*Tractatus* 1 – 3.5

In the first three sections of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein introduces his three-level view of the world, the thought, and the proposition. This view lays the foundations for his elucidations of philosophical problems in the later sections of the *Tractatus*. In addition, his three-level view illustrates an isomorphism between the world, the thought, and the proposition, and this isomorphism clearly draws a limit to the world and to the thought. That is, it explicitly demarcates the possible from the impossible, and the thinkable from the unthinkable.

Wittgenstein starts his development with his ontological view. According to Wittgenstein, the world is the totality of existing atomic facts, and the atomic fact is a complex of objects arranged in a certain way. Furthermore, Wittgenstein asserts that the possibilities in which things can be combined together, i.e. the form, are *intrinsically* contained in objects and determined by the structure of objects. This implies that, provided the existence of objects in the world, all combinations of things, and therefore all possible atomic facts are immediately given. Hence, the objects in the world are *independent*, in the sense that they may occur in any possible atomic fact that contains them.

The existing atomic facts together with all possible atomic facts form the logical space of the world. Since possible facts are determined and given by the *intrinsic* properties of objects, then it follows that the logical space contains *all* possible atomic facts. In other words, atomic facts cannot be *accidental*; there cannot be a new atomic fact whose possibility is not *foreseen* by the structure of things. Hence, the logical space is the limit of the world; all possible facts lie inside the logical space, and outside of the logical space is what is impossible.

Following his view of the world, the next level in Wittgenstein’s hierarchy is the “pictorial theory” of the thought. According to Wittgenstein, the thought is a *representation* of the atomic fact. It consists of thought-elements, which are in a one-to-one correspondence with objects in the world, i.e. the thought-element *stands for* the object. Therefore, the thought-element also has the internal properties which the object possesses, and hence all possible ways of combinations of thought-elements are determined by these internal properties. The thought is a complex of thought-elements combined in a certain way. Hence, all possible thoughts are immediately provided by the structures of the thought-element.

Up to this point, it is clear that there exhibits an isomorphism between the thought and the world, as Wittgenstein says in 2.17 of the *Tractatus*, “In the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that someone can be a picture of the other at all.” From the explication of the thought, it can be seen that it is the possible ways of combination, i.e. the form, that *allow* the thought to be able to represent the fact in the world. Hence, as with the form of the fact in the world, the form of the thought demarcates the limit of the thinkable and the unthinkable. The form is not part of the represented, but is *shown* by the thought. This isomorphism also illustrates a significant connection between the thought and the world; that is, what is thinkable is also possible, and vice versa. Since the way in which the world works is logical, in the sense that they behave in accordance with logical laws, hence we may not think illogically. It is impossible for one to formulate an illogical thought, for example, “I am physically in the computer and the computer is physically in me.” For such a thought violates the laws of logic, and hence there is no possible fact in the logical space of the world that corresponds to such a thought.

Wittgenstein’s hierarchy of the world and the thought addresses two important questions in traditional philosophy, namely the sense and the truth. The sense of a thought, according to Wittgenstein, is the possible atomic fact that it represents. The truth-bearer in Wittgenstein’s system is the thought, and the truth and the falsehood are defined to be dependent upon whether the thought agrees with the reality or not. That is, if a thought agrees with the reality (i.e. the existing fact), then it is true; otherwise, it is false. It is remarkable that, since the form of the thought is the totality of all possible thoughts, it excludes all nonsense thoughts. For instance, one may not have the thought “Mortality is Socrates,” since the form prevents the two thought-element, mortality and Socrates, from combining in this way. This answers Wittgenstein’s objection to Russell’s “Multiple Relation Theory” of judgment.

The thought is expressed by the proposition, which forms the third level in Wittgenstein’s hierarchy. The proposition is the propositional sign perceptible by the human sense system. The proposition consists of words, which correspond to thought-elements. However, a proposition has a sense *only* if it represents a thought, that is, *only* if the words that constituent the proposition are combined in a definite way that corresponds to the combination of the thought-elements in the corresponding thought. Hence, “the proposition is articulate” (3.141 and 3.251 of the *Tractatus*). When it does, the truth and the falsehood of a proposition are naturally determined by the truth and the falsehood of the thought it represents, but the *truth-bearer* in Wittgenstein’s hierarchy is the thought but not the proposition, since the truth and the falsehood are *defined* to be the alignment and the non-alignment of the thought with the reality, respectively.

The object in the world is *labeled* by the name, which is a perceptible sign in the proposition. It follows that the name cannot say what the object in, and hence that one may not know the nature of an object from its name. For otherwise the object would be compound, and the name would be *decomposed* into further constituent parts which themselves signify objects. There would, then, be an infinite and non-terminating sequence of propositions that depict what a thing is, and hence one would never obtain the sense of the name. A significant application of this assertion is that natural sciences, and propositions in general, cannot describe what the world is; they can merely offer a description of the world. Signs may be *defined* to describe complexes; however, according to 3.24 of the *Tractatus*, “A proposition about a complex stands in an internal relation to the proposition about its constituent part,” and therefore a significant proposition (that represents a thought) can be analyzed in one and only one definite way.

Wittgenstein notes the significant distinction between symbols and signs. Signs are *physical*, *empirical*, and sensibly *perceptible*. For instance, a sign may be the chalk formation on a board, the ink on sheets of paper, the sound waves in air, etc. In contrast, symbols are signs that stand in a projective relation to the world; in other words, symbols stand for objects in the world. The symbol signified by a sign is *shown* by its usage and application in a proposition. It is, however, this distinction between symbols and signs that gives rise to the “most fundamental confusions” in philosophy, as Wittgenstein argues in 3.324. One of the main causes of confusions is that the same sign may signify different symbols in everyday language. For instance, the word “is” is typically used to signify three different symbols in different propositions: the existence (e.g. “I am”), the predication (e.g. “Socrates is mortal”), and the identity relation (e.g. “The author is Wittgenstein.”).

Language and grammar may allow one to construct a proposition that is well-formed (in the grammatical sense) yet has no sense, such as “Mortality is Socrates.” Therefore, the confusions and paradoxes in philosophy, such as Russell’s paradox which Wittgenstein addresses in 3.333 of the *Tractatus*, are mainly generated because the *grammatical syntax* of language is not aligned with the *logical syntax* of the world. Therefore, it is a significant task of philosophy to employ a symbolism that excludes all such confusing uses of the same sign to signify different symbols and that will help philosophers break through the grammatical syntax of a proposition into the underlying logical syntax.

Wittgenstein’s elucidations of the problems of philosophy in the later sections of the *Tractatus* are mainly based upon his three-level hierarchy of the world, the thought, and the proposition. For this hierarchy exhibits an important isomorphism between the three levels, which connects the thought and the philosophical propositions to the world. As explicated above, the world has a limit, the logical space, that is determined by the internal structures of objects in the world, but this limit lies outside of the world. By the isomorphism, the thought and the philosophical propositions also have their limits, which lie outside of them. Hence, the possible, the thinkable, and the sayable are the one, while the impossible, the unthinkable, and the unsayable are the one. The main task of philosophy, therefore, is to clarify and elucidate the thought and the proposition, but philosophical propositions are incapable of asserting anything that is unsayable, i.e. that is outside of the world. Hence, Wittgenstein asserts that the problems of philosophy have been essentially solved, and concludes that, in philosophy, “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent” (*Preface* of the *Tractatus*).