

“This is How Things Are”

Paulo Estrella Faria

UFRGS

According to Elizabeth Anscombe’s testimony, ‘Wittgenstein used to say that the *Tractatus* was not *all* wrong: it was not like a bag of junk professing to be a clock, but like a clock that did not tell you the right time.’ (Anscombe 1959: 78). I want to discuss an example of the difference between a bag of junk and a malfunctioning clock. My topic is twofold: (i) the notion of a general form of proposition as Wittgenstein articulates it in the *Tractatus* (hereafter *TLP*), and then (ii) what becomes of it in his later work. Although I will touch briefly on a couple of writings from the so-called “middle” period, my main concern will be the criticism of the general form of proposition in the *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter *PI*). This choice of emphasis has been dictated by my dissatisfaction with two nearly opposite yet complementary sorts of reaction to that criticism. According to the first, and I guess most widespread sort of reaction, which will be illustrated here by the joint work of Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, these sections amount to a repudiation of the very idea that there could be anything like a general form of proposition. According to the second sort of reaction, to be exemplified here by an offhand remark of Roger White’s, the *PI* criticism is just irrelevant to an evaluation of the Tractarian doctrine. I will argue against White (and so far in agreement with Baker and Hacker) that the criticism *is* relevant; but then I will also argue, against Baker and Hacker, that what *PI* contains is a vindication, rather than a blanket rejection, of what I will claim is the very kernel of the Tractarian doctrine. That will leave me with the burden of drawing the line between the preserved kernel and whatever disposable accretions there may be. I bite the bullet about that burden.

What follows depends critically on two general assumptions I don’t have the space to argue for in any detail, and accordingly content myself with stating out loud from the beginning – by way, as it were, of laying my cards on the table. First, I hold it safe to say that specifying the general form of proposition is the crowning technical achievement of *TLP*. And then I also think it safe, nay even safer, to say that the point of *every* technical issue dealt with in *TLP* is ultimately philosophical, aimed as such ‘peculiar hooks and manipulations’ (5.511) of logical work are at the task of clarifying thought, the proper business of philosophy (4.112).¹ Conjoining these assumptions, we reach the view that specifying the general form of proposition is (or, we’ll get there presently, should anyway be) the main *philosophical* achievement of *TLP* – which is precisely what makes it so important to understand what becomes of that achievement in Wittgenstein’s later work.

1 When quoting from the *Tractatus* I mostly follow the Ogden translation (Wittgenstein 1921a), correcting it as the case may be by comparison with the McGuinness-Schulte critical edition of the German text (1921b) as well as (if less often) with the ‘centenary’ edition by Luciano Bazzocchi of the Pears-McGuinness translation (1921c). I am rather fastidious about giving both the date of original publication and that, should it be different, of the editions I have used. This holds for all items in my references.

Now that view must be qualified by an understanding of the task bequeathed by Wittgenstein to his readership – in other words, by making explicit how the specification of the general form of proposition is to be used as a tool in the logical clarification of thoughts.² With that aim in view, two constraints should be met from the outset.

The first constraint is to make sure that we understand the connection between the general form of proposition and both the so-called 'picture theory of meaning' on one hand, and, on the other, what Wittgenstein himself calls his 'fundamental thought' (4.0312): namely, that 'the "logical constants" do not represent' – that (as the method of truth-tables is meant to bring to the fore) there are no "logical objects" (4.441).³

To begin with, the picture theory and the theory of truth-functions are one and the same. It's not as if the former dealt with elementary propositions, and the latter with truth-functions thereof (a quite common misunderstanding). That's why Anscombe, whose lead I follow closely here, presents the picture theory in the second of her two chapters on *negation*, the arch logical operation (1959: 64–48).⁴ Elementary propositions are themselves truth-functions (*TLP* 5), and that's not mere *façon de parler*, witness the equivalences '(TFTF)(p, q) $\equiv p'$ ' and '(TTFF)(p, q) $\equiv q'$ '. But then the theory of truth-functions, which *is* the picture theory, reaches its fullest expression in the description of 'the one and only general primitive sign in logic' (5.472), and that is the general form of proposition (5.47).

So much for the first constraint. I state the second briefly, hoping to do better on another occasion, and using Wittgenstein's own words. The first sentence (vintage early Wittgenstein) in the Preface to *TLP* reads famously: 'This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already had the thoughts which are expressed in it – or at least similar thoughts. It is therefore not a textbook.' Suffer me now to juxtapose that sentence to two remarks by, respectively, "middle" and "later" (a.k.a. "second") Wittgenstein, both of them published by G. H. Von Wright in his rather idiosyncratic selection of 'miscellaneous remarks' (Wittgenstein 1977). In 1931, thirteen years after the completion of *TLP*, we find Wittgenstein saying: 'I ought to be no more than the mirror, in which my reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right.' (1977: 18) And then in a remark from 1948, three years after the completion of the *Investigations* ("Part I", but that should go without saying now): 'Anything the reader can do for himself, leave to the reader.' (1977: 77) Far be it from me to downplay the changes in Wittgenstein's thought between 1918 and 1948 (this paper is after all about one such change, and a rather big one at that), but I claim that here we touch a true invariant. If *TLP* is not (could never be read as) a textbook, that's because its reader is invited to do for herself what the author will not do for her.⁵

2 Here I draw on – among other important contributions (Rhees, Ishiguro, McGuinness) – the very illuminating exchange between Peter Sullivan (2004) and Cora Diamond (2012, and then 2019). I wish I could discuss these works in anything like the piecemeal way they ask from their reader, but that's for another occasion.

3 The 'fundamental thought' was there from the very beginning of Wittgenstein's logico-philosophical itinerary, witness the letter to Russell dated June 26, 1912 (see McGuinness 2012: 30). Both the picture theory and the general form of proposition surface in the wartime notebooks. See for the former Wittgenstein 1961: 7 (and then *passim*); and check the latter at, e.g., Wittgenstein 1961: 75 or 1961: 89.

4 In the very next chapter, 'Consequences of the Picture Theory', Anscombe states explicitly that 'the picture theory does not permit any functions of propositions other than truth-functions. Indeed, we should not regard Wittgenstein's theory of the proposition as a *synthesis* of a picture theory and the theory of truth-functions; his picture theory and theory of truth-functions are one and the same.' (1959: 81)

5 Russell, who would come to dislike what he saw as the sibylline diction of *TLP* (to say nothing of the later work), asked Wittgenstein back in 1912 why he wouldn't give explicit arguments in support of his oracular pronouncements. To which Wittgenstein answered that of course he could give arguments, but

Taken together, the two constraints boil down to the idea that, for our current purposes as much as quite generally, it behooves the reader of *TLP*, rather than its author, to get hold of the general form of proposition *and use it* as a tool in the clarification of thoughts.

With these assumptions in place, we can at last turn to the difference between a bag of junk and a defective clock.

Now the first thing to take into account is that *TLP* contains two different, if closely inter-related, accounts of the general form of proposition, call them (in the meantime, as this terminology is to be presently discharged) the “informal” and the “formal” accounts.

Roughly speaking, the “informal” account runs from 3.312 through 4.5 up to the 5.47s, and the “formal” one goes from 5.5 through 5.502 up to 6 and the 6.0s. They are each summed up in a brief statement, respectively:

‘The general form of proposition is: this is how things are.’ (4.5)

and

‘The general form of truth-function is $[\bar{p}, \bar{\xi}, N(\bar{\xi})]$.

This is the general form of proposition.’ (6)

Appearances notwithstanding, though, the “formal” account doesn’t *supersede* the “informal” one. The reader is supposed to work with both, moving back and forth in her effort to see, through the mists of understanding (cf. *PI* § 102), the way propositions are obtained from other propositions through what Wittgenstein calls truth-operations.⁶

Anscombe has a nice explanation of the latter notion, one which uses an example not to be found in Wittgenstein, yet strictly congenial to the Tractarian approach: ‘Take a relation and its converse, e. g. ‘husband of’ and ‘wife of’, and consider the two propositions: ‘a is husband of b’, ‘a is wife of b’. We now introduce an operation, called ‘conversion’, the sign of which is ‘Cnv’ placed before a relative term; thus, instead of writing e. g. ‘bRa’, we write ‘aCnvRb’. Then ‘aCnv(husband of)b’ emphasizes the internal relation of two propositions ‘a is husband of b’ and ‘a is wife of b’ by exhibiting the second proposition as the result of an operation upon the first (of course, an operation that could only be performed on propositions of this relational form).’ (1971: 117)⁷

That the two propositions in Anscombe’s example are internally related means no more (and, sure, no less) than that ‘aCnv(husband of)b’ is the outcome of the application of the operation Cnv to ‘a is husband of b’. The operation may be applied successively (it is essential to an operation that it can be so applied) but, so far like negation, its successive application would just get us alternating between the base proposition ‘aRb’ and its truth-function ‘bRa’. At which point we may feel like rejoining that, in a way more intuitive kind of example, a relational

that would spoil the *beauty* of the thing. Russell characteristically comments: ‘I told him I hadn’t the heart to say anything against that, and that he should acquire a slave to state the arguments.’ (Letter to Ottoline Morrell dated 27.05.12, cf. Monk 1990: 54)

6 A brief remark on ‘moving back and forth’: this paper is *not* aimed at presenting the *Tractatus* according to the “order of reasons”, should it be found in a “linear” or in a “sequential” reading, in Bazzochi’s useful terminology (cf. Wittgenstein 1953c; see also Bazzochi 2008 and Hacker 2015). What I offer in these scanty paragraphs is rather a “phenomenological” description of the way I am struck by Wittgenstein’s remarks: of what, then, enables me to use Wittgenstein’s propositional variable in order to uncover the truth-functional construction of propositions ‘as I find them’ (cp. *TLP* 5.631). So much for the extent to which the “context of discovery” may do duty for the “context of justification”.

7 See the extended discussion of (and improvement on) Anscombe’s example in Diamond 2012 and 2019: 97-153. For more on the Tractarian notion of an operation see in particular Hylton 1997.

asymmetric proposition 'aRb' and its converse proper (in Russell's notation, 'bR̄a'), are also each a truth-function of the other (if Abraham is father of Isaac, then Isaac is son of Abraham), so what's the point of contriving such an unnatural operation as Anscombe's Cnv? The answer is that, by Wittgenstein's lights, 'aRb' and 'b a' are just one and the same proposition as they have exactly the same truth-conditions. Hence, 'Abraham is father of Isaac' is a truth-function of itself, as required by the "Principle of Extensionality" (TLP 5).

The distinction between internal relations (and properties) and proper (external) relations and properties should enable us to get rid of the vexed question, which opposed Moore and Russell to Bradley and Bosanquet, 'whether all relations are internal or external' (TLP 4.1251). The answer is 'Neither', as the dispute is marred by equivocation on the term 'relation'.

And that's how we come to formal concepts (4.126): like 'relation', a host of concept-words comprising 'concept' itself, 'object', 'complex', 'fact', 'number', 'color' etc. do double duty, as concept-words proper ('There are two objects such that...') and as 'wheels turning idly' in philosophical parlance ('There are objects'):

'The expression of a formal property is a feature of certain symbols.

'The sign that signifies the characteristics of a formal concept is, therefore, a characteristic feature of all symbols, whose meanings fall under the concept.

'The expression of the formal concept is therefore a propositional variable in which only this characteristic feature is constant.' (4.126)

'The propositional variable signifies the formal concept, and its values signify the objects which fall under this concept. (4.127)

'Every variable is the sign of a formal concept.' (4.1271)

In a correct concept-script, then, the difference between 'There are two objects in my pocket' and 'There are objects' is expressed by the fact that a variable may substitute for 'object' in the former, which will give us a well-formed formula in which the variable, let it be x , will be bound by the existential quantifier, while *nothing* can replace 'objects' in the latter.

Now *proposition* is itself a formal concept, arguably the most important formal concept to be dealt with in a correct concept-script. We are thus entitled to ask: is there a non-philosophical, groundfloor use of 'proposition'? In other words, can we use this technique of substituting variables for the troublesome word (what Sullivan calls 'the replacement strategy', cf. 2004: 45-7) to represent the job 'proposition' may possibly be doing in our thinking and speaking? As I will try to show, the job cannot be the same in TLP and the PI, but not for the reasons espoused by Baker and Hacker.

The notion of a general form of a set of propositions surfaces midway in the examination of the concept of an *expression* (3.31). We have been told that an expression 'is the common characteristic mark of a class of propositions.' (3.311). Now Wittgenstein adds: 'It is therefore represented by the general form of the propositions which it characterizes.' (3.312).

'The general form of proposition is a variable' (4.53). It is the form of the general term of a formal series. That's why its introduction is preceded by that of the concept of an operation, and by the distinction between functions and operations.

Very well, it is a variable. How do we go about specifying its values? How do we do that, in particular, without flouting what Poincaré and Russell called the Vicious Circle Principle?

For it looks as if we are dealing with a proposition, call it Φ , which is about all the values of the propositional variable ‘This is how things are’. But Φ just is ‘This is how things are’ itself, or an extensionally equivalent (and then, by Wittgenstein’s lights, strictly the same) proposition.⁸ In other words, the set of values of Φ would contain Φ itself – and now paradox lurks in the vicinity. As Sullivan writes: ‘The ramified type-theory that Russell adopted in the face of the paradoxes rules out there being a general form of proposition. The totality of all propositions is, paradigmatically, an illegitimate totality according to that theory, since any statement about all propositions would, viciously, have to be a member of the totality of which it spoke, and so presuppose it.’ (2004: 49-50) We might reply by contraposition that there being a general form of proposition rules out Russell’s type theory (on which see *TLP* 3.331-3.333); but I digress.

We are at this point halfway towards what I’m still calling the “formal” rendering of the general form of proposition. At *TLP* 3.316 Wittgenstein had stated:

‘What values the propositional variable can assume is determined.

‘The determination of the values is the variable.’

Now at 5.501 we have:

‘The values of the variable must be determined.

‘The determination is the description of the propositions which the variable stands for.

‘How the description of the terms of the expression in brackets takes place is inessential.

‘We may distinguish three kinds of description: 1. Direct enumeration. In this case we can place simply its constant values instead of the variable. 2. Giving a function fx , whose values for all values of x are the propositions to be described. 3. Giving a formal law, according to which those propositions are constructed. In this case the terms of the expression in brackets are all the terms of a formal series.’ (*TLP* 5.501)

We’ll have to come back to the claim that the way the values of the propositional variable are specified is ‘inessential’. Let me just note, in the meantime, one more step in the transition from 4.5 to 6 – from the “informal” to the “formal” rendering of the general form of proposition. Given the availability of the three kinds of description introduced in 5.501, it comes as no surprise that Wittgenstein should write:

‘So instead of ‘(-----T)(ξ , _ _ _)’ , I write ‘N($\bar{\xi}$)’.

‘N($\bar{\xi}$) is the negation of all the values of the propositional variable ξ .’ (*TLP* 5.502)

Now to the ‘inessentiality’ of the ways in which the values of ξ may be given. To begin with, enumeration will not be possible if the set of values is infinite, a possibility which Wittgenstein, advisedly enough, does not exclude (Sullivan 2004: 52): that’s the reason why he has the infinitary operator N rather than the Sheffer stroke (cf. White 2006: 89-90). Neither will it be possible, I should add, if that set, even though finite, is at least partially inaccessible.⁹

8 Cf. the alternative renderings introduced in *PI* § 134, on which more in a while.

9 Let me explain. The notion of an inaccessible proposition (an unthinkable thought) has no place in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, early or later – indeed, *TLP* 5.61 (echoing the Preface to the book) rules it out of court quite explicitly: ‘What we cannot think, that we cannot think: we cannot therefore *say* what we cannot think’. By contrast, both Russell and Moore had a hard time with (possibly true) propositions which are, one way or another, inaccessible – which are *blindspots*, to use Roy Sorensen’s useful label (Sorensen 1988). It’s not, I emphasize, that we cannot possibly know the truth-value of such propositions (that would be trivial and uninteresting): we cannot *think* them, even though we can *describe* them. That’s the case of thoughts about one’s own objects of acquaintance, as illustrated by Russell’s example of Bismarck’s private thoughts in ‘Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description’ (1911:

The second method involves giving a function f_x such that each of its values, for every value of x , is a proposition to be described.

The third method consists in giving a formal law in accordance with which propositions are described. Here all values of the variable are terms in a formal series, and that is what the "formal" rendering of the general form of proposition, which is of necessity the general form of a truth-function (*TLP* 6), achieves.

The general form of proposition is the form of a truth-function, which in the "formal" rendering of *TLP* 6 is explicitly presented as (what at this point the reader already knows) the outcome of an operation: namely, the joint negation of all the values of the propositional variable ξ : 'Neither ξ_1 nor ξ_2 nor $\xi_3 \dots$ '. 'Why *joint* negation?', one might feel like asking: alternate negation ('Not- ξ_1 or not- ξ_2 or not- $\xi_3 \dots$ ') would do just as well, witness *Principia Mathematica* – and *TLP* 3.3441: in other words, $\{\sim, \vee\}$ is an expressively complete set of connectives – and Wittgenstein remarks: 'Herewith is indicated the way in which a special possible notation can give us general information.' (*ibid*).

Yet the 'crystalline purity' (*PI* § 104) of Tractarian logic concealed a secret wound, and herein lies the key to its defective performance as a clock: the vexed problem of the 'possible forms of elementary propositions', dealt with in the 5.55s. The problem is raised by the tension between, on one hand, the requirement that the possible forms of elementary proposition be known *a priori* (by contrast with being discoverable through some kind of Russellian "logical experience", *TLP* 5.5521-2) and, on the other, Wittgenstein's admission that after all they *cannot* be so known (5.571). All that is knowable a priori about them is that they are logically independent (4.211) and made up of names (5.55) in immediate connection ('like the links of a chain', cf. 2.03). Wittgenstein's notorious way out of this tangle was to posit a division of labor between logic and its application (5.557). It is incumbent on the former to specify the general form of proposition alright; but we have to turn to the *application* of logic (that is, to the analysis of propositions as they present themselves to us in everyday language) to discover, one at a time, the forms of elementary propositions: 'What lies in its application logic cannot anticipate.' (*ibid*). And Wittgenstein adds immediately: 'It is clear that logic may not clash with its application.' (*Ibid*.)

One thing, though, was known in advance – and herein lies much of what Wittgenstein would later dismiss as the 'dogmatism' of *TLP*: that it was out of question that the application of logic should uncover any propositions such that were both elementary (not further analyzable while still retaining propositional form) *and* not logically independent from any other proposition. Hence the unhappy promissory note (aimed in pointedly *ad hominem* vein at Russell): 'The assertion that a point in the visual field has two different colors at the same time is a contradiction.' (6.3751)

114-17) and in the corresponding chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912: 54-8), on which see the excellent discussion in Diamond 2000. That's the case, as well, of Moore's discovery of the incongruent conjunctions which raise the problem we know today (thanks to Wittgenstein) as 'Moore's Paradox': a possibly true proposition about oneself that one cannot coherently take as true. Russell's inaccessible propositions, together with his notion of the unavoidable privacy of a good deal of a 'logically perfect' language (cf. Russell 1918: 25-6) are the primary, if often overlooked, target of Wittgenstein's so-called 'private language argument' (*PI* 243-315). Moore's Paradox is discussed at length in section x of *Philosophy of Psychology: a Fragment* – MS 144, formerly known as 'Part II' of *PI* (Wittgenstein 1953b: 199-202) – and throughout the writings on the philosophy of psychology from the years 1946-51. I have dealt, rather perfunctorily, with Russell's Bismarck in my 2010: 154-6, and at much greater length with Moore's Paradox in my 2001a and (fixing a number of errors in the preceding) in my 2009: 26-38. The contrast between Wittgenstein's disparagement of Russellian inaccessibility and his abiding fascination with Moore's Paradox is very striking – but that's a topic for another paper.

That is the dramatic novelty of the 1929 paper ‘Some Remarks on Logical Form’: the “discovery” that there are, after all, internal relations between elementary propositions¹⁰ – the “discovery”, in other words, of a momentous clash between logic and its application. The assertion that a point in the visual field has two different colors at the same time is *not* a contradiction – neither conjunct in the logical product ‘a is red & a is green’ negates the other, even though they cannot both be true. The result was predictable: ‘This is how it is, what I said in the *Tractatus* doesn’t exhaust the grammatical rules for ‘and’, ‘not’, ‘or’, etc.; rather, there are rules for the truth functions which also deal with the elementary part of the proposition.’ (Wittgenstein 1964: 109). Whatever else (and there’s much else, though not for the purposes now at hand) the rules cannot be strictly truth-functional anymore. At which point it would seem as if nothing was left of the imposing view of *TLP* 5.47-6.¹¹ At first blush anyway, this is how things are.

Yet this is *not* how things were for Wittgenstein: witness sections 114, and then 134-6 of *PI*.¹² I cannot provide a detailed commentary of these sections, and will accordingly stick to essentials, hopefully showing you how to tell what I called ‘the kernel’ of the doctrine of the general form of proposition from what Wittgenstein came to see as its ‘sublimation’ (in the sense bruited in *PI* § 89) in *TLP*. With that aim in view, I proceed to warn you against both White’s cavalier dismissal and Baker and Hacker’s inflationary reading of those sections, in the meantime commending the contribution of a philosopher who was no Wittgenstein scholar yet got it to my mind exactly right. I mean Arthur Norman Prior (1965, 1971).

In ‘Throwing the Baby Out with the Ladder’, White states, without argument, that in *PI* Wittgenstein ‘explicitly rejects the idea of the general form of proposition’ (White 2011: 60). Later on, in ‘Logic and the *Tractatus*’ (2017), in the context of an otherwise excellent treatment of the question ‘Why only one logical constant?’, White appositely quotes from Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks* this entry, dated May 5, 1915:

‘Does the general form of proposition exist?

Yes, if by that is understood the single “logical constant”.’ (Wittgenstein 1979: 45)

He might just as well have quoted from *TLP* 5.47, a remark clearly derived from that entry, as the editors of the book dutifully record. Anyway, here is what he has to say about it: ‘It is to my mind astonishing how irrelevant the remarks about the general form of proposition in *Philosophical Investigations* are to the point at issue here.’ (White 2017: 297)¹³

I proceed to show how utterly misguided White is there. But that amounts to share a reading (or a couple of guidelines for a reading) of the relevant sections, most notably § 134, of the *Investigations*.¹⁴

10 That was actually a rediscovery, as Russell dealt with ‘synthetic incompatibilities’ from 1900 onwards, most notably in the one among his books which Wittgenstein himself avowed to have studied most carefully, *The Principles of Mathematics* (cf. the chapter ‘Difference of Sense and Difference of Sign’ in Russell 1903: 229-35). Hence the point of ‘*ad hominem*’ in the preceding paragraph. I discuss the Russellian background in my 2001b.

11 And, to be sure, *TLP* 6 has to ruled out of court anyway: whatever else, the general propositional form cannot be the general form of truth-function.

12 When quoting from the *Investigations* I usually give Anscombe’s translation (1953a), occasionally taking on board Hacker and Schulte’s amendments (1953b)

13 See also White 2006: 86.

14 The brief intermezzo formed by 134-6 follows the reconception of philosophy and its tasks (§§ 118-133), which was dictated by the opening sustained exercise in self-criticism aimed at the *Tractatus* (§§ 1-117); and it paves the way, through a renewed examination of the concepts of meaning and understanding (§§ 137-142), for the extended treatment of rule following (§§ 143-242) which is the mainstay of *PI* in much the same way as the specification of the general form of proposition was the mainstay of

Section 134 (which harks back to § 114) opens in a pointedly ironical mood: 'Let us examine the proposition "This is how things are." – How can I say that this is the general form of propositions? – It is first and foremost *itself* a proposition, an English sentence, for it has a subject and a predicate.'¹⁵

Notice, though, how that sentence is actually used in everyday language ('For I got it from there and nowhere else.'). Here is a possibility: 'He explained his position to me, said that this was how things were, and that therefore he needed an advance' (*ibid.*).

So far the humdrum English sentence, which in that use stands for any statement (for whatever, that is, the subject may have said while explaining his position), can indeed be taken as a 'propositional *schema*' (*ibid.*), to that extent in ostensible agreement with *TLP*. But then Wittgenstein asks us to consider a handful of kindred constructions, specifically 'Such and such is the case' and 'Things are so and so', both of which may also be used as such a schema¹⁶ – at which point the irony which was there from the outset turns into blatant sarcasm: 'One could also simply use a letter, a variable, as in symbolic logic. But surely no one is going to call the letter "p" the general form of proposition.' Why, one feels like rejoicing, isn't that exactly how it is used in propositional calculus? There indeed every *p* and *q* and *r* is itself a propositional variable taking as values all sorts of atomic (logically independent) propositions. But then such atomic variables are also logical "black boxes": we are not required to know anything of their inner structure, only of the way they enter in truth-functional compounds.

Wittgenstein goes on: 'To repeat: "This is how things are" had that position only because it was itself what one calls an English sentence. But though it is a proposition, still it gets employed as a propositional variable' (*ibid.*) And there we are: 'The general form of proposition is a variable.' (*TLP* 4.53). It's as though we are uncovering the 'civil status' (*bürgerliche Stellung*: *PI* § 125) of the general form of proposition. I write 'as though' for the time being, humoring for a while the readings I will ultimately reject.

The next sentence in § 134 is the crux for the reading I am advocating: 'To say that this proposition agrees (or does not agree) with reality would be obvious nonsense.'

Now, to begin with, there is a reading on which saying that would indeed be obvious nonsense: taken by itself, detached from its anaphoric antecedent (that is, from whatever the subject may have said in order to explain his position), 'This is how things are' is a variable alright, but a *free* variable. Small wonder that so taken it has no truth conditions. But that cannot be the whole story and, again, it is implausible, to say the least, that Wittgenstein would, for once, have done for his reader what the reader can do by herself.

Suppose Ann says 'It's raining cats and dogs all day long', and Luke comments 'That's how things are'. Taken *by itself* Luke's statement says nothing about how things are (meteorologically or otherwise). If Laura, who's just entering the room, missed Ann's assertion, she will

TLP. The core notion connecting the two mainstays is that of the successive application of an operation, be that operation the joint negation of an arbitrary selection of propositions or (among others) 'add 2' or 'red again'.

15 This is unalloyed Wittgenstein. Compare the record of another such momentous "discovery" in *Philosophical Remarks*: 'Concept (*Begriff*) and object (*Gegenstand*), but that is subject and predicate.' (1964: 119) Frege, one feels like saying, turns in his grave; we rather laugh and go on, the joke looks so harmless. After all, we had just been invited to acknowledge 'that there is not just one logical form which is *the* subject-predicate form.' (*Ibid.*)

16 There is at least one difference, though: in 'Such and such is the case' (*das und das ist der Fall*), the propositional schema is 'Such and such', the clause 'is the case' adding no more to each and every value of that variable than the redundant 'is true' would do (cf. § 136, on which more below). Cf. *TLP* 1: 'alles, was der Fall ist'

of course have no idea about the truth-conditions of what Luke said. That doesn't mean it has no truth-conditions, though: if it's *not* raining cats and dogs all they long, Luke's comment is plainly false. The case is in no way more vexing than that of Davidson's celebrated example 'The Earth moves. Galileo said that.' (Davidson 1968). No one would dream of trying to make sense of the second of these sentences in abstraction from the first. And, to be sure, no one would feel like calling 'that' the general form of proposition either. By contrast, in Wittgenstein's example, 'This is how things are' is a *bound* variable.

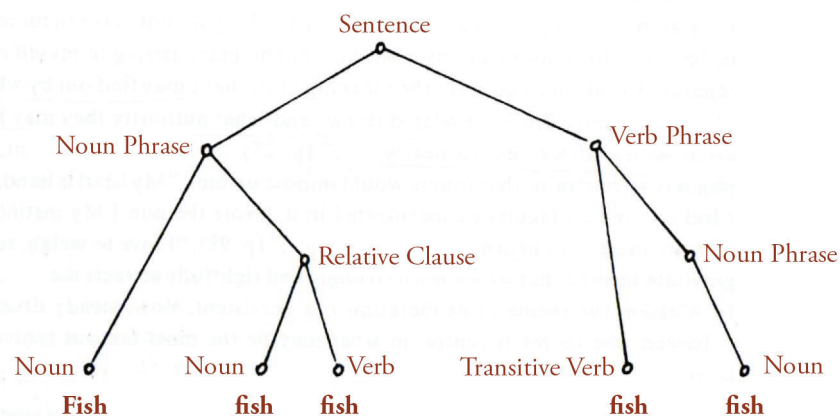
'This is how things are', then, has no truth-conditions by itself, *exactly* like a relative pronoun detached from the name or description which is its anaphorical antecedent, or a free variable in a formal calculus, has no reference by itself.

To the best of my knowledge, the first author to discuss in print the anaphoric structure of Wittgenstein's example was Arthur Prior in an encyclopedia entry published in 1965, from which I quote: "'This is how things are" is a propositional variable in ordinary speech in much the same way that a pronoun is a name variable in ordinary speech. In Wittgenstein's example, the "value" of this "variable" is given by a specific sentence uttered earlier, much as the denotation of a pronoun may be fixed by a name occurring earlier.' (Prior 1965: 229).¹⁷

Baker and Hacker, however, read *PI* 134-6 as a flat denial of the very idea that there could be anything like a general form of proposition, and connect that reading with four interconnected claims, three of which are plainly false and the fourth is incoherent – a gist of truth embedded in a falsity – as I proceed to show.

To begin with, Baker and Hacker state that 'This is how things are' cannot be compared to reality. Now that is plainly false if, as in Wittgenstein's example, it is anaphoric upon some empirical proposition.

But it gets worse. Wittgenstein writes that the role played by the sentence as a variable 'illustrates the fact that *one* feature of our concept of a proposition is, *sounding like a proposition*' (*ibid.*), Baker and Hacker take that at face value and make of 'sounding like a proposition' a condition for anything to fall under the formal concept *proposition*. But it is neither a sufficient condition, witness Chomsky's celebrated 'Colorless green ideas sleep furiously'¹⁸, nor a necessary one – witness 'Fish fish fish fish fish', a grammatically correct (and actually true) English sentence:



(Something like: 'Fish that other fish fish are in the habit of fishing fish themselves.')

17 Cp. the crystal-clear presentation of the same point in Prior 1971: 37-9.

18 Chomsky 1957: 15

19 Picture credit: Dolan (1982: 75).

The obvious way to reply to this is to claim that 'proposition' is a family-resemblance concept, its use governed by criteria, which are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. Which is precisely what Baker & Hacker do, but then they stop there, while Wittgenstein goes ahead: *nothing* will be called a proposition which is unfit to provide an anaphoric antecedent to 'This is how things are'. To sum up: 'we call something a proposition when *in our language* we apply the calculus of truth-functions to it.' (*PI* § 136).

It gets even worse, though. Baker and Hacker notice that the variable is used anaphorically ('or cataphorically', they rightly add, 1983a: 251), but then give an incoherent account of that: 'The use of 'This is how things are' is indeed distinctive. It is employed primarily to pick up a previous explicit or implicit statement. In this respect it is *like* a propositional variable, but it *lacks* [my emphasis, PF] what seemed to be an essential feature of the proposition, namely agreement or disagreement with reality.' (1983b: 315) But you can't have it both ways: either it is anaphoric (or cataphoric) upon some truth-valued proposition (it is a bound variable), and then it shares the truth-value of that proposition, or else it is 'a wheel turning idly' (cf. Wittgenstein 1964: 51), a free variable lacking in truth-conditions. Baker and Hacker want to eat their pudding and have it.

Last but not least, Baker and Hacker find in the remarks on truth in *PI* § 136 a 'repudiation of the correspondence thesis of *TLP*' (1983a: 252), which would be superseded by a form of the so-called 'redundancy' view. Were that true, to be sure, there would be another dramatic departure from *TLP* in *PI*. But § 136 contains no more of a 'repudiation' of the correspondence thesis than *TLP* contains an endorsement of it. In both works, Wittgenstein simply bypasses that thesis.²⁰ I cannot pursue the issue further here, but the reader is invited to ponder Wittgenstein's remark about 'the verb of the proposition' at *TLP* 4.063. The remark is, let me add in passing, unfair to Frege (on which see Anscombe 1959: 106). Howbeit, Wittgenstein could never have accepted the seeming asymmetry between 'is true' and 'is false'. Both are operators, which is what *PI* § 136 brings to the fore:

'p' is true = p

'p' is false = ~p

The equivalence between *p* and 'p is true' underscores the fact that, when we say that a proposition is true, we are not ascribing it any property (let alone the property of corresponding to the facts), we are just asserting the proposition. That's how, as Frege writes, 'the word 'true' seems to make the impossible possible: it allows what corresponds to the assertoric force to assume the form of a contribution to the thought.' (Frege 1969: 252). There is indeed a predication in "Snow is white' is true' – but what we are predicating is, *about the snow*, that it is white.

Suppose I wanted to analyze 'Everything Moore says is true' so that the role of the disposable truth-predicate should be made explicit. I, for one, would be happy to render it as 'For every *p*, if Moore says that *p*, then *p*.' (cp. Prior 1971: 38)

But what this example makes manifest is the vulnerability of anaphoric chains such as those which feature 'This is how things are', to *empirical* circumstances which cannot be known *a priori*. Suppose Luke says 'Everything Ann says is true'. Unbeknownst to Luke, Ann just said 'Everything Luke says is false'. If Laura, upon hearing Luke's utterance, wanted to endorse it saying 'This is how things are', her attempt would be frustrated, as there is no proposition

20 See, for the *locus classicus* of the indictment of the view that *TLP* is committed to a correspondence view of truth, Ishiguro 1969.

which could do duty as an anaphoric antecedent of her pronouncement. The anaphoric chain is *ungrounded*.²¹

I had thought of addressing *On Certainty* in some detail. Suffice it to sketch the approach: the deepest watershed in Wittgenstein's progress from 1929 onwards was the abandonment of the postulate of the independence of sense from truth – of what Warren Goldfarb (1997) calls the 'presuppositionlessness' of logic (compare *TLP* 2.0211 vs. *PI* § 242) – see also White 1974: 23-5, and Santos 1996).

The outcome is nicely summed up in § 401 of *On Certainty*: 'I want to say: propositions of the form of empirical propositions, and not only propositions of logic, form the foundation of all operating with thoughts (with language).'

I think that is a difficult idea, not because it is recondite, but because it goes against the grain of a deeply entrenched picture of what Wittgenstein here describes as 'operating with thoughts'. On that picture, thought evolves in a frictionless medium, sealed off from the hazards of causation and the accidents of history.

There is room, though, for wondering what exactly Wittgenstein means by 'propositions of the form of empirical propositions', in particular as he goes on to say that the phrase 'is itself thoroughly bad; the statements in question are statements about material objects' (Wittgenstein 1969: § 402). My suggestion, which should come as no surprise at this point, is that a proposition has the form of an empirical proposition when it can occur as the anaphorical antecedent of the propositional variable 'This is how things are'.

I hope these closing comments shed some light on this notoriously intriguing remark from *On Certainty*: 'Isn't what I am saying: any empirical proposition can be transformed into a postulate – and then becomes a norm of description. But I am suspicious even of this. The sentence is too general. One almost wants to say "any empirical proposition can, theoretically, be transformed ...", but what does "theoretically" mean here?' (Wittgenstein 1969: § 321). I venture to suggest: 'theoretically' means 'a priori, independently of any experience' – which to my mind explains why Wittgenstein goes on to say: 'It sounds all too reminiscent of the *Tractatus*.' (*Ibid.*)²²

References

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1959) *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3rd edition (South Bend, Indiana: Saint Augustine's Press, 1971)
- Baker, G. P. & Hacker, P. M. S. (1983a). *An Analytical Commentary on Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations'* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)
- _____ (1983b). *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Understanding* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)
- Bazzochi, Luciano (2008) 'On Butterfly Feelers: Some Examples of Surfing on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*' in *Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society - New Series (Volume 16)*: 125-40

21 See Kripke 1975 for further discussion.

22 I am thankful to Anderson Nakano, João Vergilio Cuter, Luiz Carlos Pereira, Luiz Henrique Lopes dos Santos and Mauro Engelmann for discussion of a preliminary version of this paper. In another key, warm thanks are also due to Cora Diamond, Eduardo Vicentini de Medeiros and Gilad Nir for generous help with the bibliography. Work in the paper was supported by the National Council for Scientific Development (CNPq), Grant # 313405/2018-2.

- Chomsky, Noam (1957). *Syntactic Structures*, 2nd edition (Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000)
- Davidson, Donald (1968) 'On Saying That', *Synthese* **19**: 10-146, reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984): 93-108
- Diamond, Cora (2000). 'Does Bismarck have a beetle in his box? The private language argument in the *Tractatus*', in Alice Crary and Rupert Read, eds., *The New Wittgenstein* (London & New York: Routledge): 262-292
- _____ (2012). 'What can you do with the general propositional form?' in José Zalabardo, ed., *Wittgenstein's Early Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): 151-94
- _____ (2019). *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)
- Dolan, John M. (1982). 'The distant drum in *Walden*', *The Thoreau Quarterly* **14**: 64-85
- Faria, Paulo (2001a). 'Le guêpier de Moore', in Sandra Laugier, ed., *Wittgenstein: Métaphysique et Jeux de Langage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France): 129-52
- _____ (2001b). 'À l'écoute de Russell: de la "théorie de la connaissance" à la philosophie de la psychologie', in Christiane Chauviré, Sandra Laugier and Jean-Jacques Rosat, eds., *Wittgenstein: les Mots de l'Esprit. Philosophie de la Psychologie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J.Vrin): 129-55
- _____ (2009). 'Uma Sombra de Dúvida: Reflexividade e Fechamento Epistêmico', *Philosophos* **14**: 63-113
- _____ (2010). 'Memory as Acquaintance with the Past: Some Lessons from Russell, 1912-1914', *Kriterion* **121**: 149-172
- Frege, Gottlob (1969). 'My Basic Logical Insights', in *Posthumous Writings*, edited by Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel and Friedrich Kaulbach, translated by Peter Long and Roger White (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979): 251-2
- Goldfarb, Warren (1997). 'Wittgenstein and the Fixity of Meaning' in William W. Tait, ed., *Early Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein* (Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois): 75-8
- Hacker, P. M. S. (2015). 'How the *Tractatus* was meant to be read', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, **65**: 648-668.
- Hylton, Peter (1997). 'Functions, Operations, and Sense in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in William W. Tait, ed., *Early Analytic Philosophy: Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein* (Chicago and LaSalle, Illinois): 91-105, reprinted in Hylton, *Propositions, Functions, and Analysis: Selected Essays on Russell's Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005): 138-52
- Ishiguro, Hidé (1969). 'Use and Reference of Names', in Peter Winch, ed., *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul): 20-50
- Kripke, Saul A. (1975). 'Outline of a Theory of Truth', *The Journal of Philosophy* **72**: 690-716, reprinted in Kripke, *Philosophical Troubles: Collected Papers, Volume 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 75-98
- McGuinness, Brian, ed. (2012). *Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents 1911-1951*, 4th edition (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell)
- Monk, Ray (1990). *Wittgenstein: the Duty of Genius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books)
- Prior, A. N. (1967). 'Correspondence Theory of Truth', in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York & London: Macmillan), volume 2: 223-32
- _____ (1971). *Objects of Thought*, edited by P.T. Geach and A. J. P. Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Russell, Bertrand (1903). *The Principles of Mathematics*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2010)
- _____ (1911). 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **11**: 108-128
- _____ (1912). *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- _____ (1918). *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010)
- Santos, Luiz Henrique Lopes dos (1996); 'A Harmonia Essencial', in Adauto Novaes (org.), *A Crise da*

- Razão (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras): 437-55.
- Sorensen, Roy A. (1988). *Blindspots* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Sullivan, Peter (2004). 'The general propositional form is a variable' (*Tractatus* 4.53). *Mind* **113**: 43-56
- White, Roger M. (1974). 'Can whether a proposition makes sense depend on the truth of another?', in Godfrey Vesey, ed., *Understanding Wittgenstein* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press): 14-29
- _____ (2006). *Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Reader's Guide* (London & New York: Continuum)
- _____ (2011). 'Throwing the Baby Out with the Ladder: On "Therapeutic" Readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in Rupert Read & Matthew A. Lavery, eds., *Beyond the Tractatus Wars: The New Wittgenstein Debate* (New York: Routledge): 22-65
- _____ (2017). 'Logic and the *Tractatus*', in Hans-Johann Glock & John Hyman (eds.), *A Companion to Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell):
- Wittgenstein Ludwig (1921a). *Logik-Philosophische Abhandlung / Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Kritische Edition*, herausgegeben von Brian McGuinness und Joachim Schulte (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998)
- _____ (1921b). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C. K. Ogden (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999)
- _____ (1921c). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: Centenary Edition*, edited and with a Foreword by Luciano Bazzochi, Introduction by P.M.S. Hacker, translated by David Pears and Brian McGuinness (New York, NY: Anthem Press, 2021)
- _____ (1929). 'Some Remarks on Logical Form', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 9 – Knowledge, Experience and Realism*: 162-71, reprinted in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, eds. James Klagge & Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993): 29-35
- _____ (1953a). *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, third edition of English and German texts (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967)
- _____ (1953b). *Philosophical Investigations*, the German text with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, revised 4th edition by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009)
- _____ (1961). *Notebooks 1914-1916*, edited by G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, the German text with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979)
- _____ (1964). *Philosophical Remarks*, edited by Rush Rhees and translated into English by Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975)
- _____ (1969). *On Certainty / Über Gewissheit*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975)
- _____ (1978). *Culture and Value / Vermischte Bemerkungen*, edited by G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, translated by Peter Winch, 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980)

Abstract

I offer an interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* (§§ 134-6) about the doctrine of a 'general propositional form' as it was presented in the *Tractatus*. Against the prevailing reading, I argue that these sections contain a vindication, rather than an out and out rejection, of what I claim to be the kernel of that doctrine. I make use of A. N. Prior's gloss on § 134 of the *Investigations* to underscore the anaphoric structure of Wittgenstein's example of the use, in ordinary language, of a propositional variable. I round up the discussion with a brief glance at the vulnerability of grounding of anaphoric chains.

Keywords: General propositional form. Truth-functions. Anaphora. Grounding.

Resumo

Proponho uma interpretação das observações de Wittgenstein nas *Investigações Filosóficas* (§§ 134-6) sobre a doutrina da 'forma proposicional geral' exposta no *Tractatus*. Contra a leitura predominante, sustento que essas passagens contêm uma defesa, ao invés de uma rejeição sumária, do que eu alego ser o núcleo daquela doutrina. Recorro ao comentário de A. N. Prior ao § 134 das *Investigações* para salientar a estrutura anafórica do exemplo que dá Wittgenstein do uso, na linguagem ordinária, de uma variável proposicional. Encerro a discussão com um breve aceno à vulnerabilidade da fundação (grounding) de cadeias anafóricas.

Palavras-chave: Forma proposicional geral. Funções de verdade. Anáfora. Fundação (grounding).