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Connecting Probability and Will in the early Wittgenstein

"What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (T,7). Wittgenstein's closing line to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is striking in many ways. It at once presents itself to the reader as a refutation of the integrity of the work itself: the propositions that the Tractus is built out of are precisely the kinds of statements which Wittgenstein believes cannot be spoken about. More subtly, in asserting an ethical imperative in the form of *must*, this final statement presents itself as a contradiction, whereby even in trying to describe the limits of language we may falter. Yet despite these apparent difficulties, Wittgenstein's closing proposition fits perfectly in line with crucial themes of the Tractatus, one of which is the determination of propositions as either containing sense, being senseless, or as nonsensical. To give a brief insight into the complicated way in which Wittgenstein treats these terms, we may think of propositions with *sense* as those that picture the world, propositions that are *senseless* as those that offer no insight into the state of the world, and propositions that are nonsensical as those that do not describe things of the world: which is defined by Wittgenstein as "all that is the case" (1). With these definitions in hand it is now possible to elucidate the tension residing in the closing line. For Wittgenstein, it is not acceptable to ever 'speak nonsense', i.e. the "correct method of philosophy" would be to only use propositions with sense (T, 6.53). Yet the Tractatus at many points presents propositions that are nonsensical, in that they describe phenomenon such as Ethics and

Aesthetics, and thus the Tractatus in this way does not 'practice what it preaches' at a superficial level. Wittgenstein is hyper-aware of the tension he has created, but posits some benefit to his use of nonsensical statements throughout the work, "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" (T, 6.54). Under what Conant describes as the "ineffability reading" of the Tractatus, we are led to believe that nonsense as a category has subcategories, namely that there is nonsense that *"misleads"* and nonsense that *"illuminates"*, with the Tractatus as a principle example of the latter type (Methods, 375). Over the rest of the essay, we will consider Wittgenstein's treatment of probability propositions, explain how they are an example of illuminating nonsense, and then consider the implications of this line of argument on Wittgenstein's treatment of various aspects of the Will.

To fully understand the importance of a probability proposition in relation to a 'normal' proposition, we must familiarize ourselves with Wittgenstein's picture-theory and general thoughts on propositions. We earlier explained that Wittgenstein describes the world as "all that is the case", to explain this more thoroughly we note that he defines what is the case as a "fact" or "the existence of states of affairs" (T, 2). The world is made up of the collection of states of affairs that are true. However, in building propositions, we can consider states of affairs that are both the case and those that are not the case, as states of affairs are "thinkable" in so far as "we can picture [them] to ourselves" (T, 3.001). This quality of picturing is crucial for Wittgenstein as he believes

all propositions have a “logico-pictorial form in common with what [they] depict” (T, 2.2), and so a “proposition is a picture of reality” (T, 4.01). This sets up a neat system for Wittgenstein in that propositions (and more generally language) have a way to map to truth values. Namely, propositions when thought of in this manner, share the same form as pictures, and thus share the same form as the world. Propositions can then be thought of as showing “the logical form of reality”, although it is impossible to describe this form, and in evaluating the truth-values of propositions, we only need to consider the truth-value of a proposition’s pictorial-content as, “A proposition can be true or false only in virtue of being a picture of reality” (T, 4.06). In this manner, Wittgenstein is able to construct a logical framework for language wherein every proposition that has sense is necessarily connected to the existence of a state of affairs that make up the world. Analysing language then becomes a manageable process of breaking down composite propositions into their simplest form, and then examining the world to see if what they depict is the case.

Propositions are supported by truth-grounds, and often times these truth-grounds can overlap for two propositions ‘r’ and ‘s’, i.e. the truth of both ‘r’ and ‘s’ may depend on some elementary proposition ‘e’ being true. Wittgenstein uses this fact to describe the general form of propositional probability, “If T_r is the number of the truth-grounds of a proposition ‘r’, and if T_{rs} is the number of the truth-grounds of a proposition ‘s’ that are at the same time truth-grounds of ‘r’, then we call the ratio $T_{rs} : T_r$ the degree of probability that the proposition ‘r’ gives to the proposition ‘s’” (T, 5.15). Wittgenstein goes on to assert that “We use probability only in default of certainty—if our knowledge of a fact is

not indeed complete, but we do know *something* about its form" (T, 5.156). Yet, here Wittgenstein is clear to distinguish between the form of propositions and probability propositions, as the latter contain only a "general description of a propositional form" (T, 5.156). Thus, it is clear under Wittgenstein's picture-theory, that probability propositions are unable to have sense in the same way that other propositions do. For Wittgenstein the generality aspect of probability propositions is unimportant in this regard as, "The mark of a logical proposition is *not* general validity" (T, 6,1231). A proposition depicts a possible instance of the world, and thus is able to be analysed, but the truth of a probability proposition cannot be evaluated as, "in itself, a proposition is neither probable nor improbable. Either an event occurs or it does not: there is no middle way" (T, 5.153). Although the probability proposition holds in its generalized form, when put under analysis it fails to picture the world: being only an "excerpt of other propositions" it becomes nonsense.

Even though statements about probabilities are thus considered nonsense, statements about probability are still important in Wittgenstein's framework. A proposition lacks sense as a function of its logico-pictorial form, yet propositions without sense are still important for the human lived experience. Consider, as an example a russian roulette scenario, where Wittgenstein is presented with two revolvers with 100 chambers. We give Wittgenstein the first revolver and tell him out of the 100 chambers 99 have bullets in them and 1 is empty. We then give Wittgenstein the second revolver and tell him out of the 100 cartridges 1 has a bullet in it and 99 are empty. We spin both revolvers to switch up the active chamber and tell Wittgenstein that he must pick one to

fire. Wittgenstein, assuming he values his life, will choose to play the game with the second revolver, following from the law of probabilities. Notice though that if Wittgenstein picks up the revolver with 1 bullet in it and says ‘I have a 1 out of 100 chance of being shot’, this would be a nonsensical statement, as the chamber at the time of the statement has already been determined, and thus if we knew all the facts of the world, we could determine exactly if there was a bullet or not in the active chamber. Probability does not follow from examining the world, as it is not of the world. In Wittgenstein’s example in the *Tractatus* with black and white balls, simply observing that half the balls we have so far drawn out of a bag are white and half are black does nothing to logically determine the probability of the color of the the next ball I draw out of the bag. Probability statements in a certain sense go beyond the mere facts of the world in that they cannot be verified by simple observation. Thus, in this manner there are similarities between probability and concepts like aesthetics and ethics: probability statements cannot be put into words as their form does not match the form of language. However, it is also clear that probabilistic statements and thoughts are not only helpful but actually indispensable to the human condition. While probability propositions are nonsense, they are in fact examples of ‘illuminating’ nonsense (much like the tractatus), and in what follows we will discuss how applying the concepts of probability to the Will can elucidate parts of its nature.

Causality plays a critical role to Wittgenstein’s examination of the Will in the Tractatus, especially when he considers its default state. One of the primary motivations for the Tractatus is to ground language, or sensical language, as purely logical.

Wittgenstein however believes that causality goes above mere logical relationships, “There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened. The only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity” (6.37). Central to Wittgenstein’s picture-theory, and indeed also central to his theory of probability, is the notion that elementary propositions are independent of one another. This property of independence then negates any possibility that elementary propositions can be causal as they “cannot be deduced from another” and thus any sort of “causal nexus” that may seem to exist is no more than “superstition” (T, 5,1361). Wittgenstein then asserts that the Will is free precisely because of this property, “The freedom of the will consists in the impossibility of knowing actions that still lie in the future“ (T, 5.1362). There is no necessary logical connection between the state of affairs in the present, and what the state of affairs in the future will be: “We *cannot* infer the events of the future from those of the present”(T, 5.1361).

While Wittgenstein’s formulation of causality is certainly neat, it leaves us feeling as though his methodology as failed to capture certain properties of the world that exist in the relationship between the present and the future. Consider the following simple logical world. Builder A is constructing a tower out of three kinds of blocks, X, Y and Z. Due to the nature of their composition, these blocks have certain logical properties following from their physical properties which determine possible states-of-affairs: namely, if a X is on top then any block can be stacked on it, if a Y is on top than either a Y block or a Z block can go on top of it, and if a Z is on top than only an X can go on top of it. A, who is perfectly logical, constructs this tower by uttering one of three

propositions, “place an X block on the tower”, “place a Y block on the tower, or “place a Z block on the tower”. Consider A’s possibilities given a certain state of the world. If an X is on top of the tower then A has the possibility to utter any of these three propositions. Yet if Z is on top of the tower A can only state “place an X block on the tower”; due to the logical composition of this contrived world all other propositions would be nonsensical, even if those same propositions may contain sense given other states of affairs.

What is the point of this example? On the surface there is little in common between it and the complex world we inhabit. I posit that in *our world too, the properties of a current state of affairs affect the possible state of affairs in a subsequent time step.* The world is built out a physical objects, and these objects have physical properties and laws they must obey. Imagine a situation in which it is the case that a cat is on a mat in front of us. If we take as true the law in physics that no object can travel faster than the speed of light, this law will certainly limit the possible position of the cat one second in the future. Here we do not claim that physical laws are necessarily deterministic, as Wittgenstein points out these physical relationships are not purely logical (6.3431). Yet it seems as though *physical laws and causal relationships have the ability to exclude certain future states of affairs*. From our example in the previous paragraph, we may say that although A cannot know *precisely* what the future actions he will take, by examining the state of the world it is possible for him to know *precise actions he will not take*: if a Y block is on top of the tower he will never call for an X block. A cat will never be able to move to a location two light years away in the time span of one second.

Wittgenstein posits that, “There is no possible way of making an inference from the existence of one situation to the existence of another, entirely different situation” (5.132), yet it unclear how every situation can be “entirely different” from one another when both possess a shared history. Within a given moment of time, elementary propositions can certainly be independent of one another, but as time propagates they are not independent of their past states. Here we may begin to think of causality as a sort of probability proposition: the set of possible states of affairs in any future moment is determined by the current states of affairs of the present moment in a logical manner, but it is also impossible to determine in a logical manner exactly which states of affairs will actually occur. The misleading case in our contrived example is that of when a Z block is on top of the stack, as it appears that A can only call for an X block. In our lived world, there are an infinite amount of elementary propositions and logical relationships, and thus it is impossible for any current state of affairs to logically necessitate a single future state of affairs. However, this does not mean that the cardinality of the sets of future possible states of affairs is equivalent between all possible configurations of what is the case. In probability terms, we may say that it is more likely that Wittgenstein will live if he picks the gun with only one bullet loaded. Thinking of causality in terms of probability then, we may state that A’s Will is *more free* when an X block is on the top of the tower then if a Y block in on top of the tower, as there are *additional future states of affairs* available to him from his current situation. In both cases though, as the general consideration becomes particularized, only one future state of affairs is chosen, and

thus in Wittgenstein's words there is still, "no *logical* connexion between the will and the world" (T, 6.374).

Wittgenstein considers issues of physical causality paramount to the Will's capacity to operate as a moral agent. The Will is the moral component of the metaphysical subject, "my will is good or evil" (Notebooks, 73). Yet, as we have seen Wittgenstein does not consider ethics to be of our logical world, "it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics. Propositions can express nothing that is higher" (T, 6.42). In this manner, just as he divorces logic from causal laws he separates the world from the Will, "The world is independent of my will" (T, 6.373). In discussing the Will then Wittgenstein makes it clear that as moral agent, the subject's Will does not have capacity to affect what is and what is not the case, "If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts—not what can be expressed by means of language" (6.43). Wittgenstein's conception of Will is quite distinct from how we typically view the will as even he notes: willing something is connected with action and yet "wanting does not stand in any logical connexion with its own fulfilment" (Notebooks, 77). He presents the example that demonstrates the difficulty: "I can imagine carrying out the act of will for raising my arm, but that my arm does not move … We should then arrive at the position that the act of will does not relate to a body at all, and so that in the ordinary sense of the word there is no such thing as the act of the will" (Notebooks, 86). Finding himself in a bind of sorts, presenting the will as a necessary metaphysical component of the subject but seemingly disconnected from acts, Wittgenstein tries to reconcile his argument with the

following statement, “The act of the will is not the cause of the action but is the action itself” (Notebooks, 87). However, if the act of the will is action, and the will is a moral actor, then it seems that action from a willing subject has an ethical component inherent to it, and under Wittgenstein’s conception of the world as composed of strictly non-ethical facts, it is still unclear how to reconcile this apparent divide.

I will here once again posit that by considering the Will in light of Wittgenstein’s discussion of probabilities we may be able to further elucidate the nature of the Will and its relationship to the logical world: in nonsense we are able to demystify that which is transcendental. Wittgenstein is forced to awkwardly combine Will and action into a single entity performed by subjects due to the division he sees between causality and the facts of the world. However, earlier we have made the argument that, in fact, when viewed as probabilities, causal relationship do have the ability to influence what are the possible future states of the world, although picking out the *exact* future state of the world is not logically possible. Considering the Will as moral purveyor under this view of causality there is then a more straightforward and intuitive connection between the Will and action: the Will picks out a set of possible actions of which the subject acts on, and thus every action of the subject is logically willed into action, but there is no *logical necessity for the Will to will any particular action* in any given moment. Ethics then, in approximation, can be considered as a series of ratios. A subjects at any moment has available to him a set of possible actions, from which one and exactly one will have transpired by the next moment. A willing subject has a Will that from the set of these actions, picks out a subset of actions of which the subject can perform willfully. Each

action, due to the nature of causality, picks out a set of possible states of affairs that will be the case after the action has completed. If then, there is some mapping where certain states of affairs are ‘good’ and some states of affairs are ‘bad’, a willful action can be considered ‘better’ or ‘worse’ in comparison to other willful actions by examining the ratio of ‘good’ worlds it has the capacity to bring about to the total number of worlds it has the capacity to bring about. Certainly whether states of affairs can be labeled as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is also a matter of ‘nonsense’ for Wittgenstein, and it may only be the case that we can present an ordering of states of affairs where some future worlds are ‘better’ than other future worlds, yet it is clear that by continual applications of a probabilistic framework, we are able to delve deeper into ‘higher’ matters than if we were to only stick to the mere Wittgensteinian-facts of the world.

Wittgenstein hoped the Tractatus could present solutions to age-old philosophical questions. It’s solutions however are not of any definite form, but rather follow from a tightening of Philosophy. In this way “The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem” (T, 6.521). Questions of Ethics, Aesthetics etc… are not truly questions of Philosophy, and thus Wittgenstein states that, “it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact *not* problems at all” (T, 4.003). Yet here we may want to slightly condition his claim to say that the deepest problems are in fact not *philosophical* problems at all. Wittgenstein acknowledges the existence of things that cannot be talked about, “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical” (T, 6.522). These ‘things that cannot be put into words’ are still open problems for the human experience though. Questions of ethics,

aesthetics, probability, etc. are all pressingly felt in day-to-day life. Thus when Wittgenstein says the solution to these questions comes about in the vanishing of the question, we must consider that what he means is that the perfect life is the purely philosophical one. What the Tractatus does not try to answer, and the what we must ask, is then 1) are we capable of living life in this manner and 2) is living life in this manner truly desirable. I leave these questions as mostly open, but only hope to point out that in the Tractatus Wittgenstein attempts to go above 'the facts' and delve into nonsense to help elucidate the structure of language itself. In this movement, it seems Wittgenstein has created a blueprint for future action, whereby these 'nonsensical questions' may be approached by leaving the logical realm. It would then seem that if there is a method of addressing these questions which are intertwined with the human experience, that while from a philosophical perspective it could be necessary to allow them to vanish, as metaphysical subjects we may have a duty to pursue their nature and elucidate their properties, even if it requires delving into nonsense.

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