

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications

Philosophy, Department of

---

7-1-1974

# Wittgenstein's Tractatus: Some Metaphilosophical Considerations

Howard Kainz

Marquette University, [howard.kainz@marquette.edu](mailto:howard.kainz@marquette.edu)

---

Published version. *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 1974): 172-178, [Stable URL](#). © 1974  
Caddo Gap Press. Used with permission.

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

***Philosophy Faculty Research and Publications/Department of  
Philosophy***

***This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION; but the author's final, peer-reviewed manuscript.***  
The published version may be accessed by following the link in the citation below.

*Journal of Thought*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 1974): 172-178. [Publisher Link](#). This article is © Caddo Gap Press and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Caddo Gap Press does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Caddo Gap Press.

## **WITTGENSTEIN'S TRACTATUS: SOME METAPHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**Howard P. Kainz**

In the case of many philosophers, a study of their earlier works could lead to a misconception of their doctrine. For example, if we concentrated on Kant's early work, OBSERVATIONS ON THE FEELING OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND SUBLIME, we would be led to think that Kant attributed aesthetic feeling to psychological makeup and to temperamental, sexual, and racial differences. If we concentrated on Hegel's early writings, we would think that the final, "absolute" synthesis of reality was to be found in religious consciousness. If we took Marx's 1844 Manuscripts too seriously, we would be led to believe that he looked forward to some ultimate goal "beyond" communism, which would manifest the real structure of human society. And we could make similar observations regarding the earlier Wittgenstein, the logical atomist, as compared with the later Wittgenstein of the "word games".

In all such cases, however, the misconceptions that would result from such a study would be misconceptions specifically as to "what was the doctrine of Kant on aesthetics," "what was the doctrine of Hegel on the Absolute," etc. In other words, they would be misconceptions resulting from a distorted view of the significance of some "early work" in the context of the development of a particular philosopher, or in the context of the development of the history of philosophy.

But if we put aside questions of temporal and historical philosophical development, to examine these early works on their own merits-- this can be useful--especially if it is a relatively self-consistent, systematic presentation, and especially if it is set in the context of the question, "does this early work tell us anything about reality?" For, after all, the main purpose of philosophy is not to determine what philosophers have opined, but to try to say something about the way things are. And the world view in an early work can be just as useful for that purpose as a later one. Not necessarily "truer." But very likely it would be inappropriate to apply the terms "true" or "false" to a world view "qua" world view. For almost any world view seems to contain, at least implicitly, some general criteria for determining truth and falsity--criteria which could not be applied to itself without "begging the question." If we had a world view of world views, "then" we might be able to discuss them in terms of truth or falsity. But in lieu of any such hypothesis, we shall hypothesize that, just as the mountain climber can get a view of the landscape from the east or the west, or just as the artist can get a view of his model from the front or the side--so also any philosopher at any time in his development can present what is "truly" a "view" but not necessarily more true or more false than other views--even the later views of the same philosopher.

But is not a specific world view to be judged "false" when it gets into inevitable self-contradictions? For example, in Wittgenstein's case, the propositions of the TRACTATUS, "insofar as they do not represent the world itself by way of elementary propositions, but are precisely 'about' the relationship between language and reality, lie outside the scope of assertions that have sense and therefore are 'nonsensical."<sup>1</sup> But then again, Kant's views in his first CRITIQUE about space and time and the categories-- if they add anything to our knowledge--might well be taken as instances of "a priori synthetic" judgments in metaphysics; but this would make the whole enterprise of the CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON (namely, determining whether a

priori synthetic judgments are possible in metaphysics) rather superfluous. Similarly, the Thomistic view that truth is "conformity of the mind to objective reality" raises the question as to whether the mind that makes this statement is conformed to the objective reality of truth.

Perhaps, then, it is inevitable that any elaborately structured philosophical system should come now and then to the limits of its "viability". And perhaps it is these limits that supply the necessary and sufficient impetus to other world views, which can remedy the defects of the former (without, however, failing to avoid some "sui generis" defects of their own).<sup>2</sup>

But different world views are not necessarily different in all respects. And indeed, it is the recurrence of similar ideas in strikingly different philosophical contexts that is one of the most interesting "phenomena", from a metaphilosophical point of view. Should not these convergences, as they turn up, merit our special and serious consideration, precisely "because" two or more *very* disparate philosophers have enunciated them? The answer to this question, of course, lies outside any particular philosophical system.

Rather than trying to answer this question, this paper will simply take its departure from the world-view presented in Wittgenstein's TRACTATUS, and point out some possibilities of parallels in the world views of some other philosophers--namely, Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel. In this way it will be supplying some of the "facts" that one would have to consider before trying to answer the metaphilosophical question brought forward in the preceding paragraph.

Wittgenstein, of course, situates philosophy exclusively in the realms of logic and language. However, if we treat these realms as just one "sphere of discourse" about philosophy, and make proper allowance for differences in perspective, these are some of the parallels or convergences that turn up:

### **Vis a vis Plato - - - -**

Wittgenstein says that number, "qua" number, is outside the domain of logic and logical forms (4. 128). For logic in itself is a domain which is transcendent, i.e. , transcends all experience and all bodies of doctrine, including mathematics (6.13). Logic is a completely a priori system (5. 4541, 5. 552), which contains in itself no numbers. The propositions of mathematics are an exemplification of logical method (b.2); but this

relationship is not convertible. That is, logical propositions do not exemplify mathematics or number. And in fact it would even be a misnomer to speak of any logico-philosophical realm as a "monism" or a "dualism" (4.128).

Although Plato does not describe the relationship of number to the Ideas in any extant dialogue, it is well-known that he considered mathematical ideas to constitute a kind of intermediate world of Ideas--separate from sensible reality, but inferior to Ideas of Forms in the strict sense. Thus, as Aristotle presents Plato's doctrine in METAPH. I, 6--the causative, separate Numbers are stable and eternal realities, which are just a single degree inferior to the Forms, insofar as they allow a multiplication of similarities, while the Forms are pure abstract unity, prior to all multiplicity.

Thus, Plato seems to anticipate in a mythical or symbolic fashion the hierarchical relationship to be found between form-and-number in Wittgenstein's logico-philosophical reconstruction of reality (in which a priori propositions of logic take the place of a priori Platonic Forms).

### **Vis a vis Aristotle - - - -**

One thing that is hard to understand in the TRACTATUS is how a proposition, which is an assertion of a fact, and a picture of that fact as an existent state of affairs--could itself be a fact (2.141).

If a proposition depicts by means of its logical form, and if logical form itself constitutes the limits of our cognized world, it would not seem that this logical picture could itself be numbered among those facts, the sum-total of which "constitutes" the world. It certainly is not outside the world. If in addition it is not at the limits of the factual world, but within, it would then seem to be capable of being analyzed in terms of truth - possibilities, and in terms of constituent atomic objects, or termini of intrinsic possibilities of relationships. Thus in this case we could have a science of those forms depicting physical phenomena; i.e., a metaphysics. It seems to have been some such consideration which led Aristotle in his PHYSICS to the intimation that, having uncovered the intelligible form of objects, we might have a higher science about the intrinsic properties of form itself. <sup>3</sup> And this led to the METAPHYSICS.

Wittgenstein, it seems, had no such intimations. Or if he did have some such intimation, perhaps this is one major reason why he eventually abandoned the method of the TRACTATUS for the approach of the PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS. But, within the context of the TRACTATUS alone, it does seem strange that he should designate the propositions

mirroring the world as "facts"--unless he considered them merely in terms of their sensuous signs or vocal enunciations. In the latter case, Wittgenstein's theory of depiction and logical form would seem to be something definitely on the side of the mystical.

### **Vis a vis Hegel. . . .**

If one remembers to make due allowances for an extreme difference in contexts, he may also notice one striking parallel to be found in the world-view of Wittgenstein and the world-view of Hegel.

Wittgenstein, in a kind of rambling fashion, proposes for himself in the course of the TRACTATUS, the following problem: How can we express the general form of all propositions--a proposition of propositions which would summarize in symbolic form all the types and variations of propositions which are conceivable. He introduces this problem in 5.47-5.472, and follows it up in various forms in 5.5, 5.502, and 6-6.01. He concludes that the general form of propositions could be expressed as the operation of a series of negations effected upon elementary propositional variables. In other words, the general form of all (molecular) propositions could be expressed as the successive negation of the (atomic) propositions from which they are constructed.

Hegel, in the LECTURES ON THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY, criticizes Spinoza for constructing an incomplete system, in which God, the "causa sui," is the only positive reality in the world. If only Spinoza had recognized that God became a positive reality through the "negation of negation" (negating Himself by production of the world)--then he could have elaborated a system which would have given due respect to human freedom and individuality, as the "negative" of the Absolute Being of God.<sup>4</sup> Hegel, however, does not just criticize Spinoza, but attempts to present his own "Absolute" as the "negation of negation." For example, the first "Absolute" which Hegel arrives at in his PHENOMENOLOGY is "die Sache Selbst"--a particular type of individual consciousness which has negated objectivity, and then negated this negation to produce a living, categorical synthesis of subjectivity and objectivity;<sup>5</sup> and the second "Absolute" which he arrives at is Absolute Knowledge,<sup>6</sup> a supreme philosophical vantage point which has resulted from the individual's negation of himself (through culture and history), and the negation of this negation, resulting in a conscious reconciliation of the individual with his total milieu. Similarly, in Hegel's ENCYCLOPEDIA, the Absolute Idea, the Absolute Concept, and Absolute Spirit are likewise established as "negations of negation." Thus we might say that--just as Hegel's SACHE SELBST is the "fact of facts" produced by successive negations, and

just as his Absolute Knowledge is the consciousness of consciousness produced by successive negations -- so also Wittgenstein's formula for the general form of propositions,  $[\bar{x}, N\bar{z}]'(\eta)$ , is for all practical purposes, a proposition of propositions, or an expression of expressions, an "absolute" which he arrives at in the domain of logic, by the process of successive negation.

In conclusion, we might observe that the inference that one draws from the above-mentioned parallels will depend, in large-part, on one's value system.

If, for example, one has ontological or metaphysical leanings, he might say that Wittgenstein, purportedly confining himself to the realms of pure logical analysis, inadvertently and covertly encounters problems, now and then, which bear on the ontological constitution of reality.

If, on the other hand, a) one is of an anti-metaphysical persuasion, but b) goes beyond mere allegations of "nonsense" to recognize some such parallelism--he might in congruence with his own value system, judge that Plato, in his doctrine of the World of Forms, was covertly or symbolically or mythically referring to relationships among propositions about the world; that Aristotle, in asking whether every form had to be considered in relationship to matter, was asking, in terms of his own mythical projections, whether every fact was a "representation" of a state of affairs; and that Hegel, in producing his Absolute through the negation of negations, was showing in a symbolic or mythical way that the general logical form encompassing all statements about reality would have to be a negation of negations.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Erick Heller, "Ludwig Wittgenstein: Unphilosophical Considerations," *CROSS CURRENTS* (Summer 1967), p. 324. Heller in this article draws attention to the comparative problematics that led gradually to a complete reversal of viewpoint in the later Wittgenstein and the later Nietzsche, respectively.

<sup>2</sup>The theory that the limitations of any philosophical "stance" condition the emergence of new philosophical positions seems to be presupposed most notably in Hegel's *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*-- provided we understand Hegel's goal of "absolute knowledge" as a metaphilosophical view superceding philosophical views.

<sup>3</sup>*PHYSICS* II, 2, 194b, 14; and I, 9, 192a, 34ff.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. *Op. cit.*, Haldane tr. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 263£., p. 286£.

<sup>5</sup>*Op. cit.*, Baillie tr. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 440.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Ibid., pp. 789-808.

Professor Kainz is in the Philosophy Department at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.