# The *Tractatus* and the Riddles of Philosophy

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Abstract

The notion of the riddle plays a pivotal role in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. By examining the comparisons he draws between philosophical problems and riddles, this paper offers a reassessment of the aims and methods of the book. Solving an ordinary riddle does not consist in learning a new fact; what it requires is that we transform the way we use words. Similarly, Wittgenstein proposes to transform the way philosophers understand the nature of their problems. But since he holds that these problems are ultimately unsolvable, rather than attempting to solve the riddles of philosophy, he aims to dissolve them.

> My veiled face is my face;
> Unveiled, I am annulled.
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> — *A Renaissance riddle* [1]

> It is by the way remarkable that the essence of riddles is not taken seriously in logic.
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> — *Wittgenstein, 1933-1934* [2]

## I. Introduction

It is a remarkable fact that the two main reflections on philosophical method in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* — 6.53, which spells out "the only strictly correct method in

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[1] Adapted from Pagis (1996: 97). The solution to this riddle is given in Section II, below.

[2] This is a somewhat loose translation of Wittgenstein (2015, Ms-156a: 59r): "Es ist übrigens merkwürdig daß das Wesen des Rätsels in der Logik nicht eingehend behandelt wird."

philosophy", and 6.54, which describes the *Tractatus* as a ladder which is to be thrown away —

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appear as commentary on 6.5, whose topic is the very possibility of "the riddle":

> 6.5 For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed.
> *The riddle* does not exist.
> If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered.[3]

6.5 begins by pointing out that extending the term "question" to cases in which there is no answer at all renders it meaningless. In consequence, the very idea that there is such a thing as an unanswerable question — *the riddle* — collapses. Words that at first confront us as such a riddle and evoke our curiosity are thereby revealed to be the mere semblance of a riddle.

This kind of sobering realisation is paradigmatic for Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophical problems as well: the appearance that they spell out a meaningful task is similarly meant to collapse under examination. Like riddles, philosophical problems are phrases which confront us as mysterious; we do not initially know exactly what they mean, although we assume that their meaning will eventually be revealed. But in the case of philosophical problems, unlike ordinary riddles, the initial obstacle to understanding cannot, according to Wittgenstein, be overcome. And since philosophical problems have no solution, they cannot be taken to spell out genuine problems at all. At 6.51 Wittgenstein immediately gives an example:

> 6.51 Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but clearly nonsensical, when it raises doubt where a question cannot be asked.
> For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is

[3] Except where noted, I cite the Ogden translation of the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1960). All references to this edition are made by paragraph number, except when referring to the Author's Preface, which I cite by page number.

an answer, and this only where something can be said.[4]

The proper response to scepticism, Wittgenstein suggests, is not to attempt to confirm or refute it, but to realise that the unsolvability of the questions it raises demonstrates the nonsensicality that lies at their basis. The general upshot is that the problems of philosophy are not to be thought of as problems of some special kind — the unsolvable kind — but as mere illusions of problems.

The comparison of the problems of philosophy with riddles is far from trivial, and its implications for our understanding of Wittgenstein's aims and methods are significant. To begin with, one cannot hope to understand the process through which, in working out a riddle, one comes to the realisation that she has been misled by her initial understanding of certain words, as long as one ignores the roles of context and use in determining the meaningfulness of signs. To solve a riddle, one must break free from the way one has so far understood the words that make it up, assign these words a new, determinate meaning that fits the new context, and thereby reduce the riddle phrase, which at first seemed puzzling, into a trivial question. Thus any account of the Tractarian conception of language that plays down the way context and use determine meaning will be unable to explain the practice of solving ordinary riddles, and hence also fail to explain our engagement with philosophical problems. But it is precisely this engagement which the book aims to shed light on.

In the case of philosophical problems, however, what is required, according to Wittgenstein, is not to find the determinate meanings that yield a solution, but to realise that there are no such meanings at all. What role, then, can the comparison with riddle-solving serve? In Wittgenstein's later work, riddle-solving is often invoked in discussions of the activity of mathematicians who confront problems, not knowing whether they are solvable or not.[5] Of particular interest to him are cases in which the unsolvability of a mathematical problem has eventually been proved. In consequence, mathematicians have modified the concepts which gave rise to the contradiction and, by means of this transformation in their use of language, surmounted what initially seemed

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[4] Translation emended. Ogden translates "Unsinn", "unsinnig" and "sinnlos" as "senseless." Here and in the citations that follow, I have kept "senseless" for "sinnlos" and used "nonsense" and "nonsensical" for "Unsinn" and "unsinnig", respectively.

[5] See e.g. Wittgenstein (2015, Ms-156a: 59r); Wittgenstein (1979: 185); Wittgenstein (1976: 84).

like genuine, albeit unsolvable riddles. But for a long time these mathematicians were driven by the conviction that their problems are significant, and that they could ultimately be solved. They experienced being in the grip of a riddle — though unbeknownst to them, it was an unsolvable one. Thus both in the case of unsolvable mathematical problems as well as in the case of unsolvable philosophical problems, comparisons with riddle-solving serve to bring out the shape of the experience of the person confronting the problem, as well as the shape of the activity through which the problem is ultimately surmounted. Some transformations of our use of language alter the problems we face and render them solvable; others make them vanish .[6]

My aim in what follows is to provide a reassessment of the aims and methods of the *Tractatus* on the basis of such analogies and disanalogies between riddles and philosophical problems. As will soon become clear, my interpretation speaks in favour of the so-called "Resolute Reading" of the *Tractatus* and against the standard, metaphysical readings of the book.[7] I will argue that Wittgenstein's purpose is not to solve, but to dissolve the riddles of philosophy. To do that, Wittgenstein does not attempt to introduce any new, riddlesome ways of conveying metaphysical doctrines. For he holds that wherever such doctrines seem to be called for, the riddles of philosophy have not yet been fully overcome.

## II. Ordinary Riddles and Philosophical Problems

Ordinary riddles are phrases whose meanings are initially unclear. In composing such riddles, the riddler extends the use of familiar phrases to unfamiliar contexts, thereby generating misleading analogies that conceal the intended solution. Take for example the Sphinx's riddle: "What has

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[6] The significance of the connections Wittgenstein draws between philosophical problems, mathematical problems, and riddles, particularly in his later work, has been illuminatingly discussed in Diamond (1991d) and further developed in Floyd (1995) and Mulhall (2015). I return to discuss the connection between philosophical problems and unsolvable mathematical problems in Section IV, below.

[7] The Resolute Reading was initially proposed by Cora Diamond and James Conant in the 1980s, and has since been the object of an ongoing debate in the scholarship. For a restatement of their initial aims and replies to some of the criticisms they received, see Conant and Diamond (2004). For an overview of the debate see Bronzo (2012).

four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" The ambiguity exploited by this riddle misleads us into looking for the solution in the wrong place; for example, we might think that what is specified by the phrase "has four legs" is an essential property of some animal species, and as long as we are thus misled, it is impossible for us to solve the riddle. When the riddle is solved, however, the solution being "a man", a new way of using words is discovered; the meanings of the words as they are used in the context of the riddle phrase become determinate, and the riddle then collapses into a trivial empirical question, a matter of finding what fits a certain description that we already understand.[8] This is the insight encapsulated in the Renaissance riddle that appears in the epigraph of this paper: "My veiled face is my face; unveiled, I am annulled." The solution to this riddle is "a riddle," and the idea behind it is that once a riddle is unravelled, it ceases to exist as a riddle.

Until the riddle-phrase undergoes this transformation, it does not function as a fully meaningful question; indeed, we could be in a situation in which the actual solution to the riddle is right in front of our eyes, and yet fail to recognise it as the solution, for we must first figure out how the words of the riddle-phrase could mean it. For example, if we are told that man is the solution to the Sphinx's riddle, we might not immediately understand how that can be so — how man can be said to be that which has four legs in the morning. To fully solve the riddle, we do not need to discover new facts, but to discover a new way of using the words with which we describe the facts, as they are already known. Until we do that, it would be wrong to explain our attraction to the riddle in terms of a concern with what it seems to be about — the Sphinx's riddle, before it is solved, is not *about* that which has four legs in the morning, for at that stage we simply do not know what these words mean. Our attraction to the riddle is in this sense independent of the availability of the solution. Moreover, since the solution is not rooted in the facts alone, it is not always possible to exclude there being other, adequate solutions, which would result from stretching the meanings of our words in other ways. Settling on a certain solution to a riddle is an act of striking a balance between a host of commitments, not a matter of inferring a conclusion from given premises.

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[8] Diamond (1991d: 269–272) offers a brilliant discussion of the unique kind of reasoning which is involved in attempting to solve riddles, which she takes to exploit an indeterminate and merely tentative use of words. My discussion in this paragraph and the next is deeply indebted to to her suggestions.

The Tractarian diagnosis of the problems of philosophy exhibits many of these features of riddles. Philosophical propositions, Wittgenstein argues, can be traced back to the manner of framing the questions to which they seem to respond (their "*Fragestellung*"). Such framing tends to involve a "misunderstanding of the logic of our language" (1960: 27–28; cf. 4.003), which is caused by misleading analogies between logically distinct expressions, lexical ambiguities (3.324–5) and ambiguities of logical form (4.0033–4.0031). The philosophical propositions with which one responds to these questions extend these misunderstandings and ambiguities, and are just as riddlesome as the original problems. Indeed, since such ambiguities render the sense of the entire expressions of which they form part indeterminate, philosophical propositions are neither true nor false, but nonsensical (4.003).

Take one of Wittgenstein's examples of philosophical nonsense, the sentence "Socrates is identical". Wittgenstein suggests that while sentences like this might give the appearance of metaphysical depth, underneath such appearance lurks mere ambiguity:

> 5.473 … ("Socrates is identical" means nothing because there is no property which is called "identical". The proposition is nonsense because we have not made some arbitrary determination, not because the symbol is in itself unpermissible.)
> In a certain sense we cannot make mistakes in logic.
> 5.4733 … we have given no meaning to the word "identical" as *adjective*. For when it occurs as the sign of equality it symbolizes in an entirely different way—the symbolizing relation is another—therefore the symbol is in the two cases entirely different; the two symbols have the sign in common with one another only by accident.

Suppose we force the philosopher who propounds this sentence to determine what she means by "identical" as she uses it in this specific context. If the philosopher holds fixed the ordinary meanings of "Socrates" and "is", the word "identical" will come to stand for a monadic predicate (corresponding to an adjective); its logical role will then be radically different from the role played by the word "identical" in its ordinary, logical use. On what basis could the philosopher claim that there is some aspect of the meaning of these two uses of the word which is common to both? The word "identical," in the new context, would seem to be a mere homonym of

"identical" as it is ordinarily used.[9] The philosopher tends to take her acquaintance with the familiar meaning of a word as a guarantee that despite the radical change of context the word retains its familiar, determinate meaning. The resulting philosophical claim, she therefore thinks, is guaranteed to make sense. But signs, according to Wittgenstein, do not carry with them any content in detachment from their concrete context of use — this is the point of the context principle announced in 3.3. Moreover, as Wittgenstein points out, a failure to secure the determination of the meaning of familiar words in unfamiliar contexts may happen "[e]ven if we believe that we have done so" (5.4733).

The failure to arbitrarily determine meanings in a given context is precisely how nonsense, according to Wittgenstein, arises. Wittgenstein says, in 5.4732, that we cannot give a sign the "wrong" sense, i.e. a sense that does not fit the propositional context in which the sign appears. This is so since there is no way to hold fixed the meanings of only some parts of a proposition, and to say that in relation to them, the meaning of another sign is "wrong" — for it is only in the context of a fully-functioning, significant use of an entire proposition that the logical roles of any of its parts are determined (3.326). This speaks against the idea, common to many standard readings of the *Tractatus*, that nonsense can arise in another way, namely as a result of the violation of the rules of logical syntax (the underlying thought being that signs already have their meanings and logical roles assigned to them, outside of any context, and *can* therefore be put into the "wrong" context).[10] But Wittgenstein's account of the emergence of philosophical problems makes no appeal to this conception of nonsense and of logical syntax. It is not language, but the philosophers who use it who are to blame for the nonsensicality of their propositions.

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[9] The example "Socrates is identical" might seem artificial and contrived, but it is not implausible to think that Wittgenstein had a specific metaphysical view in mind in choosing it, namely Bradley's notion that external relations are reducible to internal properties — which implies that the difference in logical form between a relational and a monadic predicate is no argument against the underlying unity of their meaning. Wittgenstein's own distinction between internal properties and external relations is spelled out in 4.1251.

[10] This notion of nonsense is prominent in Geach (1976); for the argument against it see Diamond (1991b), and Conant (2001), who criticises both Rudolph Carnap's and Peter Hacker's understanding of logical syntax for playing down the significance of the context principle. This debate is continued in Hacker (2000, 2001 and 2003) and Diamond (2005).

This brings out a feature of philosophical problems which we already encountered in Wittgenstein's discussion of scepticism in 6.51, and which sets these problems apart from ordinary riddles, namely, that they ultimately lack a solution. These two fundamental features of philosophical problems — the indeterminacy of their sense, and the indeterminability of their having a solution — are inextricably intertwined. So long as the sense of the riddle remains indeterminate, no solution can be assigned to it; but the indeterminacy of sense is also that which sustains our belief that the riddle is not unsolvable.

Indeed, whereas genuine riddles can be solved by determining the meaning of the ambiguous words that make them up, and thus reducing the riddles to determinate questions that can be easily answered, Wittgenstein observes that philosophers would find such treatment of their problems unsatisfying (6.53). One reason for this frustration is that the propositions to which ordinary riddles reduce, once the meanings of their terms are determined, are ordinary descriptions of ordinary facts. Disambiguating the terms of a philosophical riddle would similarly reduce it to a determinate expression, which, according to the *Tractatus*, could only be a contingent, empirical proposition, or a senseless tautology or contradiction, or some other anodyne form of expression, such as an identity statement, a mathematical proposition, or a definition. But none of these expressions seem capable of doing what the philosophical proposition purported to do, namely reveal deep truths about language and reality. That there are no other options in the *Tractatus* — in particular, that there are no determinate uses of language that are both senseful and express some robust metaphysical necessity — reflects Wittgenstein's conviction that the realm of sense is exhausted by the truth-functional combination of elementary propositions which are logically independent of one another. Much could be said about the role of this fateful conviction in the *Tractatus* and about its rejection by the later Wittgenstein.[11] But what is crucial for present purposes is that according to the *Tractatus*, the failure of philosophical expressions to possess sense is not due to the limited power of language. Rather, the failure results from the philosopher's own refusal to settle for any of the non-metaphysical options, a refusal which is not grounded in any independently available evidence, but is solely the result of

[11] One might argue that what is rejected by the later Wittgenstein is not so much the idea that there is only *logical* necessity (6.37), but the idea that logical necessity is as simple and as narrow as the author of the *Tractatus* imagined it to be. See e.g. Wittgenstein (2009: #97, #108 and #242).

the philosopher's belief that her words must make some other kind of sense.

The similarities between ordinary, solvable riddles and the problems of philosophy are clear only so long as we focus on the phase of our engagement with a solvable riddle which precedes the discovery of the solution, and compare that phase with our engagement with philosophical, unsolvable riddles. In both cases the use of words is indeterminate, and what we say using those words ultimately lacks sense. But the analogy breaks down once we notice the internal, constitutive connection between the meaningfulness of a question and the availability of its answer, which leads Wittgenstein to conclude, in 6.5, that the existence of "*the riddle*" — a meaningful, yet unanswerable question — must be denied. To the extent that philosophical riddles cannot be solved, they are not genuine riddles.

One might object that this disanalogy threatens the very usefulness of drawing any analogy between riddles and philosophical problems. But Wittgenstein is undeterred by the disanalogy, and neither should we be, since it does not weaken the fundamental philosophical point that he hopes to make by means of the analogy.[12] The comparison with riddles enables him to bring out how things appear to us from the inside of our engagement with problems of which we do not yet know whether they have a solution or not. As we have already seen, he thinks that this manifests itself in the indeterminacy of our grasp of the meaning of the words we use while working through these problems. The ultimate aim that the comparison between riddles and philosophical problems is meant to serve is to help determine how, in cases that truly do not have a solution, we can overcome the appearance that they do.

## III. Philosophical Riddles and Ethical Propositions

The discussion of unsolvable riddles in the 6.5s is anticipated by a discussion of ethical propositions, in the 6.4s, which, as I propose to read it, construes their function in our lives in terms of riddle-solving. Ethical value, according to Wittgenstein, is not to be found within the

[12] Similarly, he is undeterred by such disanalogies when he compares riddle-solving with the way we confront mathematical problems (which might turn out to be unsolvable). See e.g. Wittgenstein (1975: 185), Wittgenstein (2015, Ms-156a: 59r), and my discussion in Section IV, below.

realm of facts, and hence it cannot be construed as the content of any senseful proposition (6.41). Instead, the conferral of ethical value on facts is comparable to an act of riddle-solving, in which "[t]he facts belong only to the task and not to its solution" (6.4321; cf. 6.4312). Just as the person who already knows the facts that form the solution to a riddle might not know *that* they are the solution, and just as the person who is told the solution might not yet see *how* the riddle is thereby solved, a statement of ethical value transcends the facts and cannot be reduced to them (cf. 6.421). That is why Wittgenstein says that the world of the happy and that of the unhappy man can be different, even though there is no difference in the facts that make up their worlds (6.43).

One cannot directly demonstrate that ethical claims are in no way rooted in the facts, that is, that ethical claims are *unsolvable* riddles. For this would require that one be able to survey the entirety of facts, and show that none of them could count as the solution. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein proposes that we can learn something about the role of ethical propositions in our lives by imagining being in a situation in which we do manage to demonstrate the irreducibility of ethical riddles to factual claims:

> 6.52 We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.
> 6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem. (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)

If one could survey all the possible scientific answers and see that none of them counts as a solution to an ethical riddle, one would thereby recognise that it was not a genuine riddle. The riddle would then dissolve — it would no longer seem to pose a problem. The realisation would not consist in acquiring some new piece of knowledge, however, since there is no senseful proposition which would thereby be acquired. And since no knowledge would be gained, the transformation one would undergo, in coming to this realisation, would not be something about which one could report.

A similar line of thought is pursued in Wittgenstein's 1929 "Lecture on Ethics". He there says

that even if we had the means for reaching the realisation that no senseful proposition corresponds to the ethical expression — even if we could survey the entirety of empirical facts, and show that none of them could be what is meant by our statement of value — this would not weaken our attraction to these expressions.[13] Indeed, Wittgenstein does not say that such a realisation would make us stop using ethical expressions. Rather, his point is that the demonstration would force us to transform our relation to these expressions; we would keep uttering them, but we would no longer take ourselves to be making contentful claims thereby.[14] And although such a demonstration is *de facto* impossible, in asking us to imagine it, both here and in 6.52, Wittgenstein hints that we already can, here and now, achieve the change of attitude that would be forced on us if the demonstration were carried out.

Thus there is an important disanalogy between Wittgenstein's approach to the unsolvable riddles of ethics and his approach to the unsolvable riddles of philosophy; for whereas the attraction of the former is somehow unharmed by the realisation that they do not concern the facts, the latter get their entire point from the appearance that they do make sense, i.e. from the appearance that they do have a solution, which captures some robust fact. It is for this reason that once we unmask the unsolvability of philosophical riddles, they are to be entirely thrown away, whereas ethical propositions can survive such unmasking. An ethical proposition may have a significance in our lives which goes beyond its making an apparently contentful claim; a metaphysical proposition may not. Indeed, to live an ethical life is (very often, if not always) to be riddled by the significance of events and deeds, attempting at one time to see one sort of connection between them, and at other times to see those connections in a different way, without being able to fully determine their moral status. In philosophy, things are quite different, for to realise that philosophical claims are ultimately indeterminate is fatal to the pretense of metaphysical knowledge.

Nonetheless there is a further, important connection between the ways we engage with these two kinds of unsolvable riddles, the ethical and the philosophical. Overcoming the riddles of philosophy could be said to require a transformation of the philosopher's personality which is

[13] Wittgenstein (1965: 11–12).

[14] This interpretation of Wittgenstein's view of ethical propositions is indebted to Diamond (2000: 161).

analogous to the ethical transformation that is needed in order for a person to come to see the facts of life in a different light, without taking herself to have thereby learned any new and substantive facts on which she could report (6.521). This is why Wittgenstein conceives of his philosophy not as a theory, but as an activity; he does not aim to teach new and substantive facts, but to lead philosophers to attain greater clarity in their engagement with what they already know:

> 4.112 The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.
> Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.
> A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.
> The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions,' but to make propositions clear.

The clarity aimed at in philosophy, our coming to see the world "rightly" (6.54), is the direct result of the vanishing of confusions — in particular the philosophical confusions concerning how we see the world. The philosopher is meant to realise that her own relation to the world of facts — the logic of her language — does not depend on any of the things that her metaphysical expressions make it seem to depend on. No answer to her philosophical riddles is thereby provided; instead, it is merely her attachment to philosophical riddles that is overcome. It is for this reason that in reflecting on the value of his achievements in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein observes "how little has been done when these problems have been solved".[15]

## IV. Tractarian Methods for Dissolving Philosophical Riddles

Our attraction to philosophical riddles cannot be overcome by means of proper argument. After all, the insistence that a certain phrase has sense even though one is not in a position to spell it out is neither based on logical argument, nor is it refutable by one. An altogether different

[15] Wittgenstein (1960: 28). Relatedly, writing to Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein says that the point of the book is an ethical one. See Luckhard (1979: 94). I take it that what is ethical about it is the transformative effect it is meant to have on its readers. For an insightful discussion of this point, see Kremer (2013).

approach is needed — a dialectical form of engagement that would transform the philosopher's way of using words, rather than dispute the purported subject matter of her propositions. This is the task spelled out in the two main methodological passages of the *Tractatus*, 6.53 and 6.54. Consider 6.53 first:

> 6.53 The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other —he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but *it* would be the only strictly correct method.

The point of the method proposed in 6.53 can be put as follows: the illusoriness of a philosophical riddle would be exposed by showing that no possible solution to it would be recognised by the philosopher as correct. The application of the method is construed as an open-ended, dialogical process, whose success ultimately depends on the philosopher herself exhausting all the possible solutions that she can think of and thereby coming to recognise, on her own, the hopelessness of her insistence. Why this must be up to her shall be discussed further below.

Although the method is meant to be carried out in actual conversation, and not in writing, the *Tractatus* itself can be taken to engage in this method insofar as it provides us with the means for demonstrating to an interlocutor that she has not given determinate meaning to her signs. For example, the book introduces the general form of the proposition, which specifies the manner in which senseful propositions are generated from other senseful propositions (6–6.002). By considering the shape of the formal series which is thus generated, the interlocutor might convince herself both that it exhausts the entire realm of senseful propositions, and that none of her metaphysical propositions (or anything into which they can be reduced) belong in this series. She would thereby come to realise that these propositions have no sense, and should therefore be abandoned. Another way in which the *Tractatus* promotes the method of 6.53 is by showing that adequate logical notations can be constructed in which nothing would correspond to certain problematic expressions of our language. For example, Wittgenstein proposes notations in which there is no sign of identity (5.533), and in which there is no sign corresponding to our signs

"concept" and "object" (4.1272). He hopes to thereby convince the philosopher that since such adequate notations would not allow for the formulation of anything corresponding to the philosophical problems whose formulation in our language involves these signs, the problems themselves would be shown to be illusory. Similarly, at 3.333 Wittgenstein argues that the way functions and their typical arguments are correlated in an adequate notation prevents Russell's paradox from arising.

A different manner of engaging with philosophical riddles is described in 6.54:

> 6.54 My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
>
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

Wittgenstein here proposes that Tractarian elucidations make use of nonsense as a means for bringing about clarity. But how can that work, how can nonsense have such an effect, especially if we hold that all nonsense is mere nonsense, an indeterminate use of words that does not convey any content at all?

To answer this question it would be helpful to compare what Wittgenstein says here about philosophical elucidation with what he says (in later writings) about the way certain mathematical problems have been shown to be unsolvable.[16] One example Wittgenstein discusses is the Euclidean problem of the trisection of the angle using compass and straightedge — a problem which exercised the attention of mathematicians for more than two millennia, until it was proven (in the 19th century) to be unsolvable.[17] What is puzzling about this problem is that the mathematicians who have worked on it, eminently rational men and women, have taken themselves to be in pursuit of something real. But the referent of the seemingly meaningful subject term that their problem seemed to be about ("the trisection of the angle") turned out not to exist. To realise this was not a discovery of some matter of fact, but the discovery that a

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[16] Wittgenstein discusses unsolvable mathematical problems and the effect that proofs of their unsolvability had on the activity of mathematicians who engaged with them in various places throughout the 1930s and 1940s; see e.g. Wittgenstein (1975: 184); Wittgenstein (1976: 76 and 88); Wittgenstein (1978: 285); and Wittgenstein (2015, Ms-156a: 59r).

[17] Wittgenstein (2009: #334 and #463).

certain set of ideas was confused. So how should we understand what these mathematicians were up to, this whole time — what was the object of their thoughts, given that there is no such thing as trisecting the angle? There is a sense in which what they were up to was but a mirage. Their words meant nothing, only they were not able to see this. They were, as it were, caught up in a riddle; and unbeknownst to them, it was an unsolvable riddle, a riddle that — as 6.5 puts it — does not exist.

Consider another example. As long as mathematicians assumed that every number was expressible as the ratio of two integers, each of which was either even or odd, they were puzzled by the inability to determine the value of the square root of two. The discovery of a proof by *reductio ad absurdum* showed that no such ratio could be found; and this allowed mathematicians to see that the assumptions which were built into their very concept of number were problematic. Just like finding a solution to an ordinary riddle, overcoming the contradiction that the *reductio* exposed did not consist in the discovery of new facts, but rather in the discovery of new ways of using our words. Following the *reductio*, we are no longer tempted to speak in the ways that were revealed to be misleading; we thus overcome the attraction of the mathematical problem, not by solving, but by dissolving it, by allowing that problem to vanish. Thus, mathematicians no longer find it useful to demand that every number be expressible as the ratio of two integers, or to assume that there must be a Euclidean method of trisecting angles. In effect, they recognise that both the propositions with which the initial problems were framed, as well as those which make up the *reductio* proofs, are nonsensical, since they all suffer from the same underlying indeterminacies. Moreover, their reaction to these proofs is not limited to rejecting some propositions and keeping the rest; the adjustments involved transform the fundamental mathematical concepts, and thereby change the entirety of their language.

We can thus speak in this context of the *transformative* effect that impossibility proofs may have on the mathematician's language. In establishing that certain problems are unsolvable, such proofs push mathematicians to transcend the point of view from which their illusory problems seem like genuine ones. This is achieved by identifying the specific indeterminacies in the use of language which make the problem seem inevitable, and introducing new, determinate uses in their place. But note that this can often be done in more than one way — for example, it was not part of the conclusion of the proofs discussed above that one should alter the definition of

number in any specific way rather than another, or that one should reject the possibility of trisection rather than modify the limits of what counts as Euclidean method. The disappearance of problems is one criterion for a successful transformation of language, but a host of other considerations go into deciding how exactly to do that — just as when we examine a candidate solution to a riddle, a host of considerations go into its coming to seem correct to us (and we are not always in a position to convince others of it by means of direct argument).[18]

The point I have been leading up to is that the method proposed in 6.54 should be understood along similar lines. It takes its start from philosophical claims whose nonsensicality is covert, and which the philosophical interlocutor finds attractive. Then, by deriving implications from these claims, which exploit their underlying indeterminacy, the elucidatory argument gradually exposes tensions, inconsistencies and even contradictions between the interlocutor's various commitments. The intended effect is to get the interlocutor to recognise the indeterminate use of words that made it seem as though there was a coherent philosophical question to begin with. When this is done, all the philosophical claims involved in the process, including those volunteered by Wittgenstein, can be thrown away, insofar as they all suffered from the same indeterminacies and were thus all equally nonsensical.[19] In this connection, Cora Diamond has made the helpful suggestion that the Tractarian use of nonsensical propositions is a merely "transitional" use of words.[20] For like the steps taken within a *reductio* proof, the elucidatory propositions of the *Tractatus* create the mere semblance of making sense, but once we identify the indeterminacy that underlies them, and proceed to alter our use of words, we no longer find them useful, and so throw them away.[21]

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[18] See Wittgenstein (1978: 370), who compares the various routes one might take in developing a language that avoids Russell's paradox with the various ways one might develop a variation on a musical theme which one would tend to accept as *correct*. And see the illuminating discussion of similar examples and connections in Diamond (1991d: 275ff).

[19] For this construal of the role of elucidations see Diamond (1991c), Conant (2001) and Kremer (2013).

[20] Diamond (2000: 157).

[21] Consider the following remark by Diamond (1991a: 35), which brings out the connection between her conception of the role of elucidatory nonsense and her conception of riddle-solving: "[A]n account of the role of nonsensical propositions in the argument of the *Tractatus* can be given in terms of a kind of *riddling*, a play with sentences of a certain construction, the result of which is the rejection of such sentences as meaningless." (My emphasis).

The two methods of 6.53 and 6.54 have this in common, that they do not aim to provide solutions to the philosophical riddles to which they are applied, but merely to reveal that they are not riddles at all. Moreover, in both cases, it is not by appeal to any doctrines of his own that Wittgenstein hopes to address the confusion of his interlocutor — for he does not aim to refute the interlocutor nor to correct her. Rather, his aim in both cases is to help the philosopher recognise the need to transform her own use of language. There might be different ways to do that, various means for surmounting the attraction of riddles and thereby coming to see the world more clearly (just as there might be different ways of avoiding a mathematical problem and solving a riddle). So it is ultimately up to the philosopher herself to find "the answer" (6.52) — the one that would allow her to see, by reference to her own language and the totality of commitments and attractions that it embodies, that there was no genuine riddle there to begin with.

## V. Dissolving the Cardinal Problem of Philosophy

I have argued that the *Tractatus* aims at *dissolving* philosophical riddles, and yet for many of its readers, the book has seemed to aim at *solving* philosophical problems. Indeed, my claim that the *Tractatus* resolutely avoids advancing any substantive philosophical claims is not uncontroversial: this is the main bone of contention in the debate between the traditional and the Resolute Reading of the book. A good place to start the discussion of this issue is by looking at the letter Wittgenstein wrote Russell shortly after completing the book:

> I'm afraid you haven't really got hold of my main contention, to which the whole business of logical prop[osition]s is only a corollary. The main point is the theory of what can be expressed by prop[osition]s—i.e. by language—(and, which comes to the same, what can be thought) and what can not be expressed by prop[osition]s, but only shown; which, I believe, is the cardinal problem of philosophy. (Wittgenstein 2008: 98).

Note that the distinction between what can be said and what only shows itself, which traditional readers of the *Tractatus* (including Russell) have taken to be Wittgenstein's *solution* to the

problems of philosophy, is not here treated as a solution at all; rather, it is treated as the "cardinal problem". To see what it might mean to take the distinction to be a solution, consider the Tractarian remarks that solipsism (5.62) and the law of causality (6.36) cannot be said, but show themselves. That the world is my world and that every event has a cause seem to be substantive philosophical claims, which would not be reducible to any truth-functional combination of elementary propositions; so there should not be any room for them in Wittgenstein's account of the meaningful use of language.[22] This is why many readers have taken Wittgenstein's appeal to the distinction between saying and showing in these contexts to be his attempt to circumvent a difficulty of expression — a difficulty putatively imposed by the limitations of language (or the limitations of Wittgenstein's own conception of language). In other words, they have taken him to appeal to the distinction in order to secure access to the solutions of philosophical problems, despite recognising that they cannot be determinately said.[23] But if that were so, then the riddles of philosophy would survive the Tractarian critique after all. Indeed, despite their apparent unsolvability, they would turn out to be no less legitimate than the solvable ones. For while it might not be possible for us to determinately *say* what their solutions are, the solutions' putatively showing themselves would guarantee the continued existence of those riddles (pace 6.51). Or as though, contrary to 4.112, Wittgenstein thought that philosophy was *not* an activity but a theory, albeit an ineffable one.

Another respect in which the distinction between saying and showing has been treated as a solution rather than as a problem consists in the thought that despite their being nonsensical, philosophical elucidations can themselves convey ineffable content (namely, by *showing* it). This seems almost compelling when one considers that Wittgenstein obviously took himself to be

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[22] An alternative reading of these passages would put pressure on the assumption that what is here said to show itself truly consists in substantial claims. I say more about this alternative, below.

[23] See Russell (1960: 22); Geach (1976: 56); and Hacker (2001: 146) who writes that "[i]n the course of the book, Wittgenstein asserts many different kinds of truths that *stricto sensu* cannot be said.…"

achieving something by means of them.[24] However, not only are there alternative ways of understanding what Tractarian elucidations achieve than thinking of them in terms of conveying content; there is no indication in Wittgenstein that philosophical nonsense is any more contentful than mere nonsense, i.e. mere strings of signs lacking in determinate meaning (5.4733). Elucidatory nonsense may nonetheless be helpful, as we have seen in the discussion of 6.54 above, since the activity of elucidation gets the philosopher to realise the emptiness of other pieces of nonsense which she finds to be philosophically attractive. The *Tractatus* employs nonsense as a means for pushing the philosophical riddle further, up to the point at which the appearance that it is a genuine, solvable riddle finally dissolves.

How, then, can the distinction between saying and showing be read such that it would spell out a problem, not a solution, and such that the *Tractatus* could be taken to dissolve that problem? Like other philosophical riddles, the cardinal problem of philosophy derives from confusion and ambiguity. Specifically, it derives from the failure to draw the distinction radically enough.[25] Wittgenstein calls this confusion the *cardinal* problem of philosophy, presumably because it underlies and sustains the persistence of *all* philosophical problems: an insufficiently radical distinction between saying and showing makes it seem as though our unsolvable riddles are nonetheless genuine riddles, since even if their solution cannot be located in the realm of what can be said, it might be taken to reside in the realm of what shows itself. In consequence one ends up thinking that beyond the limits of language, and beyond the realm of the facts that are describable by language, there lies a further kind of fact, indeed, a fact which grounds all the other, ordinary facts.

But when strictly thought through, this is hopelessly incoherent; it is just as confused as the idea that we could draw limits to thought — which would require that we be able to think both

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[24] For example, Max Black (1964: p. 381) writes that "we can begin to see an escape from the nihilism of Wittgenstein's concluding remarks" by treating the elucidatory propositions of the book "as formal statements, 'showing' something that can be shown". Peter Hacker (2000: 382) has a more subtle view of philosophical nonsense, but he still thinks that the failure to express something, from which nonsense supposedly arises, is a failure to express *something*. He thus writes that in framing nonsensical propositions, Wittgenstein means what he cannot say: "What one *means* when one tries to state these insights is perfectly correct, but the endeavour must unavoidably fail."

[25] This has been convincingly argued in Kremer (2007).

sides of the limit, i.e., think that which we cannot think.[26] By contrast, the only limits we can draw to language, according to Wittgenstein, are those that exclude meaningless signs — not limits that separate us from the ineffable solutions to our unsolvable riddles. As he puts it:

> The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in the language, and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.[27]

To draw the distinction between saying and showing radically enough is to avoid the temptation to draw the limits of language in ways that leave anything more than mere nonsense on the other side of the limit. This is what happens when one thinks of what shows itself as something endowed with any of the features of what can be said (except its being sayable) — i.e. as a kind of truth or state of affairs, something which can play the logical role of grounding sayable claims or explaining ordinary facts. But to have these features is precisely what it is to be sayable. The distinction between saying and showing, strictly thought through, does not divide the realm of facts into two parts, the effable and the ineffable ones; for this realm (the totality of facts) is nothing but the realm of the sayable.

To dissolve the cardinal problem of philosophy is to learn to avoid treating what shows itself as a matter of fact of any kind. Take the two examples mentioned above, solipsism and the principle of causality. As Wittgenstein handles these topics, the claims they seem to involve lose the shape of propositions, and turn into mere images, or similes, which no longer purport to say anything about reality, but at most to give us a sense of the form of our relation to reality — evoking the first personality of all experience, the form of all descriptions of natural occurrences, etc.. The way such pseudo-claims operate is comparable, in this respect, to the way ethical propositions (while failing to convey any determinate propositional content) give expression to the speaker's attitude towards her world.

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[26] See Wittgenstein (1960: 27) and 5.61.

[27] Wittgenstein (1960: 27).

## VI. A Possible Objection: Something Inexpressible Does Exist

There is one passage in the sequence of the 6.5s which might appear to be harder to square with the reading suggested in this paper, and with the Resolute Reading more generally. For in 6.522 Wittgenstein seems to suggest that there actually are things, or facts, or truths which we can recognise, but about which we need to keep silent. Here is my translation of this passage, followed by the original:

> 6.522 Indeed, something inexpressible does exist. This *shows* itself, it is the mystical.
>
> 6.522 Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies *zeigt* sich, es ist das Mystische.

Let me begin by motivating my translation. The first thing to notice is that the original German wording of 6.522 avoids referring to any specific thing or things which are then said to be inexpressible. Pears and McGuinness's translation, by contrast, is quite problematic, since it forces the reading according to which what is inexpressible is some real but ineffable content: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words".[28] And Ogden's is only slightly better: "There is indeed the inexpressible".

Second, notice the contrast between the claim of existence made in 6.522 ("something inexpressible does exist") and the denial of the existence of "the riddle" in 6.5 ("*The riddle* does not exist"). This contrast is much clearer in the German original ("Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches" / "*Das Rätsel* gibt es nicht") but it gets lost in the two mainstream English translations.[29] Putting the two existence claims together, we are prompted to see that the existence of "something inexpressible" does not serve to guarantee the continued existence of

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[28] Wittgenstein (1974: 6.522).

[29] Here is Ogden:

> 6.5 … *The riddle* does not exist. …
> 6.522 There is indeed the inexpressible. …

And here is Pears and McGuinness:

> 6.5 … *The riddle* does not exist. …
> 6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. …

"*the riddle*". Ineffable solutions are no solutions at all (6.51), so philosophical riddles that seem to require them cannot be genuine riddles either. As I discussed above, it has indeed seemed to many standard readers of the *Tractatus* that Wittgenstein's talk of what shows itself but cannot be said indicates the availability of ersatz-solutions to philosophical riddles (which such readers therefore take to be genuine riddles). But this reading assimilates what shows itself to sayable content, which is precisely the kind of confusion that the *Tractatus* seeks to overcome.

Furthermore, 6.522 connects the idea of the inexpressible to that of the mystical, which in 6.45 was equated with "the feeling of the world as a limited whole".[30] But it is far from clear that the object of any feeling (even a mystical one) can be thought of as a proper proposition, a candidate for being true or false. So when Wittgenstein speaks of "the world as a limited whole", he need not be taken to speak of a truth of some sort (which is then putatively said, in 6.522, to be inexpressible). His use of words to express this mystical feeling is more aptly compared to the use of words involved in the propositions of ethics — propositions that may similarly be said to convey a certain feeling, but whose role in our lives does not depend on their expressing any truth-evaluable content.

Finally, the "something inexpressible" (*Unaussprechliches*) whose existence is asserted in 6.522 seems not unrelated to the silence, depicted in the immediately preceding paragraph 6.521, of the person who has undergone a transformation of her ethical outlook, has come to see the world differently but is not able to say anything about it. Her transformation is inexpressible because it does not involve the discovery of any content, but rather the vanishing of all the apparent riddles whose purported solutions would have such content. Similarly, "something inexpressible" in 6.522 need not be taken to indicate any substantive content that cannot be put into words; instead, it is best understood as marking the disappearance of words which results when we abandon a confused way of speaking.

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[30] My translation.

VII. From Riddle to Clarity

To conclude, let us reexamine the sequence of passages that lead from 6.5 to the concluding proposition 7, and consider the manner in which they interlock with one another and together form a single, sustained argument:

> 6.5 For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed.
> *The riddle* does not exist.
> If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered.
> 6.51 Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but clearly nonsensical, when it raises doubt where a question cannot be asked.
> For doubt can only exist where there is a question; a question only where there is an answer, and this only where something *can* be *said*.
> 6.52 We feel that even if *all possible* scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.
> 6.521 The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.
> (Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)
> 6.522 Indeed, something inexpressible does exist. This *shows* itself, it is the mystical.
> 6.53 The right method of philosophy would be this. To say nothing except what can be said, i.e. the propositions of natural science, i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy: and then always, when someone else wished to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions. This method would be unsatisfying to the other —he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy—but *it* would be the only strictly correct method.
> 6.54 My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as nonsense, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)
> He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.
> 7 Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.[31]

How does the discussion of riddles that lack solutions in 6.5 prepare the ground for and support

[31] The translation of 6.51 and 6.522 is my own.

the methodological remarks of 6.53-6.54 and the concluding proposition 7? Paragraph 6.5 contrasts genuine questions with unsolvable riddles, and argues that the lack of answers in the latter case indicates that these are not genuine riddles. The relevance of this suggestion to the project of overcoming the problems of philosophy is immediately demonstrated, in 6.51: if scepticism can be shown to pose questions that cannot be answered, this means that it poses no question at all — the riddle of scepticism does not exist. In 6.52, the transition from recognising the absence of solutions to recognising the illusoriness of riddles is highlighted by reference to ethical problems. In engaging with the "problems of life", we refuse to see them as questions that could be "touched" by any possible empirical proposition. Similarly, we are told in 6.53, the philosopher tends to think that the propositions of natural science have "nothing to do with philosophy". But just as the solution to the problems of life is "seen in their vanishing" (6.521), the philosopher needs to be brought to see that if all the significant scientific propositions are excluded from the start from serving as solutions to her riddles, then these riddles do not have a determinate sense, and so they are not really questions to which she *must* find an answer. To realise this is to find "the answer" (6.52), though only in the sense that it breaks the hold that such philosophical riddles exercise on her. Similarly, we can speak of something inexpressible (6.522), but this need not indicate the existence of ineffable, and yet substantive solutions to our philosophical riddles. Rather, inexpressibility is experienced in the vanishing of the philosophical, idle chatter that masquerades as a search for solutions. In this spirit, 6.54 urges us to also throw away the elucidatory remarks with which we were brought to this realisation, for the sense of the elucidations of the *Tractatus* is just as indeterminate as the sense of the riddles whose illusoriness they help us expose. But there is no loss in rejecting these elucidations after they have been used, for their only purpose is to transform, not to inform. They lead us to be silent, where previously we purported to solve illusory riddles (7).

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