THE SAYABLE AND THE UNSAYABLE IN WITTGENSTEIN'S TRACTATUS

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I. Introduction: The Aim of the Tractatus

There would hardly be anything better than the author's own summary of his own work that could serve as the cornerstone of an understanding of the main point of that work. In the preface to his first masterpiece, the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (abbreviated as the *Tractatus* hereafter), Wittgenstein has made such a remark:

> The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.
>
> Thus the aim of the book is to draw a limit to ... the expression of thoughts ....[1]

Moreover, in a letter to Bertrand Russell, he has written something seemed to be similar:

> The main point is the theory of what can be expressed (*gesagt*) by propositions – i.e. by language – (and which comes to the same thing what can be thought) and what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown (*gezeigt*); which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy.[2]

Some commentators, such as H. O. Mounce and K. T. Fann,[3] have regarded these two passages as meaning the same thing, thus identified "what can be said" with "what can be expressed by propositions" and "what we cannot talk about" with "what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown". For convenience' sake, the former pair has been termed as the "sayable", and the latter the "showable". With this dichotomy, the aim of the *Tractatus*, namely, to draw a limit to our language, can never be accomplished; since, according to Wittgenstein, both the sayable and the showable do fall within the limit of our language. I prefer to call, in contradistinction to the sayable, the second pair as the "the unsayable". And the unsayable should be, as E. Stenius has pointed out, further analyzed into "that which can be shown in language but not said, and that which can be neither shown nor said in language".[4] Therefore, the name "the showable" will be reserved for "what cannot be expressed by propositions, but only shown", and "what we cannot talk about" will be, in Wittgenstein's own words, labelled "the mystical".[5]

In the following, I will show that what Wittgenstein contends in the *Tractatus* is: both saying and showing are legitimate functions of our language; and the mystic is where the limit of our language lies.

II. The Sayable and the Showable

The expressions "what can be said" and "what cannot be said" are obviously used by Wittgenstein in a technical sense. Their meaning could only be determined upon the background of Wittgenstein's conception of language. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein conceives language in its relation to the world. At first, he asserts that our language is logical and the world is logical as well; furthermore, our language and the world are of a common logical structure form. He says:

> It used to be said that God could create anything except what would be contrary to the laws of logic. – The truth is that we could not *say* what an 'illogical' world would look like. [3.301][6]

> It is as impossible to represent in language anything that 'contradicts logic' .... [3.032]

> A gramophone record, the musical idea, the written notes, and the sound-waves, all stand to one another in the same internal relation of depicting that holds between language and the world.
>
> They are all constructed according to a common logical pattern. [4.014]

I would call this kind of internal relation "the formal correspondence" or "the formal connection" between language and the world. In addition to this correspondence of the logical structure of our language to that of the world, there exists another connection between them, to which I would give the name "material correspondence" or "material connection" between our language and the world. The meaning of this kind of correspondence or connection may be clarified through an exposition of the interrelation between "objects" (or "things") and "state of affairs", "names" and "elementary proposition". Such an exposition might be derived from the following paragraphs:

> A state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things). [2.01]

> An elementary proposition consists of names. It is a nexus, a concatenation, of names. [4.22]

> One name stands for one thing, another for another thing, and they are combined with one another. In this way the whole group – like a tableau vivant – presents a state of affairs. [4.0311]

> The simplest kind of proposition, an elementary proposition, asserts the existence of a state of affairs. [4.21]

> The sense of a proposition is its agreement and disagreement with possibilities of existence and non-existence of states of affairs. [4.2]

From the first three paragraphs, we can easily discover this interrelation: a state of

affairs consists of objects, names stand for objects, an elementary proposition consists of names, therefore, an elementary proposition presents a state of affairs. It is exactly this correspondence of the elementary propositions in our language to the states of affairs in the world that I have named as the material correspondence or connection. But the last two paragraphs show that this material correspondence needs clarification since it involves the existence and non-existence of states of affairs. In fact, as G. Pitcher says, Wittgenstein "uses terms 'situation' ('*Sachlage*') and 'state of affairs' ('*Sachverhalt*') in such a way that situations and states of affairs may be either actual (existent) or merely possible and nonactual (nonexistent)."[7] The existence of states of affairs is called by Wittgenstein "a positive fact" and their non-existence "a negative fact". [2.06] In other words, if a possible state of affairs actually exists in the world, then its existence is a fact (positive fact), and the proposition that *asserts* its existence is therefore true; otherwise, false. If a possible state of affairs does not actually exist in the world, then its non-existence is a fact (negative fact), and the proposition that *asserts* its non-existence, (speaking more accurately, *denies* its existence,) is true; otherwise, false.[8] In both cases, however, a proposition must *already* have a sense, [4.064] according to which its truth-value may be determined. Now, with Wittgenstein's conception of language in its relation to the world in mind, we may come to his distinction of saying and showing.

As to the distinction in question, the following paragraphs are rather illuminating:

> A proposition *shows* its sense.
> A proposition *shows* how things stand if it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand. [4.022]

> Propositions cannot represent logical form; it is mirrored in them..
> What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.
> What expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by means of language.
> Propositions *show* the logical form of reality.
> They display it. [4.121]

As shown in the above, our language is connected to the world in two ways: the formal and the material. In the material way, a proposition *says* or asserts the existence or non-existence of a state of affairs in the world. Such a proposition must be either true or false, and its truth-value depends on the reality of the world [4.12]. Then, what can be said is the existence or non-existence of states of affairs, i.e. the whole of reality. Using this as criterion, only propositions of natural science are qualified as saying something [6.53].[9] Concisely, propositions with sense say something while those without sense say nothing. But, if this is the case, are those propositions, such as those of logic and the equations in mathematics, which lack sense all nonsensical? If there exists between our language and the world only the material connection, the answer will definitely be affirmative; but the existence of the formal connection makes it negative. Although all the propositions of logic are tautologies [6.1], all lack sense [4.461; 6.11], all represent no possible state of affairs [4.462], all say nothing about the world [4.461; 5.142; 6.1222; 6.1233], they

> ... describe the scaffolding of the world, or rather they represent it. They have no "subject-matter". They presuppose that names have meaning and elementary propositions sense; and that is their connexion with the world. [6.124]

and

> ... *shows* the formal - logical - properties of language and the world. [6.12]

A tautology represents *all* the possibilities of the combination of its constituents. In some sense, it reflects or *shows* the logical form of our language and the world; [6.22] therefore, Wittgenstein would not regard it as nonsensical. Moreover, in spite of its lackage of sense, it *presupposes* the sense; this is another reason why Wittgenstein would not consider it as nonsensical. Similarly, equations in mathematics, though merely show the logic of the world [6.31], are not nonsensical. What can be shown, then, is the logical form of our language or of the world.

Moreover, between saying and showing there is such a relation: showing is logically prior to saying; i.e. whenever our language is used to say something, it must already (in the logical sense) show some other thing. Because, as Wittgenstein claims, a proposition which only shows something without saying anything is conceivable (e.g. the tautologies), while a proposition which only says something without showing anything is inconceivable.

Here, we may conclude this section. What can be *shown in* language is the common logical form of our language and the world. What can be *said by* language is the existence or non-existence of states of affairs, i.e. the whole reality. Both of them can be compatibly embodies in propositions, strictly speaking, propositions of natural science. In other words, both saying and showing are legitimate functions of our language; and both the sayable and the showable are within the limit of our language.

II. The Mystical as the Limit of Our Language

We have showed that both sayable and the showable are within the limit of our laguage. Does that mean: there is nothing which is unsayable by language and unshowable in language, or everything can be put into words? If so, the aim of the *Tractatus*, namely, to draw a limit to our language, is but an illusion. Wittgenstein undoubtedly denies such a view as he holds:

> There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical. [6.522]

The "mystical" is that which is not only unsayable by language, but also unshowable in language. It is beyond the reach of our language. It is that which we should pass over in silence.

In Wittgenstein's view, the most prominent members of the mystical are metaphysics and ethics. Those statements such as "*that* the world exists" [6.44],

and "to view the world as limited whole" [6.45] are what metaphysicians try to talk about,[10] but the content of these statements is mystical: they cannot be said by or shown in language, but merely make themselves manifest. Besides, ethics cannot be expressed or put into words too. [6.421] What is in the world is what it is, what it *ought to be* is not in the world [6.41]; therefore, there is no proposition of ethics in the world. [6.42] Propositions of ethics lack sense, they say nothing about the world,[11] and neither do they show anything. But that does not imply that they are nonsensical, since they "make themselves manifest" at least. The most fundamental idea in ethics is the willing subject or the "I"[12] which Wittgenstein takes for "the bearer of ethics".[13] What manifests itself in ethics is the existence of the willing subject as a bearer of ethics, or rather, as a presupposition of the existence of the world; but it cannot be said by or shown in our language, i.e. it is beyond the limit of our language.[14]

Now, we may show how Wittgenstein accomplishes the aim of the *Tractatus* on the basis of the tripartite distinction between the sayable, the showable and the mystical. Both saying and showing are legitimate functions of our language, and the sayable has sense while the showable has not; but none of them is nonsensical: only when one attempts to say what can only be shown, it is nonsensical (e.g. "1 is a number" [4.1272]). The mystical is not nonsensical as well since it makes itself manifest; only when one attempts to say or to show the mystical, he is making a nonsensical statement. Both the sayable and the showable can be put into words. It is the mystical that cannot be put into words; it is beyond the limit of our language, it must be passed over in silence; and right here draws Wittgenstein a limit to our language.

NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1961; 1974 paperback edition; Reprinted 1981; Original German edition appeared in 1921), p. 3. Further references to this work will be given by proposition numbers in brackets in the body of my text; references to the Preface of this work will be given by page numbers.
2. G. H. von Wright, ed., *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), R. 37.
3. See H. O. Mounce, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 93–100; K. T. Fann, *Wittgenstein's Conception of Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 32–33.
4. Erik Stenius, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. 223.
5. The word "mystical" occurs three times in the *Tractatus*, namely, 6.44, 6.45, 6.522. Whether they are used in the same context is disputable. In this paper, this word is used in the context of 6.522.
6. According to 3.031 and 3.032, he did not directly reject the "illogical world", what he said was that even if there were an illogical world, our language could

not say anything about it. The "logical" world is rather required by our language, if our language is to be able to say something about the world. Also see George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Pretice-Hall, Inc., 1964), Ch. 2. As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein has little interest to what the world really is. [6.1233]

7. Pitcher, ibid., p. 46.
   Several commentators hold that the German "Sachverhalt" should be rendered as "atomic fact" rather than "state of affairs". See G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967 third edition, 1959 first published), p. 30; and K. T. Fann, p. 9. Both of them say that Wittgenstein himself accepted this translation. Some other commentators did not follow this translation, but still emphasized the atomicity of "Sachverhalt". See Stenius, pp. 32-33; and Robert J. Fogelin, *Wittgenstein* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 4–5. Thus, in general, no matter how the German "Sachverhalt" is rendered, we may, according to its atomicity, compare "Sachverhalt" with "elementary proposition", as well as "Sachlage" with "proposition", and "name" with "object". For this part, also see Pitcher, p. 22, and pp. 27–41.
8. According to 4.21, only elementary porpositions assert the existence of states of affairs; namely, elementary prpositions only correspond to positive atomic facts. And, in a letter to Russell, Wittgenstein clearly claimed that the negations of elementary propositions were not themselves elementary propositions. See Anscombe, p. 34.
9. I do not mean that all propositions of natural science are saying something; e.g. the law of induction is a proposition with sense [6.31], i.e. it is sayable, but the law of causality says nothing about the world.
10. Cf. Pitcher, p. 159.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, second edition 1979), p. 78.
12. Ibid., p. 80.
13. According to Wittgnestein, both logic and ethics are unsayable and transcendental. [6.13, 6.421] However, logical necessity can be shown, while ethical *truth* cannot. Also see Rush Rhees, *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 95.
    Here, I generally follow the explanations made by Zemach, although there is a little difference between Zemach's explanation, Stenius's, and Fogelin's. See Eddy Zemach, *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of the Mystical*, ed. Irving M. Copi and Robert W. Beard, *Essays on Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1966), pp. 359–375.