

# A Possible Resolution of the Tractarian Paradox\*

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## Abstract

While Wittgenstein examines the relationship between language and the world in the *Tractatus*, he establishes a paradox which cancels out the possibility of the work being either true or nonsense. The crucial question arises as to whether this paradox succeeds in undermining the whole work or whether the work continues to function in some way in spite of it. In this article, I explain why previous interpretations aiming to resolve the tractarian paradox have failed, for instance the “traditional view” and the “resolute reading view”. My purpose is to propose a third interpretation, which I believe constitutes a possible resolution of the tractarian paradox, since, through this, the role of the paradox is clarified, namely to create space for mysticism.

## Keywords

Paradox, Truths, Nonsense, Mysticism, Silence

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## 1. Introduction

In his effort to talk about the nature of language in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein formulates the so-called “picture theory of propositions” which maintains that the constituents of language (names) correspond to the constituents of the world (objects). After he articulates this supposed “theory”, he undermines it by claiming that all of his remarks are in fact nonsense, thus resulting in a *paradox*. It seems that Wittgenstein needs to establish a paradox in order to transcend it, encouraging us to speculate through a process that ultimately surpasses the limits of philosophy. Philosophy functions as a prerequisite in this process, which, as Wittgenstein states, does not generate any truth. Once I explain why I consider the “traditional view” and the “resolute reading view” to be unfit resolutions of the tractarian paradox, I will defend a third interpretation which I call

\*The Tractarian paradox creates space for a special kind of mysticism.

the “mystical interpretation”, which seems to bear deep influences from the diachronic positions of mysticism and especially from Schopenhauer and Kant.

## 2. The Paradox in the *Tractatus*

In his effort to talk about the nature of language in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seems to propose a theory, the “picture theory of propositions”, which he later undermines, thereby creating a *paradox*. Specifically: 1) While Wittgenstein claims that all of the remarks in the *Tractatus* function as “elucidations”, at the same time, he maintains that all of these remarks are in fact “nonsense” (*TLP* 6.54, *TLP* indicates Pears and McGuinness’ translation). But, how is it possible for nonsensical remarks (see *TLP* 5.473 and 5.4733, and *NB* p. 2 (*NB* indicates the *Notebooks*) as well as *PI* I: §499-500 (*PI* indicates *Philosophical Investigations*) to function as “elucidations”? 2) How is it possible for remark *TLP* 6.54 to be truthful when it supports nonsense at the same time? Of course, Wittgenstein could not exclude remark *TLP* 6.54 by saying that it has sense, because if he did, he would violate remark *TLP* 6.53; 3) Remark *TLP* 6.53, then, contradicts itself. While it states that whoever tries to produce a philosophical proposition will fail to afford meaning to at least one of its signs, remark 6.53 also demands that we consider all of its signs to be meaningful and that the remark itself has sense; 4) How can nonsense refer to the correct method of philosophy (see *TLP* 6.53) and, likewise, how can nonsense be employed to assert that we cannot say anything about philosophy, but only the propositions of natural science? In addition to this, how is it possible to say that philosophy, which refers to the necessary truths of the world, is nonsense without doing philosophy; 5) While Wittgenstein contends that we cannot produce philosophical propositions (*TLP* 6.53), he attempts to talk about philosophy by postulating the “picture theory of propositions”; 6) Since Wittgenstein in one of his letters (in *Letters to Ludwig Ficker* (*BLF*)) characterises his book as ethical (*BLF* pp. 94-95), and according to him ethics cannot be put in words (*TLP* 6.42 and 6.421), then how is the *Tractatus* legitimately situated within the space of meaning?

Therefore, if we take the *Tractatus* to be true, then we should accept that it is a work of nonsense, as the book itself claims (*TLP* 6.53 and 6.54). On the other hand, if we perceive the *Tractatus* to be nonsense, then it cannot be true because nonsense cannot make any claims to anything meaningful (see *TLP* 6.54). Nonsense cannot speak in a meaningful way about either nonsense or sense. Thus, the *Tractatus* can neither be true nor nonsense. Consequently, it is natural for the reader of the *Tractatus* to wonder whether the paradox succeeds in undermining the entire work, something which would certainly restrict its value, or if there is a way to resolve, that is to transcend, the paradox, which would invariably strengthen it. Hence, the overall value of the *Tractatus* needs to be clarified.

## 3. What Could Be a Possible Resolution to the Difficulty of the Tractarian Paradox?

It is natural for someone to think that such a work has value if it expresses

truths. But, how is it possible for a work characterized by “nonsense” to express truths? If the *Tractatus* does indeed express truths, then we have to say what these truths exactly are. If it does not, then we have to justify what exactly the reader can gain by reading it. I will approach this issue through three different interpretations: 1) the “traditional view”, 2) the “resolute reading view” and 3) the “mystical interpretation” which is distinct from the two former views and provides a possible resolution to the difficulty of the tractarian paradox, and encourages a special kind of “mysticism”.

### 3.1. The “Traditional View”

According to the “traditional view” (or the orthodox interpretation, see [Anscombe \(1996\)](#) and [Hacker \(1975\)](#)), Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* refers to two kinds of nonsense: 1) sentences that do not have sense and are clearly “nonsense” (“Unsinn”) and 2) sentences that lack “sense” (“sinnlos”), but are useful. The second kind of nonsense is constituted by sentences that are not pseudo-truths, but sentences that transcend language. They do not have sense, therefore meaning that they cannot have truth-conditions. They cannot be said, but as they concern philosophically illuminating nonsense, they can nevertheless show something deeper. Thus, according to the “traditional view”, even if the whole *Tractatus* is nonsense, it can still express certain ineffable truths.

The crucial question that might arise at this point is whether it is possible for a truth to be ineffable. Wittgenstein does not say anything about how this is possible. From this perspective, I consider the “traditional view” to be false, given that there are no ineffable truths. The idea of truth presupposes something which we can think about and if we can think about something, we can also talk about it (*TLP* 5.61). Thus, something which we can think about cannot be ineffable. Hence, we cannot claim that there are some propositions that are nonsense which are also illuminating; that is, which show something deeper without that something being able to be said. So, we cannot claim that there is an ineffable correspondence between the elements of language and the elements of the world. As a result, it is impossible to claim an ineffable common logical form between an ineffable elementary proposition and a state of affairs. Thus, there are no ineffable truths. No silence can represent its form. So, silence cannot say anything about itself or about the form of the world.

### 3.2. The “Resolute Reading View”

According to the “resolute reading view” (or the post-modern interpretation, see [Diamond \(1988\)](#), [Conant \(1991 and 2002\)](#), [Ricketts \(1996\)](#), [Goldfarb \(1997\)](#) and [Kremer \(2001\)](#)), a part of the *Tractatus* (the “frame”, namely, the Preface and the last remarks of the work) has sense while the rest of the work (the “main body”) is nonsense and does not express any truths ([Diamond, 2005](#); [Conant, 2005](#)). Hence, the claim that there are no ineffable truths is projected onto the work. The “resolute reading view”, which rejects the distinction between simple and illuminating nonsense, does indeed appear to be more consistent than the “tra-

ditional view” since Wittgenstein makes no reference to such a distinction anywhere in the *Tractatus*. The *Tractatus* refers to the distinction between that which can be said and that which cannot be said. At no point does he distinguish between different forms of that which cannot be said. But the “resolute reading view”, which supports the notion that the “frame” of the *Tractatus* has sense, is at some distance from the tractarian spirit. The Preface (in one of his letters on the 23.06.1922, Wittgenstein writes to Ogden (in *Letters to C.K. Ogden (LO)*) that the *Preface* also constitutes part of the book (*LO* p. 55)) and the final remarks of the *Tractatus* constitute part of the book, meaning that they are still trapped in the paradox. Thus, we do not have any serious reason to understand these parts of the text in a different way from the “main body” of the work. In other words, we do not have any convincing argument to believe that the remarks of the “frame” of the work are overarching statements which have sense. Therefore, the position of the “resolute reading view” effectively remains distant from the tractarian spirit. The *Tractatus*, as has already been explained, can neither be true nor nonsense. So at this point, it would be wrong to think that the *Tractatus* needs to be corrected. Hence, these two interpretations cannot constitute one of our choices for resolving the difficulty of the tractarian paradox.

### 3.3. The Mystical Interpretation

That the “traditional view” and the “resolute reading view” fail to provide a possible resolution to the paradox forces us to rethink what the *Tractatus* could be, since it can neither be true nor nonsense. Below, I will defend my own view, according to which the *Tractatus* does not express truths but rather, a mystical tone which affords a possible resolution to the tractarian paradox. In this view, I perceive all of the remarks of the *Tractatus*, including the *Preface*, to be neither true nor nonsense, something which I have already explained above.

It seems that Russell was one of the few who recognised the spirit in which the *Tractatus* was written. In one of his letters to Ottoline Morrell in 1919 (in *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore (LRKM)*), Russell emphasises the importance of the mystical for Wittgenstein. He says: “I had felt in his book [*Tractatus*] a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, he seriously contemplates becoming a monk” (*LRKM* p. 82). Wittgenstein’s mystical tone in the *Tractatus* is highlighted by his emphasis on the idea that he is neither interested in formulating a scientific theory nor in following the scientific method (in one of his remarks in 1930 (in *Culture and Value (CV)*), Wittgenstein makes a distinction between his way of thinking and the scientific way of thinking (*CV* p. 7)). If Wittgenstein had expected something like that, he would have included the following in the *Tractatus*: 1) clarified terminology: the notions in the *Tractatus* are not clarified. By contrast, because of the unclarity of the crucial notion “object”, all of the terminology in the *Tractatus* remains indeterminate; 2) development of arguments: Wittgenstein appears to be unwilling to develop any arguments for his remarks. Some of them are even characterised

by a poetic style. In one of his letters to Morrell Ottoline, on the 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1912, Russell mentions that he had asked Wittgenstein to provide arguments for that which he believed to be true, but Wittgenstein told Russell that he considers that arguments destroy the text's beauty (McGuinness, 2005: p. 104); 3) consistency: a scientific theory cannot consist of scientific statements which contradict each other. The *Tractatus*, however, does contain contradictory statements, which thereby constitute the tractarian paradox, which has been examined above; 4) truths: a theory should support arguments about truth. The *Tractatus* gives the sense that it offers arguments but they are not formulated clearly and, therefore, do not express any truths; 5) comprehensiveness: a theory should naturally be comprehensive. By establishing a paradox in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein neither allows for nor wishes for the book to be comprehended, but rather induces us to think that philosophy attempts to speak of that which cannot be said, thereby encouraging a special kind of silence: a state of mysticism which is not propositionally represented. In one of his letters to Ogden, before the *Tractatus* was printed, Wittgenstein writes: "Rather than print the *Ergänzungen* [additions] to make the book fatter leave a dozen white sheets for the reader to swear into when he has purchased the book and can't understand it" (LO p. 46).

#### 4. The Notion "Mysticism" in the *Tractatus*

Even though the notion "mysticism" is important in the *Tractatus*, it does constitute the essential core of the work. Wittgenstein refers to "mysticism" only three times in the entire *Tractatus* (TLP 6.44, 6.45 and 6.522), without clarifying what it means. Likewise, while he examines issues related to mysticism in the *Notebooks*, the notion appears there only once (NB p. 51), and again, without any important clarifications. According to Hans-Johann Glock, mysticism is traditionally defined as the "experience of a union with God or the universe" (Glock, 2004: p. 251). In the *Tractatus*, in a sense, Wittgenstein is not so far off from the general traditional definition of mysticism, since among others, he refers to a union with nature: "The world and life are one" (TLP 5.621) and to a union with the world: "I am my world (The microcosm.)" (TLP 5.63). But in order to understand how Wittgenstein deals with the notion of mysticism in the *Tractatus*, we should not restrict ourselves to the traditional general definition which he transcends as we will see below. I will approach this issue by examining: 1) some of the diachronic positions of mysticism, as they are presented by Russell in his work entitled *Mysticism and Logic*, which might have constituted a primary foundation for Wittgenstein's thought and 2) some of his influences, mainly from Schopenhauer and Kant.

##### 4.1. The Notion of "Mysticism" in the *Tractatus* According to the Influence of Diachronic Positions of Mysticism

In his work *Mysticism and Logic*, Russell presents the diachronic beliefs of mystics (Russell, 2007: pp. 15-17), but without identifying with them himself. Those

beliefs parallel some ideas that we encounter in the *Tractatus*. In particular:

1) The first belief of mysticism refers to an insight into reality, specifically, a reality beyond the world of appearances. This insight is a different and higher form of knowledge than reason (Russell, 2007: p. 15). During the time of enlightenment, the belief emerged concerning the possibility of knowledge as insight as opposed to sense, reason and analysis, which were thought to lead to illusion (similarly the *Tractatus* cancels sense, philosophical propositions and analysis). This is the same kind insight which is pursued by the poet and the artist in order to experience reality in the same ways as the mystic (Russell, 2007: p. 16). Likewise, Wittgenstein claims that there is an inexpressible feeling (that shows itself (TLP 6.522)), which should solve the problem of life. According to the *Tractatus*, this relates with God; God as a solution identifies with the meaning of life and the world, like fate, something independent from our “will” (TLP 6.372). Those who have the mystical feeling cannot express it through propositions (TLP 6.522).

2) The second belief adopts the idea that the mystic believes in unity and not in division (Russell, 2007: p. 16). This position runs parallel to Wittgenstein’s idea that the world is a limited whole (TLP 6.45). To perceive the world as a whole presupposes that we stand outside of the world and discover it. Value comes from an attitude which stands outside the world, but is directed towards the world as a whole; this is nothing other than the mystical feeling. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, there is no sense and value in the world (TLP 6.41).

3) The third belief holds that almost all mystics believe that time is not real and hence consider the distinction between past and future to be an illusion (Russell, 2007: p. 17). At the same time, in the *Tractatus* postulates the idea of a perspective *sub specie aeterni* (under the aspect of eternity (TLP 6.45)). Besides that, the *Tractatus* also postulates the idea of eternal life which belongs to the man who lives in the present (TLP 6.4311 and 6.4312).

4) The fourth belief contends that the distinction between good and evil is an illusion of the analytic intellect (Russell, 2007: p. 17). Similarly in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that good and evil are not in the world (TLP 6.41). Language cannot give Bilder of values about something higher (TLP 6.42) and thus a moral value cannot constitute a possible state of affairs (TLP 6.42 and 6.421).

Taking into consideration the aforementioned parallels, we realise that Wittgenstein does not restrict the notion “mysticism” to the diachronic beliefs of a mystic. Beyond that, we cannot claim that Wittgenstein was influenced by Russell concerning the notion “mysticism”, since according to McGuinness, there is no evidence that Wittgenstein read Russell’s *Mysticism and Logic* before writing the *Tractatus*. We do know, however, that this work was published in July 1914 and that Wittgenstein’s last visit to England was long before the War (maybe in October 1913) (McGuinness, 2002: p. 140). Of course, we are not in a position to know whether Russell actually mentioned any of his ideas regarding mysticism to Wittgenstein. Also, one essential difference between Wittgenstein and Russell

concerning their understanding of “mysticism” is that Wittgenstein characterises mysticism as inexpressible and extends it to metaphysics, which Russell avoids doing since he asserts that philosophy is not ineffable (Wittgenstein’s disagreement with this position is confirmed in one of his letters to Russell, on the 19 August 1919, see *NB Appendix iii* pp. 130-131).

#### 4.2. The Notion of “Mysticism” in the *Tractatus* According to the Influence of Schopenhauer and Kant

Although Wittgenstein does not refer to Schopenhauer in the *Tractatus* at all, he certainly read his works (See *CV* pp. 18-19), which is why we encounter the influence of Schopenhauerian mysticism in the *Tractatus*. In particular, Schopenhauer claims that denial of our Will-to-live results in a mystical state of consciousness. He states:

“When my teaching reaches its highest point, it assumes a *negative* character, and so ends with a negation. Thus, it can speak here only of what is denied or given up [...] Now it is precisely here that the mystic proceeds positively, and therefore, from this point, nothing is left but mysticism” (Schopenhauer, 1958: Vol. II, p. 612).

Thus, Schopenhauer endorses the fundamental Kantian distinction between *phenomena*, things as they seem to us, and *noumena*, things as they are themselves, given that they belong to a world which transcends experience. Similarly, Wittgenstein acknowledges that the importance of life belongs to *noumena*. Specifically, he says that: “[t]he sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value” (*TLP* 6.41). Therefore, according to the *Tractatus*, we cannot know anything about the sense of the world; we cannot definitively speak of the meaning of life. The problems of life are impossible to answer and their resolution lies in the disappearance of the problem itself (*TLP* 6.52). At this point, Wittgenstein refers to the mystic’s experience not in the ordinary sense of the term, but in the experience of simply that “something is”; that is to say, that there are possibilities of combinations because of the world. This experience of the mystic cannot be attributed to propositions that would constitute some kind of knowledge. Therefore, philosophical problems cannot be answered just as no philosophical issue can even be posed.

According to Schopenhauer, mystical consciousness demolishes space and time and peaks with the abolishment of the “Will”, of “representation” and the “world” (Schopenhauer, 1958: Vol. I, p. 410). Tractarian mysticism promotes a similar idea. Specifically, tractarian mysticism succeeds in transcending the notions of the “will”, of “representation” and the “world” by way of the help of the paradox. The tractarian paradox prohibits the elucidation of those notions, something that encourages the idea of mysticism in the *Tractatus*.

According to the *Tractatus*, the mystic is astonished not at how the world is,

but that the world exists at all (*TLP* 6.44). In the *Notebooks*, we encounter a similar idea: “Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is” (*NB* p. 86). Essentially, the aesthetic in the *Notebooks* appears as the mystical in the *Tractatus*. This position seems to follow from one of Schopenhauer’s ideas, according to which man can liberate himself from the “will” only through artistic vision, thereby allowing him to reach a mystical state of consciousness. The distance from the “will” comes through art – especially through the aesthetic experience of music. Music is independent from the phenomenal world and it would continue to exist even if the world were to disappear (Schopenhauer, 1958: Vol. I, p. 257). Only aesthetic experience can liberate the limited form of thinking which binds us to phenomenal experience and through that liberation, we can reach a deeper understanding of the deeper nature of reality (Schopenhauer, 1958: Vol. II, p. 382). In the same way, I think that Wittgenstein perceives thought as something that limits, while he considers mysticism to be something that passes beyond thought and, consequently, beyond any theory. According to Schopenhauer, freedom cannot be located in the world, given that the world is always bound to causal necessity (see Schopenhauer, 1997: p. 211). In the same way, as we have already mentioned, Wittgenstein asserts that value cannot be located in the world (*TLP* 6.41). Hence, both Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein imply that we cannot have control of the world. Causation in Schopenhauer has to do with necessary connections between causes and effects (between “I” and “my action”), while in the case of the *Tractatus*, there are no necessary causal connections between states of affairs in the world.

As Schopenhauer characterizes the state of mysticism as ineffable, Wittgenstein perceives mysticism in the same way as a state which does not need to be expressed in words in order to elicit knowledge. He states: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical” (*TLP\** 6.522, *TLP\** indicates Ogden’s translation). This cultivates the idea of a special kind of silence wherein someone is in position to see into the possibilities of things. The mystical is that which is shown by form, which constitutes the possibility of combination without determining something specific. Tractarian mysticism promotes our ability to see the possibilities of combinations without judgements, something which we encounter in Kant, as I will explain below.

According to Kant, “judgement” is a kind of propositional cognitive function, which is determined by an objective conscious mental representation (Kant, 1998: pp. 398-399). Judgment is objectively valid once it is logically well-formed and once all of its constituent intuitions and concepts are objectively valid (Kant, 1998: pp. 281-282). The objective validity of a judgment refers to its empirical meaningfulness which is based on empirical reference as restricted by: 1) the empirical intuition of material objects and 2) the necessary and non-empirical forms of empirical intuition, i.e. our representations of space and time (Kant, 1998: pp. 155-157). Kant considers form to be an *a priori* intuition, which then attributes forms to empirical things *a posteriori*. In a sense, we pretend that we



are in a position to reach the notions of pure reason and to properly attribute forms to things, but such ideas are necessary concepts which do not correspond to any object of sensory experience. As a result, truth refers to a truth under a specific set of conditions, to the extent that the power of judgement depends on human faculties, such as imagination and understanding (Kant, 2008: p. 15). Imagination and understanding attempt to bring objects under certain concepts and to perceive them as bearing empirical features. According to Kant, the one who has capacity to create objects is the genius artist, although it is impossible to know and explain how he did so (Kant, 2008: pp. 137-139).

The consciousness to which Kant refers is similar to that which Wittgenstein promotes for tractarian readers. Tractarian mysticism pertains to that which is shown, i.e. the “form” the possibility of combinations. Thus, tractarian mysticism requires a consciousness of possibilities of combinations without literally defining any one combination, as is the case with the Kantian power of judgement. The unclarified notion of the “object” encourages one to examine possibilities without bounding any one of them. That is why it is impossible to formulate any judgement. The idea of form, as has already been mentioned, results from the idea that words are signs. The core of this opinion is based on the idea that isomorphism presupposes an association, based on the idea that words get their meaning from their stipulation by elements in the world. However, if we do not know what the objects are, we cannot provide any example, making it impossible to undergo any actual stipulation.

Therefore, I have illustrated that some of the diachronic positions of mysticism might have constituted a primary foundation for Wittgenstein’s thought but in no case could we assume that the philosopher was constrained by these positions. At the same time, Wittgenstein seems to perceive the notion of mysticism having deep influences from Schopenhauer and Kant.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This article essentially argues that, *Tractatus*, and especially the tractarian paradox, can confine the reader if the readers themselves are constrained to a literal type of reading without embracing the possibility of something beyond that.

The *Tractatus* does not aim to reveal any philosophical conclusions, but to encourage us to transcend the notion of sense and nonsense through a mystical feeling. It thereby compels us to assume that there are certain limits to the world, namely, between what is possible and what is impossible in reality. This prompts us to cultivate a better consciousness of the world, and indirectly encourages the idea that there is something mystical in the world which is incomprehensible. Therefore, it is impossible to describe the substance of the empirical world in which we live or of any possible world. We can take a step even further from our thought about the world by acquiring the mystical feeling. Thus, the tractarian paradox facilitates the experience of a special kind of mysticism; that is, a silent state of the mind which promotes us to reconsider the possibilities of the com-

binations of things in the world without judgments.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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