

KANT, NONSENSE, AND THE SUPERSENSIBLE REALITY OF THINKING: RE-READING WITTGENSTEIN'S 'PICTURE THEORY'

Abstract

This article clarifies the status of nonsense in the *Tractatus* through a case study of recognizing some of its remarks as nonsensical, namely those of the “picture theory.” We find that such recognition demonstrates that thinking is distinct from any thinkable determination of the world and thus an indeterminate limit of the determinately thinkable. Our reading thereby shows that the text’s therapeutic demonstration of its remarks’ nonsensicality is meant to impart a metaphysical insight into the nature of thinking also advanced in Kant’s first *Critique*.

Keywords: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Idealism, Metaphysics, Immanuel Kant, Language, 20th Century Philosophy, Nonsense

I - Introduction

Somewhat notoriously, Wittgenstein indicates that discerning the point of his *Tractatus* requires recognizing its remarks, in the end, as nonsensical, and that one “sees the world rightly” in doing so (*TLP*: 6.54).¹ Wittgenstein’s readers have long puzzled over what to make of this pronouncement. For most of the 20th century, readers now generally designated as “traditional readers” have taken the text to advance a theory of logic and (senseful) propositions that, by its own lights, fails to consist of senseful propositions.² More recently, “resolute readers” have challenged such readings inasmuch as they seem to be committed to a problematic notion of “ineffable truth” or “substantial nonsense”; they accordingly insist upon an “austere” or “plain” conception of nonsense without internal semantic differentiation.³ The traditional readers are said to construe the text “metaphysically”; contrastingly, resolute readers take themselves to construe the text “therapeutically,” strictly as dissolving confusions to which we are subject as philosophers.

Reasonably enough, both camps agree that we cannot *begin* with the notion that the text is nonsense, as this would preclude thoughtful engagement with the text. Even the resolute readers urge that we must let ourselves be taken in by the text, taking it to be an earnest attempt to discern a substantive answer to certain philosophical questions before ultimately recognizing various of its

¹ All citations of Wittgenstein’s works are to the abbreviations of Pichler et. al (2011). All citations of Kant’s first *Critique* refer to the standard, A/B pagination, and citations of other works of Kant are to the standard Akademie Ausgabe pagination preceded by *AA*. All citations of the *Tractatus* are to the September 2025 electronic edition maintained by Kevin C. Klement at <https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/>, with modifications to translations noted as needed.

² See for example Anscombe (1957), Hacker (1972), Fogelin (1987), and White (2006).

³ See for example Diamond (1991, 180-1), Conant (1989, 252-3), Ricketts (1996, 93-4), Conant (2000, 174-217), and Juliet Floyd (2007, 180-1).

remarks as nonsensical and the posing of those questions as confused.⁴ Given this point of agreement, a case study of credulously reading the text that culminates in such recognition promises to clarify the status of Tractarian nonsense. Our primary aim in this article is to offer such a case study and to explore its implications for the text.

Our reading focuses on the remarks comprising the text's ostensive theory of meaning, known as *the picture theory*, as the text invites us to orient ourselves to "sense" and "nonsense" via this theory to clarify the status of nonsense in the text.⁵ We find—paradoxical as it sounds—that one is to recognize those very remarks as "austerely" nonsensical on the very basis of how one has come to accept them as true.⁶ (This air of paradox is merely apparent, because in contrast to its typical use, "nonsensical" does not in this case repudiate the remarks, but rather simply indicates that they lack any particular, Tractarian-wordly truth grounds.⁷) More specifically, we aim to show how reading the remarks of the picture theory and recognizing them as nonsensical on the basis of their truth is supposed to be thought

⁴ Diamond (1991, 181) and Conant (1989, 196-7).

⁵ Compare Morris & Dodd (2009, 256-9) and Sullivan, (2004, 35-41).

⁶ Some readers suggest that the text's distinction between "saying" and "showing" can allow one to discern a theoretical point in the text while acknowledging its nonsensicality by allowing us to think that the text "shows" ineffable truths that cannot be 'said.' See for example Hacker (1972, 22). We offer an understanding of the say/show distinction regarding propositions in Section IV and find the theoretical point discerned by our case study not to be delivered by any such showing (see Sections V and VI).

⁷ In saying that the remarks of the picture theory lack particular, Tractarian-wordly truth grounds, we do not mean that nothing makes them true; rather, as we clarify in what follows, in the course of theorizing thinking, these remarks' nonsensicality shows that that thinking is distinct from anything in the Tractarian world but has all possible determinations of the latter available to it, which clearly does not concern any particular determination of the Tractarian world per se. To be clear: in a maximally capacious sense of "particular truth grounds," the remarks of course have truth grounds in virtue of being true, in this case the nature of thought vis-à-vis the Tractarian world. Not only would it be paradoxical, on our reading, for the recognition of the remarks of the picture theory as nonsensical to repudiate the remarks as untrue, it would be impossible, as one would then no longer be positioned to accept the remarks as true, and thus also no longer positioned to recognize them as nonsensical. [Acknowledgement A.]

thinking itself⁸ (“thinking” in the sense of propositional understanding – see Section II.1) and recognizing that thinking is distinct from any possible determination of the (Tractarian) world while having all possible such determinations transparently available to it.^{9, 10} That thinking is distinct from all worldly, to itself transparent determinations means, as the text puts it, that thinking lies at (not beyond) the limit of the world (*TLP*: 5.632). As we find the Tractarian world to be sense-perceptible (“sensuous” for short), call this point the *supersensible reality of thinking*. Because this metaphysical point is meant to be reflected in the *Tractatus*’s demonstration that remarks about thinking are nonsensical, the text’s intellectual-practical upshot vis-à-vis “misunderstanding the logic of our language” (*TLP*: preface) is meant to come together with a metaphysical upshot, challenging the commonly accepted metaphysical-therapeutic dichotomy concerning the text’s proper construal.¹¹ Our reading is thus identifiable as a “middle way” reading; it is distinguished by reading the text as at once austerely nonsensical and addressing a particular traditional metaphysical issue, viz. the nature of thought.¹²

This finding significantly clarifies the status of nonsense in the text in a manner that does justice to Wittgenstein’s framing of the text in the preface and penultimate remark: it makes good on the

⁸ To be clear, one does not find “the thinking of thinking” as a category explicitly in the body of the text. Insofar as we take the text’s penultimate remark seriously, however, at least some theoretical points to be discerned within the text are liable to be obliquely presented. Our reading takes this remark seriously and finds that the thinking that is explicitly theorized in the text is theorized in the manner of being made self-transparent in the way we describe here, as we argue at length in Section VI.

⁹ Compare Kimhi (2018, 12-16).

¹⁰ By thinking having all determinations of the world transparently available to it we mean, as McDowell (1996, 27) puts it, ‘there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought,’ but rather “[w]hen one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case.”

¹¹ For an explicit endorsement of such a dichotomy, see McManus (2004, 148).

¹² For an overview of prominent existing “middle way” readings, see Bronzo (2012, 45-80).

resolute denial of semantically differentiated kinds of nonsense while nonetheless discerning a theoretical point in the text that allows us to “see the world rightly” (*TLP*: 6.54) by means of “draw[ing] a limit” to the expression of thoughts in language, in that the remarks of the picture theory mark themselves off as nonsensical and thinking as an indeterminate limit of the determinately thinkable. At the same time, it significantly clarifies the text’s relation to Kant’s philosophy and Kantianism more broadly, because, as we argue below, Kant also advanced that thinking is supersensible in the sense defined above. We thus discern a paradigm instance of recognizing remarks of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical that shows the text to converge with one of Kant’s very own positions. Our secondary aim in this article, accordingly, is to situate the significance of this finding for further questions of the relation of the text to Kant and Kantianism. To be clear, the novelty of our contribution is not to detect echoes of Kantianism in the text, the existence of which has long been noted.¹³ Rather, the convergence we find with Kant is interpretatively significant because this viewpoint is discerned through the recognition of the text’s remarks as nonsensical and illuminates the text’s reflections on limits of thinking vis-à-vis nonsense; as such, one cannot question whether this viewpoint is ultimately repudiated as a confusion by recognizing said remarks as nonsensical.¹⁴ This finding thus shows that the text does not entirely repudiate Kant’s critical philosophy and thus underwrites interest in many finer-grained questions on the relation of the text to the legacy of Kantian philosophy.

Section II explicates the notion of a Tractarian “picture,” the activity of picturing—which is supposed to be identical to propositional understanding—, and the notion of representational form,

¹³ More on this in the conclusion.

¹⁴ That some viewpoints ostensibly advanced by the text are ultimately to be so repudiated is urged for example by Conant (1989, 242-283), Conant and Diamond (2004, 78, 85), Sullivan (2013, 260, 262) and Moore (2019, 68-70).

and further argues that the picture theory theorizes thought in the sense of propositional understanding as an activity. Section III exposit the text's notions of "logical form" and "logical picture" in relation to the results of Section II. Section IV then provides arguments for the claim that (a certain class of) propositions are (merely logical) pictures of facts. Section V then demonstrates how the picture theory's remarks can be subsequently recognized as nonsensical and how this recognition is meant to reflect the supersensible reality of thinking as defined above. Section VI argues that this recognition is the rendering of the very thinking theorized in Sections II-V self-transparent. Section VII shows that Kant also advanced this very position, modulo differences in his conception of the sensuous world and the internal structure of thought. The conclusion comments on the significance of these results for *Tractatus* scholarship and for the relation of the *Tractatus* to Kant and Kantianism.

II – Picturing, Form, and the Tractarian World

The picture theory theorizes propositions as instances of pictures as theorized by the text, where the latter are "models" of what they represent (*TLP*: 1.1, 2.12, 3, 3.1-3.14, 3.5, 4.021). Pictures are pictures of "facts," where the Tractarian world is the totality of (Tractarian) facts (*TLP*: 2.1). A picture is itself a fact used as a vehicle of representation of a Tractarian fact (*TLP*: 2.141, 2.1513). A Tractarian fact consists in (Tractarian) objects O and a structure S, the "way objects hang together" in that fact (*TLP*: 2.032-2.024).¹⁵ The picture theory has a corresponding referentialist notion of sense: "What the picture represents is its sense" (*TLP*: 2.221), where what the picture represents is both a *how* and a

¹⁵ To avoid terminological confusion, note that we do not commit to any technical conception of "objects" as constituting the substance of the world based on some particular reading of what Morris (2008, Appendix) calls "the substance argument" (*TLP*: 2.021-2.0212). Instead, by "objects," we simply mean the elements of reality represented to be configured in some way.

what—objects structured in a certain way. This much we take to be uncontroversial. Before explicating the notion of “representational form” belonging to pictures, we argue that the picture theory also subtly but importantly theorizes propositions as *acts* of thinking (propositional understanding) expressed through propositional signs.

II.1 – Picturing, Propositional Understanding

It may seem that the picture theory does not theorize “thinking” as an activity, inasmuch as it de-psychologizes Russell’s Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement out of which it emerged by focusing on propositions and their relation to the world rather than the judging subject as a relatum in a judging relationship.¹⁶ It does, however, invoke thinking as an activity in direct connection with propositions. Propositions are “applied, *thought-out* [*gedachte*] propositional sign[s]” (*TLP*: 3.5, our emphasis). The “method of projection” is “the thinking of the sense of the proposition” (*TLP*: 3.11). This activity is apparently central to what propositions *are*, as “the proposition is the propositional sign in its projective relation to the world” (*TLP*: 3.12). Thus Tractarian propositions simply are acts of thinking expressed through propositional signs. This thinking must be propositional understanding—“know[ing] what is the case, when [a proposition] is true” (*TLP*: 4.024)—rather than judging: the proposition as such does not contain “what is projected ... itself” but rather its “possibility” (*TLP*: 3.13). Given that propositions are supposed to *be* pictures, there must in general be an activity associated with pictures—call it picturing—that is supposed to be the same as propositional understanding. We confirm this result when we explicate picturing in the following.

¹⁶ Connelly (2021, 136-140).

II.2 – Representational Form

Our aim here is twofold: (i) to show that picturing consists in using some sense-perceptible complex to model another with sensitivity to when the objects represented are structured as the model; (ii) to provide arguments for the claim that pictures must share a form of representation with what they represent (*TLP*: 2.17).

The *Tractatus* introduces the notions of pictures and picturing in one stroke: “We make pictures of facts to ourselves” (*TLP*: 2.1 – translations modified). The text’s operative sense of “picture” is “model of reality” (*TLP*: 2.12).¹⁷ We can in turn unpack this sense of “picture” by attending to Wittgenstein’s inspiration for the picture theory, namely, the Paris courtroom model mentioned in his *Notebooks*: “In the proposition a world is as it were put together experimentally. (As when in the law-court in Paris a motor-car accident is represented by means of dolls, etc.)” (*NB* 1979: 29.9.14). Picturing a car accident with everyday objects like dolls and the like involves those objects representing other objects in some represented situation by standing in or going proxy for (*vertreten*) the latter. Wittgenstein calls such representing objects (*Vertreter:innen*) the “elements of the picture” (*TLP*: 2.13-2.131).

Pictures are complexes whose elements stand in certain relations to one another or that have a certain “structure” S, thus are indeed facts (*TLP*: 2.14-141, 2.15). A picture is further a fact *in a (logico-syntactic) use*: “the representing [*abbildende*] relation that makes a picture into a picture belongs to the

¹⁷ Compare Morris (2008, 119).

picture” (*TLP*: 2.1513 – translations modified).¹⁸ One such use is the representation of the obtaining of another fact, F, which is a matter of objects O being structured in manner S*. Call such a picture a *positive* picture P₊. A positive picture is true if O are structured in manner S*, otherwise false.¹⁹ Expounding upon the remark that “the picture represents what it represents, independently of its truth or falsity...,” the *Tractatus* advances that “there are no pictures which are true *a priori*” (*TLP*: 2.22, 2.225). Two intervening remarks clarify the sense in which this is so:

To know [*erkennen*] whether a picture is true or false we must compare it with reality (*TLP*: 2.223).

It is impossible to know [*erkennen*] from the picture alone whether it is true or false (*TLP*: 2.224).

Accordingly, no picture is *a priori* true in the sense that when using one fact as a representation—thus making that fact into a picture—we do not know whether what is represented is as represented. In this way, a picture is by its nature both possibly true and possibly false. A positive picture is thus distinct from its truth-ground (the fact represented to obtain) should it obtain, as well as the fact that falsifies it should it obtain—P₊ represents F “from without” (*TLP*: 2.173). Call this the *Disjointness Principle*.²⁰

¹⁸ We intend the parenthetical qualifier ‘logico-syntactic’ to mark that the use of a fact as a picture renders the fact-cum-picture subject to a network of logical, inferential relations. This conception of the use as internal to a picture’s standing as a picture stands in contrast to *NB* 1979: 26.11.14:

Can one negate a picture? No. And in this lies the difference between a picture and proposition. The picture can serve as a proposition. But in that case something gets added to it which brings it about that now it says something. In short: I can only deny that the picture is right, but the picture I cannot deny.

In the *Tractatus*, the “something” that gets “added” to the picture “which brings it about that now it says something”—the representing relationship—belongs to the picture: without this relationship, it is simply a fact, not a picture in the Tractarian sense.

¹⁹ *TLP* 2.17, 2.21, and 2.223 clearly show that the *Tractatus* uses ‘correct/incorrect’ (*richtig/falsch*) and ‘true/false’ (*wahr/falsch*) interchangeably for pictures; accordingly, we also use these terms interchangeably for pictures.

²⁰ [Acknowledgement D.] See also White (2006, 43).

In using some fact-cum-representational vehicle P_+ to represent the obtaining of some F , we are therefore situated to judge whether F obtains or does not. For every F that we can represent as obtaining with another fact F_P , we can therefore use the very same F_P to represent that F does *not* obtain, that is that some objects O are *not* structured in manner S^* .²¹ A given F_P therefore has two possible uses, a positive and a negative use, P_+ and P_- . By *TLP* 2.22, a true (false) P_- must also be entirely distinct from its truth-ground (falsifier), that is the Disjointness Principle expressed in *TLP* 2.173 also holds of negative pictures. Picturing—either positively or negatively—is thus indeed propositional understanding or “know[ing] what is the case, when [the pictured is as pictured]” (*TLP*: 4.024), as we advanced above.

We now argue for the claim that

What a picture must have in common with reality to depict it in its manner - correctly or falsely - is its form of representation (*TLP*: 2.17).

The meaning of this claim is clarified by *TLP* 2.15:

That the elements of the picture relate to one another in a determinate manner represents that the things so relate to one another.

This connection of elements of the picture is called its structure and its possibility its form of representation.

Taken together, we understand *TLP* 2.15 and 2.17 to advance the following identity requirement for P_+ (P_-) possibly to represent the obtaining of F (the non-obtaining of F) at all: what P_+ (P_-) represents is possibly structured *as* the elements E of F_P (possibly structured *other than* the elements E of F_P), that is S is *identical to* S^* and it is possible both that S/S^* holds and that it does not hold of O —otherwise

²¹ [Acknowledgement C.]

the form or possibility of structure would not be common to picture and pictured.²² The following argument—premised on the above and Frege’s principle of the *Determinacy of Sense*²³, namely that there is only *one* possible structure S^* that makes P_+ (P_-) true (false) for a given F_P —legitimizes *TLP* 2.17 so understood.

Form Argument, First Variant^{24,25}

- i. P_+ (P_-) represents that O are structured in precisely manner S^* (are not structured in precisely manner S^*) by exhibiting precisely structure S . (*Determinacy of Sense*)
- ii. By the nature of picturing, we are aware of E being structured in manner S in representing that O are or are not combined in manner S^* .
- iii. We are aware *only* of S in representing that S^* holds or does not hold of O : we are not attending to two structures in attending to a fact used as a picture, but one.
- iv. While we are not aware of O *being structured* (*not being structured*) in manner S^* in representing that S^* holds of (does not hold of) O (*Disjointness Principle*), we are aware of S^* qua possible structure in representing that S^* holds of O , in that we know how O would be structured if P_+ (P_-) is true (is false).
- v. So: S and S^* must be identical. (iii, iv)

²² Whether S/S^* possibly does not hold of E turns out to be beside the point.

²³ This principle, in the first instance, simply is the law of excluded middle, such that it follows for example that ‘any object Δ either falls under concept Φ or it does not ... : *tertium non datur*.’ See Gottlob Frege (2016 [1893/1903], 69). Therefore the sense of a concept—the way it picks out objects in its extension (compare Frege (1960 [1892], 57–58)—is completely determinate—its boundaries are “sharp,” as Frege (2016 [1893/1903], 72, 74–75) puts it.

²⁴ This argument has affinities with and is indebted to that of Sullivan (2001, 105–6) that the combination of names in an atomic proposition is identical to the combination of objects represented by that proposition, as is apparent by comparison of Sullivan’s argument with the second variant of the Form Argument regarding one-way propositions below.

²⁵ We take premises (i) and (iii) to be the load-bearing premises here. Wittgenstein would come to find the use to which the Determinacy of Sense is put in (i) to be problematic by the time he was writing the *Philosophical Investigations*. See for example PI 2009: § 68–71, 76–81, 99–108. Indeed, we can already see its weakness for the paradigm case of a picture of the Paris courtroom model: in this case, the premise implies that when the model is true, the represented objects stand in identical spatial interrelations to one another—up to a scale factor—as the model’s elements do to one another; but if, as appears to be the case, the model can only represent relative distances and angles to a certain precision—leaving an indeterminate range of possible configurations in the represented objects for which the model would be a correct representation—then contrary to the identity requirement, there is no *single* set of spatial relations shared between the Paris courtroom model and what it represents when the model is correct. (iii) is a phenomenological point we take to be correct in this context. We find its counterpart to be more contentious in the second variant of this argument; we also find evidence that Wittgenstein continues to be concerned to defend the general point as his thought develops, including in the *Investigations*. See fn 29.

vi. S^*/S is a possible structure of O , because $P_+(P_-)$ is possibly true (is possibly false).

vii. S^*/S is a possible structure of E , because it is the actual structure of E .

viii. Therefore, $P_+(P_-)$ shares a possibility of a structure with what it represents, namely the structure it exhibits, *qua* possible such structure, in order to represent what it does in the first place— $P_+(P_-)$ shares a “form of representation” with what it represents in order to represent it at all. (vi, vii)

That S is identical to S^* shows that the structure S of a picture does not stand in for some distinct S^* —it does not represent in the sense of *vertreten*. Rather, it is a display of itself *qua* merely possible structure, and one represents this display as holding or not holding of some objects O —the picture “shows forth” its form of representation (*es weist sie auf*) in representing what it does in the first place and so cannot represent this form (*TLP*: 2.172). S is not a further element of F_P , but the unity of specifically those elements *qua* possible such unity, shared with O . S *qua* possible structure is a form F_S through which we can picture either the holding or the not-holding of S —both the “positive pole” and the “negative pole” are picturable by means of F_P . Moreover, sensitivity to S *qua* possible such structure when picturing includes sensitivity to the possibility of the not-holding of S ; F_P thus has both poles of F_S in common with its pictured subject matter in either picture P_+ or picture P_- . Because sharing such a form with what it represents while being distinct from its truth-ground and falsifier is essential to a picture being the characteristic representation that it is, a picture is thus *necessarily* both possibly true and possibly false, that is the Bipolarity Principle applies to pictures.²⁶ Because a pair of positive and negative pictures are representable by means of the very same F_P , the difference between a

²⁶ See Hanks (2014) for more on the Bipolarity Principle and its presence in early Wittgenstein’s thought. See also fn 31.

positive and a negative picture does not correspond to any additional element or structural relation in what is pictured (more on this in Section IV).

A corollary of *TLP* 2.15 and 2.17 is that all Tractarian facts are sense-perceptible (“sensuous” for short), thus that the Tractarian world is sensuous. For all Tractarian facts are picturable (*TLP*: 2, 2.034, 3.001, 3.02). By *TLP* 2.15 and 2.17, the objects represented are always possibly structured *as* the fact-cum-picture; but it is difficult to see how any fact could be used as a vehicle of representation—made into a picture—without being sensuous. It follows that Tractarian facts are as such sensuous.

III Logical Form and Pictures

Because the text identifies thoughts with both “logical picture[s] of the facts” and with “applied, thought-out propositional sign[s],” the notions of logical picturing and of logical form require attention. The *Tractatus* calls what is common to all forms of representation “logical form” or “the form of reality,” and calls any picture with logical form in common with what it represents a “logical picture,” such that “every picture is *also* a logical picture” (*TLP*: 2.18, 2.181, 2.182). The text does not elaborate logical form vis-à-vis pictures in general further, and with good reason. No further illuminating account can be given for *that which is common to all forms of reality characteristic of so many pictures*. The most we can say is that any picture displays *some* possibility we think by its means. To appreciate this point, consider a pair of pictures: first, a representation of someone’s shirt’s color with a printed instance of their name in that color; second, a topographical map of the ocean floor. The former represents no spatial relations, only possible colors. The latter, no colors, only spatial relations. Defining *what is common to all forms of reality* requires saying what is common to the forms in these two pictures, but there is simply nothing more specific to say about how these respective pictures

represent their respective subject-matters beyond observing that they both represent some possibility. Indeed, any further commonality between distinct forms of representation would simply be another variety of form of representation that can represent the specific sort of possibilities indicated. For example, we could indicate the form of two-dimensional spatiality as common between a map of a country and a three-dimensional model of a landscape. Specific forms of representation are individuated by a specific kind of sortal under which both the pictorial elements and the depicted objects fall, namely those that can be combined in specific ways (for instance those elements that can stand in two-dimensional spatial relations).

To be clear, we do not take “logical form” to be exhaustively theorized by this minimal definition vis-à-vis specific forms of representation. Indeed, we take it that aspects of logical form are not shareable by any particular pictured subject matter as such. For example, the conjunction operator has logical form, but the conjunction in the proposition “the cup is on the table and the cat is on the mat” represents no structural feature of the cup’s being on the table nor of the cat’s being on the mat, nor of any additional facts.²⁷ Accordingly, all we advance here is that logical form is, whatever else, that which is common to all pictures, that all pictures are accordingly logical pictures, and that logical picturing includes all picturing theorized in Section II.

IV – (Single-Fact) Propositions Are (Merely Logical) Pictures

With the above notion of logical pictures and logical picturing in hand, we argue that propositions each of whose truth-ground is the obtaining or non-obtaining of a determinate fact are

²⁷ [Acknowledgement CI.]

logical pictures of facts. Because such propositions affect a division of logical space by reference to a single possible fact, call them *single-fact propositions*.²⁸

Some commentators, for example McGinn (1999, 503), read the picture theory as merely drawing an “analogy between pictures and propositions.” But the text never softens its claim that “a proposition *is* a picture of reality” into a claim that the former is merely like the latter (*TLP*: 4.01 – our emphasis).²⁹ Even when acknowledging some apparent distinctness of pictures and propositions, the *Tractatus* insists that propositions nonetheless “prove to be pictures—even in the ordinary sense—of what they represent” (*TLP*: 4.011 – translations modified). Notably, the above positions us to affirm this *prima facie* puzzling assertion by showing that a picture is (Ia) a sensuous fact (Ib) used as a vehicle of truth-apt representation of the obtaining or non-obtaining of another fact, where this representation is possibly true and possibly false and (II) shares a form or possibility of structure with what it represents (the “identity-of-form requirement”).

(Ia) clearly applies to propositions in general. We can take (Ib) to be definitional of the sort of proposition the text advances to be a picture, i.e. that the text advances precisely what we have called single-fact propositions to be pictures. For this to be so, the text must be advancing the same referentialist notion of sense of the picture theory for such propositions, according to which their sense just is their truth-ground. We also find that the text is committed to the transparency of the Tractarian world to propositional thought in the way expressed by McDowell (1996, 27), as reflected in Premise

²⁸ [Acknowledgement D2.] One could readily argue that it follows from the Determinacy of Sense that all logically contingent propositions are truth-functions of single-fact propositions. (If the Determinacy of Sense is false, there are logically contingent propositions with an indeterminate range of facts as truth-grounds.)

²⁹ Emphasis added.

(iii) of the below argument for the identity-of-form requirement: “there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought,” but rather “[w]hen one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case.” The way in which such propositions are both possibly true and possibly false, moreover, is just as it is for pictures: in being aware of—understanding—a single-fact proposition, it could be, for all we know, that p or that not p . Thus the Disjointness Principle holds of single-fact propositions: the truth-grounds of a thought each such proposition expresses “answer” the thought as something other than it, to borrow McDowell (1996, xii)’s formulation.

(Ia) and (Ib), then, hold of single-fact propositions. The last requirement, (II), however, is *prima facie* difficult to believe for any proposition. For (II) to hold, the words of a single-fact proposition must be structured in a way that is identical to the possible way in which the objects are structured in the corresponding possible fact. But how could the represented *objects* ever possibly be combined in identical manner to the *words* of a propositional sign, when these are in general such different sorts of entities? For instance, how is the hanging together of the words in the sign of the proposition “the cat is on the mat” the *same* structure exhibited by a feline’s being on a mat? An adaptation of the Form Argument clarifies this puzzle while showing that (II) indeed holds for single-fact propositions.

First note that the elements of every one-way proposition’s sign—its words, W—are structured such that the propositional sign is not a mere “mixture of words” (*kein Wörtergemisch*), but an “articulate” unity thereof (*TLP*: 3.14-3.141). As before, call this structure S. A one-way proposition also has a sense with a particular structure thought to hold or not to hold of the represented objects O (*TLP*: 4.2). Call this structure S*. Call a positive single-fact proposition that represents the holding of S* of O p_+ , a negative single-fact proposition p_- . Now consider:

Form Argument, Second Variant

- i. Single-fact proposition $p_+(p)$ represents that O are structured (are not structured) precisely in manner S* through W being structured precisely in manner S. (Definition)
- ii. In understanding $p_+(p)$, we are aware of S holding of W in representing that S* holds (does not hold) of O. (Premise)
- iii. While we are not aware of S* *holding of* O in understanding $p_+(p)$ (Disjointness Principle), we are aware of S* (qua possible structure) in understanding $p_+(p)$, in that we know how O would be structured (would not be structured) if $p_+(p)$ is true (*TLP*: 4.024). (Premise)
- iv. We are aware *only* of S in understanding $p_+(p)$: we are not aware of two structures in understanding a proposition.³⁰ (Premise)
- v. So: S and S* must be identical. (iii, iv)
- vi. S*/S is a possible combination of O, because $p_+(p)$ is possibly true (is possibly false). (Premise)
- vii. S*/S is a possible combination of W, because it is the actual combination of W. (Premise)
- viii. Therefore, $p_+(p)$ shares a possibility of a structure with what it represents, namely the combination it exhibits as a propositional sign, in order to represent what it does in the first place— $p_+(p)$ shares a “form of representation” with what it represents in order to represent it at all. (v-vii)

³⁰ We may for example imagine a sample of whiteness in attempting to think of ‘the meaning of “snow is white”,’ and thereby convince ourselves that the combination thought amongst objects cannot be the combination of the sign ‘snow is white.’ But crucially, we *need not* do anything other than understand the utterance to intellectually position ourselves to judge in which cases it is true: one single intellectual act, namely one of linguistically mediated understanding, is all that is required, which suffices to see that this premise is true. Compare with the insistence that one need not have a mental image of a red flower occur to one to follow an order to fetch a red flower at *BB* 1960: 3-4 and the following from *PI* 2009: §329: “When I think in words, I don’t have ‘meanings’ in my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; rather, language itself is the vehicle of thought.” (*Wenn ich in der Sprache denke, so schweben mir nicht neben dem sprachlichen Ausdruck noch ‘Bedeutungen’ vor; sondern die Sprache selbst ist das Vehikel des Denkens.*) See also *PI* 2009: § 95, 317-8, 327-332, 435-6, 432, 496-500, 503-4, 511 for other passages in the *Investigations* that are intriguing in light of this premise together with our findings below.

With the identity-of-form requirement established, we see that single-fact propositions are indeed logical pictures.^{31, 32} As before, the result shows that S does not stand in for some distinct C* but rather is a display of itself qua merely possible structure, and one represents this displayed possible structure as holding or not holding of the represented objects. In other words, S is not a further element of the propositional sign, but the unity of specifically those words qua possible such unity, shared with O. S qua possible structure is a form F_S through which we can represent either the holding or the not-holding of S. Moreover, sensitivity to S qua possible such structure when representing the holding of S of O includes sensitivity to the possibility of the not-holding of S of O and vice versa; the propositional sign either of p_+ or of p_- in its “projective relation to the world” thus has both poles of F_S in common with what it represents (*TLP*: 3.12).³³ We could therefore by convention use a propositional sign without a negation sign to express the non-obtaining of the combination conferring unity upon that sign, showing that “nothing in reality corresponds to [the negation sign]” (*TLP*: 4.062).³⁴

The above argument can be further elucidated by reflecting on the identity of picturing with propositional understanding, that is being intellectually positioned to ascertain whether or not some sensuous such-and-such are thus-and-so. Indeed, by premise (iv), an act that so positions us just is the act of thinking manifest in our understanding of a one-way proposition as expressed through its sign.

³¹ Compare Sullivan (2001, 105-6).

³² Because sharing a form with what it represents while being distinct from its truth-ground and falsifier is essential to a single-fact proposition being the characteristic representation that it is, a single-fact proposition is thus *necessarily* both possibly true and possibly false, that is the Bipolarity Principle applies to single-fact propositions.

³³ For the *Tractatus*, then, thinking “the thought p ” is none other than thinking the content expressed by p qua thinkable such content. Thus, to register possible difference with Frege (1956, 307), if there are such things as “thoughts” grasped by such an act, such thoughts are not characterized by any determinate content over and above the content of those thoughts but are rather none other than the explicitly self-reflexive acts of thinking said contents.

³⁴ Compare Kimhi (2018, 104).

Therefore, thoughts themselves are acts of logical picturing and propositions are such acts expressed through propositional signs (*TLP*: 3, 3.5). Thinking the sense of a proposition is thus internal to the identity of the expressed proposition, just as *TLP*: 3.11-3.13 advances (see Section II.1).

We can further specify that the single-fact propositions expressed through “our two-dimensional script”³⁵ (say, English or German) are *merely* logical pictures rather than pictures of a specific form of representation, as the representing elements, qua representing elements, are not of the same sort as the objects they represent as combined. This is because they are not individuated by some kind of structure or variety of form of representation—the two-dimensional scripts of English and German, for example, are not limited merely to representing two-dimensional spatial relations; the concatenations therefore do not represent spatial relations *per se*, but whatever possible structure they conventionally express. The structures internal to one-way propositional signs are therefore structures simpliciter that share logical form simpliciter with reality in that they express some conventionally chosen possible combination of objects that can be thought to obtain or not, that is some possible sense (*TLP*: 4.12, 4.2). A one-way proposition thus “shows” (*zeigt*) or “shows forth” logical form (*er weist sie auf*), that is the form of reality, in precisely the way all pictures do (see again *TLP*: 2.172): by displaying precisely some possible structure of reality in the combination internal to its sensuous face that is thought to obtain or not (*TLP*: 4.122). We take it that this is precisely what the text means by its famous slogan that “a proposition *shows* its sense,” that is “how things stand, *if* it is true.” As will be clear shortly,

³⁵ NB 1979: 26.9.14

the theoretical point we discern in recognizing remarks of the picture theory as nonsensical is not delivered by any such showing.³⁶

V – The picture theory, recognized as nonsensical

We have now read the remarks of the picture theory so as to reconstruct valid arguments for its main claim: that propositions are logical pictures of reality. This reconstruction also precisely positions us to recognize the picture theory's remarks as nonsensical. Because it expresses the essential points just reconstructed, *TLP*: 3.13 proves to be an especially illuminating case study that positions us to recognize many of the remarks already reconstructed as nonsensical in like manner. *TLP*: 3.13 reads in full:

- (I) A proposition includes all that the projection includes, but not what is projected.
- (II) Therefore, a proposition includes the possibility of what is projected, but not what is projected itself.
- (III) A proposition therefore does not yet contain its sense, but does contain the possibility of expressing it.
- (IV) (“The content of a proposition” means the content of a senseful proposition.)
- (V) A proposition contains the form, but not the content, of its sense.³⁷

The “projection” at issue here is the “projection of a possible situation,” where we use a propositional sign as such a projection by “thinking the sense of the proposition” (*TLP*: 3.11). We are thus positioned to accept each sentence. (I) and (II) remark that thinking through a proposition involves sensitivity to the possible obtaining of its truth-grounds; (III) remarks that thoughts expressed through propositional signs contain the possibility of their own expression, in that the combinations of words just are the

³⁶ This is so in two important ways: (i) the theoretical point is not delivered by a display of some particular thinkable determination of the Tractarian world; (ii) the theoretical point is not the mere entertaining of a possibility, but the recognition of an *a priori* necessary truth.

³⁷ Sentence enumerations added, translations modified.

possible combinations one thinks in the thought-of objects; (IV) is a terminological reminder; (V) remarks that the thinkability of the sense one thinks through the proposition brings along its possibility and hence that the possibility of the objects of thought being combined as one thinks them—the form of the proposition's sense—is contained in the proposition.

We discern nonsense, upon further consideration, in (V), in the way it is true: (V) is both necessarily and *a priori* true and thus lacks any Tractarian-wordly truth-*conditions*, that is lacks sense. The remark has the grammatical form of a predication. But it cannot be a contingent proposition, because it cannot be false. Suppose, *per impossible*, that (V) were false, that is that proposition *p* did not contain the form of its sense; the latter proposition would then not be *p* but with a different property, but instead either not a proposition or a different proposition, as its truth-grounds would not be the same possible combination of objects. In other words, (V) is necessarily true because a one-way proposition's logical identity is given by its truth-grounds, such that its failing to contain the form of its sense would simply render it not itself.³⁸ The remark is also true *a priori* because one need not ascertain the obtaining of any particular truth-ground of any senseful proposition to ascertain its truth.

Because (V) cannot be false, were it any sort of proposition by the letter of the text, it would have to be a tautology (*TLP*: 4.46). But it is clearly not a proposition of logic resulting from truth-

³⁸ Our reading of 3.13 as nonsensical thus bears out the suggestion of Sullivan (2004, 35) that the *Tractatus* is out to expose a certain “characteristically philosophical kind of ‘double-think’” in which we engage when theorizing about language and thinking. In this instance, we slide from thinking that a proposition meaning what it does is something that is just contingently so—in that we need not have expressed that very thought through that very propositional sign—to thinking we have made some discovery about that very proposition, expressible in turn through another senseful proposition. But in fact, it was our use of the propositional sign as a medium of expression that gave the propositional sign the representing-relation it has to reality in the first place. Therefore, conditioned on this choice, the propositional sign necessarily represents its objects.

operations on a base of one-way propositions, for example, “ $p \vee \neg p$.” The only other sort of proposition that is logically true is a conceptual truth, but neither is the remark one of those. Conceptual truths concern internal relations among structures of the very same facts: “all chairs are extended in space” is necessarily true because something’s being a chair requires that very thing’s being extended in space (*TLP*: 5.121, 5.122). By contrast, a proposition containing the form of its sense concerns the relation between *distinct* possible parts of reality, namely, the propositional sign and the proposition’s truth-grounds. The remark is necessarily and *a priori* true, and therefore utterly without sense, but not a tautology, and thus *unsinnig* as opposed to *sinnlos* (*TLP*: 4.4611).

3.13 is thus recognized as “austerely” nonsensical, as communicating no particular content whatsoever, via neither any sense nor any quasi-sense. Contrary to the repudiatory connotations of the term “nonsensical” (*unsinnig*), however, this recognition in no way repudiates the reasoning through which we came to see 3.13 as true. Indeed, the remark is recognized as nonsensical *in its truth*: one-way propositions are logical pictures of reality, such that every such proposition by necessity contains the form of its sense, no matter which particular truth-grounds obtain.³⁹ The remarks that express the unconditional internal relation between thought, language, and reality are thus without sense owing to the unconditionality and internality of this relation (*TLP*: 3, 3.001, 4.014). The movement of thought through which we come to recognize 3.13 as nonsensical is therefore in no way repudiated by this recognition: The movement of thought does not engender confusion but exposes as confused the

³⁹ We see, therefore, in thinking through the explicit definition of contingent truths (truths with conceivable opposites) offered by the remarks of the picture theory, that these remarks themselves express *absolute truths*, that is truths without opposites. (“...we could not *say* of an ‘unlogical’ world how it would look.” *TLP*: 3.031) [Acknowledgement A2.]

thought that the unconditional internal relation between thought, language, and reality can be expressed with senseful propositions.

Because 3.13 expresses the essential points of our reconstruction of several remarks of the picture theory, the theoretical point of recognizing those, too, should be as we indicate it here. To raise two examples: “we use the sensibly perceptible sign as a projection of a possible situation ... The method of projection is the thinking of the sense of the proposition” (*TLP*: 3.11) expresses the same unconditional internal relation between thought and language just reviewed; the remark that every picture must share a form of representation with what it represents in order to represent it at all (*TLP*: 2.17) does the same for cases where the vehicle expressing propositional understanding perhaps has a specific variety of such form. Both remarks are therefore *a priori* necessary truths but distinct from logical truths, thus nonsensical remarks, for the same reason 3.13 is.

This finding thus notably indicates an essential relation between the text’s therapeutic and metaphysical dimensions—understanding the text’s practical-intellectual upshot regarding avoiding philosophical confusion requires understanding its metaphysical upshot about the nature of thinking: If successfully thinking thinking itself entails not thinking any particular determination, one cannot think thinking determinately. In recognizing this, one recognizes that one cannot think thinking as an object of senseful discourse and therefore that thinking cannot be an object of the Tractarian world, though it has all determinations of this world transparently available to it. “Seeing the world rightly” therefore apparently involves appreciating the supersensible reality of thinking, that is, seeing that thinking itself lies at the limit of the determinately thinkable and thus of the world (*TLP*: 6.54).

VI – Thought thinking itself

In this section, we aim to show that the recognition of 3.13 as nonsensical in its truth is thought thinking itself as the limit of the determinately thinkable.

The movement of thought through which we came to accept 3.13 as true recognized single-fact propositions to be logical pictures and thus accepted the main contention of the picture theory. It was therefore a thinking that took the propositional understanding theorized by the picture theory as its object. Call this thinking “meta-thinking” and propositional understanding “fact-thinking.” The question then arises: is meta-thinking identical to fact-thinking? Clearly, a given episode of meta-thinking is not the thinking of any particular fact *per se*. Nonetheless, the following shows that meta-thinking and fact-thinking are identical in that meta-thinking is fact-thinking made self-transparent.

1. In thinking any given instance of fact-thinking, all we can think is the truth-ground of such thinking as possible, thinkable determinations of Tractarian reality. (Sections II-III)
2. For any such truth-ground to be thinkable is for us to be intellectually positioned to ascertain whether it obtains. (Sections II-III)
3. But we are already intellectually positioned to ascertain whether it obtains in thinking the truth-ground.⁴⁰ (Premise)
4. Thus, thinking any given instance of fact-thinking is an explicitly reflexive instance of fact-thinking.⁴¹ (2-3).
5. Meta-thinking is the thinking of what is common to all instances of fact-thinking. (Definition)
6. What is common to all instances of fact-thinking is our being intellectually positioned to ascertain whether or not some Tractarian fact obtains. (Sections II-III)
7. But our capacity to think “being intellectually positioned to ascertain whether or not some Tractarian fact obtains” is none other than fact-thinking in its reflexive dimension in the way indicated by (1)-(4)—there is no other grasp we have of this notion other than thinking it *in*

⁴⁰ And we are thinking such a truth-ground when we are thinking it as thinkable

⁴¹ [Acknowledgement Z.]

concreto for some given instance.⁴² Thinking fact-thinking in general is none other than fact-thinking in its reflexive dimension thinking its own universality. In other words: meta-thinking is fact-thinking made self-transparent. (Premise)

Recognizing 3.13 as nonsensical on the basis of the arguments for 3.13 is therefore thought thinking itself as the indeterminate limit of the determinately thinkable.⁴³

To be clear, on our reading, thinking renders itself *only partially* self-transparent in recognizing 3.13 as nonsensical in its truth. Rendering thought fully self-transparent would require making the internal articulations of thought in logical space perspicuous, and we have already advanced that some of thought's internal structure is not that of any picturable subject-matter (Section IV), and the way we have shown thought to think itself proceeded essentially through consideration of when the form of thought is identical to the form of picturable subject-matter. This finding is thus a contribution to the program of reading the text it recommends, namely discerning how the *Tractatus* is meant to render thought fully self-transparent.

VII – Kant on the supersensible reality of thinking

Kant advances both that “thinking”—the activity of the “I think” or “thinking I”—does not distinguish any particular, conceptually determinable object of thought and that it has all possible determinations of the (sensuous) world of experience transparently available to it.⁴⁴ As such, Kant

⁴² [Acknowledgment T.]

⁴³ This result elucidates why *TLP* 3.13 is austerely nonsensical in its truth: the activity of thinking as such always includes itself, thus no content is communicated to thinking when it becomes self-transparent, that is nothing comes to thinking from without in such episodes. See *TLP* 3.05 in this connection: “We could only know *a priori* that a thought is true if its truth were to be recognized from the thought itself (without an object of comparison).” (Translations modified.)

⁴⁴ By “particular, conceptually determinable object of thought” we mean object of thought to which pure and/or empirical concepts of the understanding apply, that is to which concepts of experience apply. For Kant, such concepts just are the

advances the supersensible reality of thinking in the above sense.⁴⁵ Kant advances the first point most explicitly in the “Paralogisms of pure reason” in the first *Critique*; the second is a straightforward corollary of his Copernican turn advanced and defended throughout the first *Critique*. Our purpose here is simply to make good on both of these interpretive claims without considering Kant’s reasons for advancing these two points.

Kant straightforwardly states that the thinking “I” is an “entirely empty [*gänzlich leer*]” representation that does not distinguish any object whatsoever (A346/B404). He makes clear, moreover, that this is so because of the impossibility of becoming determinately conscious of oneself “only as thinking” (B429). Thus, in claiming that the “I” that thinks does not distinguish any object whatsoever, Kant also means that “thinking” does not distinguish any object whatsoever.

But what does Kant mean by such statements? McDowell (1996, 4) claims that “Kant is not drawing our attention to a special kind of thought, the empty ones,” but rather advancing that purported thoughts shown to be “empty” are not thoughts at all. If this is generally right, Kant must be saying that there simply is no thought of the “thinking I” in its purity, but rather only the thought of impure thought as given through intuition; thus there simply is no “thinking” in its intuition-less purity. If one generally believes that any thinking that is not cognition is generally dismissed by the first *Critique*, this view is textually supported by Kant repeatedly arguing against the possibility of cognizing

particular determinations thinking (or more specifically, the understanding) can make of its objects (A50-1/B74-5, A69/B94, A137/B176).

⁴⁵To be clear, we do not intend this label to invoke any specific sense Kant attached to the word “supersensible”—a realm of noumenal objects *beyond* the limits of cognition, perhaps; rather, we intend it in the sense specifically defined in the Introduction and Section V, though we also believe that it captures some of how Kant conceived of *homo noumenon* or ourselves qua intelligences—see footnote 71 below together with A541/B569, A547-553/B574-581 and AA 6:418 in this connection.

(*erkennen*) pure thinking without any intermixing of material supplied by intuition (A350, A355-9, A361, A366, A382, A402, B406-413). One philosophical motivation for this view is that the statement “the thought of thinking is not the thought of anything in particular, but nonetheless a possible thought” appears to refute itself, in that any thought would seem to have its corresponding particular object, in this case *pure thinking*; thus if the thought of pure thinking is so much as possible, it should have a particular object, namely *pure thinking*. Call this the *performativity objection*.

The performativity objection has real force. But as convincing as one may generally find it, Kant plainly has a positive view of thinking, which shows that by its own lights, *pace* the performativity objection, the *Critique* itself centrally includes exercises in thinking that are not cognition.⁴⁶ Kant presents a summary diagnosis of the problems with the rational psychologists' proofs at B411*:

‘Thinking’ is taken in an entirely different signification [*Bedeutung*] in the two premises, in the major premise, as it applies to an object in general (hence as it may be given in intuition); but in the minor premise only as it is in relation to self-consciousness [*wie es in der Beziehung aufs Selbstbewusstsein besteht*], where, therefore, no object is thought, but only the relation to oneself as subject (as the form of thinking) is represented. In the first premise, things are talked about that cannot be thought of other than as subjects; the second premise, however, talks not about things, but about thinking (in that one abstracts from every object), in which the I always serves as the subject of consciousness...⁴⁷

In the very same breath as Kant considers “thinking” taken in such a way that it does not signify any object, he identifies it in relation to self-consciousness and advances that it does not signify an object *when so taken*. Thus, Kant has a positive view of thinking in its intuition-less purity, one that has to do with its “relation to self-consciousness.” In the A-Edition of the paralogisms, Kant explicates this point at greater length and makes clear that the self-consciousness at issue is that of the unity of apperception:

⁴⁶ The latter point about the *Critique* tends to be appreciated by commentators who thematize freedom over knowledge when discussing the place of regulative principles in the text. For a particularly trenchant case, see Neiman (1994).

⁴⁷ Translation modified.

...that the being that thinks in us supposes that it cognizes itself through pure categories, and indeed through those under each heading that express absolute unity, follows from this: Apperception is itself the ground of the possibility of the categories, which for their part represent nothing other than the synthesis of the manifold of intuition, insofar as that manifold has unity in apperception. Self-consciousness in general is therefore the representation of that which is the condition of all unity, and yet is itself unconditioned. Hence of the thinking I (the soul), which [thus represents] itself as substance, simple, numerically identical in all time, and the correlate of all existence from which all other existence must be inferred, one can say **not so much** that it cognizes **itself through the categories**, but that it cognizes the categories, and through them all objects, in the absolute unity of apperception, and hence cognizes them **through itself** (A401-2; cf. B131-2, B157, A346/B404).

The self-conscious “I think” in the sense at issue is thus “the representation of that which is the condition of all unity, and yet is itself unconditioned.” This unconditioned condition of all unity is itself the absolute unity of apperception, that “higher” unity that “itself contains the ground of the unity of different concepts in judgements” (B131-2). Because this unity is unconditioned, it must be the original-*synthetic* unity of apperception that “produces the representation **I think**” in its identity across instances of explicitly self-conscious acts of thinking, that is that makes the analytical unity of apperception possible (B133).⁴⁸

The “empty” self-consciousness expressed through the “I think” is therefore the self-consciousness of the original-synthetic unity of apperception, the nature of which Kant adduces as the reason for the emptiness of this self-consciousness. Given the centrality of this notion to the transcendental deduction and of the latter to the whole critical philosophy, Kant therefore clearly had a positive view of “pure” thinking without contributions from intuition. Thus, according to Kant’s arguments in both the paralogisms and the deduction, one can certainly *think* this pure thinking in its

⁴⁸ See Engstrom (2013, 37-54) for a careful exposition of the relations between the original-synthetic unity of apperception, the original-analytic unity of apperception, the faculty of knowledge, and the dimensions of self-consciousness attendant to each.

emptiness given the very possibility of those arguments: anybody who follows these arguments must be thinking this pure thinking in following them.

The thought of pure thinking is therefore possible for Kant, and this thought is “empty,” such that “thinking” in its purity does not distinguish any object (A346/B404). The performativity objection, however, forces a specification of a restricted sense of “object” for which this could possibly be true: given a maximally capacious conception of “object,” there must be an object of the thought of pure thinking if this thought is so much as possible, namely *pure thinking*. Thus, given that thinking can be thought in the first place, there could only be a restricted sense of “object” for which “thinking” can be advanced not to distinguish any object of thought. A look to the paralogisms clarifies this particular sense of “object” that excludes pure thinking:

Thinking, taken in itself, is merely the logical function and hence the sheer spontaneity of combining the manifold of a merely possible intuition; and in no way does it present the subject of consciousness as appearance, merely because it takes no account at all of the kind of intuition, whether it is sensible or intellectual. In this way I represent myself neither as I am nor as I appear to myself, but rather I think myself only as I do every object in general from whose kind of intuition I abstract. *If I here represent myself as a subject of a thought or even as ground of thinking, then these ways of representing do not signify the categories of substance or cause, for these categories are those functions of thinking (of judging) applied to our sensible intuition, which would obviously be demanded if I wanted to cognize myself* (B428-9 - italics added; cf. B404/A346, A382, A398-9, A400-2, B406-7, B411, B427, B429-30).

There is a lot in the above passage with which we could detain ourselves; for present purposes, it suffices to note that the emphasized last sentence clearly expresses that the thought of any subject of “thinking” in its purity is not the thought of anything to which the categories legitimately apply because the categories “are those functions of thinking ... applied to our sensible intuition”; thus the thought of thinking in its purity is also not such a thought. Therefore, the sense in which “thinking” is an “empty”

representation for Kant is that the thought of thinking is not the thought of any particular sensuous object. This makes good on our first claim.

The second point is a straightforward corollary of Kant's Copernican turn, in which objects of experience are postulated to conform to our concepts of them (Bxvii). As Kant puts it in the Second Analogy of Experience, the only objects within the “cognitive sphere” are to be found amongst so-many representations held together in consciousness, and so an object can only *be* a certain objective rule-governed synthesis of apprehension of sensibly given representations (B234-6/A189-191). Objects of experience are therefore none other than certain contents to be found within our faculty of cognition or understanding and are as such transparently determinable by thinking. Thus, any possible determination of (sensuous) objects of experience is transparently available to thinking.

To be clear, Kant's conception of the sensuous world *prima facie* importantly differs from that of the *Tractatus*—for instance, sensuous objects are “appearances” and not “things in themselves” (Bxxvi), whereas the *Tractatus* has no notion of things in themselves that transcend capacity of determinate thought. Kant's view of how thought is internally articulated in the pure categories likewise *prima facie* substantively differs from how thought's internal articulation is presented in the *Tractatus*, consideration of which is key for fully rendering thought self-transparent in the manner recommended by both thinkers.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Kant at least implicitly advances the supersensible reality of thinking in the above sense modulo these differences. Because Kant advances this position through a discussion of what thinking in its intuition-less purity is, which is the *self*-conscious unity of the original-synthetic

⁴⁹ One clear example is that Kant has no story about the quantifiers of first-order logic in relation to other logical concepts.

unity of apperception, this thinking of pure thinking must be *pure thinking thinking itself*. Just as our reading of the picture theory recommends a program of reading the *Tractatus* as attempting to render thought self-transparent as the “limit of the world,” then, these considerations recommend a program of reading the first *Critique* in parallel fashion.⁵⁰

VIII - Conclusion

In this article, we have carried out a case study in recognizing remarks of the *Tractatus* as nonsensical that found the text, at a certain level of description, to be advancing a point Kant also at least implicitly advances: both the *Tractatus* and the first *Critique* are in their respective fashions attempting to render thought self-transparent as the limit of the sensuous world, having all determinations thereof transparently available to it while being nowhere amongst it. This finding has significance all on its own for *Tractatus* scholarship. At the hermeneutic level, it is a first contribution to a new “middle way” reading that notably understands the text to be positively speaking to a specific traditional metaphysical problem while consisting of “austerely” nonsensical remarks. It is also noteworthy that it finds the conception of the metaphysical subject as the “limit of the world” presented in the remarks on the solipsism later in the text already in view when recognizing the remarks of the picture theory as nonsensical.⁵¹ It also motivates further research on the text inasmuch as fully appreciating how it bears on the nature of logic and thinking vis-à-vis world requires further rendering perspicuous thought’s internal articulation in logical space and how the Tractarian world is situated

⁵⁰ Newton (2019, 891) urges this reading of the first *Critique*.

⁵¹ This helps to clarify why *TLP* 5.61—which echoes the limit observation—succeeds the portion of the text on propositions, pictures, and logical space and immediately precedes reflections on the thinking subject. See Sullivan (1996, 195-219) for a reading of the remarks on solipsism consonant with our finding.

within and relates to its form (see section III). In addition to these points of significance for *Tractatus* scholarship, it is in closing further worth speaking to how our reading relates to existing Kantian readings of the text and bears on the question of the text's relation to Kant and Kantian philosophy more generally.

Many other commentators have found Kantian echoes within the text. For instance, Stenius reads the “limits of language” that the text is meant to demonstrate to be parallel to Kant’s limits of theoretical reason and thus reads the text as “transcendental” – limits-of-thought-demonstrating – in a manner parallel to Kant’s critical philosophy (Stenius 1960, 214-220).⁵² However, many readers understandably take nonsense to be theoretically vacuous and so, in light of the text’s penultimate remark instructing us to see the text’s remarks “in the end as nonsensical,” generally urge caution in taking philosophical ideas in the text to be advanced by the text rather than targeted for criticism. Thus James Conant takes it that many readers “tend to mistake the views that are under scrutiny ... for the views the author wishes to espouse” (Conant 1989, 248).⁵³ From this general point alone it is thus entirely reasonable for Peter Sullivan to urge such caution about Kantian echoes in the text in particular (Sullivan 2013, 262). This caution is additionally warranted given that the preface seemingly targets Kant’s project of “transcendental critique” (A12/B25-26) for criticism in echoing it and indicating that

⁵² For other readings discerning Kantian echoes in the text, see for example Hacker (1972, 206-214), Appvelqvist (2016, 715-6), Moore (2019, 68), Moore (1985, 136), Moore (2006, §2-3), Moore (2012, 226, 241-8), Moore (2015, 337-340), Moore (2013, 244-6), Moore (2003, 184-190), Moore, *Points of View* (1997, 148-152), Sluga (1983, 130-3) and Tang (2011, 598-607).

⁵³ See also Conant and Diamond (2004, 78, 85).

“what lies on the other side” of any theoretical limit drawn to determinate thought by philosophy (“cognition” for Kant; “thought” for the *Tractatus*) should “simply be nonsense.”⁵⁴

The converge with Kant on the nature of thinking that we find in the text is thus striking because, unlike any other Kantian echoes so far noted in the literature, it was discerned *through* recognition of remarks of the text as nonsensical, rather than through any credulous reading of remarks that could perhaps subsequently be repudiated as confused when recognizing those remarks as nonsensical. Moreover, this convergence is one that sits squarely within with Kant’s project of “transcendental critique,” so we can rest assured that the preface does not target this aspect of Kant’s project for criticism. Kant also calls the original-synthetic unity of apperception “transcendental” because it “grounds all concepts *a priori*” (A107) in that it is that unity “through which all of the manifold given in an intuition is united in the concept of an object” (B139). Thus this unity of pure thought is an unconditioned condition of all possible cognition of the sensuous world and just for this reason cannot be cognized, that is known or even thought in the manner of the sensuous world (see again A402). The picture theory also investigates the nature of thought vis-à-vis the sensuous world and finds the same limit of thinking and truth-apt language in doing so: thought (propositional understanding) is an indeterminate limit of the determinately thinkable in that it is the unconditioned, *a priori*, necessary form of the latter, and thus efforts to think thought itself propositionally (that is, in the manner of the sensuous world) are necessarily confused.

⁵⁴ Moore (2013, 240) and Moore (2019, 69-70) also acknowledges that certain strands of Kantianism are plausibly one of the text’s targets of criticism.

It is finally worth contradistinguishing our reading with the existing Kantian reading most sensitive to the threat the text's perceived nonsensical self-refutation could pose to the Kantianism it discerns, from Adrian Moore. Moore (2012, 242) proposes reading the text as offering an ineffable understanding of what it is to make propositional sense, namely, "a practical understanding, [one of whose] significant aspects, an insight into how not to be seduced into thinking that his book is the network of truth-evaluable propositions that it presents itself as being." He advances that this understanding brings with it

an insight, more generally, into how not to be seduced into thinking that the nonsense that accrues from bad philosophy is what it presents itself as being. This makes the *Tractatus* a significant contribution to good philosophy, albeit an indirect one. It is indirect because Wittgenstein does not so much practise good philosophy in this book as indicate, by assuming the role of the bad philosopher, why, how, and where good philosophy needs to be practised.⁵⁵

Moore thus takes the text to be a "species of transcendental idealism,"⁵⁶ which he defines as the view that "certain essential features of whatever can be made sense of in accord with [a certain kind of sense-making] depend on features of [that sense-making] itself" such that this dependence "[cannot] be made sense of in accord with [that sense-making]":⁵⁷ for the *Tractatus*, that of which we can make propositional sense depends on propositional sense-making (by sharing in its logical form⁵⁸), but this dependence cannot be made sense of propositionally.

Without wishing to enter on the question of whether the text is a species of transcendental idealism *per se*, we agree that logical form cannot be made sense of propositionally, but on our reading,

⁵⁵ Compare Moore (2013, 244-8, 253-4), Moore (2015, 347), Moore (2003, 190-1), and Moore (1997, 150-7).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 142

⁵⁷ Ibid., 246

⁵⁸ Ibid., 235-6

it can be *thought* as shared between thought and its subject-matter, which is a moment of thought thinking itself in recognizing *TLP* 3.13 as nonsensical (see sections III and IV). Moreover, and this is the crux of our break from Moore, this recognition does not repudiate the movement of thought that led to recognition of the remark as true: the remark is recognized as nonsensical *in its truth*, in that it expresses an *a priori* necessary truth of thought vis-à-vis world. As such, the remarks are not meant to function as mere exhibitions of “bad philosophy.”⁵⁹ Rather, the text read rightly is meant to exhibit philosophy done rightly, which is thought thinking itself in self-consciously non-propositional fashion and thus recognizing all attempts to theorize thought propositionally to be confused. The text thus converges with Kant on the nature of thinking without self-repudiation.⁶⁰

Our finding thus shows that, however else the text stands critically in relation to Kant, it does not entirely repudiate his critical philosophy. This in turn motivates many finer-grained questions of how the text relates to Kant’s own philosophy and (post-)Kantian philosophy more broadly. For instance, the portion of the preface discussed above raises the question of whether the text critically repudiates Kant’s phenomena-noumena distinction in ways that retain this convergence, which depends nontrivially on how one understands this distinction. It is also notable that Hegel criticizes attempts to limit determinate forms of thinking in seemingly similar fashion as the preface of the *Tractatus*, advancing that identifying some limit to thinking means “pressing onward” beyond that limit, occupying both sides of it, such that it is not genuinely thinking’s limit.⁶¹ As other scholars have

⁵⁹ Moore (2012, 242-3).

⁶⁰ Compare Moore (2012, 248-252).

⁶¹ Hegel (2010 [1812/6], 21). This limited form of thinking in Kant is thus for Hegel “untrue both in its relation to actuality and to the concept” of thinking—Hegel (2010 [1812/6], 106). Relatedly, Hegel (2000 [1802], 342-3) criticizes Kantian idealism (among other idealisms) for illicitly limiting thinking from the in-itself by way of its phenomenon–noumenon

emphasized, Hegel also regards Kant's original-synthetic unity of apperception as a positive contribution to philosophy and arguably develops this notion into his notion of the Concept (*Begriff*).⁶² Hegel also conceives of the focal point of philosophy as pure thought thinking itself, a conception to which we have found the first *Critique* at least implicitly committed and that we have argued the *Tractatus* shares.⁶³ These points of contact of the *Tractatus* with Hegel's philosophy in relation to Kant's thus motivates further systematic study of how the *Tractatus* sits alongside Hegel's philosophy on its own and in relation to internal pressures within Kant's.⁶⁴ We certainly do not wish to enter on these questions here and certainly do not purport to have offered an exhaustive catalogue of the questions our finding raises for the relation of the text to Kant's philosophy and (post-)Kantian philosophy more generally. In finding the text to converge with Kant in attempting to render thought self-transparent as the limit of the world through its nonsensical remarks, however, we do believe we have shown that the text sits squarely in the tradition of post-Kantian philosophy, and converges with Kant's own philosophy itself, in ways so far unappreciated.⁶⁵

distinction: For Hegel, Kantian idealism does not discover a true limit to thinking but simply does “not permit itself to regard cognitions as a knowledge of the thing-in-itself.” On the latter, see Engelman (2022, 25n16).

⁶² See for example Pippin (2018, Ch. 3) and Martin (2020, 135).

⁶³ This is so if the focal point of philosophy is “truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself”—Hegel (2010 [1812/6], 29). That this is only the focal point of philosophy rather than its entirety is reflected in Hegel's having a philosophy of nature whose execution is other than pure thought thinking itself. See Martin (2020, 131, 134-6) for some orientation to the systematic relation between Hegel's logic and philosophy of nature.

⁶⁴ To be clear, this study would almost certainly have to be systematic rather than historical, as evidence showing direct influence of Hegel on Wittgenstein is scant. See for example Cook (1984, 102-7).

⁶⁵ Acknowledgements

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