems implausible that Wittgenstein should mislead us by indicating that *all* of his propositions will be recognised as nonsensical, rather than only those which are excluded from the frame. Secondly, the above picture is at odds with Diamond's claim that we have to 'throw away' all of Wittgenstein's apparent ideas in the *Tractatus* in order to gain a correct view of the world. Rather, we are left with a perfectly meaningful account of how it is that we come out with nonsense. This means that, thirdly, the ladder metaphor does not make much sense either. We do not find steps that, like rungs of a ladder, must be climbed in order to

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[18] Ibid., p72
[19] Ibid., p53; cf. Conant (2002, pp457f)

arrive at a correct view of the world. All we get in the *Tractatus* is an explanation of the source of nonsense and an opportunity to train our nonsense-detecting skills.

The main problem with the above picture, however, is this: the criterion for having recognised certain sentences as part of what Wittgenstein counts as nonsense is that those sentences are thrown away after one has read the *Tractatus*. From the fact that Wittgenstein keeps certain ideas that are expressed in the *Tractatus*, it then follows that they do not count as nonsense. By citing external evidence, Hacker[20] has convincingly shown that Wittgenstein took seriously the idea of things that cannot be said but shown, even many years after writing the *Tractatus*. Connected with this idea is his, therefore equally genuine, idea of the 'mystical' as that, which cannot be said but shown. But this obviously contradicts the central claim of the new reading. The new reading argues that Wittgenstein does not *really* think that there is something which can be shown but not said – and that, consequently, he holds that there is no mystical either. All the new reading can say with regard to the mystical is that under the illusion that there is something that can be shown but not said, we are in the grip of a mystical feeling towards this something.

The new reading was introduced as an interpretation that would avoid the problems faced by the traditional account. The difficulties sketched show, however, that, according to the criterion of adequacy laid down in section one, the new reading is in no better position than the account it was supposed to replace. The therapeutic interpretation remains unconvincing. I believe, however, that the above problems not only show the inadequacy of the new reading but also give a clue to an alternative approach to our puzzle.

5. The role of the 'mystical'

At 6.522, Wittgenstein says that

> There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

Wittgenstein thus characterizes the things we cannot speak of as mystical. But what does he mean by the 'mystical'? It is known[21] that at the time of writing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein was much influenced by Tolstoy. Tolstoy's *Gospels*[22] was one of his favourite books[23] and many of the ideas expressed in the *Tractatus* and in his *Notebooks*[24] seem to have been taken from Tolstoy. Taking a closer look at Tolstoy's writings may therefore advance our understanding of Wittgenstein's notion of the mystical.

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[20] Hacker (2000, pp371ff); cf. Hacker (2003) and Proops (2001)
[21] Cf. Monk (1990, pp115ff)
[22] Tolstoy (1971)
[23] Monk (1990, p213)
[24] Wittgenstein (1961b, especially 11 June 1916 ff)

In his *Confession*[25], just preceding the *Gospels*, Tolstoy gives an account of his notion of faith as irrational knowledge. Irrational knowledge alone can answer the question of the meaning of life. An answer to this question is necessary for life itself. Faith is thus 'a knowledge of the meaning of human life in consequence of which man does not destroy himself but lives.'[26] '[T]he knowledge of faith flows', Tolstoy says, 'from a mysterious source', which is God.[27] By examining theology, he wants to disentangle the explicable − that which is understandable by reason − from the inexplicable − that which falls outside the realm of reason and belongs to the realm of faith. Tolstoy writes,

> I wish to recognize anything that is inexplicable as being so not because the demands of my reason are wrong (they are right, and apart from them I can understand nothing), but because I recognize the limits of my intellect. I wish to understand in such a way that everything that is inexplicable shall present itself to me as being necessarily inexplicable, and not as being something I am under an arbitrary obligation to believe.[28]

Two ideas are of interest here. First, according to Tolstoy, we can have irrational knowledge, knowledge that cannot be understood by reason but that contains 'the deepest human wisdom'[29]. Secondly, by drawing the limits to reason, or intellect, and thereby to the explicable, we can delimit the realm of such irrational knowledge. The latter idea seems reminiscent of Wittgenstein's claim that philosophy 'must set limits to what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought' (4.114). And further, that philosophy 'will signify what cannot be said, by presenting clearly what can be said' (4.115). We can thus find a parallel between Wittgenstein's distinction between what can and what cannot be thought or said and Tolstoy's distinction between what can and what cannot be known rationally. Moreover, according to Wittgenstein, what cannot be said can nevertheless be shown. There thus seems to be a further parallel between this latter idea and Tolstoy's claim that what cannot be known rationally can nevertheless be known irrationally. And while, for Tolstoy, the source of such irrational knowledge is 'mysterious', so also Wittgenstein calls all that, which cannot be said but shown, the 'mystical'. Considering these parallels, it seems obvious to conclude that, against the new reading, the 'inexpressible' is indeed 'there' for Wittgenstein. And not only is it there, it is shown by ordinary language and the world of facts. We can therefore, in some sense, grasp it − although Wittgenstein drops Tolstoy's term 'knowledge' for this kind of insight.

I do not here intend to introduce a whole new interpretation of how to make sense of the nonsense in Wittgenstein's text. But I would like to suggest that the above notion of the mystical might give a key to the puzzle one faces when

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[25] Tolstoy (1971)

[26] Ibid., p51

[27] Ibid., p68

[28] Ibid., pp80f

[29] Ibid., p53

reading the *Tractatus*. It seems that Wittgenstein had certain thoughts in the extraordinary, irrational, sense – thoughts about the essence of the world and language, ethics, aesthetics and religion. When Wittgenstein tried to communicate these thoughts by means of language, he realised that he came out with nonsense. His sentences cannot be understood as expressing ordinary thoughts. But they can nevertheless lead the reader to understand what Wittgenstein was trying to communicate. This might seem more intuitively obvious for Wittgenstein's later propositions about solipsism, ethics, aesthetics and religion. I want to propose, however, that the same might be said of his earlier remarks. For even his highly abstract discussion of logic and language is ultimately concerned with the essence of language and the world. It is concerned, therefore, with something that Wittgenstein might consider to be graspable, in the end, only by means of some kind of mystical insight.[30]

By taking seriously the notion of the mystical as that which can be shown but not said, the present account not only avoids the problems that face the new reading. It also solves the puzzle with which the traditional account left us. The Tractarian propositions are, as Wittgenstein says in 6.54, nonsense. But they can nevertheless convey a mystical insight. Once we have grasped what Wittgenstein wants to communicate by means of them, we realise that the sentences themselves must be 'transcended'. We become aware that Wittgenstein's thoughts cannot be expressed by language. For what can be expressed by language are only ordinary, rational, thoughts about possible facts in the world. We can thus use the Tractarian sentences as rungs of a ladder. We can climb until we understand what Wittgenstein is trying to communicate and thus reach a correct view of language and the world. Wittgenstein does, therefore, accomplish his aim of drawing the limits to thought – rational thought which can be expressed by language.

An obvious objection might be raised. The above considerations might solve our initial puzzle of reading the *Tractatus*. But they leave us with the equally perplexing problem of how to make sense of the notion of an insight into things that cannot be understood rationally. Although I agree with the perplexity of this idea, Wittgenstein might be alluding to precisely this problem when, in the preface, he writes that

> Perhaps this book will be understood only by someone who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it … Its purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it.

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[30] Within the scope of this essay I can, of course, only gesture at a 'mystical' interpretation. In a more detailed discussion, it would have to be shown exactly how we can understand the claim that the mystical is *not* limited to the ethical, aesthetic and religious, as was held by Stenius (1960, pp222ff).

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