

# Can one sentence say what another sentence can only show?

Perspectives on the discussion of *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* 4.1212 (“Was gezeigt werden kann, kann nicht gesagt werden”) in the light of the literary features of the work<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Printed here is a lecture on the notion of showing in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* in the light of the literary features of the work. After a brief exposition of questions related to the notion of showing in the TLP, the showing of TLP's sentences is associated with the showing of logical notation and the showing of poetical sentences. It is proposed that showing of logical notation and of TLP's sentences might be understood in an intransitive way, resembling the way works of art and especially poetic works show. This understanding of showing directs our attention to varieties of expression rather than to something beyond language.

## 1. A philosophical desire

In philosophy there exists a strong desire: to reach out to the unreachable. This desire seems to have motivated the most marvellous achievements in the use of reason. It leads us to strive for the realm of truth, to ask about

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1 The following text reproduces a lecture given at the University of Bergen (Norway) at December 3rd 2010 on the occasion of Disputation of the doctoral thesis “Zur philosophischen Bedeutung der sprachlichen Gestaltung von Wittgensteins *Logisch-philosophischer Abhandlung*”. The title of the lecture was given by an external examination committee. Due to its origin stages in the history of interpretation of the TLP and the lecture's train of thought are displayed in condensed sketch rather than spelled out in detail. The research for the dissertation and this paper was connected with the *Discovery* Project supported by the European Commission under the eContentplus programme at the Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen and the department of philosophy at the University of Bergen. The lecture owes most of its spirit and texture conversations with Deirdre C. P. Smith, Helle Nyvold and Ralph Jewell, whom the author wishes to thank.

ultimate certainty, to venture towards reality beyond mere appearances. Wittgenstein kindles this desire afresh: he offers to our minds the unthinkable.

In Wittgenstein's early work *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* the task of philosophy is stated:

4.114 Sie soll das Denkbare abgrenzen und damit das Udenkbare.  
Sie soll das Udenkbare von innen durch das Denkbare begrenzen.

4.115 Sie wird das Unsagbare bedeuten, indem sie das Sagbare klar darstellt.<sup>2</sup>

4.114 It should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable.  
It should limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable.

4.115 It will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable.<sup>3</sup>

According to its preface the *Tractatus* is a book that “deals with the problems of philosophy” (TLP preface). Following sentence 4.115 the task of the *Tractatus* should consist in clearly displaying what can be said. If this is achieved the book will have said what can be said, and thereby it will have said what can be thought. The unsayable and with it the unthinkable would have been limited from within. – “The Unthinkable”?, “The Unsayable”?, this sounds fascinating to a philosopher's ear. What could put our faculty of reason to a harder test than the Unthinkable, what could put our means of speaking to a harder test than the Unsayable? – So, just what is the Unsayable in the *Tractatus*?

Sentence 4.12 reads:

4.12 Der Satz kann die gesamte Wirklichkeit darstellen, aber er kann nicht das darstellen, was er mit der Wirklichkeit gemein haben muss, um sie darstellen zu können – die logische Form.

4.12 Propositions can represent the whole reality, but they cannot represent what they must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it—the logical form.

Here the object that appeals to our desire for the unreachable is given a name. The Unsayable is what sentences must have in common with the world in order to be a sentence, and this is: “the logical form”. But the *Tractatus* not only offers and names the Unreachable. It seems that it also provides the conceptual tool for handling it. The succeeding sentence reads:

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2 Deutschsprachige TLP-Zitate sind TLP 1984 entnommen.

3 Englischsprachige TLP-Zitate sind TLP 1922 entnommen, wenn nicht anders im Text angegeben.

4.121 [...] Der Satz *zeigt* die logische Form der Wirklichkeit.

4.121 [...] The propositions *show* the logical form of reality.

And a little later:

4.1212 Was gezeigt werden *kann*, *kann* nicht gesagt werden.

4.1212 What *can* be shown *cannot* be said.

This is the remark that appears in the title of this lecture. Having arrived at it we get the following impression: The *Tractatus* displays what can be said and thereby it will mean what cannot be said. What cannot be said is what a sentence must have in common with the world in order to be a sentence. This is the logical form. Unfortunately this most desirable entity, “the logical form”, cannot be expressed in sentences. But there seems to be a solution at hand: that what is *impossible* to say, is *possible* to show. Although the Unsayable cannot be *said*, it could be *shown* by language. Thus the concept of showing seems to offer a way forwards toward the unreachable. Harald Johannessen points to a similar interpretation of the distinction between “showing” and “saying” in the *Tractatus*, and the significance of showing, when he writes:

both parts of the distinction are ways of presenting truths, and the showing part presents the really important ones, – the higher ones. (Johannessen 2008: 10)

## 2. Complication

Showing seems to offer us an inviting path ahead towards the unthinkable. So, it could perhaps in this sense satisfy the philosophical desire. But the issue of showing gets more complicated. There are other sentences in the book that appeal to our faculty of reason as well, and they line up our thinking to doubt the conceptualisation of showing as a means for reaching out to the unreachable. Sentence 6.54 evokes this doubt fortissimo:

6.54 Meine Sätze erläutern dadurch, dass sie der, welcher mich versteht, am Ende als unsinnig erkennt, wenn er durch sie – auf ihnen – über sie hinausstiegen ist. (Er muss sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist.)

Er muss diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig.

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

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly. (TLP 6.54, translation by Conant 2002: 377)

How can the idea that we have a good philosophical concept, namely “showing”, fit with the claim that nonsensical sentences should have provided this concept? Is sentence 6.54 perhaps not meant seriously? Should we not better neglect it, so that we can stay with the conceptual achievement? – This might be a temporary solution; but I doubt that any philosophical mind would be satisfied with overlooking it permanently. If we consider this remark in our attempts to understand the *Tractatus*, then there is a problem that Cora Diamond expressed in this way:

The problem is how seriously can we take that remark, and in particular whether it can be applied to the point (in whatever way it is put) that some features of reality cannot be put into words. [...]

Are we going to keep the idea that there is something or other in reality that we gesture at, however badly, when we speak of the ‘the logical form of reality’, so that *it, what* we were gesturing at, is there but cannot be expressed in words? (Diamond 1988: 7)

Diamond addresses here that one way of including 6.54 in the interpretation of the *Tractatus* is to combine the notion of nonsense with the idea of showing. Diamond is clearly not in favour of this combination. If we would combine nonsense and showing, the sentences in the *Tractatus* might be nonsensical, but while we were trying to understand this nonsense we learned that sentences do not only say something, but they also can show something. Therefore, the sentences in the *Tractatus* need not necessarily say something of philosophical value; they could *show* it. In that case the *Tractatus* would be something like “illuminating nonsense”, to use a phrase from Peter Hacker (Hacker 1986: 18).

The construction of illuminating nonsense might hold for a while to save the philosophical promise of the *Tractatus*. But soon the faculty of reason is puzzled and will charge that we face a paradox. As James Conant puts it:

In the case of illuminating nonsense, there is a thought available to be grasped – a thought which is the thought those words intend. But the thought our words here intend cannot be said: our audience must be made to look beyond what our words merely say. [...]

If nonsense is nonsense in virtue of its failure to make sense, then how are we to “grasp” what is “meant”? How are we to discern the presence of meaning in the absence of meaning? (Conant 2002: 393)

Diamond and Conant point to the same thought: if we take 6.54 seriously, then it is not consistent to save the *Tractatus*’s “sense” by saying it is

only shown. At the same time the two authors point out that rejecting this construction does not imply rejecting the idea of “showing” in general. What has to be rejected is the compound of nonsense and showing that has been created in order to save a “quasi-sense” in the book. According to Diamond and Conant, this compound would fail to draw the distinction between “showing” and “saying” deeply enough. They write:

To fail to draw the distinction deeply enough here means: to construe the ‘showing’ side of the distinction as a kind of ‘conveying’ of a quasi-propositional content that we can at least attempt to say (though ‘strictly speaking’ we are unable to say it). To draw the distinction deeply enough means: no longer being tempted to construe ‘showing’ on the model of a funny kind of saying. This still leaves it open to different resolute readers to develop different understandings of how showing works. (Conant and Diamond 2004: 66)

And one page later they specify:

‘What can be shown cannot be said’ (§ 4.1212): to take the difference between saying and showing deeply enough is not to give up on showing but to give up on picturing it as a ‘what’. (Conant and Diamond 2004: 67)

With this we are back to the sentence 4.1212 which appears in the title of the lecture. So how may this remark be discussed in connection with the literary features of the *Tractatus*?

### 3. Intransitive showing

I follow the thought sketched so far. I think it is convincing that there is a problem connected with “trying to say what cannot be said”. And I do want to follow the suggestion made to treat this problem. That is: I will try to say something about how sentences can show, and at the same time I will try to give up picturing at “what cannot be said”. How may I do this?

It seems to me that the expression in TLP 4.1212 almost predetermines our thinking in a certain direction: “4.1212 What can be shown, cannot be said.” – Immediately we may want to respond: “Interesting! – What is it that can be shown and cannot be said?” Trying to answer this question leads us to the difficulties that I roughly sketched: we fall into the temptation to explicate what cannot be said. But there is no sentence that could answer this question. Therefore we might say,

following the *Tractatus*, that this question is nonsensical (cf. TLP 4.1274).

If it is a nonsensical question, then it might help to ask in another way. In particular we would like to find a reformulation that prevents us from trying to picture the Unsayable. My suggestion is to reformulate this question by using “to show” in an intransitive way. In the first question it is used in the transitive form, that is as having a direct object which is what is shown. By contrast, using “showing” in an intransitive way we can still talk about showing without talking about the object. One example is to ask: “How can a sentence show?” I want to call this the intransitive way of asking about showing.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Logical notation shows

With this question of intransitivity in mind let us go to a sentence in the *Tractatus* that deals with showing. In sentence 4.1211, just before our title-sentence 4.1212, the *Tractatus* reads:

4.1211 So zeigt ein Satz „fa“, dass in seinem Sinn der Gegenstand a vorkommt, zwei Sätze „fa“ und „ga“, dass in ihnen beiden von demselben Gegenstand die Rede ist.

Wenn zwei Sätze einander widersprechen, so zeigt dies ihre Struktur; ebenso, wenn einer aus dem anderen folgt. Usw.

4.1211 Thus a proposition “fa” shows that in its sense the object a occurs, two propositions “fa” and “ga” that they are both about the same object. If two propositions contradict one another, this is shown by their structure; similarly if one follows from another, etc.

What has this passage to offer, if we interested in the intransitive use of “showing”? – In this example there are two sentences “fa” and “ga”. These two sentences are said to show by means of their signs and the position of the signs within the two sentences. This showing takes place solely on the

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<sup>4</sup> Asking the question of showing in an intransitive way and thereby giving up focusing on objects of what sentences show allows in the following to utilize the notion of showing mentioned in TLP 4.121 f. for understanding the TLP and for exploring how the sentences of the TLP show. That means also that by asking in an intransitive way forms of showing might be aligned which might exhibit differences when conceptualising them transitively. An appropriate dealing with this question of different forms of showing would require an essay in its own right. For making me aware of this I am very thankful to one of the reviewers of the Wittgenstein-Studien.

level of the “propositional sign”, which consists, according to the *Tractatus*, in the elements of the sentence (words) in their relation to each other (TLP 3.14). We can also say: the propositional sign is a structure that can show.

A consequence of the showing of the structures of “fa” and “ga” seems to be that it would be unnecessary to say that the same object “a” plays a role in “fa” and “ga”. Once we are clear about how to hold the structure, this is shown. It would be superfluous to add an expression like:  $a = a$ . This is something that Wittgenstein makes explicit in one of the notebooks that precedes the *Tractatus*. Here the consideration that the equals sign is unnecessary when we have a logical notation that shows, follows directly the sentence that is 4.1212 in the *Tractatus*:

Was gezeigt werden kann kann nicht gesagt werden.

Ich glaube man könnte das Gleichheitszeichen ganz aus unserer Notation entfernen und die Gleichheit immer nur durch die Gleichheit der Zeichen (u.u.) andeuten.“ (BEE, MS 102: 46r-47r, 29. 11. 1914)

What can be shown, cannot be said.

I believe one could completely remove the equals sign from our notation and indicate identity always just by identity of the signs (u.u.). (BEE, MS 102: 46r-47r, 29. 11. 1914) [translation by C.E.]

In the *Tractatus* these two thoughts are not next to each other. The second is found instead around TLP 5.53:

5.53 Die Gleichheit des Gegenstandes drücke ich durch Gleichheit durch Gleichheit des Zeichens aus, und nicht mit Hilfe eines Gleichheitszeichens. Verschiedenheit der Gegenstände durch Verschiedenheit der Zeichen.

[...]

5.531 Ich schreibe also nicht „f(a,b).a=b“, sondern „f(a,a)“ (oder „f(b,b)“). Und nicht „f(a,b).~a=b“, sondern „f(a,b)“.

5.53 Identity of the object I express by identity of the sign and not by means of a sign of identity. Difference of the objects by difference of the signs.

[...]

5.531 I write therefore not “f(a;b) : a = b”, but “f(a;a)” (or “f(b;b)”)  
And not “f(a;b) : ~a = b”, but “f(a;b)”.

With these remarks we see the function of logical notation; logical notation is meant to show. It is an “alternative form of expression” that shows. With a similar idea Diamond describes the purpose of logical notation as: “a way of translating ordinary sentences into a completely perspicuous form.” (Diamond 1988: 10) Diamond calls this translation also “transition”, as in this remark:

We are left after the transition with a logical notation that in a sense has to speak for itself. (Diamond 1988: 9)

In this sentence there is an interesting formulation that brings us further in investigating the showing that may be achieved by sentences: logical notation shall “speak for itself”. Conant too uses this formulation when he talks about showing:

[The] *Tractatus* shows what it shows (i. e. what it is to make sense) by *letting language show itself*, not through “the clarification of sentences,” but through allowing “sentences themselves to become clear” (Conant 2002: 424)

As in our reformulation of the question about showing, “to show” is here not used in a transitive way. There is no object for the showing apart from the structure that shows. Let me summarize what I have said so far about showing: sentences can show by means of their structure, that is by their elements and how they are related. If a sentence is expressed in this way, we might say that “it shows itself” or that “it speaks for itself”. This formulation leads me to talk about literary features.

## 5. Logical Notation, Poetry and Intransitive understanding

Our question: “how can a sentence show?” has become transformed into the question: ‘how can a sentence speak for itself?’ My answer is this: a sentence speaks for itself, insofar it does not stand for anything outside itself. This is the case, if its elements (words) do not refer to an object, but they are standing for themselves. To look at signs in this way, as standing for themselves, is a special way of looking at signs. As I said before, it takes place at the level of the “propositional sign” (Satzzeichen). This way of looking at signs is not only present when we regard the structure of logical notation, it is also often characteristic when we regard a string of words as poetry. Especially in a modern understanding, the poeticality of a text manifests itself by this “standing for itself”.

Let me illustrate this aspect: Imagine a poem that describes a cherry tree at the beginning of spring. Hundreds of such poems have been written. The poetic value of each of them is not constituted due to the reference to any particular tree, nor by any claim about the tree. What makes them poems is the composition of words. Similarly, in the case of a still life in painting: thousands of times an apple lying on a table next to a glass of wine and a bottle in the background has been painted. To experience such paintings as works of art, is to let the colours, brightness, per-

spective be experienced for what they are. Perhaps it is most clear in the case of music: tones are most often not used to represent things; the tones make up a melody and the piece stands in its own right.

To look at signs as standing for themselves corresponds to a special way of understanding. In accordance with our line of investigation, this way of understanding can be called “intransitive understanding”. This term, as introduced by Wittgenstein, has been further characterised by Kjell S. Johannessen (1994), who takes it as the special way of looking at an object as a work of art. Intransitive understanding takes place when we do not ask for the meaning of an object. By contrast we are interested in it as something in itself. Indeed, as Johannessen points out, asking for the meaning is in many cases to miss the distinct mode of experiencing that a work of art can offer (cf. Johannessen 1994: 245).

We might add here a remark from the later Wittgenstein. It falls in with the difference between a sign as referring to a thing and the poetical mode of sign:

1556. Das Sprechen der Musik. Vergiss nicht, dass ein Gedicht, wenn auch in der Sprache der Mitteilung abgefasst, nicht im Sprachspiel der Mitteilung verwendet wird.

[...]

In der Wortsprache ist ein starkes musikalisches Element. (Ein Seufzer, der Tonfall der Frage, der Verkündigung, der Sehnsucht, alle die unzähligen *G e s t e n* des Tonfalls.) (BEE, TS 229: 396, September/Oktober 1947; also in MS 134, March 29th and March 30th 1947)

1556. The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.

[...]

In our language there is a strong musical element. (A sigh, the tone of voice of question, of declamation, of longing, all the countless *g e s t u r e s* of tone of voice.)” (BEE, TS 229: 396, September/Oktober 1947; also in MS134, March 29th and March 30<sup>th</sup> 1947) [translation by C.E.]

Here we get the feeling that in poems as in music as in everyday conversation there is showing at work that is realised in a great variety of ways, for example in a tone of voice or in gestures. To recognize the showing of sentences is, so to speak, to become aware of their “body-language”. I am tempted to say: when we see the logical notation showing, then we are aware of its “body-language”, or: its poeticality.



not refer to the world. The word “world” here has no meaning, but only the possibility of entering in various ways into sentences. By following these transformations we become acquainted with the work. We make it part of our world and language.

Here one might ask: but what is left then from “understanding” the work, if it does not say anything about the world? What do we gain from working through it? To respond to these questions I would point to Wittgenstein's introduction, where he writes:

Sein [des Buches, C.E.] Zweck wäre erreicht, wenn es einem, der es mit Verständnis liest, Vergnügen bereite. (TLP: preface)

Its [the books, C.E.] object would be attained if there were one person who read it with understanding and to whom it afforded pleasure. (TLP 1922: preface)

I believe that this fits well with what I have said. We can enjoy following the book as we enjoy a concert or a drama. We enjoy the way in which means of expression are employed.

## 7. Can one sentence say what another can only show?

But yet, before I finish, I still have to respond to two more questions. The first is: did I reply to the question: “can one sentence say, what another can only show?” – My reply is that I tried to say in which sense we might be able to talk about the showing of signs. The question ‘what can a sign show that cannot be said?’ was regarded as a nonsensical question, if it implies trying to convey unsayable statements. To give up focusing on “what cannot be said”, I suggested isolating the intransitive side of showing. From this point of view we are not looking at sentences as referring to something, but we look at them as facts in themselves. We can talk about their “internal relations”, in particular “In the sense in which we speak of facial features.”, as the *Tractatus* says (TLP 4.1221). To put it in a nutshell: If we give up focusing on “what cannot be said” in our discussion of showing, we are left with that part of showing that can be talked about.

## 8.

So I come to the second of the last two questions, and this is: Isn't the turn to intransitivity begging the real philosophical question, the question about the Unsayable? The desire to reach out for this unreachable was the starting point of our investigation. Didn't I treat this desire with an argument for being content with the reachable? Didn't I imply that we should enjoy appearances instead of trying to get out of the cave? – I did and didn't.

It is correct that if we adopt this view on showing, we are led towards enjoying particulars. As the Wittgenstein notes in 1932:

(Sokrates stellt die Frage, was Erkenntnis sei und ist nicht mit der Aufzählung von Erkenntnissen zufrieden. Wir aber kümmern uns nicht viel um diesen allgemeinen Begriff und sind froh, wenn wir Schuhmacherei, Geometrie etc. verstehen.) (BEE, TS 212: 226)

(Socrates asks the question what understanding is and he is not satisfied with the enumeration of understandings. But we don't care much about this general term and we are pleased, when we understand the work of the shoemaker, geometry etc.) (BEE, TS 212: 226) [translation by C.E.]

But to say that this would be a restriction, to say that this means to enjoy just the appearances (as opposed to the real things) would be misleading again. It would still be operating within the distinction between "mere appearances" and "true reality"; or in our case the distinction between "the sayable" vs. "the Unsayable". I think the way of investigation that I have followed aims rather at developing the ability to see that the question about the Unsayable is nonsensical. One might say: Wittgenstein does not prefer to stay in the cave, but his way of dealing with it is to show that there has not been a cave all along.

This does not mean that the philosophical desire is unnecessary. By following the desire we do not get a special knowledge that satisfies the desire through grasping the unreachable. Rather the recognition that there is nothing to reach equips us with a new readiness to appreciate the richness of appearances without any loss.

If we regard Wittgenstein as contributing to philosophy, I believe our conception of philosophy must be open enough to allow a disappointing treatment of long developed desires.

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