

The Composition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: An Interpretative Study

Nikolay Milkov

University of Paderborn, Germany

nikolay.milkov@upb.de

Abstract: *When Wittgenstein started writing the Tractatus in June 1915, he believed that he was producing a theory. Accordingly, he chose a theoretical style of expressing his thought. Wittgenstein abandoned this style only toward the end of his finishing the work. He realized that what he was producing was not a theory but a manual for improving our thinking and language. Unfortunately, it was too late to change the architecture and style of the book: Wittgenstein simply had no time to do that. This drawback makes the Tractatus notoriously difficult to understand and is apparently the major factor that led to the so-called "Tractarian Wars."*

Keywords: *Frege, Russell, Tractatus, Wittgenstein*

1. The New Archaeological Studies of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*

Wittgenstein Tractarian studies have experienced a real turn in the last few years, a turn produced thorough chronological reconstruction of the composition of the *Prototractatus* and the publication of the University of Iowa *Tractatus* Map.²² *The Prototractatus tools* (PTT) are especially helpful since they give us much detailed and important information on the genesis of the *Tractatus* and its corrections made by Wittgenstein as displayed

Both were published on the Internet: <http://wittgensteinsource.org>,
<http://tractatus.lib.uiowa.edu/tlp/>.

in MS 104 (also called Bodleianus). It appears that Wittgenstein started writing down his “treatise” not later than in the last days of June 1915.²³ He finished it late in 1918 in 12 phases (to be discussed in § 5) of work that also included:

- The *Ur-Tractatus* (the first 12 pages)
- The *Core-Tractatus* (the first 28 pages)
- The *Proto-Prototractatus* (the first 70 pages)
- The *Prototractatus* proper (the first 103 pages). (Pilch, 2018, p.106)

The present paper is interpretative. It seeks to make sense of the new archeological work on the composition of the *Tractatus*. Among other things, our analysis shows the resolute reading of the book to be mistaken. It is important to remember that this influential interpretation was advanced more than 30 years ago by Cora Diamond and James Connant as an alternative reading of Wittgenstein’s work (Crary and Read 2002). According to it, the *Tractatus* consists of two parts—a body and a frame. To the frame pertain §§ 3.32–3.326, 4–4.003, 4.111–12, and 6.53–4. All other paragraphs are part of the body. Wittgenstein considered the frame seriously, whereas all the remaining propositions of the book, which belong to its body, are written “tongue in cheek.” The main idea of the frame is expressed in § 6.54 which read:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.).

²³ See Bazzocchi (2015, p. 339). According to Pilcher (2018, p. 132), Wittgenstein started writing the *Tractatus* two months later, at the end of August 1915. In the present paper, we will follow Bazzocchi’s dating.

This was the real message of the *Tractatus*.

The new archeological work of the *Tractatus* shows that Wittgenstein's book was really composed of different building blocks, produced in different periods of time. In a sense, it was really a patchwork. However, these parts were not the ones announced by the resolute readers. In other words, the new empirical material failed to support the interpretative hypothesis of the New Wittgensteinians. And, as in science, a hypothesis that is not supported by the empirically collected materials is just to be abandoned. Famous in this connection are the phlogiston theory of combustion, and the ether theory of propagation of electromagnetic or gravitational forces that were experimentally disproved.

2. The Evolvement of Wittgenstein's Early Thought

In his "Notes on Logic," "Notes Dictated to G E Moore," and the first pages of *Notebooks 1914–1916*, Wittgenstein wrote down what he believed to be his logical-philosophical *discoveries* (Milkov 2012).²⁴ Here are the three most well-known examples of such discoveries:

- In the "Notes on Logic" (p. 94), Wittgenstein set out that propositions correspond to facts (we will return to this discovery in § 3)—not to complexes—of the world which are their meaning.
- In "Notes Dictated to G E Moore" (p. 108), he formulated the Doctrine of Showing.

²⁴ In 1931 Wittgenstein remembered: "When I was in Norway during the year 1913–14, I had some thoughts of my own." (1980b, p. 20) And a year earlier, in 1930, he had noted: "When before 16 years, I had the thought that the law of causality is meaningless and that there is a view of the world that eschews with it, I had the feeling of starting a new epoch." (MS 183: 6.5.1930) In contrast, in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein maintained that what he made were not discoveries but grammatical-philosophical remarks. Importantly enough, this claim went together with the contention that he was concerned with grammar, not with logic.

- In the *Notebooks* (p. 7), Wittgenstein advanced the idea that when we think and operate with language, we make “logical pictures” of *states of affairs*.

Apparently, between 1913 and June 1915, Wittgenstein was convinced that there was something like a logical world—in a way similar to what Frege would call later (in 1918/19) “the third world”—and that his task was to make discoveries in it. In this sense, “logical investigations explore the nature of all things” (1953, § 89). Moreover, at that point in time, Wittgenstein believed that his philosophical discoveries were autonomous, which meant that they could be discovered in isolation, one by one.

Importantly enough:

- The ideas that Wittgenstein discovered in the course of these years were of different significance: some of them were fundamental, other not. Still other were practically useless.

- Wittgenstein often forgot his previous discoveries, recalling them only after periods of time with dissimilar length, expressing them now in a new, different form. We are going to see how this side of his method of working affected the composition of the *Tractatus* in §§ 3 and 7.

- Wittgenstein believed that his discoveries fitted together perfectly well—in a sort of a pre-established harmony—even if one must develop them a little bit further to make them fit together perfectly well. (In such cases, Wittgenstein formulated new propositions whose task was to help fit the old discoveries, or building blocks, together; cf. § 6.) Unfortunately, as we will see in the following, Wittgenstein’s old and new discoveries did not always fit together.

These traits of Wittgenstein’s work shaped the process of composing the *Tractatus*.

3. Wittgenstein's Key Discovery

The main claim in this paper is that the discovery which made Wittgenstein confident that he was ready to start writing his treatise was guided by the remark made in the *Notebooks* on May 9, 1915: "The proposition is the picture of the fact." (p. 46) In contrast, when he introduced the term *picture* on September 29, 1914, and also in the next few months, he claimed that the proposition was the picture of a *state of affairs*, not of *facts* (pp. 7f., 25, 34). But why was this, prima facie, minor difference so important to Wittgenstein?

Wittgenstein had used the term *fact* even before that. Actually, this was the great innovation in "Notes on Logic" and in "Notes Dictated to G E Moore" (see § 2). From August 1913 till May 1914, however, Wittgenstein maintained that propositions *corresponded* to facts, not that they *pictured* facts. But the first months after Wittgenstein introduced the notion of picture and picturing on September 29, 1914, he always used it together with the notion of the state of affairs. Intriguingly, the term "state of affairs" was introduced nine days earlier, on September 20, 1914. So it is legitimate to ask if the introduction of the concept of picturing was its implication.

But let us return to the question: Why was the discovery that "the proposition is the picture of the facts" so important to him? We maintain that the answer to this question is to be sought in the critique Frege addressed to him—and to Russell—in December 1912. (Milkov 2013) Frege attacked (Russell's and) Wittgenstein's decision to identify complexes with facts, pointing out that "a complex is not like a fact. For example, it could be said that a complex, unlike a fact, moved from one place to another."²⁵ Frege also stated that, if an object were a part of a fact, the fact would be larger than the object. In effect, Frege held that, whereas "a complex is a spatial object, composed of spatial objects," a

²⁵ Wittgenstein (1974, p. 199; 1964, p. 301).

fact is not.²⁶ Facts are something like organic unities, a kind of living entities.²⁷ Especially, the idea that when we understand propositions we grasp spatial complexes struck Frege as mistaken. He argued, instead, that in such cases, we understand *one* thing, namely the thought that we grasp, which can be either true or false. It sharply differs from the spatial complex that is segmented. Later, in “Thoughts”—perhaps stimulated through his discussion with Wittgenstein in December 1912—Frege defined “fact” as “a thought that is true” (1918/19, p. 368).

Wittgenstein took the first step in digesting and adopting Frege’s criticism in his critical remarks to Russell’s book project *Theory of Knowledge* (June 1913), and then in “Notes on Logic” (September 1913). His argument was (we have already mentioned it in § 2) that “the meaning of a proposition is that fact which actually corresponds to it” (pp. 94, 112). This claim tied up with another one: the fact is the proposition’s “truth-maker” (p. 95).

As we already have seen, however, when Wittgenstein introduced (aka discovered) the “picture-theory” on September 29, 1914, he connected it with state of affairs, not with facts. In other words, for more than seven months, perhaps out of enthusiasm over his new discovery, the picture theory, he forgot the lesson he had received from Frege. Indeed, states of affairs are much more “complex” than facts. In particular, they indicate that there are wholes (situations), the parts of which—“things”—reciprocally relate to one another (Mulligan 1985; Milkov 2020a, pp. 98, 106). Apparently, Wittgenstein needed more time to orient himself in his own discoveries.

But why were pictures thus different from conventional

26 Ibidem.

27 It becomes clear, at this point, that the clash between Frege’s position and that of Russell–Wittgenstein in December 1912 was a form of a confrontation between the German and the British philosophical traditions. (Milkov 2015, 2020)

propositions? The answer to this question can be found in a remark made by Wittgenstein approximately at the same time, on April 4, 1914 (1979, p. 26). He now realized, perhaps echoing Frege's suggestion about the nature of facts, that pictures are living entities: a picture "presents a state of affairs ... like a *tableau vivant*" (*lebendes Bild*; "like a living picture," in Ogden's translation of *Tractatus* 4.0311). Conventional propositions, in contrast, are not living entities. Wittgenstein's key discovery of May 9, 1915 was made in this context. Now he found out that "the proposition is the picture of the fact" (p. 46).

It deserves notice that this was not an easy birth. Only three weeks before that, on April 15, Wittgenstein had complained: "I cannot bring out how far the proposition is the picture of the situation [state of affairs]. I am almost inclined to give up all my efforts." (p. 41) The discovery that propositions picture *facts* resolved the problem.

The most important implication of this discovery was that Wittgenstein now found out that there was something identical between the picture and the fact:²⁸ the pictorial (or logical) form. The decisive point at stake here is *identity*, not a correspondence. This automatically implied that, as Wittgenstein put it, "I can devise different pictures of the fact. ... But what is characteristic of the fact will be *the same* in all these pictures." (pp. 46f.—italics added) The only necessary condition for this is that all these pictures have as their meaning the *same* particular fact they were modelling.

But the discovery of May 9, 1915 had further implications for Wittgenstein's logical philosophy. Above all, the (partial) identity between pictures and facts implied that the language and the world are, in the sense of this identity, the same. Wittgenstein,

²⁸ In a sense, with this understanding, Wittgenstein rehabilitated the identity theory of truth Russell abandoned after he published "On Denoting" (1905). See on this n. 15 and Milkov (2020b).

however, did not stop here. Shortly afterward he postulated no less than six different partial identical ontological–logical levels: (i) the *world*, (ii) the *fact*, (iii) the logical *picture*, (iv) the *thought*, (v) the *proposition*, and (vi) the *general propositional form*.

The just-mentioned partial identity is based on the fact that the transition from one level to another (the world, the fact, the picture, the thought, the proposition, and its general form) is accomplished simply by arranging the elements of the preceding level in a new *way* (*Art und Weise*) (Milkov 2019). This means that, in a sense, the higher levels of Wittgenstein’s logic–ontology were a kind of *doppelgänger* of the basic levels—they are not autonomous entities. By way of a genealogical remark, the phrase “*Art und Weise*” was to be found at the very beginning (on p. 3) of the *Ur-Tractatus* in this form: “The proposition is the propositional sign plus the determinate relation (*Art und Weise*) of picturing” (3.2). This is an indication that Wittgenstein had this conception on his workbench from the very beginning.

In short, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein maintained that “in a state of affairs [in the atomic fact], objects stand in a determinate relation [*Art und Weise*] to one another” (2.031). In other words, states of affairs are nothing but “the determinate way in which objects are connected in [it]” (2.032). This connection gives us a topologically congruent tight “fitting” (*passen*) of the objects (of their boundaries) of the states of affairs of one and another, in a specific arrangement (in a specific way). According to this conception, the elements (the objects) in the state of affairs are not connected with the help of a *third element*, a mortar;²⁹ they stick together through the topology of their boundaries alone. In other words, states of affairs are nothing but collections of invariant items (objects) ordered in a specific way (Milkov 2019, pp. 9 f.). They have *no constitutive* role. The other five transitions

²⁹ “The elements [of a state of affairs] are not connected with one another by anything.” (1984, p. 252)

to a “higher” level of this openly branched ontology are made by the same token. Among other things, this position gave birth to Wittgenstein’s “eliminativism” in the *Tractatus* (see Milkov 2002a, p. 51), which follows the method of leaving all “third elements” aside.

We find that the discovery of May 9, 1915 was the finishing piece in Wittgenstein’s early logical philosophy. He now believed that with it, the main parts (building blocks) of his work were already there—they only had to be synoptically ordered. Historically, this claim is supported by the fact that Wittgenstein started composing the *Tractatus* immediately after he made this discovery of May 9, 1915—at the end of that month (Bazzocchi 2015).

4. The *Prototractatus* Grows up From Six Cardinal Propositions

Wittgenstein developed his project book in a peculiar fashion: he started with a series of six (partly) identical levels. To be more explicit, he formulated six cardinal propositions in which the world, the fact, the (logical) picture, the thought, the proposition, and its general propositional form were successively defined:

- (1) The *world* is all that is the case.
- (2) What is the case, the *fact*, is the existence of states of affairs.
- (3) A logical *picture* of facts is a thought.
- (4) A *thought* is a proposition with a sense.
- (5) A proposition is a *truth-function* of elementary propositions.
- (6) The *general form* of a truth-function is

The six cardinal propositions of the *Tractatus* are self-sufficient but at the same time articulate six levels of *dependency* on each other—for example, thinking is ontologically dependent

on the world, and language is logically dependent on thinking.³⁰

Next, out of his cardinal propositions Wittgenstein advanced a hierarchical “logical tree” out of which his project book developed further (Stern 2016, p. 205). More explicitly, the genealogical picture of composing the *Tractatus* showed up that it grew up in an organic, quasi-vegetal way, out of a bundle of six trunks. It comprised logical tree-branches that grew out of the bundle of six “trunks” of the book. The implication of Wittgenstein’s adopting this approach was that the *Tractatus* was written as something like a collection of footnotes to the six cardinal propositions quoted above. In other words, the book “consists of remarks on remarks on remarks” (Mayer 1993, p. 114).

But we can put this point also in another, perhaps more balanced perspective. According to it, the text of the book project was arranged to start up and evolve in six different levels that are in a relation of dependence: in different chains of thought following the six cardinal propositions. In this context, we can say that by composing the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein followed the “hexaptych principle,” “hexaptych” meaning here a polyptych with six parts. This metaphor, however, has its own problems. The point is that each of these levels but the first one is superstructured over another so that the sixth level is superstructured, in this sense, five times. Apparently, this is not a conventional hexaptych.

In the wake of new archaeological research into the composition of the *Tractatus*, interpreters like Peter Hacker and Luciano Bazzocchi, as well as the Iowa *Tractatus* Map, suggest a new way of reading the book. They claim, and we join them here, that “the book should be read as a hypertext, a tree-structure defined by the author’s numbering system. ... [It should be read] not sequentially, from the beginning to end” (Stern 2016, p. 204). This suggestion was supported by the (only) footnote Wittgenstein

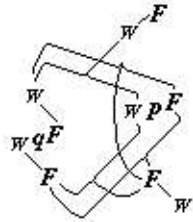
³⁰ “*Language* is [only] the method to express our thoughts in perceptible way.” (Wittgenstein 1980a, p. 235)

added to the book:

The digital numbers assigned to the individual propositions indicate the logical importance of the propositions and the stress laid on them in my exposition. The propositions *n.1*, *n.2*, *n.3*, etc. are comments on propositions no.*n*; the propositions *n.m1*, *n.m2*, etc. are comments on propositions no. *n.m*; and so on.

There was also a new edition of the *Tractatus* that presented it in this way (Wittgenstein 2017).

Importantly enough, besides that Wittgenstein had quite solid theoretical grounds to follow this highly unusual method of presenting his ideas, it was also supported by the Doctrine of Showing, which he had on his workbench not later than in the end of 1913.³¹ It found expression, for example, in para. 6.1203 of the *Tractatus*, which claimed that the proposition “ $\sim(p.\sim q)$ ” could also be written in the following manner:



The idea was that a suitable graphical form of the logical notation also shows the logical properties of the world and of the language. In the “Notes Dictated to G E Moore in Norway,” the Doctrine of Showing was formulated thus: “in ‘*aRb*’, ‘*R*’ is *not* a symbol, but *that* ‘*R*’ is between one name and another symbolizes” (1979, p. 109).

In short, Wittgenstein did not introduce the idiosyncratic method of exposing his ideas in the *Tractatus* simply for the sake of aesthetic perfectionism. Rather, his objective was to produce

³¹ Wittgenstein communicated the Doctrine of Showing in a letter to Russell, in November 1913 (1979, p. 127ff.).

a surveyable presentation of his logic. In fact, “‘surveyable’ (*übersichtlich*, literally, overview-able) is a key term of art for Wittgenstein, and carries the sense of making it possible to take in a complex structure at a glance, in the way that one can grasp the lay of the land by looking at a landscape from a well-placed hill or tower” (Stern 2016, p. 215). Moreover, this position was already started by Frege (Milkov 1999).

5. Putting the Pieces (the Logical–Philosophical Discoveries) Together in Good Order

Let us now turn to the chronology of writing the *Tractatus* and to discuss in more detail its composing.

In § 1, we have already noted that Wittgenstein composed the *Tractatus* in 12 phases. Phases I and II, in which Wittgenstein composed the *Core-Tractatus*, were creative. During this period Wittgenstein developed ideas that were to elucidate his cardinal propositions. After 28.03.1916, phase III started, which saw Wittgenstein simply integrate “the good propositions” of the “Notes on Logic” into his growing manuscript. In phase IV he also integrated the “good” propositions of his *Notebooks* I and II.³² At the end of 1916, Wittgenstein wrote down some new propositions that were based on “Notes Dictated to G E Moore in Norway.” On the New Year Eve of 1916, the *Proto-Prototractatus* was finished. Wittgenstein’s book project now comprised 71 pages. In 1917 (phases VI and VII of the composition of the book³³), he integrated the “good propositions” of “Notebooks” III. At the end of the year, the *Prototractatus* was finished. In 1918, Wittgenstein made some corrections to it, leading to the final version of the

³² *Notebooks* I was kept from 22.08.1914 till 01.11.1914, *Notebooks* II from 01.11.1914 till 20.06.1915, and *Notebooks* III, from 15.04.1916 till 10.01.1917.

³³ These were composed in Vienna in early 1917. In Phase VI there are still no remarks on ethics (Pilch 2018, p. 109).

Tractatus.

This chronology of composing the *Tractatus*, revealed by the recent archaeological studies of the book, confirms the suggestion that the early Wittgenstein used his old discoveries as finished building blocks out of which he concocted the book. In other words, what Wittgenstein incorporated in the upcoming *Tractatus* were not simply scattered fragments from his *Notebooks* but well-formed *spolia* that were integrated in his new masonry (Pilch 2018, p. 139, n. 82).

Even if we leave the hypertext-order of the *Tractatus* out of consideration, the adoption of a synoptic method of working, connecting his logical–philosophical discoveries into a *system* after May 1915, produced a radical change in the style of his writing. This found expression in a letter to Russell from December 22, 1915, in which Wittgenstein wrote: “The method has changed drastically.” (1995, p. 102) Wittgenstein himself was conscious that his new style of expression made his text “very hard to understand without further explanation”³⁴ (Ibid.).

Most importantly, the *Tractatus* disrupted the natural evolvement of Wittgenstein’s thought—the meditation form of writing that was characteristic of the *Notebooks* (and also of the *Philosophical Investigations*)³⁵ and increased the impression, also to himself, that he was a theoretical philosopher, producing a *system*. Among other things, this change of style was strengthened and supported by the adoption of the numbering system of Russell’s and Whitehead’s *Principia mathematica* in the book.

34 Later, Wittgenstein himself noted that every sentence of the *Tractatus* must really be *read* as the title of a whole *chapter* (Rhees 1984, p. 159).

35 As Wittgenstein wrote in a letter to Russell, “the problems are becoming more and more lapidary and general.” (1995, p. 102)

6. The Emergence of Wittgenstein's Anti-theoretical Stance

Unfortunately, the natural development of Wittgenstein's thought in these months worked in a direct opposition to this endeavor to promote a synoptic conception and also against any theoretical orientation. As we already have noted, when he started composing the *Tractatus* in June 1915, Wittgenstein believed that he was advancing a new *theory*. To be more explicit, as late as June 6, 1915, he spoke about a "picture-theory" (1979, p. 55). Apparently, at that point in time, Wittgenstein was convinced that he was a theoretical philosopher. Shortly afterward, however, Wittgenstein realized that the propositions of this "treatise" do not advance a theory at all. This was confirmed by the fact that after June 1915 he carefully avoided speaking about theory.

In parallel, Wittgenstein also stopped speaking about "truth-making." Ostensibly, this was because the standard theory of truth-making requires: (i) autonomous truth-makers: facts and states of affairs (in contrast, there are no autonomous truth-makers in the identity theory of truth³⁶); (ii) autonomous truth-bearers, or propositions (Simons 1992). After adopting the partial identity between states of affairs and propositions in May 1915, however, these conditions cannot be met. Facts, states of affairs, and propositions were not autonomous anymore.

7. When did Wittgenstein Realize that the Propositions of the *Tractatus* are Nonsensical?

The new archaeological explorations in the composition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* showed that the development of Wittgenstein's thought was not as straightforward as one is usually

³⁶ Russell defended the identity theory of truth between 1900 and 1905. After composing "On Denoting," however, he advanced the correspondence theory of truth, based on his famous multiple relation theory of judgment. Between September 1913 and May 1915 Wittgenstein developed his limited identity theory of truth as a reaction to Russell's new theory of judgment, which Wittgenstein criticised, starting June 1913.

inclined to believe. In fact, Wittgenstein's *Notebooks* were an "experimental field for reflections in all directions" (Pilch 2018, p.122). A typical example is Wittgenstein note of 12.04.1915, which we already quoted in § 3: "I cannot bring out how far the proposition is the *picture* of the state of affairs. I am almost inclined to give up all my efforts." (p. 41) After his discovery from 9.5.1915, that "the proposition is the picture of the fact" (p. 46), not of states of affairs, he stopped speaking about states of affairs altogether (and, incidentally, also about truth-functions³⁷), only to reintroduce them after he restarted writing the *Prototractatus*.

The evolution of the *Prototractatus* clearly shows this palpable tension between a theoretical stance and anti-theoretical intuition in the early Wittgenstein. For example, in the process of composing the *Prototractatus*, the concept of *model* was gradually replaced by that of *picture*, so that in the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein spoke about models only three times, virtually opposing this term to picture, a term used dozens of time.³⁸ Moreover, while working on the book, in several cases he replaced the word "model" with "picture."³⁹ Similar is the fate of the notion of "concatenation" (*Verkettung*) of objects (a term mentioned only in 4.122), which was gradually replaced by "connections" (*Verbindung*) of objects (it is mentioned 10 times in the *Tractatus*).

Revealing the meandering development of Wittgenstein's thought between 1914 and 1918 is instructive indeed. In particular, it helps to better understand his most controversial proposition, 6.54, that actually led to the "Tractarian wars."⁴⁰ To be more

37 We are not going to discuss this topic in the present paper.

38 Among other things, this point shows that the interpretation of the Tractarian pictures as models (Mersch 2011, p. 23) is mistaken.

For example, on p. 3 of the "diplomatic presentation" of the *Prototractatus*: http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/PTT/PTT_A_1.pdf

40 Important as it was, the zigzagging progress of Wittgenstein's thought with the composition of the *Tractatus* was not the main reason for the difficulties to understand it. The main difficulty, as we see it, is discussed in Milkov (2017).

precise, Wittgenstein's claim that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are nonsensical evolved at least in three steps:

(i) First, at the end of the *Core-Prototractatus* (on p. 18), Wittgenstein started to maintain (while he was in Sokal, Galicia, late in 1915) that his very loose "theories" are nonsensical in the sense that they are not necessary. According to him now, "philosophy [only] aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity" (4.112).

(ii) Months later, on p. 49 of the *Proto-Prototractatus*, while in Olomouc in the second half of 1916, Wittgenstein noted that "a philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations" (4.112). A little later, on p. 59, he "discovered" that we could also elucidate the primitive signs.⁴¹

(iii) Only in the second half of 1917, however (on p. 86), Wittgenstein wrote that the propositions of his book "serve as elucidations" (6.54). This discovery was followed by the insight that "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical"⁴² (Ibid.).

It is clear that when Wittgenstein started working on the *Tractatus* at the end of June 1915, he did not realize that his propositions are nonsensical. Apparently, Wittgenstein developed this position only after he became convinced that both his logical notation and his ontology had *no constitutive role*.⁴³ They could only help by elucidating our thinking and language. At the end

41 Primitive signs were indefinable and, as Aristotle had already put it (*Met.*, 1039b27), the indefinables are ineffable.

42 According to the "New Wittgensteinians," these two propositions pertained to the "core propositions" of the *Tractatus* that were not meant "tongue in cheek." In truth, they were written down at quite different times.

43 Regarding this see the penultimate paragraph of § 3 where we examined this in respect of the Tractarian ontology. We have shown there that the Tractarian logic has no constitutive role in (Milkov 2013, p. 203).

of the day, however, they are to be (or, more precisely, *can be*) eliminated, or thrown away.

Significantly, Wittgenstein developed the idea of 6.54 while working on “the solution of the problems of life” (6.521).⁴⁴ Besides, Wittgenstein realized that the propositions of his book were nonsensical after he reread the already composed *Proto-Prototractatus* over and over again. This work made the real message of his work clearer to him. It helped him to develop a synoptic picture of the book.

Unfortunately, Wittgenstein discovered this too late to change the architecture and the style of the book; he simply did not have the time to do that. To be sure, Wittgenstein wanted to publish his ideas, and he also knew very well that he would not survive the War. He considered finishing his work at the earliest as his main task.⁴⁵ It was a race against time. In contrast, in the early 1930s, when Wittgenstein decided to put his “later philosophy” in print, he had enough time to experiment with the style of articulating his thoughts. The experiments started with the *Philosophical Remarks*, *Philosophical Grammar*, and the *Big Typescript*, went through the *Blue* and the *Brown Books*, only to find an appropriate solution in the first version of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1936).

8. Our Interpretation

In order to better understand this most intricate proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, we will follow the interpretation we developed elsewhere (Milkov 2017). According to it, the objective of the *Tractatus* was similar to that of Frege in his *Conceptual*

44 This work was supported by the reading of Leo Tolstoy’s interpretation of the *New Testament*. On how the discussion of these problems can lead to Wittgenstein’s “quietism” see Milkov (2003).

45 “You must get my manuscript printed whether anyone understands it or not,” wrote Wittgenstein to Russell on May 22, 1915 (1995, p.102).

Notation, namely to set out a new, “perfect” symbolism.⁴⁶ Among other things, it can help to discriminate between sense and nonsense, and so can make our thinking clearer. Once we learn, with the help of this symbolism, by way of mastering it, how our thinking works correctly, we do not need the symbolism anymore. At last resort, this means that the logical and conceptual distinctions that Wittgenstein made in the *Tractatus* were only needed in order to make our language and thinking better. When this objective is achieved, we can discard them.

Importantly enough, the distinctions made in the *Tractatus* are not false. They simply are not necessary in order to think correctly. That is why they *can* be abandoned—but only when the logical symbolism is perfect and when the reader who understood it has also *mastered* it. As a result, the task to elaborate and to make good use of the perfect language is most important and can have particularly fruitful results.

Among other things, this interpretation is supported by Wittgenstein’s remark in 6.54, which we already referred to in § 1, in particular, by his claim that the person who understood the propositions of the book recognized them as nonsensical *only* “when he has used them—as steps—to *climb up* beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has *climbed up* it.)” (Italics added). Wittgenstein’s insistence on *climbing up* clearly points at a process of reaching a *higher position*, in our interpretation, in the process of mastering the perfect symbolism of the *Tractatus*.

9. Epilogue

The account given above shows that many ideas of the *Tractatus* could be easily presented as discoveries—in fact, they were pronounced as discoveries. In the process of composing the

⁴⁶ Another point that we are not going to discuss in this paper is that the Tractarian perfect symbolism has no constitutive import (see §§ 3, 7).

book, however, Wittgenstein gradually realized that they had no constitutive but only supportive role—the role of scaffolding. This point convincingly explained the concluding remark of the *Tractatus*: “Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them [the propositions of the *Tractatus*] as nonsensical” (6.54).

These two tendencies of the *Tractatus* made it notoriously difficult to understand. On the one hand, there were many theoretical winks in the work, but on the other hand, at the very end, it declares that they were “nonsensical.” These two contradictory tendencies in the book created the illusion of a seemingly theoretical study in philosophy that was essentially and effectively “nonsensical.” This ambiguity was also the main reason for the infamous “Tractarian Wars” between the “New” and “Old” Wittgensteinians.

The anti-theoretical tendency in Wittgenstein’s outlook reached a new stage after 1929, when he clearly realized that the new ideas he pronounced in the *Tractatus* were not discoveries but conceptual remarks. Apparently, the progress of Wittgenstein’s eliminativism by composing the *Tractatus* was only a beginning of a development that ended in the radical eliminativism of his *Philosophical Investigations*.⁴⁷ The proposition 6.54 simply marked an important step in this direction.

References:

Bazzocchi, L. 2015. “A Better Appraisal of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* Manuscript,” *Philosophical Investigations* 38, pp. 333–359.

Crary, A., and Read, R. (ed.) 2002. *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge.

Frege, G. 1918/19. “Thoughts”, in: G. Frege, *Collected*

⁴⁷ We will discuss the eliminativism of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in another paper.

Papers. Oxford: Blackwell, 1984, pp. 351–72.

Mayer, Verena. 1993. “The Numbering System of the *Tractatus*,” *Ratio* 6: 108–120.

Mersch, Dieter. 2011. “Ikonizität. Theorie des Bildlichen nach Wittgenstein,” in: *Bild-Performanz*, ed. Ludger Schwarte, München: Wilhelm Fink, pp. 111–126.

Milkov, N. 1999. “The Latest Frege,” *Prima philosophia* 12: 41–8.

Milkov, N. 2003. “Tolstoi und Wittgenstein: Einfluss und Ähnlichkeiten,” *Prima philosophia* 16: 187–206.

Milkov, N. 2012. “The Construction of the Logical World: Frege and Wittgenstein on Fixing Boundaries of Human Thought,” in: Elisabeth Nemeth *et al.* (eds.), *Crossing Borders: Thinking (Across) Boundaries*, Vienna, pp. 151–61.

Milkov, N. 2013. “The Joint Philosophical Program of Russell and Wittgenstein and Its Demise,” *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 2: 81–105.

Milkov, N. 2015. “Frege and the German Philosophical Idealism,” in: Dieter Schott (Hg.), *Frege: Freund(e) und Feind(e)*, Berlin: Logos Verlag, pp. 88–104.

Milkov, N. 2017. “The Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: Toward a New Interpretation,” *Southwest Philosophy Review* 33: 197–212.

Milkov, N. 2019. “Wittgenstein’s Way,” in: Shyam Wuppuluri and Newton da Costa (eds.), *Wittgensteinian (adj.): Looking at sciences from the viewpoint of Wittgenstein’s philosophy*, Berlin: Springer, pp. 7–19.

Milkov, N. 2020a. *Early Analytic Philosophy and the German Philosophical Tradition*, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Milkov, N. 2020b. “The History of the Concept of ‘Truth-making’,” (manuscript).

Mulligan, K. (1985), “ ‘Wie die Sachen sich zueinander verhalten’ . Inside and Outside the *Tractatus*,” *Teoria* 2: 145–74.

- Pilch, M. 2018. "Frontverläufe in Wittgensteins *Prototractatus*," *Wittgenstein-Studies* 9(1): 101–154.
- Rhees, R. (ed.) 1984. *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1918. "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," in idem, *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. by R. C. Marsh, London: Unwin, 1956, pp. 175–281.
- Simons, Peter. 1992. "Logical Atomism and Its Ontological Refinement: A Defence," in Kevin Mulligan (ed.), *Language, Truth and Ontology*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, pp. 157–79.
- Stern, David. 2016. "The University of Iowa Tractatus Map," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 5(2): 203–20.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1922. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, tr. by David Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London: Kegan Paul.
- . 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1964. *Philosophical Remarks*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1974. *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1979. *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. by G E M Anscombe and G H von Wright, Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1980a. *Das Blaue Buch. Eine philosophische Betrachtung*, ed. by Rush Rhees, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- . 1980b. *Culture and Value*, ed. by G H von Wright, Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1984. *Wittgenstein und der Wiener Kreis*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- . 1989. *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung. Kritische Edition*, ed. by B F McGuinness and Joachim Schulte, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- . 1995. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Cambridge Letters*, ed. by B F McGuinness and G H von Wright, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- . 2017. *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung nach seiner eigenen Form mit Ergänzungen*, ed. by L. Bazocchi, lulu.com.