

## Overcoming Metaphysics in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Bryan W. Roberts

### 1. OUT THROUGH THEM, ON THEM, OVER THEM

Any attempt to tackle the “metaphysical propositions” at the outset of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* must proceed with some humility. The natural goal is of course to seek a consistent interpretation of the early propositions, one that is both globally consistent, within the body of the text as a whole, as well as locally consistent on its own. Yet the experience of seeking a consistent interpretation of the *Tractatus* is much like trying to solve a Rubik's cube, in which one doesn't even know if the creator has managed to arrange the colored stickers in such a way that a solution is possible. The obvious “global” puzzle here is Wittgenstein's apparent rejection of metaphysical language in the penultimate propositions of the work, in spite of his strikingly metaphysical remarks at the beginning. This tension, having long perplexed commentators, remains at the center of the current debate over so-called “resolute” readings of the *Tractatus*. But there is also a “local” puzzle in getting the colorful remarks in the outset of the *Tractatus* to align consistently with themselves. This latter problem is the concern of the present paper.

The particular difficulty that we shall undertake is to try to make sense of the notion of *possibility* as Wittgenstein applies it to atomic facts and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>. The puzzle gets its most poignant expression in the 2.0's. After arriving at proposition 2.01 with the view that the world, the totality of *existing* atomic facts, is all that is the case, Wittgenstein immediately proclaims that there is a space of *possible* atomic facts that is essential to each object (2.011 and 2.013). Possible atomic facts need not exist, and that some indeed do not seems to be a central part of Wittgenstein's considerations. Yet he nevertheless takes these spaces of possible atomic facts to be “essential” to objects, which apparently *do* exist. So does a space of possible atomic facts exist or not? One wants to say no, in that some of its elements do not exist. But if not, then what kind of status to

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<sup>1</sup>“Atomic fact” is the Ogden/Ramsey translation of *Sachverhalt*. All references to the *Tractatus* are quoted from the Ogden/Ramsey translation, except where otherwise noted.

these possible atomic facts have, in being essential to existing objects? For ease of reference, call this the *problem of possibility*.

Commentators tend to approach this local problem humbly, perhaps due to the looming presence of the global problem. Ian Proops, for example, prefaces his (2004) analysis of Tractarian possibility with the explicitly counterfactual assumption that Wittgenstein's words here can be taken as "making full sense" (Proops 2004, 107). In fact, Proops's sweeping caveat reflects a real feeling of contingency with which the book affronts its readers. However, this feeling is one that I believe may be fruitfully embraced. My strategy will be to review what the so-called "argument for simples" says about fundamental elements in Wittgenstein's world, and to take seriously the contingency that this argument leaves open. This will send us off into a larger discussion of the status of Tractarian possibility.

The primary reading that I will be arguing for is this: Wittgenstein's propositions up to through the 2.0's are best understood as making methodological use of a primitive notion of counterfactual possibility, that applies both to his claims about substance as well as to his system of analyzing truth-possibilities. I build this reading in three steps:

- First, I suggest we read the so-called "argument for simples" as going no farther than the conditional claim that if the world has no substance, then no picture-theory is possible.
- Second, I show how the primitive methodological permissibility of this same kind of counterfactual possibility provides the foundation for Wittgenstein's analysis of truth-possibilities.
- Third, I discuss the precise status OF that counterfactual possibility in comparison to a recent competing account by Ian Proops, and go on to discuss Wittgenstein's use of modality in comparison to the philosophies of Kant, Frege, and Russell.

I conclude with the suggestion that Wittgenstein's use of counterfactual possibility is simply a primitive notion in his thinking.

Along the way, I shall be giving various interpretive suggestions that I take to be rather modest, in particular to try to make sense of the so-called "argument for simples."

But to begin, let us get this argument straight in the crosshairs by reviewing the path that Wittgenstein's thought wanders in the up through the 2.0's.

## 2. FROM WORLD TO SUBSTANCE AND BACK AGAIN

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* begins with the world as a whole, and immediately penetrates down into its most basic parts. The totality of that which is the case—the world—divides into facts (*Tatsache*), and these in turn divide into existing “atomic facts” (*Sachverhalten*). Existing atomic facts consist of combinations of objects that hang together “like links in a chain,” and these objects are where the analysis hits bedrock. Indeed, Wittgenstein would later quote the Theaetetus in suggesting that his objects are like primary elements, which “can only be *named*, no other determination is possible, neither that it *is* nor that it *is not*” (Wittgenstein 1958, §46).

Perhaps in the spirit of an atomist like Boltzmann<sup>2</sup>, but unlike the works of atomists like Frege and Russell, the direction of Wittgenstein's monologue here notably does *not* build a system up from primitive elements. Rather, it is the other way around: the *Tractatus* begins with a system as a whole and penetrates *down*. In a 1919 letter to Russell, Wittgenstein suggests that this order of presentation is not by chance:

Sachverhalt [atomic fact] is, what corresponds to an Elementarsatz [elementary proposition] if it is true. Tatsache is what corresponds to the logical product of elementary props when this product is true. The reason why I introduce Tatsache before introducing Sachverhalt would want a long explanation. (Wittgenstein 1979, 130).

That explanation wanting, let us forge ahead toward a slightly larger picture of where Wittgenstein is headed, before speculating as to what the explanation might have been.

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<sup>2</sup>Although the Boltzmann's theory of particle dynamics is framed by an ontology of atoms, his work does *not* build up from the mechanical laws governing those atoms. Indeed, like Wittgenstein, Boltzmann's central difficulty was the practical impossibility of describing the individual atoms in a complex system. Boltzmann overcomes this difficulty by using statistical methods to describe the behavior of a physical system *as a whole*, instead of in terms of its atomic constituents. For a different take on Boltzmann's influence on Wittgenstein, see Visser (1999).

Having arrived at the notion of an object, Wittgenstein is now able to examine its nature. The discussion of atomic facts in the 2.01's aims to expose the notion of a (logical) space of possible atomic facts, which is "essential" to all and only objects. The 2.02's then proceed to comment on the "simplicity" of objects, which for Wittgenstein seems to entail the establishment of a particular fixed and unchanging feature. This feature turns out to be the space of possible atomic facts, as we shall discuss shortly. Finally, in the remainder of the 2.0's, Wittgenstein builds back up in order to draw conclusions about the nature of the world. The atomic facts now inherit a definite or determinate structure, which is in turn inherited by the facts, the totality of which is the world.

Thus, to roughly summarize: Wittgenstein begins with the world, dives down into its substance in order to establish a particular fixed feature, the space of possibility, and finally resurfaces in order to say what is fixed about the structure of the world. This is a remarkably oblique way to say how the world has a fixed structure. However, accepting for the moment that Wittgenstein requires some such fixed structure, it is likely that some motivation for this approach arises out of worries about the nature of simple objects.

Wittgenstein's deep uncertainty about simple objects comes to plague his thought by the end of his 1915 notebooks. His fundamental difficulty, as Sullivan (2003) has discussed, is that of being committed to an atomistic analysis of language. One consequence of this commitment is the expectation that the world decomposes into simple fundamental elements—like in the study of chemistry. And yet throughout the notebooks, Wittgenstein seems to labor under the difficulty of not knowing anything at all about what those simple elements are like. Now, knowing nothing at all about a putative entity is legal grounds for doubting that entity's existence, I suppose. So this difficulty actually amounts to a serious problem for our first-run sketch of Wittgenstein's analysis. One begins with the world, but upon diving in finds that it isn't clear that something is down there at all—let alone whether or not that something is fixed. So how then can one come back up with a fixed structure?

This problem of simple elements takes its Tractarian form in the question of whether or not the world has substance. The traditional meaning of the term "substance" is that which endures across change, as I will discuss in more detail in a moment.

Wittgenstein introduces substance leading into the crucial discussion of fixed features in the 2.0's. Here, it seems he would like to say that if the world does indeed have substance, in the form of some collection of fixed atomic elements, then they may be dubbed "objects." But expressing this idea is a rather awkward, since the very existence of these elements is in serious doubt. One cannot say that objects *are (sind)* the substance of the world. For this would be to take for granted the contingent presupposition that the world has substance. As Sullivan suggests, this kind of sensitivity is just like Smith's not wanting to say that *has* or *hasn't* "stopped beating his wife" (Sullivan 2003, 78). Either response entails the presupposition that Smith was at one time beating his wife, which we take to be a contingent presupposition. Similarly, in proposition 2.021, Wittgenstein is justifiably inclined to write that "objects form [*bilden*] the substance of the world," in order to avoid *identifying* objects with substance, and thus enter more safely into a discussion of whether or not this substance actually exists<sup>3</sup>.

The received view of Wittgenstein's discussion at this point is that he then shows the existence of simple objects through a *reductio ad absurdum* argument<sup>4</sup>. The reading of these passages as an "argument for simples" is objectionable for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it makes the elliptical presentation of metaphysics that I have just described seem arbitrary. If Wittgenstein can produce an argument establishing the unconditional existence of simple atomic objects, then why not start with those objects, as Russell did, and build up to atomic facts, then facts, and then finally the world? But a more serious objection is that the backbone of the "argument for simples" reading is a claim that is not found in these passages. Wittgenstein makes no actual *reductio* inference here. He simply formulates a conditional, and remains silent beyond that.

There is a great deal in the *Tractatus* that must be read off implicitly, but Wittgenstein's silence here should be taken more seriously. Indeed, this seems to be a case in which one man's *reductio* can effectively be another man's *modus tollens*. We can just as easily read the so-called "argument for simples" as a conditional claim, which suggests only that *if* the world had no substance, *then* we could not describe it or form

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<sup>3</sup>One clear example in which Wittgenstein shows an awareness of the problem of contingent possibility is in his 1939 lectures, where he asks if it can be true or false that "Smith drew the construction of a heptagon" with a ruler and compass (Wittgenstein 1976, 45).

<sup>4</sup>This is the view described by Pears (1989, 66).

pictures of it at all. Equivalently: if we can picture anything at all about the world, then the world has substance – full stop. Another way to put my suggestion is that everything in Wittgenstein's system that deriving from the notion of simple objects is contingent upon the condition that we can form pictures about the world—and that Wittgenstein leaves this condition open. Of course, this Russellian kind of move is somewhat unsatisfying as a justification of Wittgenstein's picture-theory of semantics. But this is not the kind of use that I benefit that I have in mind. Rather, as we shall see in the next section, the permissibility of analysis resting on counterfactual possibility is visible elsewhere *Tractatus*, and is in fact indispensable to Wittgenstein's account of “logically connected” bodies of sentences.

However, before going too far with this, we should measure this reading against the relevant passages in the text. Certainly, Wittgenstein's commitment to the claim that “if the world had no substance, then there would be no pictures of the world” is unquestionably clear from propositions 2.0211 and 2.0212<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, there is no explicit indication of a derived contradiction following this assertion. What we can say is that Wittgenstein is equally committed to the proposition flipped in its contrapositive form:

**if** we can form any pictures of the world, **then** the world has fixed features.

The received view then proceeds to add the truth of the antecedent as an implicit part of the text—in contrast, I will suggest that we should simply accept the text here as it stands. The debate would be easily decided were there a clear consensus on how to interpret the context of Wittgenstein's argument. Regrettably, he does not. So let us try to gain contextual insight through a reconstruction of the argument.

I suggest we get there by entering the 2.0's with the following rather modest interpretive commitments:

[1] The basic fixed features of the world are its substance.

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<sup>5</sup>2.0211: If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

2.0212: It would then be impossible to form a picture of the world (true or false).

- [2] A fully analyzed proposition has a determinate sense if and only if its constituent names go proxy for fixed objects in the world.
- [3] If a proposition has a determinate sense, then it is a “complete” description.
- [4] If a proposition about a complex is possible at all, then that proposition completely describes the complex.
- [5] A description of the world is a description of complexes.
- [6] Pictures are tokens of propositions.

Let us discuss each of these commitments in turn. As already suggested, claim [1] is a reading of substance in its traditional role. The notion of substance has a long philosophical history, reaching from Aristotle's notion of a primary substance (*ousia*) up through Kant's definition of substance (*Substanz*) as “permanence of the real in time” (A143/B183) and beyond. Kant, intriguingly, took substance to consist in an enduring framework of objects, which remained fixed over all existence changes. Indeed, the interesting resemblance of Kant's objects to Tractarian objects, which Wittgenstein calls “the fixed, the existent” (2.0271), has already been pointed out by Proops (2004). However, while Proops goes on to suggest that these objects are fixed over a space of possible worlds, I suggest only that we adopt the weaker claim, that Tractarian objects simply represent a primitive fixed feature of the world.

Working out Wittgenstein's definition of sense now leads directly to claim [2]. Wittgenstein suggests in various places that names (simple signs) in a proposition go proxy for objects in a possible atomic fact<sup>6</sup>. The *sense* of a proposition is then taken to be the factual arrangement that this proposition represents. Now, suppose the reference (*Bedeutung*) of none of the names in a completely analyzed proposition was to a *fixed* object, but instead to entities that could be arranged in various ways. In other words, let us suppose that the names of a proposition were not themselves simple. Then neither would the sense of the proposition be determinate, since the proposition could represent more than one possible arrangement (and hence have more than one possible sense). As a result, we can say that if a name in a fully analyzed proposition does not go proxy for an object that is *fixed*, then that proposition does not have a fixed sense. This is what I take

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. 2.131; 3.21-3.221.

Wittgenstein to be saying in 3.23: “The postulate of the possibility of the simple signs is the postulate of the determinateness of the sense.”

Claim [3] captures Wittgenstein's apparent belief that if analysis can proceed down to the fixed components of a proposition, and thus yield a fixed sense, then there is nothing that has been left out of what this proposition describes. In other words, the description is complete. Claim [4] is entailed by proposition 2.0201 as an immediate consequence<sup>7</sup>. Claim [5] follows from Wittgenstein's opening metaphysics, where he describes the world as the totality of (complex) atomic facts. Claim [6] is expressed most notably by propositions 3 and 4 in conjunction<sup>8</sup>.

Let us now grant these interpretive claims, and use them to recast Wittgenstein's argument in a clearer light. Wittgenstein supposes that the world might have no substance, which is to say that it has no basic fixed features [1]. This means that whether or not an object is a constituent of a given complex cannot be a fixed matter, and hence neither can a name's going proxy for that object<sup>9</sup>. So no proposition has a determinate sense [2], and no description of a complex is “complete” [3]. But if there is no complete description of a complex, there can be no propositions about that complex at all [4]. This implies that there can be no propositions about the world [5], and hence no pictures of the world either [6]. In sum: if the world had no substance, then there would be no pictures of the world. So if we *can* form pictures of the world, then the world must have fixed features.

Zooming back out to a wider context, we can now see what it means for Wittgenstein to carry these hypothetical fixed features back up to the world as a whole, as was suggested above. Call the fixed features of the world “objects,” if they do indeed exist. That they are fixed means that they combine in a definite way to form existing atomic facts (2.031). This implies that there is a definite totality of existing atomic facts. Hence, if a possible atomic fact is essential to an object, but not an element of the definite

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<sup>7</sup>2.0201: “Every statement about complexes can be analyzed into a statement about their constituent parts, and into those propositions which completely describe the complexes.”

<sup>8</sup>The type versus token language distinguishing Wittgenstein's propositions versus pictures/propositional signs is due to Ramsey (1923, 469).

<sup>9</sup>This conclusion is suggested, I think correctly, by both Pears (1989, 66) and Proops (2004, 117), as a means of interpreting proposition 2.0211: “If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.”

totality of existing atomic facts, then we may say that it does not exist (2.05). In other words, the existence of a possible atomic fact is a stable yes-or-no matter.

Wittgenstein's fixation on the fixed is not arbitrary. Indeed, the result that atomic facts have a stable existence is central to Wittgenstein's account of the logically connected bodies of propositions, as we shall discuss in the next section. But for now, what is especially notable is the *conditional* status of this result. The existence of a possible atomic fact is only a stable matter under the hypothesis that objects have a fixed existence, and hence that we can form pictures of the world. Consequently, the majority of Wittgenstein's propositions—or at least a good-sized chunk—depend on this hypothesis as well. So it is completely natural that one feels the tug to read in the implicit claim that we actually *do* form pictures of the world. However, this claim is not what Wittgenstein has presented us, and I do not think it is what he intends. What he has actually presented us is a logically connected body of sentences, in which the notion of fixed objects follows from the notion that we can pictures the world.

It will thus be instructive to see how Wittgenstein himself suggests we understand possibility in these kinds of connections. As I shall argue in the next section, the kind of counterfactual assertion that Wittgenstein makes here in the presentation of his metaphysics is not only permitted, but essential to his analysis of syntax. Thus, we need not view this conditional claim as an absurd explanation of why the world has fixed structure; it is rather the introduction of a piece of analytic machinery that is foundational to Wittgenstein's theory.

If I am right that Wittgenstein ultimately leaves open the question of whether or not the world has substance, then we now have a natural answer to the question we left open in the beginning: why does Wittgenstein pursue such an elliptical path in his opening presentation, from world to substance and back again? Why didn't he build everything up from atoms? The answer seems to be that it was because he refused to straightforwardly admit the assumption that these atoms exist. Instead, he began with what he *knew* existed—the world as a whole—and built up its structure under the counterfactual condition that the substance of the world consists of fixed atomic parts.

Wittgenstein ends a frustrated discussion of the existence of simple atomic objects in the final pages of his 1915 notebook with an allusion to this problem of the existence

of atoms. But he also jots what I believe to be the skeleton of the solution that is ultimately adopted in the *Tractatus*:

Our difficulty was that we kept on speaking of simple objects and were unable to mention a single one.

If a point in logical space does not exist, then its co-ordinates do not exist either, and if the co-ordinates exist then the point exists too.—That's how it is in logic. (Wittgenstein 1979, 21.6.15)

In carrying out the analogy as Wittgenstein suggests, a “point” is evidently meant to correspond to an object. And it is likely that “coordinates” correspond to what Wittgenstein calls in the notebooks a *logical place*, a term identified in the *Tractatus* with an element of the space of possible atomic facts (3.4 - 3.42). So the analogy that Wittgenstein intends is perhaps this: *if* there are logical places, *then* there are objects. These early comments must of course be handled with care outside the context of the completed text, but in this case, I believe that in this case their relevance is born out. In particular, it is notable that even in this early stage of development, Wittgenstein's claim goes no farther than a conditional proposition—no *reductio* inference is actually made.

So let us pursue the idea that Wittgenstein's metaphysics of objects goes no farther than to condition simple objects on the contingent possibility that we can form pictures of the world. In order to understand the significance of such conditionals for Wittgenstein, we must now look ahead in the text to how Wittgenstein himself describes them, in the Tractarian account of logical connections between sentences. Once we have understood this, we can then revisit the logical connection between Wittgenstein's apparently metaphysical claims about objects and pictures.

### 3. CONDITIONALS AND CONNECTED PROPOSITIONS

One of the central features of Wittgenstein's analysis consists in its ability to separate and distinguish the truth of a proposition from its role in language; I shall be referring to this distinction loosely as a distinction between *semantics* and *syntax*. Let us first address the former. For a Tractarian proposition to be true is for it “to say things

stand in a certain way, *and they do*" (4.062, my emphasis). The proposition represents correctly if it is true, and incorrectly if it is false. In other words, it is the arrangement of existing objects that validates or invalidates a proposition. Now, that a proposition "correctly" represents the world need not be a fixed matter at all, and indeed Wittgenstein suggests as much<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, given Wittgenstein's commitment to atomistic analysis, this definition of truth allows for its determination through a simple truth-functional procedure, consisting ultimately in the comparison of basic linguistic facts with basic ontological facts. Elementary propositions (facts that are linguistic), like atomic facts (facts that are ontological), consist in atomic elements strung together "like links in a chain." In order to check the veracity of an elementary proposition, we need only compare it to reality<sup>11</sup>. If both the linguistic fact and the ontological fact turn out to have the same representational form—if the chains are, as it were, linked in the same way—then the proposition is true. Otherwise, it is false.

On the other hand, an elementary proposition has *sense* because its names share a representational form with some collection of objects in the world: "In a proposition a name is the representative of an object" (3.22). This is a very early commitment for Wittgenstein, going back to his 1913 Notes on Logic: "that a certain thing is the case in the symbol says that a certain thing is the case in the world" (Wittgenstein 1979, 96). We can perhaps think of this as a kind of criterion for whether or not a sentence is an admissible member of a language. Furthermore, since the *possible* atomic facts are intrinsic (*wesentlich*) to objects in and of themselves, and thus independent of any *actual* arrangement of these objects, this allows for a clean separation of the admissibility of a proposition from its truth. But notably, Wittgenstein takes this notion of an admissible proposition to be a descriptive, rather than prescriptive: "You cannot prescribe to a symbol what it *may* be used to express. All that a symbol *can* express it *may* express" (Wittgenstein 1979, 131).

This suggests that any putative notion of an "inference rule" must be build directly into the syntax of language. Wittgenstein does not propose a set of inference rules that would allow him to *derive* logical connections between propositions; this would

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<sup>10</sup>Cf. 2.0271: "The object is the fixed, the existent; the configuration is the changing, the variable."

<sup>11</sup>The way in which this comparison is carried out is of course through the formation of pictures; however, a discussion of this aspect of the analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

leave him with the problem of justifying these inference rules that so vexed Russell. Instead, as Diamond (1991) and Ricketts (1996) have each pointed out, Wittgenstein simply takes these logical connections to be primitive features of language. Here is how Wittgenstein describes a conditional relation between two propositions:

If  $p$  follows from  $q$ , I can conclude from  $q$  to  $p$ ; infer  $p$  from  $q$ .

The method of inference is to be understood from the two propositions alone.

Only they themselves can justify the inference.

Laws of inference, which—as in Frege and Russell—are to justify conclusions, are senseless and would be superfluous. (5.132)

We do not justify a conditional inference between propositions by a general rule, but rather describe the immediate way in which they are intrinsically logically connected<sup>12</sup>. As Ricketts notes, “inference is grounded in the sentences themselves, in the structures of the sentences that ensure that the truth-grounds of all the premises are also truth-grounds of the conclusion.” (Ricketts 1996, 82).

But perhaps the most important feature of these logical connections is that Wittgenstein has conceived them so as to be independent of any particular truth-value: “[o]ne can *draw conclusions* from a false proposition” (4.023). However, the well-defined nature of these logical connections does owe to the *determinateness* of the space of possible atomic facts inherent in objects. For as a result of this, a genuine proposition is able to pick out a well-defined “logical place” in this space, and hence take on a definite meaning—independent of its truth or falsity. The importance of this separation of syntactic and semantic features cannot be understated, as it carries an important consequence for the contingent status that I have attributed to Tractarian objects. Much of Wittgenstein’s theory, including the hypothesis of simple objects, is contingent upon a proposition whose truth value goes ultimately unstated: we can form pictures of the world. If one were required to know the truth-value of a proposition in order to draw conclusions from it, much of the *Tractatus* would be paralyzed by the contingent status of

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<sup>12</sup>The term of “logical connectedness” is due to Ricketts. For a more detailed exposition, see Ricketts (1996, §IV).

objects. This paralysis is overcome 1) through the separation of syntax and semantics, and 2) through an account of that syntax as *definite*.

We can now begin to see how Wittgenstein's cleavage between syntax and semantics points the way toward a clearer understanding of his metaphysics. Consider the relationship between the propositions  $p$ ,  $\sim p$ , and  $\sim \sim p$ . Wittgenstein would not say that there is a rule of inference by which ' $\sim \sim p$ ' affirms ' $p$ ' and denies ' $\sim p$ '. Instead, he says that these relations of affirmation and denial describe the way in which these propositions are intrinsically, logically connected:

The proposition ' $\sim \sim p$ ' does not treat of denial as an object, but the possibility of denial is already prejudged [*präjudiziert*] in affirmation. (5.44)

This state of being connected *prior* to judgment is precisely the state that Wittgenstein attributes to objects when he introduces possible atomic facts:

In logic nothing is accidental: if a thing *can* occur in an atomic fact the possibility of that atomic fact must already be prejudged [*präjudiziert*] in the thing. (2.012)

Both propositions 5.44 and 2.012 rely on a notion of counterfactual possibility, in that they each describe a property that is independent of truth or falsity, independent of what the facts are. In particular, a meaningful proposition is connected to a body of sentences regardless of whether or not it is true. Similarly, an object is connected to a space of possible Sachverhalts independently of which of them actually exist.

Wittgenstein writes that a proposition "*shows* how things stand, *if* it is true" (4.022). So to understand a proposition means "to know what is the case, *if* it is true (4.024, my emphasis). These conditions are counterfactual ones; the *actual* truth of the proposition is not required in either case. This notion of counterfactual possibility lies at the very heart of Wittgenstein's analysis, playing an essential enabling role in both in his philosophy of language and in his development of metaphysics.

This reading is has two attractive consequences. The first is one way out of the problem of possibility. The problem was to understand the status of a possible state of affairs, if it cannot be said to exist. Wittgenstein seems to have simply deployed a

primitive expression of the “possible” predicate. This predicate is furthermore independent of—but equally primitive as—Wittgenstein’s notion of existence. The separation of these two ontological features is no more problematic than the separation of syntax from semantics, and indeed, Wittgenstein seems to think of them analogously.

The second, more interesting consequence of taking counterfactual possibility as primitive, is that we now have a more robust understanding of the conditional claim expressed in the 2.02’s. Recall my suggestion that we simply take Wittgenstein’s conditional claim at face value: if we can form any pictures of the world, then the world has fixed features, full stop. We needed some account of the conditional relation between these two propositions in order to understand Wittgenstein here—why not draw on Wittgenstein’s own account? As per Wittgenstein’s suggestion, we need not rely on the particular truth-value of the propositions in order to analyze their relationship. Rather, we must consider their connection to be built into the very syntax of language. One should thus read the proposition “we can form pictures of the world” as standing in a particular state of logical connection to the proposition “the world has substance,” which is an intrinsic feature of the syntax of Wittgenstein’s language, but independent of its actual truth-value. Quite simply, one should read the so-called “argument for simples” as a counterfactual conditional expressing nothing more than the logical connection between two propositions.

Still, there remains something unsatisfying about this account. Perhaps, at its root, it is that we have both an intuitive feeling for what is meant by the notion of syntax, in addition to a lengthy account in the *Tractatus*. But we have neither to help us understand the precise status of Wittgenstein’s modalities. So let us now discuss first the prospect of a precise modern characterization of Wittgenstein’s notion of possibility in terms of possible worlds. This is followed by a brief discussion of the status of possibility in the philosophies of Kant, Frege and Russell. Finally, we shall return to the suggestion that I have given here, that counterfactual possibility can simply be taken as a primitive feature of Wittgenstein’s analysis.

#### 4. THE STATUS OF POSSIBILITY

The most precise description of Wittgenstein's notion of possibility that I am aware of, which incidentally provides a significant challenge to my reading, is due to Ian Proops (2004). Proops deals with Wittgenstein's vague modal language with a precise possible-worlds semantics, suggesting that "talk of possible worlds is the best way to systematize his various metaphorically presented modal conceptions" (Proops 2004, 110). I begin by exploring the possible implications of such a "systematization" in detail. Although its precision is indeed attractive, Proops's characterization of possible atomic facts as analogous possible worlds is, I shall argue, highly problematic.

##### *Proops Possible Worlds*

The notion of possible worlds could be used in one of two ways in order to interpret Wittgenstein. The first is in a modal realist interpretation, taking possible worlds to be existing elements of Wittgenstein's ontology. This is evidently *not* a faithful way to construe the *Tractatus*; as Ricketts correctly notes, "it is clear that Wittgenstein does not countenance possibilia in his ontology. To do so would undermine the identification at 2.01 of atomic facts with combinations of objects" (Ricketts 1996, 89). Ricketts is giving expression to what I am here calling the problem of possibility. Wittgenstein takes the totality of *existing* arrangements of objects to be the totality of facts, that is, all that is the case. But this totality conspicuously fails to include any possible-but-non-existent arrangements of objects. So it simply doesn't make sense to attribute ontological significance to possible worlds in this way. Indeed, if the world were taken to be just one element of an existing space of possible worlds, then it would make more sense for Wittgenstein to begin, "A space of possible worlds is all that is the case," and proceed to develop his system from there. But of course, Wittgenstein's famous opening proposition sets out otherwise: *The world is all that is the case.*

Alternatively, possible worlds can be used as a semantic device in an account of the truth-conditions of a language. It is along these lines that Proops makes use of the notion. Inspired by an interesting analogy to Kant's account of substance, Proops contends that Wittgenstein's so-called "argument for simples" is meant "to establish the

existence of Tractarian objects,” contrary to what I have suggested (Proops 2004, 106). In the course of this interpretation, possible worlds are given their standard functional role of assigning of truth-values to propositions. In particular, Proops takes the possible existence of an atomic fact to be equivalent to some possible world's assignment of the value “true” to an elementary proposition expressing that atomic fact. The result is a reading that takes the same space of possible atomic facts to determine both the *admissibility* of a proposition as such, as well as the *truth* of that proposition (in a possible world).

Although the clarity and elegance of this idea is rather attractive, it is immediately problematic as an interpretation of the *Tractatus*. To begin, there is the minor technical difficulty of giving the *actual* world its Tractarian significance in a possible-world semantics. Possible world semantics typically do *not* build a special place for the “actual” world into its models. But the world, the *actual* world clearly plays a significant role in Wittgenstein's account of truth-assignment. Alternative modal semantics that build in this feature are indeed available, but each requires further departure from Wittgenstein's text, at least in order to introduce the additional assignment that picks out an actual world from among the possible ones. However, this difficulty is not especially significant. The more fundamental problem, which cannot go unaddressed if we are to take this interpretation seriously, is that the semantic possible-world interpretation seems to have badly misplaced Wittgenstein's separation of syntax and semantics. Quite simply, the “possible truth” of a Tractarian proposition is not a semantic feature, but a syntactic one—it is what makes a proposition a proposition, independently of any truth assignment.

The sense of a Tractarian proposition is the *possible* arrangement of objects that the proposition represents, which is to say the possibility of a proposition's being true or false<sup>13</sup>. As discussed above, this possibility has nothing to do with any particular metalinguistic assignment of truth—rather, it is this possibility that makes a proposition an admissible proposition in the first place. On the other hand, a proposition's being a representation of *actual* reality is what assigns the value “true”<sup>14</sup>. These two features must be independent, if we are to continue to read a clean separation of syntax and

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<sup>13</sup>2.221: “What a picture represents is its sense.”

<sup>14</sup>4.06: “Propositions can be true or false only by being pictures of the reality.”

semantics into the *Tractatus*. But it is precisely these two features that are conflated on Proops's reading—they are both taken to be a matter of existence in a possible world. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is as clear as one may expect of him on this point: “It must not be overlooked that a proposition has a sense that is independent of the facts: otherwise one can easily suppose that true and false are relations of equal status between signs and what they signify” (4.061)<sup>15</sup>. This consequence refers to a Russellian consideration that Wittgenstein clearly rejects.

Still, from a post-Kripkean perspective, it is rather easy to confuse Wittgenstein's concatenation of “possible” and “truth” with the assignment of truth in possible worlds. This confusion is likely compounded by Wittgenstein's expression of logically connected truth-possibilities in the form of a truth-table, which we now commonly associate with the metalinguistic analysis of a proposition's truth. However, I am not the first to observe that these are mistaken interpretations of the *Tractatus*. As Ricketts as already noted: “Wittgenstein does not introduce truth-tables as a metalinguistic device to calculate the logical properties of object language sentences. Wittgenstein's truth-tables are object language expressions” (Ricketts 1996, 81). Ricketts's remark is confirmed by Wittgenstein's discussion of truth-possibilities in the 4.4's; in particular, “The sign which arises from the co-ordination of that mark ‘T’ with the truth possibilities is a propositional sign” (4.44).

As might be expected, Proops's questionable reading of the role of possibility lead him to even stranger results as his discussion of sense proceeds. In order to get his interpretation to go through, he admits that he must depart somewhat from the text, identifying a proposition's having sense with its having a particular truth value. Proops goes on to note a significant objection to this view, that this “is incompatible with Wittgenstein's view of tautologies and contradictions as without sense even though they are, respectively, true and false” (Proops 2004, 124; endnote 31)<sup>16</sup>. He responds by apparently refusing to take Wittgenstein seriously on this point. Citing the conjunction of 4.06 and 4.462, he suggests that as a consequence, “tautologies and contradictions

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<sup>15</sup>Here I cite the Pears & McGuinness translation, which I think is clearer in this case than Ogden/Ramsey. The German reads: “Beachtet man nicht, dass der Satz einen von den Tatsachen unabhängigen Sinn hat, so kann man leicht glauben, dass wahr un falsch gleich.”

<sup>16</sup>C.f. 4.46-4.461.

cannot, strictly speaking, be true or false.” (Proops 2004, 124; endnote 31). But to conclude that Wittgenstein's system does not attribute *truth* to tautologies is, in my view, a rather drastic conclusion.

However, these difficulties dissolve when Wittgenstein's notion of possibility is understood in the way that I have suggested. Suppose that, as I argued in the previous section, Wittgenstein is relying on a primitive notion of counterfactual possibility in his presentation of the *Tractatus*. Let us furthermore equate the sense of a proposition with its representation of some possible state of affairs, as I said above. This matter of representing a *possible* state of affairs entails that a proposition has the possibility of being true *or* false—neither possibility is excluded. Now, consider the two propositions that lead Proops to his drastic conclusion:

Propositions can be true or false only by being pictures of the reality (4.06)  
and

Tautology and contradiction are not pictures of the reality (4.462).

I suggest that we give real significance to the “or” in this first proposition: if a proposition is a picture of reality, then it can be true *or* false. Clearly, this is not the case for tautologies and contradictions, the former being always true, and the latter always false. The drastic conclusion may thus be avoided—it is the lack of *possibility* that prevents tautologies and contradictions from being pictures of reality.

The core problem with the Proops possible-world interpretation is not its inability to capture the various puzzles scattered throughout the *Tractatus*. The real problem is that it collapses Wittgenstein's distinction between sense and truth-assignment. This is, equivalently, to collapse a clean separation of syntax and semantics into a muddle. Such a collapse is clearly unacceptable, since the separation of these concepts seems to have been one of Wittgenstein's central projects in the *Tractatus*. As Wittgenstein himself writes:

In logical syntax the meaning of a sign ought never to play a role; it must admit of being established without mention being thereby made of the *meaning* of a sign; it ought to presuppose *only* the description of the expressions. (3.33)

From this observation we get a further view—into Russell's *Theory of Types*. Russell's error is shown by the fact that in drawing up his symbolic rules he has to speak about the things his signs mean. (3.331)

Wittgenstein's comment here, along with the unnecessary textual problems wrapped up in the possible-world interpretation, suggest that this approach is on the wrong track. So let us consider instead some other ways to understand the status of possibility in Wittgenstein's work.

### *Kant*

Proops (2004, §1) has argued in some detail for the possibility that Kant influenced Wittgenstein's notion of substance. Might Wittgenstein's notion of modality have also benefited from Kant's influence? Kant develops three modal "schemas" as well as three modal "postulates" in his theory of judgment. Each pertains to the possible, the actual, and the necessary. And indeed, except for the fact that Kantian modalities are set in a temporal context, Wittgenstein's modal language does seem to bare some resemblance. Kant's schema of possibility is "the agreement of the synthesis of various representations with the conditions of time in general"; the schema of actuality is "existence at a determinate time"; the schema of necessity is "the existence of an object at all times" (B184-A145).

Nevertheless, it is entirely unclear whether or not the analogy can be pushed much further beyond this superficial resemblance. While Wittgenstein is willing to claim that there is a space of possibility "prejudged" (*präjudiziert*) in objects, Kant's modality of possibility (the *problematic* modality) is very clearly taken to be a "kind" of judgment (*Urteil*), which is in turn a kind of cognition (*Erkenntnis*). And while Wittgenstein evidently endorses just one notion of truth that can be applied to propositional signs and pictures, Kant seems to support a modal dualist theory of truth: two distinct kinds of facts determine two kinds of necessary truth, those that are analytically necessary and those that are synthetically necessary. So beyond a rather superficial comparison, it seems unlikely that Kant's conception of possibility will be much help in understanding Wittgenstein's.

*Frege and Russell*

Neither Frege nor Russell offer much in the way of an entry-point to understanding Wittgenstein's modalities either. Indeed, both of them seem to abhor the very idea. As far as I know, Frege mentions modal or "apodictic" judgment only in a brief comment in the *Begriffsschrift*. There, Frege seems to agree with Kant, that modal judgments such as "possible" and "necessary" have no influence at all on the conceptual content of a judgment. But as a result, he suggests that "*the form of the apodictic judgment has no significance for us*". He goes on:

If a proposition is advanced as possible, either the speaker is suspending judgment by suggesting that he knows no laws from which the negation of the proposition would follow or he says that the generalization of this negation is false. (Frege 1879, 13).

Frege thus seems to have written modality right out of his analysis gives it little further consideration.

Russell's view of modality is equally cynical. Whether or not he developed a view on these matters before the 1919 publication of his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* is not clear. But if he did, it seems unlikely that he took modality very seriously. In the *Introduction*, Russell attributes talk of modality to the "hopeless confusions" of philosophers, suggesting instead that a propositional function "will be *necessary* if the function is always true, *possible* if it is sometimes true, and *impossible* if it is never true" (Russell 1919, 165). In other words, Russell equates necessity and possibility with the truth of universal and existentially quantified propositions, respectively—placing Russellian modality far away from the Tractarian notions.

*The Natural Road Forward*

Curiously, sifting through the standard list of Wittgenstein's influences seems to turn up little insight into his view of possibility. Neither is there much help available that I know of in the philosophies of Boltzmann, Hertz, and Schopenhauer<sup>17</sup>. This seems to present us with one open question and natural road forward. The question is: who, if

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<sup>17</sup>I take these philosophers, along with Frege and Russell, to comprise the "standard list" of influences on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

anyone, came to influence Wittgenstein's concept of possibility in the *Tractatus*? An answer to this question not immediately forthcoming, I suggest we take instead take the following natural road forward: to accept possibility as a primitive concept in the *Tractatus*.

The following may perhaps be said about such a concept. As a *primitive*, possibility seems to qualify the notion of existence. When Wittgenstein says that an atomic fact is possible, he means that it is possible for the atomic fact to exist. This possible existence may certainly be asserted independently of the fact's actual existence. We may thus sensibly talk about the possibility that a fixed object exists, or that an atomic fact exists, or that a picture exists, and so on – and do so independently of whether not any of them *actually* exist in the world. Anything more, in my view, must be passed over in silence.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although we are perhaps still far from the “coherent system” that Ramsey (1923) attributes to the *Tractatus*, I do hope to have now turned the cube in such a way that the colors align in a few places. We have seen how much of the *Tractatus* can be understood to rest on a primitive notion of possibility, which allows for several difficult parts of the work to consistently fit together. However, it is possible that this approach also points to a way out of the global problem.

I have suggested that we understand Wittgenstein's metaphysical claims to have the same kind of contingent status as his propositions, independent of their judgment against the world. What would it mean to picture the hypothesis that we can form pictures of the world? It is in one sense self-validating, and in another self-destructive. Self validating because we would have indeed formed a picture—but self destructive because there is a difficult regress here that we certainly cannot get out of. For if we cannot form pictures of the world, then we cannot picture that fact, thus placing the very notion in a realm outside of what can be meaningfully said. So it seems that there is no way to make such a comparison, and hence these propositions may be senseless. Might it thus be said

that the truth of the *Tractatus* must itself maintain only a nebulous, contingent status, like the very pictures, objects, and atomic facts that it treats? This is an admittedly vague hypothesis, and to carry this idea through would of course require much more research. So for now, let us leave this as the topic of another paper.

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