

Tractatus in Context: An Overview

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Wittgenstein finished his *Abhandlung* while on leave from the army in the summer of 1918. As soon as it was safe to do so, he sent a copy to his mentor Bertrand Russell. But before Russell even got the manuscript, Wittgenstein lamented (Letter from Wittgenstein to Russell, dated June 12, 1919; WC, p. 92/93): “the...hope that my manuscript might mean something to you has completely vanished....no one will understand it even if it does get printed!” Wittgenstein had worked with Russell face-to-face for two years. So what hope do we have?

It was with this question in mind that I set out to reconstruct the context for Wittgenstein’s great but brief work. By “context” I mean the specific writings that Wittgenstein was responding to in his work, sometimes positively, often negatively; earlier or fuller drafts of his own ideas; comments that he made in lectures, letters and conversations concerning the subjects of the book or the book itself; and early reactions to the work. These help us to understand what was at stake, and what Wittgenstein thought was at stake, in his book.

Much of this is already familiar, including his pre-war *Notebooks* and his correspondence with Russell. But some of it remains untranslated into English, such as the pre-war *Geheime Tagebücher*, Hänsel’s diaries, and Hermine’s diary; some is out of print, such as the letters to Engelmann and his memoir, Pinsent’s diary, and the correspondence with Ogden; some is unpublished, such as Ramsey’s notes of conversations with

Wittgenstein, and Carnap's notes of some lectures by Waismann; and finally, some is only recently available, such as Moore's full notes from Wittgenstein's lectures, and Skinner's notes from Wittgenstein's dictations. In other cases, the material has been available, though we haven't always recognized its relevance. In any case, much of the context is obscure or difficult to reconstruct. And most of all, no one had tried to organize all the contextual material so that we could see what there was that was relevant to each proposition. I hope this will put us in a better position to appreciate Wittgenstein's book.

My book is organized to follow the *Tractatus* basically proposition by proposition. But there is also a chapter devoted to the prefatory material, including an account of the title, the author, the dedication, the motto, and then the preface itself. There is a chapter on the initial project, including a long excerpt from one of Russell's pre-war lectures. Near the end there is a chapter on Wittgenstein's experiences in the war as context for the closing remarks. There is a closing chapter recounting Wittgenstein's views of the *Tractatus* in retrospect. Finally, there is an appendix compiling the letters from Frege and other early reactions to the *Tractatus* as well as all nine published reviews of the book.

My book is not intentionally giving an interpretation. No doubt the selection and organization of material does itself require a certain amount of interpretation. But where I am aware of interpretive issues at stake, I tried to offer all the relevant contextual evidence.

I am aware of three new English translations of the *Tractatus*—one by Duncan Richter already in print from Rowman & Littlefield, including an overview of the secondary literature; one by Michael Beaney forthcoming from Oxford; and one by David Stern with Joachim Schulte and Katia Saporiti forthcoming from Cambridge, which is eventually supposed to include the *ProtoTractatus* and the complete 1914-1917 *Notebooks*. Speaking

of the complete notebooks, there is also finally an English translation of the coded diary forthcoming by Marjorie Perloff. While my book generally follows the Pears and McGuinness translation, it does so with attention to other translations, and can easily be read in conjunction with any of them.

From the first time I read the *Tractatus* in 1975, I was interested in the notion of simple objects, why Wittgenstein thought there must be simple objects, and what he had in mind when he spoke of them. This was in fact the first topic on which I looked for information outside the book itself.

On May 6, 1915, Wittgenstein writes in his wartime notebook (NB, p. 45): “As examples of the simple I always think of points of the visual field (just as parts of the visual field always come before my mind as typical composite objects).” And in the 1918 penultimate draft, the so-called *Prototractatus*, he imagines a different example: “Let the thing [*das Ding*] be a material point surrounded by infinite space.... 2.01411: The spatial point is, according to this view, an argument place.” (PT 2.0141, 2.01411). In 1930 or 1931, when Wittgenstein was teaching at Cambridge, he replied to some questions about the opening passages of the *Tractatus* (*Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1930-1932*, p. 120): “Objects, etc. is here used for such things as a color, a point in visual space, etc....”

But other passages in the *Notebooks* (pp. 50, 60 & 68) suggest that ultimately he left it open what the simple objects were. It was not that he knew there were simple objects because he could point to examples. Rather, it was a sort of transcendental deduction that there must be simple objects: “But it also seems certain that we do not infer the existence of simple objects from the existence of particular simple objects, but rather know [*kennen*]

them—by description, as it were—as the end-product of analysis, by means of a process that leads to them” (May 23, 1915), and “It seems that the idea of the SIMPLE is already to be found contained in that of the complex and in the idea of analysis, and in such a way that we come to this idea quite apart from any examples of simple objects, or of propositions which mention them, and we realize the existence of the simple objects—*a priori*—as a logical necessity” (June 14, 1915). Still, he had qualms about this approach at that time: “Our difficulty was that we kept on speaking of simple objects and were unable to mention a single one” (June 21, 1915).

But it seems that Wittgenstein meant to be agnostic about any examples of simple objects by the time of the *Tractatus*. Norman Malcolm reports a conversation from 1949 (*Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, p. 70): “I asked Wittgenstein whether, when he wrote the *Tractatus*, he had ever decided on anything as an example of a ‘simple object’. His reply was that at that time his thought had been that he was a *logician*; and that it was not his business, as a logician, to try to decide whether this thing or that was a simple thing or a complex thing, that being a purely *empirical* matter! It was clear that he regarded his former opinion as absurd.” In fact, Wittgenstein had also criticized himself in this way many years earlier, in a lecture on February 6, 1933 (WLM, p. 250): “If you look at Russell & at *Tractatus*, you may notice something very queer—i.e. lack of examples. They talk of ‘individuals’ & ‘atomic propositions’, but give no examples. Both of us, in different ways, push questions of examples on one side.”

In fact, the position Wittgenstein took in the *Tractatus* coincides with the one Russell articulated in his 1918 lectures on the Philosophy of Logical Atomism (PLA, Lecture II. Particulars, Predicates, and Relations, pp. 60-61; January 29, 1918):

...the definition of a particular is something purely logical. [Russell calls the terms in atomic facts “particulars.”] The question whether this or that is a particular, is a question to be decided in terms of that logical definition. In order to understand the definition it is not necessary to know beforehand ‘This is a particular’ or ‘That is a particular’. It remains to be investigated what particulars you can find in the world, if any. The whole question of what particulars you actually find in the real world is a purely empirical one which does not interest the logician as such.

In the *Tractatus*, then, Wittgenstein goes on to claim and then argue that there must be simple objects—that analysis cannot be endless and must reach a terminus. Russell had believed that, but didn’t think it could be shown. In the question period after the lecture just cited, Russell was asked by a “Mr. Carr” (pp. 63-64): “Are complexes all composed of simples? Are not the simples that go into complexes themselves complex?” Russell replied: “...that is, of course, a question that might be argued—whether when a thing is complex it is necessary that it should in analysis have constituents that are simple. I think it is perfectly possible to suppose that complex things are capable of analysis *ad infinitum*, and that you should never reach the simple. I do not think it is true, but it is a thing that one might argue, certainly. I do myself think that complexes...are composed of simples, but I admit that it is a difficult argument, and it might be that analysis could go on forever.”

Then Mr. Carr goes on to ask: “You do not mean that in calling the thing complex, you have asserted that there really are simples?” And Russell replies: “No, I do not think that is *necessarily* implied.” Carr is alluding to the argument that Leibniz made in the

Monadology (§§1 & 2, in *Leibniz: Selections*, p. 533): “The *monad* of which we shall here speak is merely a simple substance, which enters into composites; *simple*, that is to say, without parts. And there must be simple substances, since there are composites; for the composite is only a collection or *aggregatum* of simple substances.” This is in fact the position that Wittgenstein took in the notebook entry quoted above from June 14, 1915.

Three days later, in his wartime notebooks, Wittgenstein reflects on the nature of this issue (NB, p. 62; June 17, 1915): “...it seems to be a legitimate question: Are—e.g.—spatial objects composed of simple parts; in analyzing them, does one arrive at parts that cannot be further analysed, or is this not the case?”:

—But what kind of question is this?—

*Is it, A PRIORI, clear that in analyzing we must arrive at simple components—
is this, e.g., involved in the concept of analysis—, or is analysis ad infinitum
possible?—Or is there in the end even a third possibility?*

Wittgenstein goes on to give an argument in the following two propositions (2.0211-2.0212) for the first possibility, which seems to have the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. This lamentably brief set of propositions was elaborated in an earlier work. In April 1914 G. E. Moore traveled to Norway to visit Wittgenstein where he was working on logic. While there he took dictations from Wittgenstein on his current thoughts. These included (Appendix II in NB, p. 117): “The question whether a proposition has sense (*Sinn*) can never depend on the *truth* of another proposition about a constituent of the first. E.g., the question whether $(x) x = x$ has meaning (*Sinn*) can’t depend on the question whether

$(\exists x) x = x$ is *true*. It doesn't describe reality at all, and deals therefore solely with symbols; and it says that they must *symbolize*, but not *what* they symbolize."

In 1923, after having translated the *Tractatus* into English and after having written an extensive review of the book for *Mind*, Frank Ramsey travelled to rural Austria to meet with Wittgenstein where he was teaching elementary school. He stayed for a couple weeks and there are notes by Ramsey that seem to be from these conversations. These notes put the point like this (Item #002-27-01, p. 24, from Frank Plumpton Ramsey Papers):

Presuppositions atomic prop[ositions]

Simple objects

Presupposing these is as he says presupposing the determinateness of the sense, that analysis must have an end.

If no simples no picture could be made which might not be nonsensical.

Much later, in 1930, when Wittgenstein was meeting with members of the Vienna Circle, Waismann proposed to work with Wittgenstein to organize Wittgenstein's ideas into a book. At this time Wittgenstein was still working from the *Tractatus* and introducing some innovations which, however, do not pertain to this point. For a while Wittgenstein worked with him on this project, but eventually found it unsatisfactory. Keeping those qualms in mind, here is the relevant passage from Waismann's draft ("Theses," Appendix II in WVC, pp. 252-253):

Elements are simple. For that reason they cannot be described.

What can be described? Whatever is complex. The description of a complex will consist in a specification of the way its components are related to one another. If those components too are complex, they can be described in the same way, etc.

Here the question arises whether that process can be continued indefinitely.

Suppose that were possible. Then every sign occurring in a proposition p would signify [*bezeichnen*] a complex, and that complex could in turn be described by means of a further proposition q . Can I then ever be sure that a sign used to describe something has meaning [*Bedeutung*]? No, for I should have to check every time whether that complex *existed*, i.e., whether proposition q was true. It would hence depend on experience whether a sign had meaning [*Bedeutung*]. But then no description at all would be possible.

So here we have what I think is the context for 2.02-2.0212. It brings in the dictations to Moore in 1914, the pre-war notebooks in 1915, the *Prototractatus*, a 1918 lecture and discussion from Russell along with the contrasting view of Leibniz, notes from Ramsey's 1923 discussions with Wittgenstein, Waismann's notes of Wittgenstein's thoughts in 1930, Lee's notes of a conversation with Wittgenstein in 1930-1931, Moore's notes of one of Wittgenstein's lectures in 1933, and Malcolm's recollection of a conversation in 1949. These help us better appreciate how Wittgenstein was thinking about simple objects.

The idea that there are simple objects is connected with the possibility of analyzing facts into their component parts, and the idea that there are simple names is similarly

connected with the possibility of analyzing propositions into their component parts. This raises the question whether such an analysis is unique or not. Wittgenstein addresses this directly at 3.25 by affirming that it is: "A proposition has one and only one complete analysis."

While Mauthner will be mentioned by name by Wittgenstein only later, in 4.0031, he also seems relevant here as a target of Wittgenstein's disagreement. Fritz Mauthner was an Austro-Hungarian journalist, with interests in philosophy and especially language. He is impressed by the variety of languages, and he sees their underlying logic to be variable in the same way (*Beiträge zu Einer Kritik der Sprache*, vol. II, p. 66; quoted and translated in Janik and Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, p. 130): "Sound human understanding would necessarily have to learn that henceforth there are as many logics as there are languages with different structures."

Russell visited China to give lectures in 1920-1921. (This is why Russell passed off the job of getting Wittgenstein's work published to his assistant Dorothy Wrinch.) The mathematician J. E. Littlewood reported (*Littlewood's Miscellany*, p. 130) that, upon returning from China, Russell "said once, after some contact with the Chinese language, that he was horrified to find that the language of *Principia Mathematica* was an Indo-European one." In an article written not long after returning from China ("Logical Atomism," p. 166; published in 1924, probably written in March 1923), Russell therefore reconsidered:

The subject-predicate logic, with the substance-attribute metaphysic, are a case in point. It is doubtful whether either would have been invented by people speaking a non-Aryan language; certainly they do not seem to have arisen in China...

This rethinking on Russell's part also occurred to Wittgenstein. In his conversations with the Vienna Circle in 1929, Wittgenstein came to appreciate these kinds of alternate possibilities (WVC, pp. 41-2; December 22, 1929):

When Frege and Russell spoke of objects they always had in mind things that are, in language, represented by nouns, that is, say, bodies like chairs and tables. The whole conception of objects is hence very closely connected with the subject-predicate form of propositions. It is clear that where there is no subject-predicate form it is also impossible to speak of objects in this sense. Now I can describe this room in an entirely different way, e.g. by describing the surface of the room analytically by means of an equation and stating the distribution of colours on this surface. In the case of this form of description, single 'objects', chairs, books, tables, and their spatial positions are not mentioned any more. Here we have no relation, all that does not exist.

In fact, Wittgenstein's proposed analysis in "Some Remarks on Logical Form" (PO, pp. 31-32; July 1929) follows this "entirely different" approach.

Frege rejected unique analyzability, not because of the variety of languages, but because even with a given language, it seems possible to analyze it in different ways ("On Concept and Object," FR, p. 188): "...a thought can be split up in many ways, so that now one thing, now another, appears as subject or predicate. The thought itself does not determine what is to be regarded as the subject. If we say 'the subject of this judgement', we do not

designate anything definite unless at the same time we indicate a definite kind of analysis.” To me, however, Frege’s illustrations seem unsatisfying because they seem incomplete—a fuller analysis could be offered that might be unique.

In his course lectures in the early 1930s Wittgenstein occasionally discussed and critiqued the *Tractatus*. On February 6, 1933, he said (WLM, p. 253): “I was wrong in supposing that it had any *sense* to talk of a *final analysis*.” In this case, it is not hard to see what Wittgenstein’s view is, but it helps to see how it contrasts with the views of Mauthner and Frege, and how both Russell and Wittgenstein came to rethink the view later on.

One of the best-known aphorisms from the *Tractatus* is 5.6: “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” The idea of such limits is introduced in the third and fourth paragraphs of the Wittgenstein’s Preface, and repeated, among other places, at 4.114. In the Preface Wittgenstein warns us against thinking of this limit in a way that implies there is something on the other side, and at 4.114 he offers a clear way to avoid this “by working outwards through what can be thought.”

There is an obvious precedent for this in Kant’s *Prolegomena*. While it is somewhat uncertain whether Wittgenstein had studied or even read the First Critique before writing the *Tractatus*, there is good evidence he had read the *Prolegomena*, at least the First Part on “How is Pure Mathematics Possible?”, which he alludes to in the pre-war notebooks and the *Tractatus* (NB, p. 15, October 19, 1914 and 6.36111). But if we read on to §57 in the Conclusion, we find this relevant passage (pp. 101 & 103):

Bounds [*Grenzen*] (in extended beings) always presuppose a space existing outside a certain definite place, and inclosing it; limits [*Schranken*] do not require this, but are mere negations, which affect a quantity, so far as it is not absolutely complete. But our reason, as it were, sees in its surroundings a space for the cognition of things in themselves, though we can never have definite notions of them, and are limited [*eingeschänkt*] to appearances only....

... In mathematics and in natural philosophy, human reason admits of limits but not of bounds, namely, it admits that something indeed lies without it, at which it can never arrive, but not that it will at any point find completion in its internal progress. ...

...For in all bounds [*Grenzen*] there is something positive (e.g., a surface is the boundary of corporeal space, and is therefore itself a space, a line is a space, which is the boundary of the surface, a point the boundary of a line, but yet always a place in space), whereas limits [*Schranken*] contain mere negations...

The distinction that Kant draws is relevant to the claims that Wittgenstein makes, though the terminology Kant uses (in German) to mark the distinction is hardly employed by Wittgenstein. When Wittgenstein writes in the paragraph 3 of the Preface: "...in order to be able to draw a limit [*Grenze*] to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable..." he is using *Grenze* in Kant's sense above. But when, in 4.114, Wittgenstein proposes that we set those limits [*begrenzen*] by working outwards through what can be thought, he is employing what Kant called *Schranken*.

It seems worth retaining Kant's distinction, and it seems worth marking it in English by distinct translations. When we look to the context, however, things only get muddier. Karl Kraus was an aphorist whom Wittgenstein greatly admired, and listed among his influences. One of Kraus's aphorisms reads (*Half Truths and One-and-a-Half-Truths*, p. 67): "When I don't make any progress, it is because I have bumped into the wall of language. Then I draw back with a bloody head. And would like to go on." Kraus doesn't use either German term here, but he uses a metaphor which is more closely associated with boundary (*Grenze*) than limit, and it is a metaphor that Wittgenstein takes up. Wittgenstein used this image in the conclusion to his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics" (PO, p. 44; November 17, 1929): "My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who have ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly absolutely hopeless." Note that Wittgenstein uses the English word "boundaries" here (and "walls"). Six weeks after the lecture on ethics, on December 30, 1929, Wittgenstein met with Schlick and Waismann in Vienna and explained (WVC, pp. 68-69, and cf. p. 93): "Man feels the urge to run up against the limits [*Grenzen*] of language....This running up against the limits of language is *ethics*....But the inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*." Here I think we can improve the translation, since Wittgenstein uses *Grenze* when he speaks German, but only six weeks earlier he made the same point using the word "boundaries" in English. When Wittgenstein addresses this issue just a year later, November 10, 1930, in his lectures at Cambridge he again talks, in English, about the "boundary" of language (WLM, p. 87 = Lee, p. 34). However, in these same lectures, in purely mathematical cases (WLM, pp. 37, 217 & 245) Wittgenstein uses the word "limit" to describe convergencies. Since it seems that he wishes

to use the mathematical case as the model for the limit of language, he has himself contributed to the confusion, and perhaps was confused himself.

But the confusion is not complete confusion. At 4.463 Wittgenstein uses a geometrical model and when he describes the situation in the notebooks (NB, p. 30; November 14, 1914) and in the parenthetical paragraph in the *Tractatus*, it is the one place he uses a form of the German *schränken* to draw the relevant distinction as Kant does. The solid body *beschränkt* [restricts, limits] the movement of others “in the negative sense,” while the empty space is *begrenzte* [bounded] by solid substance “in the positive sense.”

The imagery survives into the *Philosophical Investigations* (§119) where Wittgenstein refers to the “bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits [*Grenze*] of language.” So in this case the context helps us sort out potential confusions in Wittgenstein’s book.

A line that has created some perplexity is in 5.1361: “Superstition is nothing but belief in the causal nexus.” Ludwig Boltzmann was a philosophically-minded Austrian physicist. Wittgenstein had once hoped to study with him, a hope ended by Boltzmann’s suicide in 1906. In 1931 (C&V, p. 16) Wittgenstein specifically listed Boltzmann as one of his early influences. In one of his popular essays, “On the Principles of Mechanics,” Boltzmann wrote (pp. 138-139):

...in man instinct recedes considerably, but its traces are still noticeable everywhere.... Superstition [*Aberglaube*] likewise is instinctive in character, and often some of the most educated people cannot quite rid themselves of it. It arises

from the continued effect of our need for causality in cases where it is unjustified. The habit of looking for causal connections everywhere induces us to establish a causal link between events that seem purely accidental and with some other often disparate ones, so that the law of cause and effect which correctly applied is the basis of all cognition becomes a will o' the wisp that leads us on to quite erroneous paths.

This asserts the causal instinct as the basis for superstition generally.

In 1922, when Ogden sent a draft of the translation of the *Tractatus* to Wittgenstein for examination, Wittgenstein commented (LO, p. 31; April 23, 1922):

“Belief in the causal nexus is superstition” isn’t right. It ought to be: “Superstition is belief in the causal nexus”. I didn’t mean to say that the belief in the causal nexus was one amongst superstitions but rather that superstition is nothing else than the belief in the causal nexus. In German this is expressed by the definite article before “Aberglaube”.

When Frank Ramsey had meetings with Wittgenstein in 1923, they discussed the *Tractatus*. In a letter to G.E. Moore five months later, he reported (February 6, 1924): “By the way, I remember your asking me about ‘superstition is belief in the causal nexus’, and I told you falsely, by a queer lapse of memory, that W[ittgenstein] said nothing about it, what he said was that he really meant ‘Belief in the causal nexus is the superstition.’” (Unfortunately, this

issue is not mentioned in Ramsey's surviving notes from what was probably his discussions with Wittgenstein.).

Many years later, Georg Kreisel was a favorite student of Wittgenstein's. He attended lectures beginning in 1942, and continued in contact thereafter. Kreisel reported on Wittgenstein's explanation of 5.1361 (in Denis Paul, "Reminiscences," *Wittgenstein Studies*): "Wittgenstein had wanted the German to run 'Aberglaube ist der Glaube an den Kausalnexus', leaving emphasis to be expressed by word-order, and favoured the English translation 'Belief in the causal nexus is sheer superstition'." This interpretation, however, at least as expressed in this translation, seems to shift the meaning *away* from what Wittgenstein had explained in the 1920s, and *away* from the point made by Boltzmann.

Regarding Wittgenstein's retrospective remarks on the *Tractatus*, J. N. Findley recalled a meeting he had with Wittgenstein in February of 1930 ("My Encounters with Wittgenstein," pp. 171-172): "I remember that we discussed what he said about the superstitiousness of believing in a causal principle, but then and on other occasions he did not like being questioned unless it was in the course of his own pursuit of a line of talk and thought." Both the Kreisel and the Findley recollections give point to Ramsey's remark to G.E. Moore about his meetings with Wittgenstein in 1923 (PO, pp. 47-48): "...in reply to [Ramsey's] questions as to the meaning of certain statements, Wittgenstein answered more than once that he had forgotten what he meant by the statement in question."

The diagram in 5.6331 has been the source of considerable discussion. It is the one with an eye at the end of an oval-shaped outline of a visual field. Some discussion has centered on the position of the eye relative to the sketched visual field, other has had to do

with the shape of the visual field. Since Wittgenstein is denying the diagram: “the form of the visual field is surely not like this,” one needs to figure out what aspect he is denying.

The problem here is reminiscent of the problem Wittgenstein created when he wrote to G.E. Moore (WC, p. 193; August 23, 1931), concerning Weininger’s book *Sex and Character*:

I can quite imagine you don’t admire Weininger very much.... It is true that he is fantastic [i.e., fantastical] but he is *great* and fantastic. It isn’t necessary or rather not possible to agree with him but the greatness lies in that with which we disagree. It is his enormous mistake which is great. I.e. roughly speaking if you just add a “~” to the whole book it says an important truth.

Okay, but are we thereby rejecting each thing in the book, or only at least one thing in the book, and if so, which one?

When Wittgenstein first writes this proposition in his wartime notebooks (NB, p. 80; August 12, 1916), the hand-drawn diagram has the eye at the apex of the field, neither in nor out of it. The hand-drawn diagram in the *Prototractatus* (5.33541; photo reproduction of handwritten MS, p. 84) has the eye slightly outside the field. The three typescripts of the *Abhandlung* all have hand-drawn diagrams that put the eye simply ambiguously at the end of the field, neither in nor out. The corrected typescript of the English translation has a hand-drawn diagram with the eye lying slightly out of the field, while the published German edition has the eye perhaps slightly in the field (*Ludwig Wittgensteins Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung, Entstehungsgeschichte und Herausgabe der Typoskripte und*

Korrekturbeispiel, pp. 162, 236 and 303; pp. 379 and 450). All of those variations suggest that the precise placement of the eye was *not* the issue in Wittgenstein's mind.

In a letter to Ogden, dated April 23, 1922, Wittgenstein commented on the draft of the English translation. The negation ("*nicht*") seems to have been ignored in the translation, which he corrected, and then he goes on to address the diagram. He says (LO, p. 20): "The figure should be like this [in which the eye lies outside of a sack-shaped field] and not [in which the eye lies outside a *triangular-shaped* field]; because that is how people very often imagine the shape of the field of vision to be. This, by the way, has *nothing whatever* to do with light going in straight lines." This suggests that the point all along had to do with the shape of the visual field and not the location of the eye. But it is still hard to see what his point is.

This becomes clear in a course lecture from 1933, where Wittgenstein considers: "Our visual field is blurred at the edges." He is then noted as saying the following (WLM, pp. 292-293; March 6, 1933):

Very queer statement; true in one way, false in another.

...

But *has* our visual field got blurred edges?

(1) Do we ever notice it?

(2) Could we say what it would be like if it were otherwise?

If you draw your visual field in a sense you are bound to draw edges blurred, but you must also admit that this isn't quite like what you see.

...

But the visual field has no outline.

What's at the edge of visual field *may* be blurred in a sense that can't be recognized.

This experience couldn't be reproduced in a drawing by a blurred outline.

...

In one sense what is blurred *could be imagined* with a sharp outline; but I can't imagine my visual field with a sharp outline.

The visual field has no boundary; it has no sense to say that the visual field has one.

"Blurred round the edges" of visual field, is either (1) nonsense or (2) describes a particular experience, which you needn't always have.

This suggests that the issue is whether the visual field can be represented as having a boundary. From his letter to Ogden it is clear that the triangular-shaped boundary fails to capture what is wrong—not because light can bend, but presumably because it altogether fails to admit a sense of vagueness about the edges of the visual field. The sack-shaped diagram better captures the notion of vagueness. But it is nevertheless also wrong because it represents this vagueness as a *boundary* at all. The idea seems to be that there is no *a priori* shape to the visual field at all. The point seems to be that there is no form that the visual field has, as opposed to its having some form other than what is pictured.

My favorite illustration of the relevance of context for appreciating the *Tractatus* is the importance of Wittgenstein's wartime experiences for understanding some of the closing propositions. I made this case already in the first chapter of my book *Wittgenstein in Exile*. Here I will just focus on proposition, 6.373: The world is independent of my will.

Taken in the context of the *Tractatus* it is very hard to see why Wittgenstein makes this assertion, or why he thinks it is plausible. But taken in the context of his experiences at the front, as recorded in the coded remarks in his diary, it makes a great deal more sense.

The antecedents for this proposition in the *Tractatus* appear in the *Notebooks* beginning in July, as Wittgenstein is under attack. We know this from the coded diary, where he records that he was first “shot at” April 29, 1916. “In constant danger of my life” (May 6, 1916). The Brusilov Offensive began June 4, 1916, he records on July 6th: “Colossal exertions in the last month” (GT, pp. 69-74), and this mortal danger continues through the end of July. During this time he is constantly coaching himself about how to hold up under such difficult conditions—conditions that are quite out of his control.

It is only after he is shot at that God and death are first mentioned in the *Notebooks* (May 6 and July 5, respectively: NB, pp. 72-73). He had been calling on God regularly (in the coded diary) since he entered the service, but it is apparently mortal danger that propelled these topics into the *Tractatus*.

Only in the sort of extreme circumstances Wittgenstein was in would someone find it plausible to say that the world was independent of his will. This assertion is made in so many words in the *Notebooks* on July 5, but is preceded with: “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless.” Then Wittgenstein goes on stoically to recommend: “I can only make myself independent of the world—and so in a certain sense master it—by renouncing any influence on happenings.” The remark takes life as a form of self-coaching, but then after reflection takes on a metaphysical cast—“the world is independent of my will”.

Having renounced the role of the will in changing the facts of the world, he retains a role for the will in changing his *view* of those facts. He had earlier reflected (GT, p. 70): “In constant danger of my life....From time to time I despair. This is the fault of a wrong view of life.” On July 29 in his coded diary he goes on to equate sin with “a false view of life.” And on the same day in his philosophical *Notebooks* he twice states what would become proposition 6.43: “The world of the happy man is a different one from the world of the unhappy man.” Wittgenstein encourages himself to be happy rather than unhappy in his circumstances as they are. This is up to him, a matter of the will: “A man who is happy must have no fear. Not even in the face of death” (NB, p. 74).

I will close with a complaint about the timing of this conference. It is scheduled in 2021, to celebrate the centennial of Wittgenstein’s great book. But, despite being dated 1921, Wittgenstein’s *Abhandlung* was not published in 1921. In January of 1922 Wittgenstein asked his friend Hänsel to see if he could get ahold of a copy of “*mein Zeug* [my stuff]” in Vienna. After searching diligently, he was unable to find that journal issue in the bookstores or libraries (*Ludwig Hänsel – Ludwig Wittgenstein: Eine Freundschaft*, pp. 59-60). In a letter from Ogden to Wittgenstein (*Gesamtbriewechsel*), dated April 10, 1922, Ogden reports that “the *Annalen* itself appeared” the same day that he received Wittgenstein’s March 28th letter—so, in early April, 1922!

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